

The smart coupons

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NAVIN Public School in Seelampur, east Delhi, has over 100 children who can afford to pay an annual fee of ₹5,600, the quarterly fee for an average private school in Delhi. There are 28 others who, till two years ago, were going to government schools, before they decided to switch over to this school. Bhagwati Prasad, the owner and principal of the school, is paid through vouchers by the students' parents who are beneficiaries of a programme called School Choice, run by non government organisation (NGO) Centre for Civil Society (CCS) and global prepaid services player Edenred.

The NGO offered parents the option of choosing from a list of private schools in their locality, resulting in Bhagwati Prasad's school being chosen by some parents. The project offered vouchers of ₹3,700 a year for four years for 800 odd children. According to CCS, the response to the limited number

of seats was in thousands.

Maya, whose husband is a daily-wage labourer, is happy with the progress of her daughter Tripti. Her only grouse is that the children with vouchers sit in a separate classroom, and are not taught as much English as the others.

Though all the school children are admitted in standard three, their ages vary from 11 to 13 years. When the students first came to the school, they could neither read nor write, though they were in the fifth and fourth standards then, says Bhagwati Prasad. These children work at home with their parents, and are primarily engaged in making incense sticks or pulling copper out of wires. According to Prasad, the parents therefore, do not pay particular attention to the children's studies.

When the children first came to the school, they were admitted to the pre-primary standard for a few months and then promoted to the first standard. Next year, when the programme ends, the children

would be promoted to the fifth standard. "Our efforts were aimed at prepare them for that," says Prasad.

Tripti and Gulista, two of the beneficiaries of the programme, earlier studied in government schools. They now say they like their current better, though they sit on the floor and admitted in lower classes.

Prasad says unless parents pay attention to such children, it would be tough. He says the children's parents hardly turn up at school meetings and that they don't send their children neatly dressed to school. Almost everyday, children reach the school, saying no one woke them up on time. Children from poor families are entitled to study in private schools through seats reserved for them under the Right to Education Act.

"We hope governments would see sense in using our voucher model to enable poor children access private schools in their locality," says a CCS spokesperson.

Edenred provides the



vouchers and functions as the programme's back office. Sandeep Banerji, managing director and chief executive, Edenred, says these vouchers are not the same as cash transfer. They are targeted for pre-designed and specific purposes. For instance, in Aryan Public School, his coupons provide for fees, uniforms and even a coupon of ₹100 a month for food.

The company has tied up

with grocers in the area, to enable them to provide food of choice to parents. The grocers can later get the coupons reimbursed. The best part, he says, is parents can use these coupons in more than one school. So, if a particular school falls below their expectations, they can switch to another one covered under the programme. States like Pondicherry Uttarakhnad, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and

Gujarat are considering ways to help poor children gain access to private schools, he says.

The use of vouchers is one way to ensure grants reach the children. The company monitors leakages, and helps run the programme for a fee. He feels without financial inclusion, cash transfers simply cannot work. Vouchers are one option to fill the vacuum.

The parents of Gulista and Tripti seem to agree.