**Daanish dilemma: beyond the fold**

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The thickness of a sheet of high-quality 250-300 grams per square meter matte printing paper is approximately one-third of a millimeter.

If you fold it in half, it will become twice as thick. How tall do you estimate that stack will be if you fold that paper in half thirty times? As much as a phonebook, a car, or maybe a house? In fact, that folded stack will be 358 kilometers tall, approaching the altitude of the International Space Station orbiting 408 kilometers above us.

Fold it another 10 times – 40 times in all – and the stack of folded paper becomes 366,504 kilometers tall, almost the distance from the Earth to the Moon (Earth-to-Moon distance: 384,400 kilometers).

The above is an illustrative example of how bad the human brain is at comprehending exponential and indeed nonlinear functions. It is also bad at numerical cognition. In their article, Lindsey Hasak and Elizabeth Y. Toomarian at Stanford University (‘Brains are bad at big numbers, making it impossible to grasp what a million COVID-19 deaths really means’, March 31, 2022) described how the human brain is built to compare quantities, not to count – we can easily recognize quantities of one, two, three and four but need to stop and count for quantities greater than that.

One explanation that evolutionary biologists and anthropologists have offered is that 50,000-100,000 years ago in the African savanna, the human brain evolved to recognize the faces of one’s tribe (among other tasks) which ranged in size from 50 to 300 members. This may explain why the suggested value of Dunbar’s number, the number of stable relationships human beings can maintain, is estimated in the range of 150-250.

That is why when we speak of 26 million out-of-school children, 174,096 public schools of which 52,000 are without electricity, 36,000 are without toilets, 36,000 are without boundary walls, and 35,000 are without drinking water, our brains simply put these figures in categories of ‘big’ and ‘bigger’ numbers. The scale of the challenges before us for both in-school and out-of-school children is incomprehensible, compounded further by the steady growth of our population.

Last month saw an announcement from the federal government that Daanish Schools, Shehbaz Sharif’s pet project as chief minister of Punjab, will now be expanded to all provinces (excluding KP). Daanish schools are, of course, residential schools for children of the least privileged children in our society. Since 2010, there are currently 16 Daanish schools in operation in Punjab, with several more in various stages of development.

Notably, when Daanish schools are established in a district, they are built in pairs, one for boys and one for girls. Today, a total of 11,000 children are attending Daanish schools in Punjab. Children going to these schools are also performing very well academically – in SSC, 90 per cent of students earned marks in the A+ grade range, 6.0 per cent in the A grade range, and in HSSC, 32 per cent of students earned marks in the A+ grade range and 38 per cent in the A grade range. Recent Daanish schools are being established at costs ranging from Rs1.1 to Rs3.4 billion.

Building on this idea, the Punjab Daanish Schools and Centers of Excellence Authority has been selecting some existing schools for significant upgradation and redesignation as Center of Excellence (COE). These COEs have also been yielding better academic performance than is typical from public schools, but at a lower cost than Daanish schools. In addition to Daanish school students, another 17,000 students are enrolled in COEs – 28,000 students in all. Even put together that is about one-thousandth of the number of students that are currently out of school, and it took us 14 years to do it.

Before I go on, I want to clarify that I appreciate the fact that the government is spending on education and giving children who would otherwise probably never have had an opportunity for a good education and a shot at life, rather than shoveling it into the usual bonfire of subsidies and special interest groups. However, given the cost figures, it is abundantly clear that neither Daanish schools nor COEs are solutions to the education quality and infrastructure crisis of existing public schools or the out-of-school children crisis.

To begin, the Islamabad Capital Territory (ICT) is getting its first Daanish school, and, to that end, a PC-1 is already in the works. The school will be established at an approved cost of Rs5 billion and the CDA has allocated 10 acres (80 kanals) of land for it.

Let me try to explain why you should not accept that Rs5 billion figure as just another ‘big’ number and try to put it in context: In the current 2023-24 budget, the Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training (MoFEPT) was allocated a total of Rs16 billion for the recurrent budget to support the operations of all 450 schools in the ICT area, many of which suffer from the same lack of infrastructure as schools in the rest of the country (electricity, boundary walls, toilets, and drinking water, not to mention computers and Internet access).

Alternatively, in the 2022-23 budget, the MoFEPT was allocated approximately Rs3 billion from the PSDP for development projects at schools in the ICT. Thus, we are about to spend the equivalent of one-third of the entire recurrent federal school budget, or approximately twice its typical development budget, on establishing a single school.

I welcome the government spending (much) more than is typical on a school that delivers results, but I am also mindful of the enormous opportunity cost of this development spending. I will be happy to see a Daanish school established in the capital but then I also expect the government to make the same haste in finding the funds needed to at least add missing basic infrastructure to existing schools in the ICT it is responsible for.

Time and again, governments have exhibited a pattern when faced with a difficult, large-scale problem: Set up a new parallel system and ignore or sweep problems of the existing system under the rug instead of addressing the governance issues that are at the root, to the benefit of the existing system. In the same way, many of the powers and functions listed in the Punjab Daanish Schools and COEs Authority Act 2010 mirror those of the Punjab Education Department.

The ICT Daanish school, like existing Daanish schools in Punjab, will probably succeed in its goals and transform the lives of a few hundred students every year. But, at this cost, speed, and scale, Daanish schools will not solve the problems of existing public schools. Daanish schools are currently serving 28,000 students which does not address the education emergency at any meaningful scale (30,000,000 children in public schools, 25,500,000 in private schools, plus another 26,000,000 out-of-schools, each about 1,000 times greater than the population of Daanish/COE schools) that federal and provincial governments are so fond of proclaiming but whose redressal none have been willing to fund.

Putting out-of-school children into schools and giving the ones already in schools an efficacious education is our multi-decade moonshot, and we won’t achieve it by folding a piece of paper 40 times.

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