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Anti-tobacco drive lacks fire in schools

150 schools in Ernakulam district were declared tobacco-free in 2011. One year later, a study showed that many of them slipped because tobacco products had returned to the shops around the schools.

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M. P. PRAVEEN

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Sleepy-eyed monitoring and sloppy enforcement continue to torpedo efforts to rid educational institutions in the State of tobacco and related products.

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Educational institutions are declared free of tobacco on meeting conditions laid down based on the provisions of the Cigarettes and other Tobacco Products (Prohibition of Advertisement and Regulation of Trade and Commerce, Production, Supply, and Distribution) Act (COTPA) and a High Court judgment in this regard.

Section 6 of COTPA prohibits sale of cigarette or any other tobacco product to any person who is under 18 years of age and in an area within 100 yard of any educational institution.

Besides, the High Court has directed the formation of School Protection Committees (SPCs) and district- and State-level monitoring committees to ensure the enforcement of COTPA and its allied rules in educational institutions.

“Ban on sale of tobacco products within 100 yards of educational institutions is enforced during campaigns by the police and the health department. But as soon as the campaign ends, these products are back in the shops. Only constant monitoring at the grassroots level in which school authorities and local people have a big role to play can solve this,” said Saju V. Itty, the executive director of Kerala Voluntary Health Services and member of the State-level monitoring committee.

He had an example. 150 schools in Ernakulam district were declared tobacco-free in 2011. One year later, a study showed that many of them slipped because tobacco products had returned to the shops around the schools.

The police and health departments can't do the lone ranger act.

Districts like Ernakulam and Thiruvananthapuram have between 1,300 and 1,500 government and aided schools. “Add

unaided schools and nursing colleges to the count, and the enormity of the task becomes clear,” said Mr. Itty.

“Coordination among the departments of health, police, and education with the support of district administrations and NGOs is absolutely vital,” he said.

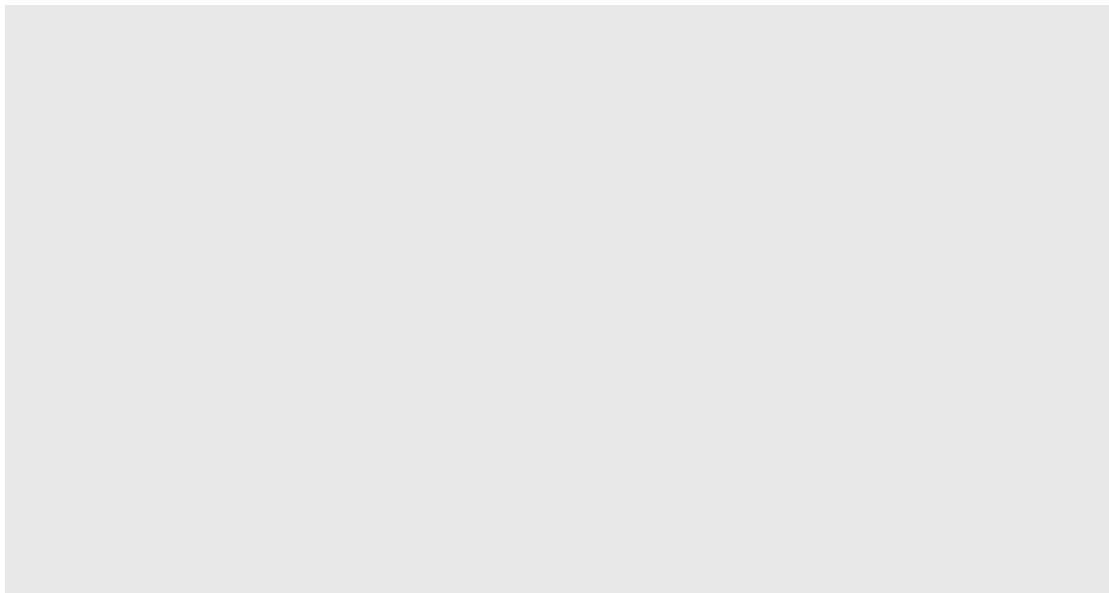
He said transfer of officials helming the anti-tobacco drive also could backfire as the effectiveness of the campaigns depends on the commitment of the officials.

The School Protection Committees and the district- and State-level monitoring committees too came in for a lot of flak.


“There is no point in just having these mechanisms in place. They should meet as directed by the High Court, take stock, and act accordingly. This is not happening in many districts now,” said Mr. Itty.

School Protection Committees composed of the head of the institute, the PTA representative, the local station house officer and the school leader are supposed to meet at least once in a month. The functioning of the committees has to be periodically reviewed by the district-level monitoring committee chaired by the District Collector.

State-level monitoring committee with the Home secretary as the chairperson is supposed to meet at least once in six months.



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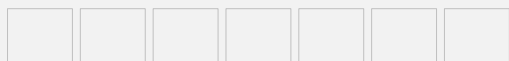
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