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## EXTRACURRICULARS ON BOARD'S PRIORITY LIST

# Mind over marks, CBSE tells schools

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Calcutta: The Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) has directed all affiliated schools through a circular to prioritise extracurricular activities and periodically review the examination pattern to create a "broader sense of identity among students beyond test scores and ranks".

The focus of the circular sent last week is mental health and wellness. The board has asked schools to sensitise parents so that they do not put undue academic pressure on students, recognise signs of psychological distress, and respond empathetically.

The message comes from a board that many parents choose over others because they want their children to focus solely on academics and excel in competitive examinations after Class XII.

"The school shall prioritise extra-curricular activities, including sports, arts, and personality development initiatives. The examination pattern shall be periodically reviewed to cultivate a broader sense of identity among students beyond test scores and ranks," the circular said.

The CBSE has asked schools to regularly organise sensitisation programmes for parents on students' mental health.

"It shall sensitise parents and guardians to avoid placing undue academic pressure, to recognise signs of psychological distress, and to respond, empathetically and supportively," the circular says.

In addition, emotional regulation, mental health literacy, life skills education and awareness of institutional support services shall be integrated into student orientation programmes and curricular activities, the board has said.

Many children migrate to the CBSE after Class X, hoping to have better



chances of cracking engineering and medical entrance tests. Premier schools affiliated to other boards face an exodus of bright students after Class X.

A section of parents insists that their children should pursue science in Classes XI and XII, without caring about the kids' preferences and interests. In some cases, when students lack the required marks, parents start negotiating with the school to allow the student to study science.

An official from a CBSE school cited the example of a Class XI boy who wanted to switch from science to humanities before the Class XI final exam this year.

"The boy wanted to give up physics, chemistry and math before the Class XI final exam. A child wanting to do so after studying the subjects for a whole year says how difficult it might be for him to cope with the academic rigour that these subjects demand. The stress builds when children have no interest or inclination towards the subject," the school principal said.

According to the schools, most parents still want their child to be "a doctor or an engineer".

"But not everybody is cut out for that," said Jaidev Ghosh, the South Point High School principal. "Schools and parents have to identify what a student is good at, which could be theatre, arts, football, or something else and

hence the focus on diversified fields."

The CBSE has told schools to provide regular, structured career counselling services for students and guardians to reduce "unrealistic academic pressure, promote awareness of diverse academic and professional pathways, and assist students in making informed and interest-based career decisions".

Ghosh said parents were not always to be blamed.

"A teacher can see varied perspectives because she is looking at 500 students. For the parent, all aspirations rest on that single child. They tend to think that if they are sending their children to the same school, giving them equal opportunities or maybe more than their peers, then why would that not yield equal results?" said Ghosh.

A singular focus on exams and giving up all extracurricular activities before them has become the norm across schools.

Thin attendance for sports or students backing out at the last minute are also challenges schools encounter.

"We have 15 activities in the new session, and unlike earlier, they will be open to students up to Class XII and not only up to Class VIII. Children have to be encouraged to have hobbies. Scrolling the phone is not a hobby and does not relax their body and mind," said Satabdi Bhattacharjee, principal, The Newtown School.

"In today's dynamic and demanding educational landscape, the emotional resilience and mental health of our students require collective attention and proactive support," the board has said.

All teaching and non-teaching staff must undergo mandatory training sessions at least twice a year under certified mental health professionals on identification of warning signs, response to self-harm and referral mechanisms.