



Education is not just the acquisition of knowledge but the development of communication, negotiation, and diplomacy skills that lead to the holistic development of an individual.



Education right from kindergarten in a structured way lays a solid foundation for the future. While this understanding is not new, recent global events have clearly emphasized the importance of holistic knowledge for students right from K-12 and all the way through graduate education. Since the 1980s, greater emphasis has been placed on professional education, particularly on the four-year engineering disciplines in India. This has been possible with the liberalization of engineering education with the arrival of many private engineering and technological institutes. Such an effort has paid rich dividends in terms of an educated technical workforce and has resulted in the upward mobility of some sections of society. While still inequalities exist in developing societies, the above has rightly highlighted the importance of education as an important equalizer. We should not be carried over



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by such a development alone, which focuses on one subset of higher education.

Recent unsettling events around the globe highlight the need for broader educational skills including awareness of global history, communication skills, dealing with society with good diplomatic capabilities, and vocational-technical talents.

## Broader K-12 Education

The foundation for skilled and talented members of society starts with quality training at the school level. World governments have realized the need for early childhood development and are allocating resources to this section of society. The importance of engagement at a personal level and interactions face to face have received greater attention after the past two years of virtual education, emphasizing the importance of childcare and education.

According to Dr. Prema Sundararajan, who retired after 22 years of service from Kendriya Vidyalaya Sangathan, from her own colorful experience as a teacher, administrator, TV anchor and project investigator for WHO aptly states, “I believe that a global perspective is an integral part of students’ learning experience to enable them to make their own informed decision without bias from ideologies or otherwise.” Dr. Prema Sundararajan brings to light what her daughter felt about formal education, “When my daughter came back after her wedding and met the commissioner of Kendriya Vidyalaya, she said, *I am an engineer now and have scored very high in my subjects in school education, but when I am married, I realize, all my school education has not taught me, when what and how to interact with my in-laws and so on.*’ This clearly



proves a big gap in school education and living one’s life.”

These sentiments are reflective of the sentiments of stakeholders about the importance of broader education. Ms. Kay McDowell, President & CEO of Lubbock Chamber of Commerce adds to the above sentiment as, “There needs to be a strong emphasis in education on critical thinking, problem-solving and the ability to communicate effectively on all levels. Also, educators must keep a constant eye on future careers so they can effectively train the workforce for jobs that haven’t even been created yet.”

## Evolving Education

Interactive, broad-based, and flexible are the hallmarks of evolving school education. Virtual model of education has heightened the importance of physical interaction between peers of the same age group to learn as well gain the learning experience. Experience is indeed a great educator. If we

compare the structured education from elementary school level to college today as against 4 decades ago, we could see the need for and importance of value-based education. Special and elective subjects such as environmental sciences, art, theater, and music occupy an important place in the elementary school education level itself, these days. For example, fifth-grade curriculum in Lubbock, USA-based public schools involve main subjects such as reading, mathematics, science, and social studies. In addition, on daily basis subjects such as art, culture, and music are learned depending on personal preference. Such a curriculum clearly emphasizes holistic education sowing seeds from an early age to have a broader view of the world.

In addition to structured education offered by public and private educational institutes, there is equal importance to parental support and guidance. In the United States, there is a good percentage of students undergoing homeschooling as well.



The importance of pre-kindergarten education was emphasized recently by President Joe Biden in his first State of the Union address to the United States' Congress. President Biden has an ambitious plan of universal and free pre-k education for 3- and 4-year-old kids and quality childcare. Early investments pay off and in India, pre-k education is indeed a business on its own, which is needed but at affordable costs.

### US Liberal Education

United States prides itself in offering liberal education and Ivy leagues are known for such programs offering flexibility for students. India's NEP 2020 is also providing such flexible options in college education, which is a welcoming one for training global citizen scholars. Soft skill lessons need to be part of education. Dr. Prema Sundarajan states, "Students must be given many opportunities to demonstrate social skills, thinking skills, and negotiation skills. Just working and studying for exams will not help at all for their growth. In addition to field-specific and soft skills, character building is needed. In fact, the recent Covid-19 and global events in Ukraine have heightened the need for such attributes. Ms. McDowell agreed and pointed out, "In today's world the skills needed more than ever before are character attributes such as honesty, integrity, fairness, and kindness."

### Onwards and Upwards

Policymakers, governments, and parents understand that universal pre-schooling and enhanced quality have their associated costs. But these costs are worth it and will have positive effects. It is the responsibility of stakeholders to keep this investment a high priority given its influence



Kay McDowell



Dr. Prema Sundararajan

on national development and global welfare. The model followed in the United States may be worth having a look at. In the United States, public schools, which offer quality K-12 education at no cost to students, are independently governed by locally elected boards and funded transparently through some portions of revenues from property taxes on homeowners. State governments support public schools with additional minimal support coming from the federal government. This gives shared responsibility and governance for parents and school agencies, which is hoped to offer quality education. Such direct oversight and transparent governance may not be available in many countries but is worth exploring. Engaged parent-teacher associations (PTAs) play important roles in developing students and schools. The involvement of parents in enhancing the quality of schools is a key step towards the overall development of students and the community. Stakeholders like administrators, teachers, and parents should infuse interest and curiosity among students. "We the adults, i.e.,

parents and teachers should explore, and make the students also to ask questions, encourage them to go beyond, be curious and challenging," opined Dr. Prema Sundararajan.

### Alumni

At higher education level, alumni associations play important roles in enhancing the resources of the institutions and hence the quality. Indian institutes like IITs and IIMs pride themselves in having engaged alumni. Another collaboration, which is vital but overlooked in developing nations is the "town and gown" relationship. Again, such activities are vibrant in developed economies. Lubbock Chamber of Commerce actively engages with the Lubbock Public School system and Texas Tech University in representation to policymakers for new initiatives and government funding support for improving education. Quality education relies much on the motivation and contribution of teachers, which Dr. Prema Sundararajan agreed. She adds that with stressful situations all around, students need someone to listen to them and skills like counseling help tutors.

To sum up, educational investments are vital for personal, national, and global development. Advocacy, transparent organization, and shared governance will improve education right from pre-school to post-secondary levels. Life experiences need to be conveyed to students and according to Dr. Prema Sundararajan, "Effective communication and people skills need to be demonstrated for five minutes every day in the class." Kay McDowell's sage advice is, "Don't let phones, zoom, or email get in the way of person-to-person connection."

It is clear that a well-grounded formal training with value-added education may it from school or everyday life is the way forward! 