

TIMES EDUCATION ICONS

Circulated with The Times of India, Chennai

Powered By **ChennaiTimes**

Sunday, 8 February 2026

An Advertorial, Education Promotional Feature
An Optimal Media Solutions Initiative, A Division of Times Internet Limited

Times Education Icons 2026: Honouring Leaders Shaping Learning Landscape

Some gatherings are formal. Some are inspiring. Times Education Icons 2026 was an evening where achievements were applauded, but ideas took centre stage. Bringing together educators, policymakers, academic leaders, and changemakers, the event felt less like a ceremony and more like a shared moment of reflection on what education truly means today. It wasn't just about institutions being recognised; it was about the larger purpose behind the work they do shaping lives, widening opportunities, and building futures.

Supported by Puthiya Thalaimurai as News Partner, Puthiya Thalaimurai Digital as Digital Partner, and Puthu Yugam as TV Partner, the event was organised by Optimal Media Solutions, a division of Times Internet Limited, and held on January 22, 2026, at ITC Grand Chola, Chennai. Yet beyond the venue's grandeur, what stood out was a sense of shared responsibility a room full of people who understand that the future of society begins in classrooms.

At the heart of the event was a message: Tamil Nadu has long lived by education is the state's greatest equaliser. Its progress story has always been closely tied to learning from strong public education systems to institutions that combine academic rigour with social purpose. Times Education Icons 2026 celebrated those carrying this legacy forward at a time when the world of learning is changing faster than ever.

When Sabitha, former Additional Chief Secretary of Tamil Nadu, took the stage as Guest of Honour, her words reflected both policy experience and personal conviction. Having worked closely with school education systems and governance reforms, she spoke not only as an administrator but as someone deeply invested in how education shapes human potential.

She gently questioned a system that often revolves around textbooks and exams. "Are we preparing students only to score, or to succeed in life?" was the spirit of



her address. She urged educators to create learning environments that nurture curiosity, creativity, and confidence, reminding the audience that real education goes beyond memorising content.

Sharing insights from her time on UPSC interview panels, she spoke of candidates who connected scientific ideas to

everyday cultural practices examples that showed how powerful learning becomes when students think across disciplines. Education, she emphasised, should help learners see connections, not boundaries.

Her words also reflected pride in Tamil Nadu's achievements literacy levels above 80 percent and a higher education enrolment rate well above the national average. But the pride came with a reminder: past success should not lead to complacency. With AI, digital learning, and new industries reshaping careers, education systems must keep evolving.

Also present was C. Sylendra Babu, IPS, former Director General of Police, Tamil Nadu, whose own journey stands as a testament to discipline, lifelong learning, and service. His presence underscored a powerful truth education shape not only careers, but character.

Actor Malavika Mohanan added a different dimension of inspiration. Her journey resonated especially with younger attendees, reminding them that self-belief and continuous learning matter in every profession, whether on a film set or in a laboratory.

A thought that echoed repeatedly through the event was simple yet profound: marks alone cannot define a student's future. Sabitha highlighted the growing importance of emotional intelligence, adaptability, and problem-solving skills qualities that help young people navigate a world defined by change.

She called for stronger bridges between classrooms and the real world through internships, field exposure, mentorship, and skill-based learning. Degrees may open doors, she noted, but experience builds confidence.

The two panel discussions brought energy and openness to the evening. Moderated by C. Sylendra Babu and M. J. Xavier, CEO of the DFT Group of Institutions, the sessions felt like collaborative conversations rather than formal debates.

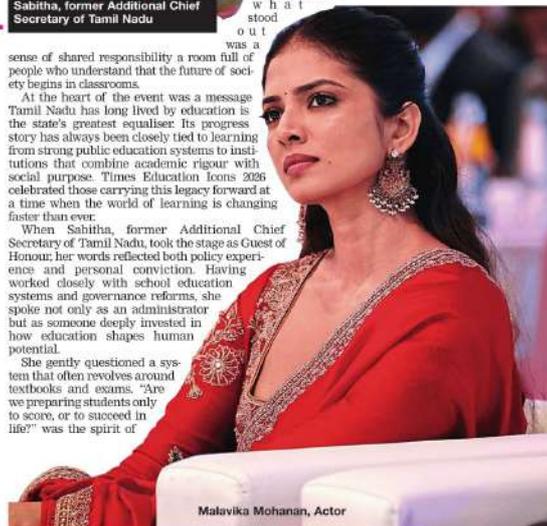
A key theme was teacher empowerment. Speakers emphasised that meaningful reform begins with supporting educators giving them training, autonomy, and tools to adapt to new learning methods. Teachers, they said, are not just instructors but mentors and guides.

There was also strong support for experiential learning, with calls to take education beyond classroom walls into industries, communities, and research environments. Participants advocated moving away from memory-based tests toward assessments that value understanding and application.

Technology, too, featured prominently but with balance. While AI and digital platforms are transforming education, panellists agreed that technology should enhance learning, not replace the human connection between teacher and student.

As the evening ended, Times Education Icons 2026 felt like more than a recognition platform. It was a reminder that education is a living, evolving journey. Tamil Nadu's legacy of valuing learning remains strong, but its future depends on how boldly institutions innovate and how closely academia, industry and government work together. By celebrating excellence while encouraging reflection and reform, the event highlighted a simple but powerful truth: The future of society is shaped not just in offices or laboratories, but in classrooms where guidance, imagination, and opportunity meet.

In honouring education leaders, the event ultimately honoured something even greater: a collective commitment to nurturing responsible, capable, and future-ready citizens.



Note: The Survey for the event has been exclusively conducted by an independent Research Agency named Avance Insights Pvt. Ltd. The Research Methodology for the event was published in the Times Education Icons, Chennai dated 12th January, 2026.

Rethinking Education Beyond the Blackboard

The panel discussion, Education Beyond a Blackboard, moderated by former IIT C. Syleendra Babu, offered a thought-provoking exploration of the future of education, questioning whether learning should remain confined to the blackboard or evolve to meet an uncertain future. Drawing from over four decades in public service and training, the moderator emphasized that education must focus on character

building, value inculcation, resilience, and adaptability rather than mere textbook knowledge. Panelists echoed the need to move beyond infrastructure-led narratives, stressing that true transformation begins with empowered teachers, urging institutions to invest in teacher development before technology or AI. They highlighted the importance of educators engaging with the world

beyond textbooks to inspire meaningful learning. Panelists noted that while knowledge is easily accessible today, skills and wisdom define success. They wanted to frame education around three pillars—knowledge, skills, and wisdom—adding that attitude is the essential fourth dimension. The discussion concluded with a strong call to include students as active partners in decision-making, reinforcing that

schools embracing participation and values will lead the way forward. The session underlined that empowered educators are central to preparing students for evolving career landscapes, balance between an educated mind, disciplined thinking, and strong values.



L-R: Ankur Kumar Jain, Aleyamma Mathew, Johnson Mathew, G Syleendra Babu, R Kishore Kumar, K R Maalathi, Moushmi Rajiv

Today, the world is not crawling—it is galloping and a nation's progress depends entirely on how its education system evolves. While the blackboard remains a powerful symbol that shaped generations through content-based learning, today's children are entirely different. We cannot restrict learning to textbooks, syllabi, or memorization. Our responsibility is to nurture creativity, critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and self-reflection. Children today are highly inquisitive, and unless we engage their curiosity, classrooms will lose relevance. Teachers must continuously empower themselves to meet these questioning minds. Examinations are no longer the end of education; assessment itself must be reimagined. If we want India to progress in a digital, automated world, education must move beyond the blackboard and inspire inquiry, adaptability, and lifelong learning.

R. Kishore Kumar
Chairman, St. John's Public School, Chennai



We were taught by teachers who relied on just two things—the blackboard and their own voice, enriched by wisdom. With no technology or gadgets, they gave us not only knowledge but discipline, values, and character, shaping us into good human beings. Even today, I remain deeply grateful to them. Having spent over four decades in education, including 35 years in government service and now with international schools, I see a clear challenge before us as educators. Education cannot be confined to textbooks alone; it must focus on character building, value inculcation, adaptability, and resilience for an unknown future. Most importantly, children must be treated as partners in decision-making. When their voices are included in curriculum and institutional planning, those schools will truly excel.

Johnson Mathew
Dean Academics, Hindustan International School



Children must learn new skills, but learning has always gone beyond classrooms and blackboards. Today, the real question is not whether technology or AI can replace teachers, but whether we are empowering teachers. We invest heavily in infrastructure—smart classrooms, STEM labs, and robotics—but are we equipping educators, who are the true agents of transformation? Are teachers discussing finance, world affairs, politics, and real-world issues beyond textbooks? Empowerment must come before technology. As school leaders, we know how difficult it is to attract, retain, and motivate good teachers. Learning does not happen through posters or gadgets alone; it happens when children observe how teachers are treated, appreciated, and respected. Beyond the classroom, education is shaped by leadership behaviour, workplace culture, and the values we practise every day.

K.R. Maalathi
Advisor to SRM Public School and Founder & CEO of Auro Educational Services



I began my career as a teacher believing my role was to provide information. Over time, as I mentored educators, I realised that a teacher's true role is to facilitate skill development. To move beyond the blackboard, three shifts are essential. First, classroom practices must become experiential and reflective. Second, meaningful technology integration can enhance creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving. Third, schools must reimagine spaces—libraries as collaborative hubs and labs as inquiry-driven learning zones. Simple practices can ignite curiosity, such as creating an 'unanswered questions' wall that encourages exploration beyond the syllabus. The CBSE's bagless days also offer an opportunity to empower students by giving them ownership of what and how they learn. When students plan, execute, and reflect, they become responsible, engaged learners.

Aleyamma Mathew
CEO, Greenfield Chennai International School, Madhavaram



Classroom learning today is not about the colour of the blackboard—green or white but about strategic learning that fosters critical thinking. Interactive panels and collaborative methods have transformed how students engage. As Thiruvalluvar reminds us, the deeper we dig, the richer the learning becomes. This shift mirrors Satya Nadella's 'learn-it-all' culture, which redefined growth in a changing world. Moving beyond the blackboard does not mean abandoning writing or fundamentals; it means strengthening collaboration, problem-solving, and pushing students beyond perceived limits. Character and discipline remain central to meaningful education. At our school, learning extends beyond classrooms through initiatives like student-led clubs. For instance, our Manam Club encourages children to practise sustainable farming, grow their own greens, and take learning home—making education experiential, responsible, and value-driven.

Moushmi Rajiv
Executive Director, SV High School

I began teaching physics and mathematics in 2000, and recently a former student asked me why she ever needed Trigonometry in her professional life. That question made me reflect deeply. Subjects like sin theta or calculus are not taught merely for direct application, but to build thinking skills. A decade ago, teachers and libraries were the primary sources of knowledge. Today, knowledge is instantly accessible through digital platforms. What truly matters now is skill development and the wisdom to apply knowledge meaningfully. Education must therefore rest on three pillars—knowledge, skills, and wisdom with attitude as the fourth essential dimension. Learning is no longer about memorising formulas, but about developing reasoning, adaptability, and judgement. It is this combination that prepares children for real life and evolving careers.

Ankur Kumar Jain
Correspondent, FIITEE Global School





Alwin International Public School, Padappai
Excellent School - National - South Zone



Everwin Public School, Maduravoyal
Excellent School - National - West Zone



Everwin Vidhyashram Senior Secondary School, Mathur
Excellent School - National - North Zone



Everwin Vidhyashram Senior Secondary School, Kolathur
Excellent School - National - North Zone



Everwin Vidhyashram, Perambur
Excellent School - National - North Zone



Everwin Vidhyashram, Surapet
Excellent School - National - North Zone



FIITJEE Global School - Chennai
Excellent School - National - South Zone



Greenfield Chennai International School, Madhavaram
Excellent School - National - North Zone



Hindustan International School, Padur
Excellent School - National - South Zone



Mahalakshmi Vidya Mandir Senior Secondary School, Chromepet
Excellent School - National - South Zone



New Prince Shri Bhavani Senior Secondary School, Adambakkam
Excellent School - National - South Zone



St. John's Public School, Chennai
Excellent School - National - South Zone



SV High School, Vanavaram
Excellent School - National - West Zone



Vels Vidyashram, Darga Road, Pallavaram
Excellent School - National - South Zone



Vels Vidyashram, Thalambur
Excellent School - National - South Zone



Zion International Public School, Mappedu
Excellent School - National - South Zone



Healthy Minds, Strong Values, Future-Ready Learners: The New Education Imperative



L-R : Sarasa Ashok, Rebekah Abishek, M J Xavier, N Vijayan, Chitrakala Ramachandran, Lakshmi Prakash, Murali Krishna

The second panel discussion at the Times Education Icons 2026 delved deep into the topic, **Healthy Minds, Thriving Classrooms: The New Responsibility of Education Leaders**. The session was moderated by M.J. Xavier, CEO of the DPT Group of Institutions, who is leading a comprehensive transformation across its universities and colleges. A Fellow of IIM

Calcutta and a Chemical Engineer from CIT Coimbatore, he brings over 40 years of experience spanning industry, teaching, research, and academic leadership. Former Director of IIM Ranchi, he has taught internationally and authored award-winning books and over 100 scholarly articles. Education today must prioritise the develop-

ment of healthy minds over the pursuit of ranks and examinations. Thriving classrooms are those that are playful, exploratory, and emotionally engaging, where learning extends beyond assessments and children's wellbeing remains central. Rising levels of student anxiety call for child-centric, inquiry-based approaches that create safe spaces for dialogue, allowing children to ask ques-

tions freely and build emotional security. A sound body supports a sound mind, making physical activity, sports, and the arts essential for holistic development. In a post-COVID, AI-driven world, education must foster critical thinking, active learning, and strong collaboration between parents and schools. Equally vital is teacher wellbeing, as happy supported educators create mean-

ingful and focused learning environments. Purposeful leadership that values care, dignity, empathy, and wellbeing ensure that teachers feel respected and empowered. When schools nurture emotional and physical health collectively, learners grow into resilient individuals capable of achieving their fullest potential.

I find this topic—Healthy Minds for Thriving Classrooms extremely relevant today. A sound body leads to a sound mind, and a sound mind creates a thriving classroom. Post-COVID, we are witnessing a significant shift in children's behaviour—they are more aggressive, emotionally sensitive, and vulnerable to negative influences. As educators and parents, we must acknowledge these changes. Added to this is the growing dominance of AI, which risks pushing critical thinking, creativity, and analytical skills into the background. Children's minds must remain active; the mind gives direction and the brain executes. Without mental wellbeing, learning cannot truly happen. Strong parent-school collaboration is now essential. Only when children's minds are nurtured can we deliver wholesome, positive, and quality education.



N Vijayan
Chairman, Zion & Alwin Group of Schools, Tambaram

For me, healthy minds are a balance of physical and emotional wellbeing. By the time a child reaches adolescence, a large part of emotional trauma and inhibitions has already formed. This makes the school's role during formative years extremely critical. Schools must create safe, non-judgmental spaces where children feel free to open up without fear of being labelled. Simple practices—such as allowing students to write about their challenges and how they wish to handle them—can be deeply therapeutic and help release emotional burdens. While teachers are not psychologists, they can offer meaningful support and guidance. Managing children's emotional energy with care allows learning to fall into place naturally. Integrating fine arts and creative expression into education further supports emotional healing, self-awareness, and holistic growth.



Murali Krishna
Director, Everwin Group of Schools



Building healthy minds is far more important than chasing scores or ranks. A thriving classroom must be playful, engaging, interactive, and exploratory. As was rightly said earlier, play should not be limited to an hour—it should flow through the school day. When we truly focus on emotional wellbeing, classrooms naturally become joyful spaces of learning. Many question whether schools can function without exams, ranks, or constant assessments, especially in India. In our school, we have no exams or worksheets until Grade 4—learning happens through play and exploration. This is not a new responsibility for education leaders; it has always been our core responsibility. Most importantly, emotionally regulated teachers create emotionally regulated learners. When educators model balance and wellbeing, children develop healthy minds and a lifelong love for learning.

Sarasa Ashok
Co-founder and Principal, Budding Minds International School, Manimangalam



This topic is very close to our hearts, as it reflects the core belief of our institution. We firmly believe that healthy minds and thriving classrooms begin with thriving teachers. When teachers feel valued and supported, they create calm, engaging, and empowering learning environments. Strong leadership reinforces the idea that learning is an ongoing journey, enabling learners to reach their fullest potential. Parents form the second critical pillar—not merely as stakeholders, but as true partners in their children's educational journey. Transparent collaboration between parents, teachers, and school management builds resilient, confident individuals. Today, the role of educational leaders has shifted beyond administration to culture-building. We must lead with care, dignity, and empathy, prioritizing the emotional wellbeing of teachers, parents, and students to nurture truly healthy minds and thriving classrooms.

Lakshmi Prakash
Founder Principal, M S Dhoni Global School, Bangalore Campus

I would like to share an insight from a Government of India report published in 2022 on the mental health of students from Classes 6 to 12. The findings show a steady decline in students' mental health due to rising anxiety levels. This clearly tells us where education must focus today. While we speak about child-centric and inquiry-based learning, it becomes effective only when children feel truly comfortable in the classroom. When a child feels safe, they ask questions freely. Creating a strong, trusting interface between teacher and student is essential to reducing anxiety. Teachers must move beyond instruction and adopt a parental role, offering space, empathy, and support. When children know they can approach a teacher during moments of stress, it significantly helps them overcome anxiety and strengthens their mental wellbeing.



Rebekah Abishek
Founder and Trustee, Aachi Global School

When we speak about healthy minds, we must acknowledge the realities children are absorbing today—from social media trends to meaningless influences. As school leaders, many of us are on what I call a 'kodiwampale journey'—moving forward without a clear destination. This must change. Nurturing healthy student minds begins with nurturing healthy, happy teachers. Unless teachers feel supported and valued, happiness cannot cascade into classrooms. In our school, our motto is 'nurturing happy children,' and that journey starts with purposeful leadership. Research already showed that children's attention spans dropped from six to eight minutes in 2002 to just two to four minutes by 2012—imagine the challenge today. Our journey must no longer be directionless. It must be intentional, compassionate, and focused on wellbeing for both teachers and students.



Chitrakala Ramachandran
Senior Principal, Casagrand International School, Perumbakkam



Aachi Global School, Ayanambakkam
Excellent School - International - West zone



Hindustan International School, Guindy
Excellent School - International - South zone



SV High School, Arumbakkam
Excellent School - International - Central zone



Everwin Matriculation Higher Secondary School, Kolathur
Excellent School-Matric-North





Casagrando International School, Kelambakkam
Excellent Emerging School-Overall-South



Everwin Vidhyashram, Janakipuram
Excellent Emerging School-Overall-South



Everwin Vidhyashram, Paruthippattu
Excellent Emerging School-Overall-North



M S Dhoni Global School, Chennai
Excellent Emerging School-Overall-South



Remo International School, St Thomas Mount
Excellent Emerging School-Overall-South



Velammal Vidyalaya, Madambakkam
Excellent Emerging School-Overall-West



Velammal Vidyalaya, Veppampattu
Excellent Emerging School-Overall-West



Zion Genesis Public School, Selaiyur
Excellent Emerging School-Overall-South



Aachi Global School, Ayanambakkam
Excellent School-Innovative Teaching-West Zone



Agarwal Vidyalaya and Junior College
Excellent School-Innovative Teaching- Central Zone



Alwin Memorial Public School, Selaiyur
Excellent School-Innovative Teaching - South Zone



Everwin Vidhyashram Senior Secondary School, Mathur
Excellent School-Innovative Teaching- North Zone



Hindustan International School, Karapakkam
Excellent School-Innovative Teaching - South Zone



Mahalakshmi Vidya Mandir Senior Secondary School, Chromepet
Excellent School-Innovative Teaching - South Zone



New Prince Matriculation Higher Secondary School, Ullagam
Excellent School-Matric-South Zone



Velammal Matriculation Higher Secondary School, Mogappair
Excellent School-Matric - West Zone





Aachi Global School, Anna Nagar
Excellent Preschool - Central Zone



Benzze Kids, Chennai
Excellent Preschool - Central Zone



EuroKids Pre - School, Chennai
Excellent Preschool - Central Zone



Everwin Global Kids, Kolathur
Excellent Preschool - North Zone



Kangaroo kids International Pre School, Chennai
Excellent Preschool - North Zone



Kidus Optimus - An Early Childhood Eden of FITJEE Global School
Excellent Preschool - South Zone



Kriyative International School, Ashok Nagar
Excellent Preschool - South Zone



Podar Jumbo Kids, Thalambur
Excellent Preschool - South Zone



Podar Jumbo Kids, Thoraipakkam
Excellent Preschool - South Zone



The Little CK's, Mugalivakkam
Excellent Preschool - West Zone



Touch Sky The International Preschool, Kolathur
Excellent Preschool - North Zone



Vkids, Mogappair
Excellent Preschool - West Zone



Woodstock Montessori (Unit of GCIS), Madhavaram
Excellent Preschool - North Zone



S.B.I.O.A. International School, Mambakkam
Excellent School-Innovative Teaching-South Zone



Vels Global School, Nandambakkam
Excellent School-Innovative Teaching- West Zone



Vellore International School (VIS), Chennai
Excellent Campus Infrastructure and Architectural Design





Budding Minds International School, Marimangalam
Excellence in Child Overall Development



Casagrand International School, Thiruvanniyur
Emerging School for Future-Ready Education



Everwin Group of Schools
Excellence as a Pioneering Chain of Schools



FIITJEE Global School
Excel Campus-Excellence in Integrated Residential School for JEE & NEET Preparation



Greenfield Chennai International School, Madhavaram
Excellence in Student Enrichment and Skill Development



Hindustan International School
Innovative and Outstanding Thought Leadership



Kriyative International School, Ekkaduthangal
Excellence in Robotics, Coding, and Applied STEM Learning



Mahalakshmi Vidya Mandir Senior Secondary School, Chromepet
Innovative Practices for Academic Excellence



SRM Public School, Guduvancheri
Excellence in STEM Education and Innovative Teaching Practices



St. John's Public School, Chennai
Excellence in Distinguished Service in Academic Excellence



SV High School, Arumbakkam
Innovative Teaching for Holistic Development



SV High School, Vanagaram
Excellence in Integrated Sports Training



Velammal Vidyalaya, Avadi
Outstanding Emerging School for Innovative Learning



Velammal Vidyalaya, Paruthippattu
Promising School of the Year



Velammal Vidyalaya, Alapakkam
Excellence in Skill Enrichment Programs



Vellore International School (VIS), Chennai
Excellence in International Residential School





Chennai's Amirta International Institute of Hotel Management
Excellence in Hotel Management



Vels Group of Schools
Women Edupreneur of the Year



Madras Engineering College, Chennai
Emerging Engineering College



Madras Engineering College, Chennai
Excellence in Infrastructure & Sustainable Campus



Remo International College, Chennai
Excellence in Aviation College



ACS Matriculation School, Arni
Excellence in Scholastic Achievement



FIITJEE Global School
Excel Campus-Excellence in Integrated Residential School for JEE & NEET Preparation



Kannammal International School, Arni
Excellence in Blended Learning



M S Dhoni Global School
Excellence School for Next-Gen Readiness



EuroKids Pre-School, Chennai
Excellent in Chain of Pre Schools



EuroKids Pre-School, Chennai
Excellent in Early Childhood Learning & Development



Kangaroo kids International Pre School, Chennai
Excellent Interactive Programme Preschool



Kangaroo kids International Pre School, Chennai
Promising Preschool



Podar Jumbo Kids, Chennai
Excellence in Preschool Franchise Leadership - Chennai



Vkids, Mogappair
Excellence in Interactive Learning



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Excellence in AI Digital Assessment

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