

Schools put exams to test

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Calcutta: The mother of a Class VI boy has taken two weeks off from work to help her son prepare for his annual examination next month. Another parent skipped a picnic on Republic Day because he did not want his daughter, a student of Class VIII, to be “distracted before her finals”.


Examinations may remain a test of parental anxiety but many schools in Calcutta are taking the less stressful and more learning-oriented path to academic assessment.

The focus across campuses is now on open book exams, oral comprehension tests and unannounced evaluation, the idea being to discourage binge studying and ease the accumulative pressure on students ahead of an examination.

“We teach a topic and hold a quick, five-minute test to find out each student’s level of engagement. There is a general tendency to skip school without reason, read only the textbook and rely heavily on private tuition. This is a cycle we are specifically trying to break,” said Damayanti Mukherjee, principal of Modern High School for Girls.

Mukherjee blames tuition for many students being “dis-engaged” in the classroom.

The current trend in some schools is to make classroom teaching interesting through the use of audio-visual elements and test the students on what has been shown. Students are also being trained to “apply” what they learn rather


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than just memorise a lesson.

Since marks in classroom assessments count in the final performance, students and their parents are forced to take them seriously.

Several school heads believe that the main reason for classroom attendance dropping before an examination is binge studying, which more often involves putting in hours at the study table at the cost of sleep and the regular activities that a schoolchild needs.

“Staying awake through the night to prepare for an examination is a common practice that leaves students tired and stressed out on the day of the test,” said a science teacher in one of the city’s top institutes.

A surprise assessment or an open book test, on the other hand, eliminates the possibility of excessive preparation and makes students do what they are supposed to: stay attentive in the classroom and try to understand what has been taught.

Modern High does an unannounced assessment usually in the last five minutes of a class, based on current content that has been either taught that day or in the previ-

ous period.

The Heritage School and South City International School have been conducting open book tests, where the accent is on testing students’ understanding of a topic. The Heritage School has oral comprehension tests where teachers read out the text twice and the students are expected to “listen and retain”.

They are given a worksheet each with questions on the portion of a text that has been read out and explained.

The New Town School has multiple-choice questions in math and science. South City International School also has “a circle time” where teachers ask impromptu questions by introducing a word and the students are required to weave a story around it.

At The Heritage School, an open book examination is conducted for groups of three. They are given a set of questions each, for which they can borrow books from the library and discuss among themselves for 30 minutes before giving the answers. “They are not allowed the use of pen and paper for those 30 minutes. They can only discuss among themselves and consult books,” principal Seema Sapru said. “The idea is for them to learn from the text and internalise it and not do superficial reading.”

John Bagul, the principal of South City International, said the objective of any assessment should be “to give a child the freedom to show his or her progress in the best way”.