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To retain school dropouts, education goes mobile

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IN an attempt to tackle increasing dropout rates, the Directorate of Education is adding a set of wheels to its Saryya Shiksha Abhiyan (education for all) programme — two mobile schools will roll onto Delhi's roads come January 25. Painted bright yellow and complete with loudspeakers blaring out the song *School Chale Hum* (let's go to school), these two 27-seater vans or "Chalta" Phirta Schools" (CPS), unlike classrooms, will be difficult to miss.

"The idea is for the CPS to enter communities with much fanfare, to spur on interest among kids and adults alike," said Vivek Ramchandani, an education officer at UNICEF, which is working in conjunction with the Education de-

partment to design the CPS.

Fitted with a 40-inch flat screen digital television, computer, library and sports equipment, the CPS will function as a learning resource centre. Portable fencing and awnings that extend out from the van will provide classroom space. "It's modelled on the principle of acroplanes, filling a compact area with as many resources as possible," said Education Secretary Rina Ray.

But both Ramchandani and Ray recognise that a mobile classroom alone will not be enough to reach and retain children who have dropped out of school. Alongside teachers, the vans will have on board curriculum specialists, teacher-trainers and community specialists to ensure the CPS effectively reaches out to people in areas it travels through. "We want to develop capacity among teachers

and the wider community to get children back into formal schools," said Ramchandani.

To reach the most marginalised of children, the CPS will first travel into slums and JJ clusters of east and central Delhi. It will stop for two-hour sessions, three to four times, six days a week, in districts with inadequate school access and a high incidence of "out-of-school" children between the ages of 6 and 14.

In the evenings, the CPS will work on adult literacy programmes. "If the vans inspire others, we'll work towards establishing a public private partnership and extend the project," said Ray.

For now the Delhi government will cover the costs of the CPS, but it will be run by non-governmental organisations (NGOs), as yet undecided, specialising in education.

DoE set to streamline education in government schools

The Directorate of Education (DoE) is planning to revisit its strategy towards children studying in classes VI to VIII in Delhi's government schools, who have been identified as the most likely to drop out. "By focusing our attention on classes VI to VIII, we can retain more children. Once they've reached Class IX, children are more likely to stay on in school," said Education Secretary Rina Ray. "We think every child should pass the Class X exams, as there's a strong correlation between crime and dropping-out of school," she added. Areas to be scrutinised include teacher absenteeism and reasons behind children, especially girls, leaving school. New teaching and evaluation methods will be developed to ensure a child understands his or her subjects, rather than relying upon rote learning. With the combining of Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) primary schools with government secondary schools in 2005, the DoE saw an increase of 80,000 in the number of children studying in Class VI, as parents didn't have to go in for fresh admissions when their children entered secondary school. Following the success of this programme, Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), which runs *anganwadi* or childcare centres and provides non-formal education to children aged between three and six years, will be linked with MCD schools. "This should create an easier education path and keep more children in school," said Ray.

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