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No sweat, school is cool

With the mercury rising even before summer sets in, the townships' classrooms are going AC. Is air-conditioning a luxury or a necessity now, ask BRINDA SARKAR & SUDESHNA BANERJEE

It's still spring, but the rising humidity is already bringing back memories of how uncomfortable summer can get. Shirts get drenched in sweat, tiffin rots in the heat and sun strokes are not uncommon.

Considering the plight of students, DPS Newtown has decided to get its entire fleet of 88 buses air-conditioned from the next academic session, starting in a few weeks, at an added cost to parents. St. Francis Xavier School in Purbachal is getting its classrooms fitted with ACs as well. Another school that many of our children attend, The Heritage School, air-conditioned its classes last year. Many of New Town's top schools have been offering classes in air-conditioned climes for several years now but several others in Salt Lake are still banking on ceiling fans to tide over the summer months.

The Telegraph Salt Lake spoke to schools and parents across the twin townships to find out if AC in schools is a luxury or necessity today.

Students in the library of the centrally air-conditioned SPK Jain Futuristic Academy in New Town. The AC vents are visible in the ceiling.

Picture by Sudeshna Banerjee

HEALTH VS HEAT

Explaining their decision to add air-conditioners to the school buses, Sonali Sen, principal of DPS Newtown, said: "When the children leave the school in the afternoon around 2.30pm, the buses become like tinder boxes. Some of our children come from Garia, Howrah, Behala or Barasat. So they spend over an hour in that heat in the bus and often fall sick. And the minute they reach home they would switch on the AC. The parents were also asking for AC in the buses. In the last 10 years, the summers have become noticeably hotter. All other local schools have AC buses. Even our private car and buspools are air-conditioned. Guardians want school bus because of security reasons but the children were finding it difficult. It was becoming a disparity. So we decided to switch to AC."

This means transport fees have got revised from Rs 3,500 in the first slabs to Rs 4,500, Rs 3,700 in the second slab to Rs 5,100 and Rs 3,900 to Rs 5,400, with the slabs being determined by the distance of the student's home from the school.

"Our transport fees are at par with what the other schools charge. Guardians had been writing to us for the last three-four years seeking AC in the buses, so they are mostly happy. Barely one per cent have asked if they could continue with non-AC buses but we cannot have two different sets of buses," said principal Sen.

DPS Megacity has had AC buses right from the start and their classes were installed with ACs soon afterwards. "Some parents want their wards to tough it out like they did, but others want them to have the best in life. It is a matter of perception, but an AC alone is not the benchmark of the standard of a school," says principal Tilottama Mallik. "We have to concede, however, that temperatures have never been this high before and after a long day, kids travelling long distances heading home would certainly be more comfortable in an AC bus."

St. Francis Xavier School in Purbachal is getting its classrooms fitted with ACs. Principal Anil Srivastava says they had been getting requests for the same for seven to eight years now. "We were unable to make the shift earlier as the electric department wanted to place the new transformer in the kids' play area. After much negotiation, our school secretary and administrator, Ajay Chopra managed a solution whereby the transformer will be placed at a distance, and cables will be drawn to the school. This is a huge win, as kids can keep their playground and get AC classes too."

The school hasn't got requests for AC buses yet, but if they do, Srivastava says they will readily convert. "We have kids coming from as far as Sukhobrishti, and in summer, buses become as suffocating as saunas. If students reach school drained out, how will they focus?"

The principal is confident that parents will comply with a hike in bus fare in such a case. "Our fees are moderate, so a hike does not pinch," he says, adding that ACs will increase productivity.

SWEAT IT OUT

A couple of years ago, Trina Datta shifted her daughter from DPS Newtown, that didn't have AC buses, to DPS Megacity, that did. "My daughter Tiana has asthma and would suffer immensely in the heat for the better part of the year. She would need inhalers and antibiotics every month. When she took admission in DPS Newtown we were under the impression that the buses were AC, and if it did, perhaps we wouldn't need to shift schools in Class VIII," says the CF Block resident.

Joie Bose, a DPS Newtown parent, is relieved that her son Devansh's rides will be cooler now. "This was long overdue," says the CD Block resident. "If kids stay in the AC in class and at home, why make them suffer in between? The Rs 1,000 hike in bus fare boils down to less than Rs 50 per day. Can't we pay this much for their comfort?"

But some parents are unhappy with the fare hike. "We hail from a middle-class family, and since the fees at DPS Newtown were already steep to begin with, another hike puts pressure on our finances," said a lady whose husband teaches at a college and she herself teaches at a preschool. They have two children attending the school and therefore are feeling double the pinch.

Annu Bengani, a parent from Uniworld City, has dealt with all kinds of schools and buses. "When I studied at South Point High School we would sit in class through power cuts without a complaint, but kids today are built differently, and the world has changed too. Now we don't even have a torch or candles at home as there are no power cuts, so how can we expect them to endure the heat?" she asks.

Annu's son Ansh was in The Newtown School — the first fully air-conditioned one in the township — but shifted to DPS Ruby Park after Class X. "The new school has AC neither in classes nor buses but then students are so busy with JEE preparations that they attend school for just a handful of days," she points out.

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Older kids understand such sacrifices but little ones cannot be reasoned with, she says.

ALL-WEATHER READY

"These days, being air-conditioned is a major criterion of parents when they choose a school," said Satabdi Bhattacharjee, founder-principal of The Newtown School.

"When there was a heat wave and the chief minister was contemplating declaring a shutdown, we did not face any dip in attendance, unlike the non-AC schools. The students came in AC buses and had sat in AC classes, so they were quite comfortable. We have a huge indoor facility and another indoor play area, which are both air-conditioned. So when it got uncomfortable outside, we refrained from only the outdoor sports, like football and basketball. All other sports could be continued indoors," Bhattacharjee said.

In the current weather, children cannot play outside for several months of the year. But in such schools, sporting activities are not interrupted because of weather conditions outside.

Jayeeta Ganguly, principal of SPK Jain Futuristic Academy, another centrally air-conditioned school which opened in 2022, explained how the architects had tried to maintain a balance between providing children with an all-weather play area and exposure to natural light. "There is a lot of glass on the surface to let in sunlight and reduce electric energy consumption. To give the students exposure to sunlight and Vitamin D, we have an outdoor free play time at the start of the day for the pre-primary classes. Older students are also allowed to go play outside during lunch or the sports period so that they do not stay completely encapsulated," principal Ganguly says of the school in Action Area IIA. All seven of their buses are air-conditioned, too.

An air-conditioned classroom in St. Francis Xavier School in Purbachal

The fleet of buses parked in the compound of DPS Newtown. All these vehicles are being fitted with air-conditioners from the next session

In the winter months at The Newtown School, the blowers are turned off and their central air-conditioner runs at a specific temperature. "If the students want, the ledges in classrooms can also be opened," Bhattacharjee said.

To counter the argument that students should be made to endure hardships in their formative years, Bhattacharjee says: "If a student is sweating and feeling weak in the heat, would he or she be in a position to absorb the teacher's lecture? As it is, children are easily distracted. To focus on lessons, they require an optimum learning space, of which AC is a part."

CAMPUS LUXURY

The majority of Salt Lake schools, however, still depend on the fan. "If you can train your mind, you can be comfortable anywhere," reasons principal of Sri Aurobindo Institute of Education, Anthony Das. "I've worked in extremely hot places like Dubai, where students hit the field in over 40 ° C. In our childhood, cricket would be played only in winter, but now it is played all year, no matter how hot it is."

"Our rooms have high ceilings and are so well-ventilated that even in peak summer parents ask for the school to be open as students find classes more comfortable than homes and because they are happier with their friends," adds Das.

Their buses do not have AC, but they are in talks with bus providers to install CCTVs and GPS trackers on them. "We want safety before luxury," Das says. "Moreover, AC buses would create a disparity. How heartbroken would students from humble backgrounds be if they saw their friends riding AC buses while they sweat it out on public transport? It's unfair and unnecessary to subject them to such pressure at this age."

Most preschools are air-conditioned too but Stepping Stone, one the first and most iconic ones in Salt Lake's CF Block, refused to make the shift till its last day, a couple of years ago. The owner-director Punam Mitra stood her ground on the issue. "Children never complained of the heat; it was always parents," she recalls. "But times are changing. How can I blame parents when my own domestic help has an AC at home? Back in the day, an outing meant a trip to Victoria Memorial, but today parents don't go there as they won't find parking space. They head to the mall instead, and so kids are exposed only to AC environs."

Is air-conditioning a luxury or a necessity in schools these days?
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