

Tackling the NWFP's high dropout and repetition rates

By Wahid Hussain

The problems confronted by the NWFP at the primary education level are similar to those faced by other provinces: limited access, low quality of education, and very high dropout and repetition rates.

The schools and literacy department of the province has recently put up a website (www.nwfp.edu.pk) which provides statistical data regarding schools from the primary up to the secondary level in the province. For the last few years, the primary education sector in NWFP has been in a state of flux. A number of reforms at various organizational levels have been initiated to make the system more efficient and responsive to contemporary needs.

The establishment of the website is one such initiative and will facilitate decision-making and planning. On it, one can find the complete details of all the province's primary and secondary school teachers. To strengthen the organizational focus on school level education, the department of education was split into two: the schools and literacy department and the higher education department under separate administrative secretaries.

At the provincial level, the twin directorates of primary and secondary education were merged while at the district and subdivision levels the duplicate male and female administrative offices were abolished and placed under the supervision of the executive district officers. The NWFP has 24 districts which meant that in the old set-up, there were 48 district education offices and more than 70 subdivision offices. Following devolution to local governments at the district level, this elaborate structure at the primary education level was dismantled.

The province's education department is the largest of all provincial departments, employing some 170,000 of the NWFP government's 295,000 employees. The education budget for 2003-04 is 25 per cent of the total budget and out of this 61 per cent has been allocated to the schools and literacy department.

According to the latest annu-



Illustration by Felica

al school census report, the total number of functional schools in the province is 21,992, of which only 7,440 are for girls. There are 60,446 primary school teachers and out of these 19,647 (less than a third) are female. The number of middle, high and higher secondary school teachers is 42,215. The government plans to recruit another 10,000 teachers this year with an additional cost of Rs 300 million. According to the 1998 census, the NWFP population was estimated at 18 million with an annual growth rate of 2.8 per cent. The figure crossed 20 million by the end of 2002, growing by at least half a million every year. The province has 3.5 million in the primary school-going age of 5-9 years. However, the number enrolled in government primary schools from kindergarten (called 'kachi') to Class V is 2,131,731. In fact, if one looks at girls separately the situation is much worse with only 37 per cent enrolled in primary school.

The gross enrolment ratio for boys 73 per cent and for girls 49 per cent. Surveys indicate that the gender gap is very large and found at all levels. What are the reasons for this lop-sided bias in favour of boys? The reasons are

obvious and known to most people: poverty, lack of conveniently located schools, lack of female teachers, and cultural bias and social taboos. No wonder the overall female literacy rate in the province is a pitiful 21 per cent. Research has demonstrated that primary education has the highest social return and that education of girls in particular brings down the population growth rate, improves basic child care, increases child immunization rates and decreases infant mortality rates.

The more disturbing statistics in the annual school census are the high dropout and repetition rates which stand at 43 per cent and 9 per cent respectively, over a six-year cycle of primary schooling. Low enrolments particularly in rural areas and high dropout and repeat rates also contribute hugely to increasing the cost of educating a child. It has been estimated that a one per cent increase in the dropout or repetition rate increases the cost of producing a primary school graduate by around Rs 630 and Rs 460 respectively. The dropout rate tends to be quite high at early level of primary schooling. It can be brought

down significantly if the Early Childhood Education (ECE) initiative — also a part of the national education policy and the much-touted education sector reforms — is implemented.

The national education policy (1998-2010) gives recognition to 'kachi' class as a substitute for early childhood education and has been linked to improved health, nutrition and activity-based learning for schoolchildren. The objective of the ECE scheme is to make the school environment more attractive and friendly by providing schools with equipment such as see-saws, monkey bars, swings, plastic bats and balls, colourfully illustrated books and so on. Several countries have achieved near 100 per cent primary enrolment and completion rates but we continue to lag far behind.

The primary education system can be made more efficient if the high dropout and repetition rates, that cause the cost of educating each child to rise sharply, were brought down. To achieve this, the authorities should introduce a policy of automatically promoting a child at the elementary level. This is the practice in most countries in the world and