

Activists urge withdrawal of school education department's guidelines mandating police clearance for NGOs

*PB Prince Gajendra Babu, General Secretary of the State Platform for Common School System, said the guidelines strip schools of their academic freedom.*



Tamil Nadu School Education Department (Photo | Twitter)

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CHENNAI: Organisations working with schools have strongly condemned the new guidelines issued by the School Education Department for conducting events in schools.

TNIE reported on December 5 that the new guidelines mandate that only NGOs on the list maintained by the department at the state and district levels will be allowed to conduct events and those not part of this approved list must submit detailed applications to state or district-level committees which will then seek police intelligence clearance before approving.

People's Watch, a human rights network, criticised the guidelines, stating that requiring police intelligence clearance would effectively exclude civil society leaders, critical thinkers, writers, lawyers and human rights advocates from participating in school events. "This amounts to a direct assault on freedom of speech, expression, and the right to information—pillars of our democratic society," they said, urging the department to "reconsider and revoke" the mandate for police intelligence clearance.

Henri Tiphagne of People's Watch also questioned why the department, which issued the guideline about a month ago, did not upload it in its website, accusing it of not being transparent. The guidelines show that the department doesn't trust its officials and teachers, and has to rely on the police to decide who will be allowed to work in schools, he added.

PB Prince Gajendra Babu, General Secretary of the State Platform for Common School System, said the guidelines strip schools of their academic freedom. "The speech of Mahavishnu in subsequent schools would have been stopped if teachers were vigilant. If state and district-level committees decide which events should be held in schools, it will destroy democracy in schools. Schools should be places of healthy discussions," he added.

A Devaneyan of Thozhamai, a child rights activist, criticised the guidelines as a knee-jerk reaction to the controversy involving self-proclaimed spiritual speaker Mahavishnu, who delivered controversial speeches in two government schools. "The guidelines do not specify who prepared them. They mention that the district child welfare officer is a member of one of the committees, but no such officer exists in the districts. This shows that the guidelines were drafted by individuals unaware that the officer responsible for children's issues in districts is the district child protection officer," he said.

He further emphasised the need for a comprehensive school safety plan to be developed with input from experts. "There is no transparency in the department, and even accessing old government orders is challenging. The department's plan should include all government orders and guidelines as attachments," he added.

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