

Initiative to change so

By Sami Mustafa

OVER the years, there has been a lot of criticism of the government's education policies. There has been criticism regarding the poor quality of government prescribed textbooks, the faltering standards of the examination boards, and of the deterioration of state-run schools in general. Recommendations have been made at different forums, symposiums, seminars and workshops, and reports are written and submitted to government for action.

Unfortunately, these recommendations and reports become part of the archives, and even though some routine action may have been taken as a result of these recommendations, there has been very little noticeable change on the ground by way of making public sector schools modern and stimulating learning environment.

Rather than depending on seminars and conferences to communicate to the government the need to bring about quick and substantial changes in the education sector, a group of educationists, instead of conferencing and seminaring, have been working on concrete steps to set up, as it were, signposts for change.

In this article, I wish to mention a few such successful initiatives that have been made in terms of re-defining educational objectives and showing the way for reforming public sector schools. It is hoped that the government will look at these efforts carefully and deliberate upon them for purposes of policy changes.

1. The National Curriculum 2000: A Conceptual Framework

This is the first-ever document produced jointly by the National Committee on Education (NCE) and the Federal Ministry of Education, spelling out the objectives of learning, away from some obscure political and ideological compulsions, to modern context of cognitive learning and emotional development.

In 1999, the National Committee on Education was formed through a notification by the federal ministry of education, with the then federal secretary of Education, Dr Safdar Mahmood, as its chairman. Through consultations with all the four provincial education departments, and at the end, with a day-long final deliberation under the chairmanship of the then federal secretary, The National Curriculum 2000 — A Conceptual Framework was approved and printed by the Ministry of Education and the NCE with a foreword by the federal secretary himself. Citibank funded the printing of the document.

Since all the provincial departments of education and the federal government approved it, it was hoped that it would become a catalyst for change. But unfortunately, before the document could be considered for implementation, General Pervez Musharraf took power in October 1999, and the document was conveniently put away in cold storage.

2. The Aga Khan University Examination Board Ordinance, 2002

In 1995, under the chairmanship of

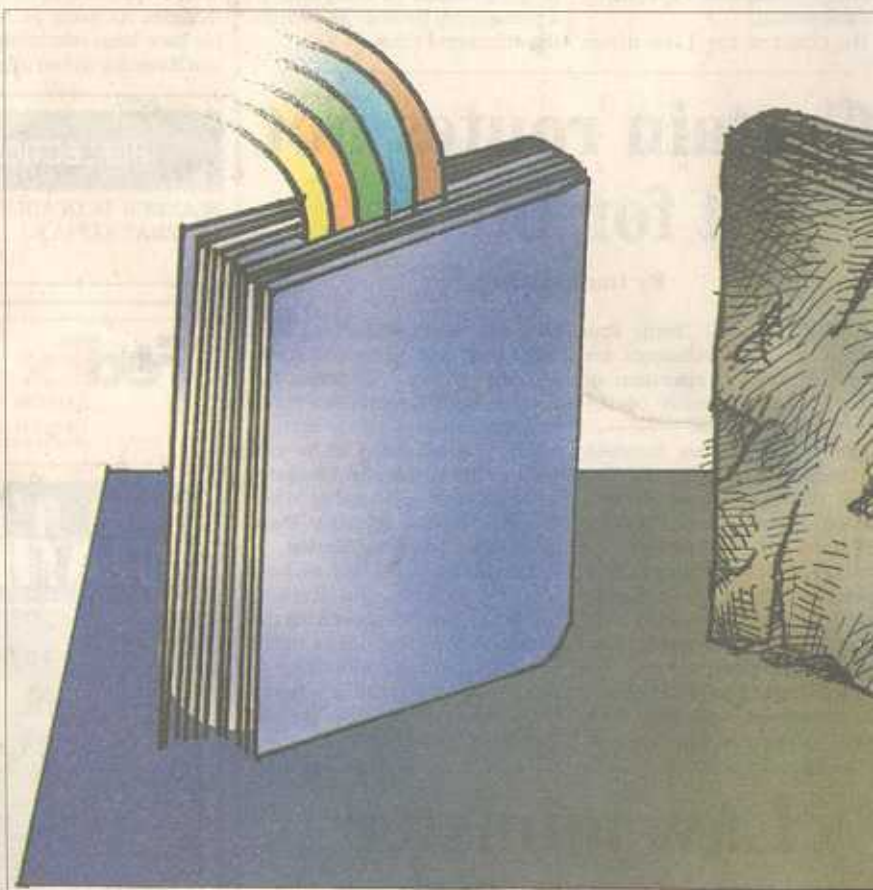
Nasra Wazir Ali, 16 schools of Karachi had together deliberated on the establishment of an independent examination board, and sent a proposal to the Aga Khan University for serving as that board. The falling standards and poor credibility of the local examination boards had made the matric (SSC) and intermediate (HSC) examinations untenable. Therefore, a reform process had to be initiated, so that the local examination boards could be revitalized and brought close to the standard of the overseas O-level examinations.

In 1998 a task force was constituted by

will serve as a catalyst for reforming the government examination boards). More importantly, it will have a long-term effect on the content of our textbooks, on the manner in which classroom instructions are carried out, in the manner in which students are prepared for demonstrating proficiency in the courses they complete, and in narrowing the gap between students taking matric and O-level examinations.

3. Alternative textbooks

The broad guidelines given by the curriculum wing of the ministry of education, Islamabad, to the provincial textbook



the Aga Khan, headed by Dr. Camar Vellani, which formalized the proposal and sent it to the education ministry in Islamabad for approval. In November this year, General Pervez Musharraf signed the proposal and issued the Aga Khan University Examination Board Ordinance 2002.

Under this ordinance, once it has been gazetted and external funding arranged for, the AKU will conduct matric and intermediate examinations with full professional credibility and transparency. Students from any school, including government schools, at an additional cost, will be able to sit for these examinations through this new board. The degree will be recognized not only by the local institutions but also by colleges abroad.

This heralds a new era in terms of providing a professionally sound and credible local examination board (which, in turn,

boards is so unimaginative and antithetical to children's interests that it can only promote an education which does not encourage curiosity, free inquiry and a spirit of investigation in young minds. There have been several unsuccessful attempts in the past to break the monopoly of the moribund textbook boards, and allow new ideas to flourish through the private sector.

Among the several good efforts on this account include that of the Book Group, the Human Rights Education Programme (HREP), the Oxford University Press (OUP) and the Punjab Middle Schooling Project (PMSP) of the Government of the Punjab. Since the early 1990s, the Book Group started developing and printing alternative textbooks for the teaching of Urdu and supplied them to schools across a cross-section of society. Today, over 120 titles (alternative textbooks along with