

The myth of free schooling

education
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Sami Mustafa has a thing or two to say on a recent decision by Punjab making education in government schools free up to the

THE Punjab chief minister, Perver Elahi, recently announced that all schooling in Punjab up to the secondary level would be free. He also has said that school-going children would get free textbooks.

Such grass populism is both unimaginative and dangerous. It is unimaginative because the people of Pakistan, despite economic difficulties and financial hardship, are willing to pay for good education for their children. They rightly believe that the future of their boys and

girls, both in terms of social well being and finding job opportunities depends on good education. It is also dangerous because if with fees the quality of education in public sector schools has been so abysmal, without fees what will happen is anybody's guess. Besides, the rhetoric of free education may well put the badly-needed and long overdue reforms in the education sector on the backburner.

Unfortunately, in the name of education what goes on in our public sector schools, very often, is neither an enjoyable experience for children, nor does it promise job and economic oppor-

tunities of our young boys and girls. Sub-standard textbooks promote rote learning, absenteeism among teachers negates whatever little good that may have come out of public sector schooling, corporal punishment, humiliation and a conformist culture destroys the self-esteem, confidence and the spirit of inquiry of our school-going children.

If this is the state of public sector schools, with their embarrassingly poor standard of education — and Punjab's schools are no exception — then education may just as well be free. If, on the other hand, the Punjab chief minister wishes to change

the state of public sector schools, and improve the quality of education in these schools, which is both the need and the aspiration of the people, and particularly of the poor people, then he should take a bold policy decision with regards to restructuring the moribund administrative machinery which, in its present form, cannot but provide only sub-standard schooling. Not as political rhetoric but as a serious, clearly defined and well-meant policy shift, he should make a concerted effort for introducing pedagogically sound and interesting textbooks, for improving the

quality of teachers and their teaching method, and revamping the examination system. When all this is put in place, he should make education free.

Since 1993 we have been working in the Government Junior Model Girls Primary School in Clifton, Karachi, through a government notification. In this government school, we have brought about a few small but significant changes. Modern textbooks for Urdu and Maths have been introduced. The absenteeism of teachers has been controlled. Their training, lesson planning, daily monitoring of classroom instructions,

abolition of corporal punishment, are some of the other changes which have had a positive impact on the school.

The parents are so happy and satisfied that in 1998, given our then 5-year track record, when we floated the idea of introducing Rs 35 per month as school fees — with which we had proposed to set up a full-fledged library, hire a librarian, hire teachers for teaching of art, music and English, and give additional honorarium to existing teachers as an incentive — all parents happily agreed to it.

From the morning shift 119 out of the 120 parents and from the afternoon shift all 76 parents who

had attended the PTA signed to give their consent for the introduction of fees. The petition was sent to the Education Department of the Government of Sindh, who then sent it to the Law Department. We have not heard from them since.

The enthusiasm of parents with the improvements we were proposing in the school (library, English teacher, teaching of art and music), and their total willingness to pay for these changes, should serve as a reminder to our policy makers and political demagogues that quality education — and not free education — is the issue, and that the need of the