

Schools Bound to Enrol Pupils for Aadhaar

Official says students won't be denied mid-day meal just because they didn't have biometric identification number

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New Delhi: The recent order asking schools to collect the Aadhaar number of each student is just an attempt to "purify student database" and monitor the mid-day meal scheme, admissions and drop-out rates better, senior government officials said.

Schools are bound to ensure that every student is enrolled for Aadhaar, but no child will be denied a mid-day meal just because he or she didn't have the biometric identification number, they said.

"There will be no problem to the child...it is the school's responsibility to enroll the child for Aadhaar by setting up a camp in the school itself. The government is not cruel to deny any child a mid-day meal," a top government official told ET. "We only want to check inflated reporting of school admissions by government schools."

Telecom and IT minister Ravi Shankar Prasad is expected to make a statement in Parliament on the issue as opposition parties like the Congress and Trinamool Congress are set to raise it in the session beginning Thursday.

Three-fourths of children in the age



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group of 5-18 already have got Aadhaar and the rest will be enrolled by June 30, the senior official said.

Another senior official said "over-reporting" of the number of children by government schools was an issue and hugely inflated numbers had been detected lately while enrolling school children for Aadhaar in Maharashtra, Haryana and Delhi.

"School principals usually say the missing children are not coming to school but they still claim mid-day meal for all — many cases are of simply ghost beneficiaries. This also means there is no systematic monitoring of

the mid-day meal scheme or the drop-out rates in schools," the official said. "Many a time, schools run out of rations as consumption is not monitored. An Aadhaar-based mid-day meal scheme will also help in the timely replenishment of food supplies and its planning as the HRD ministry will have an authenticated count."

This official said the effort was to ensure the "same child is not shown in multiple schools" and that frauds by school authorities are checked.

The HRD ministry had consulted the Unique Identification Authority on the matter before its February 28 notification.

"It is a misconception that a child will need to undergo Aadhaar authentication daily before getting a mid-day meal — the Aadhaar number will simply be recorded in the school register against the child's name. Questions are being raised over how 10 crore children will be checked for Aadhaar for mid-day meal. But 82 crore people will be using Aadhaar to get their PDS rations ... hence the argument does not stand," the official said.

He said Aadhaar in mid-day meals does not violate the Right to Education Act.

Officials said enrollment of children for Aadhaar in the age group of 5-18 years is almost complete in Delhi, while it is 85% in Kerala, 68% in West Bengal and 85% in Karnataka — all states ruled by opposition parties which are up in arms against the government move. "The said chief ministers should instead push their school authorities to complete rest of the Aadhaar enrolment of children in the next four months. Savings through Aadhaar and direct benefit transfer (of subsidies) will accrue to the states, too. Haryana has saved ₹440 crore by detecting 23 lakh beneficiaries through Aadhaar," the official said.