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Empty Classrooms Bring Shutters Down on 62 Corporation Schools: Survey

A new survey in Chennai has revealed that 62 Corporation schools have been closed down in the last one year. The survey on Status of Closure of Government Schools in Tamil Nadu, which was carried out by Child Rights and You (CRY), found that even as private schools are mushrooming in the city, the number of corporation schools is going down.

The survey was conducted over a period of one year by CRY in association with NGOs under the Sama Kalvi Iyyakam - Tamil Nadu. The survey pointed out that several neighbourhood schools, especially primary and middle schools, were shut down in the past one year.

“A total of 62 schools were shut down in the last one year, according to our survey. The significant point is that the government refuses to use the word ‘shut down’ and instead says that the schools have been ‘upgraded’. This effectively means that if there are two lower level schools like a primary or a middle school, then one of them would be upgraded to a higher level like high school or higher secondary school, while

the other school would be shut down. The school which is shut down would be called ‘upgraded’ even as the school building is shut down,” said Sarah Ramya, manager, CRY-Tamil Nadu.

However, officials of the Chennai Corporation have denied any such move. “In the past two years, we have not shut down any school,” said a senior official with the Education Department of the Chennai Corporation.

The Corporation had earlier in the year discussed the possibility of merging schools, which have low enrollments. In fact, 56 schools have been merged between 1999-2011.

According to the Corporation officials, such mergers help in concentrating resources on well-functioning schools.

But education activists say that absence of schools in the neighbourhood is one of the main reasons for dropouts and child labour.

An earlier survey by CRY had pointed out that in areas like North Chennai, children lose interest in going to school when they have to walk for 2-3 kilometres. This, coupled with the economic pressure, results in dropouts and child labour.

Others argue that the answer to lack of enrolment in government schools should be overcome by enhancing the quality and infrastructure rather than shutting down the schools.

“The reason why parents are not sending their children to these schools is lack of quality. Many have one teacher to teach multiple classes and subjects. There are no proper sanitation facilities and in the absence of staff to perform cleaning, office duty, etc., the teacher is forced to take her time off from the classes and attend to these. So, the Corporation has the responsibility to improve this condition. Instead they shut down the schools,” said P B Prince Gajendra Babu, general secretary of the State Platform for Common School System.