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State maths phobia is NCERT's worry

With five lakh failures, education department considers making subject optional

Pia Chandavarkar

Pune, November 28: While the State education department is toying with the idea of making mathematics an optional subject at the secondary school level, efforts are on in other states to boost mathematics learning.

At least 15 state boards in the country are taking up the initiative to switch to a practical, activity-based approach to mathematics by setting up laboratories to dispel the fear and generate interest in children.

Concerned, officials of the National Council for Education Research and Training (NCERT) have called upon the State to follow other states to promote the subject. With the National Curriculum Framework 2006 highlighting maths and science as a crucial component of futuristic learning, there is a growing emphasis across the country on the need to move away from the chalk and talk method of teaching to a more constructive-activity based approach.

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"NCERT has recommended the setting up of mathematics laboratories in schools, which will help children understand fundamental concepts in an interesting way. This would include understanding abstract concepts through concrete examples, with application to daily life, leading to improved performance even at later stages," said NCERT's maths and science department head Hukum Singh.

While work on the maths lab concept began in 1993, the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) issued a circular recently to all affiliated schools to introduce such laboratories compulsorily for students from classes I-X.

Moreover, the CBSE also recently changed the mathematics evaluation pattern at the secondary level, making it 80 marks theory and 20 marks practical. This was introduced in a phased out manner, in 2004, 2005 and 2006, in standards VIII, IX and X respectively. "Students appearing for the CBSE board exam in 2007 will be evaluated as per this pattern," said Singh.

While CBSE-affiliated schools in India will implement this, Singh said other schools in several states were interested in the maths lab concept, and NCERT had carried out many demonstrations, orientation and training programmes for teachers in nearly 15 states including Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand, Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, Karnataka, Bihar, and others. Maharashtra's response has been lukewarm.

With 5 lakh failures in maths among the 15 lakh students appearing for the standard X board examination in the state, the education department has been holding brainstorming sessions with academicians and parents to deliberate whether maths should be an optional subject.

Of the two brainstorming sessions held in Pune and Nagpur so far, 75 per cent of opinion has been in favour of making maths optional, while the rest have asked for alternatives like deleting complex mathematical concepts to retain the functional ones, or having different question paper sets for different IQ levels.

"The National Policy on Education (NPE) 1986 states that mathematics should be a part of general education up to the secondary school level. This implies that there should be no such bifurcation in difficulty levels which is also NCERT's stand," NCERT officials said, adding that the real problem was defective teaching methods.

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