**Wiping the SNC slate**

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This op-ed is not another technical analysis of the Single National Curriculum (SNC). Over the last two years, several people (including me) have collectively contributed an archive of at least a few dozen (up to a hundred) such articles.

This op-ed is strictly about the political dimensions of the SNC, a major agenda item for Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif on which he will operate through his minister of federal education and professional training (MoFEPT) Rana Tanveer Hussain. I emphasize the PM’s ownership because this will be a decision with widespread implications that will be attributed not only to Minister Hussain but to all parties in this coalition government.

Upon assuming the office, the prime minister, through Minister Hussain, promptly rolled back the steps that had been taken to scuttle the HEC at the behest of the chairman of a certain task force in the ex-PM Office; The commission reverted powers back to the chairman and the next HEC chairman will be appointed for four years, just like before the amendments to the HEC ordinances last year that cut that tenure down to two years.

The issue of the SNC is much more convoluted and dealing with it will not be nearly as straightforward. The prime minister and Minister Hussain have three broad options: Go forward, standstill, or step back.

Option 1: Declare the SNC as weak, double down on it and rebrand it as a PDM / PML-N version SNC-plus in the hope that this will allow the PDM / PML-N to snatch the mantle of education reform from the PTI. This is somewhat the approach the PDM government has taken on the Ehsaas programme. The income support programme has gone back to being called BISP, and all new programmes under the Ehsaas umbrella have also been renamed after the late Benazir Bhutto. The difference is that BISP has its root in the last PPP government, while the SNC is one of the PTI’s flagship programmes. Voters will see the adoption and enhancement of the SNC as an endorsement of the PTI’s education agenda.

Option 2: Stand still and do nothing. Do not enhance it, do not dismantle it, make no decisions, and let the SNC stand as it is. Imran Khan dedicated an hour-long live TV broadcast to the inauguration ceremony of the SNC for primary schools and one of his first public appearances since losing the vote of confidence was in an hours-long Twitter Space, where he listed the SNC (along with the National Rahmatulilalameen Authority and the Billion Tree Tsunami programme) as one of his flagship achievements. If the PDM government adopts the SNC (as in option 1) or lets it stand in its current form (as in option 2), come election time you can count on the PTI to sell it as an implicit endorsement of its education agenda by its political opponents. For this reason, going with either option 1 or option 2 is a win for the PTI and will not win but can only cost PDM parties votes.

The PM and Minister Hussain would do well to carefully consider which quarters they solicit advice from on dealing with the SNC. Until three weeks ago, the MoFEPT bureaucracy (traditionally averse to change) and the National Curriculum Council (NCC) management (which became the face of the SNC) were the ones assisting the PTI government in propelling the SNC forward. They would do well to remember that when they get briefed by, inevitably, the same people who until a few weeks ago were pulling for the other team.

The reason the traditionally mundane issue of a curriculum blew up in public debates was its ‘single’ aspect – the imposition of the SNC on madrassahs, public and private schools alike. The textbooks developed and distributed under the SNC project may not be much worse than the ones they are replacing in public schools but forcing them on better performing private schools is what triggered the public backlash. The MoFEPT and provincial education departments had to climb down from the conditions they placed on private schools and have since been allowed to use other textbooks, as long as their contents align with the SNC. In my opinion, even that is still an unnecessary imposition on private schools.

The PM and Minister Hussain should also remember a key criticism of the SNC, captured by the word ‘national’ in its name. Since the 18th Amendment, school education is no longer a federal matter. The centre can no longer decree curricula or education policies to provinces. A key aspect of the debate around the SNC over the last three years has been the resistance it encountered from PPP-run Sindh. That makes the idea driving the entire SNC project fundamentally unconstitutional.

The federal government cannot dictate provinces what, how, from what textbooks, in what language to teach, and how to assess their students. If this government wants to shoulder the burden of violating the constitution like the outgoing government did and offend the PPP, the government’s coalition partner, in the process then adopting the SNC project is a sure-fire way to accomplish it. The federal ministry of education should not, need not, concern itself with taking along any province - not Punjab, not Sindh, not Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and not Balochistan. The MoFEPT is only responsible for itself. If it does its job well, others will emulate and borrow from it.

The SNC comes with a lot of baggage. Why would any thinking politician want to saddle himself, his party and the government he is a part of with a policy that has received near universal criticism from politically unaffiliated subject experts? Those who have tied themselves to the SNC have been creating a lot of noise around this issue – sometimes with photo ops handing out textbooks to token madrassahs (who are years away from widely adopting it) and sometimes by cherry-picking pages from textbooks to support one claim or another.

If none of this convinces the honorable PM and the minister, they may ask themselves why Minister Hussain’s predecessor has had so little to publicly say about it since the firestorm of public opinion against the primary school-level SNC was released? His predecessor’s last tweet on the SNC was a defensive statement six months ago. If the SNC had been a net positive development, why would he not claim credit for what his own party head touts as a signature achievement but distance himself from it instead?

The SNC is a vehicle for a regressive ideology championed by Imran Khan and something to claim political credit for come election time. The goal was never the improvement of levels of learning of school children, for that is not a matter of simply replacing one set of mediocre textbooks by another. We have been replacing textbooks in public schools every few years for decades without a measurable positive difference.

In meetings, the former prime minister has referred to English-medium private school students as “mongrels,” which makes the SNC project a means to bring them to heel. Supporters of his that went to private schools may want to keep that in mind. The SNC is not meant to improve learning, it is an ideological project meant to perpetuate one man’s simplistic anti-Western worldview.

For all these reasons the present government has no choice but to go with option 3: roll back the SNC, as difficult as it may be.

First, revising public school curricula is a routine, periodic, technical exercise driven by advances in pedagogy. It should not be politicized by slapping a politically divisive brand name on it. If this government does not want to be saddled with the SNC baggage, if it does not wish to hand the PTI a victory by letting the SNC stand thereby implicitly endorsing it, the SNC name has to go. Drop the SNC name; it is a misnomer anyway. Even the SNC’s architects have stopped calling it a curriculum and now refer to it as a “minimum learning standard”.

Second, as part of this institutionalized periodic review, sanitize public-school textbooks of problematic material identified by so many technical reviews. Pay special attention to textbooks for primary schools which have been panned by teachers and independent observers alike. By all means, keep the five newly developed subjects and textbooks for other religions (if they are ready).

Third, refrain from unconstitutional actions like foisting a curriculum on provinces in violation of the 18th Amendment.

Fourth, continue the effort to mainstream madrassahs into the school system through the Directorate General of Religious Education, but do not interfere in private schools, the segment of the education sector that performs relatively better.

Finally, the present government has a short lifespan – anything from 3 to 13 months. Long or even medium-term education reforms are not within its purview and should be left to whatever government comes in after the next general elections. Resist the temptation of any offers or suggestions to repackage (even an amended) SNC that promise an ‘easy political win’ from the same offices that brought us the SNC in its current form. If you buy what they offer, it will be you, not the bureaucracy, that will have to sell it to voters.