**[Education plans: a suggestion](https://www.dawn.com/news/1689441/education-plans-a-suggestion)**

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PEOPLE are worried about the new government’s education plans. Will the Single National Curriculum be continued or shelved? Will we return to the old curriculum and the old books, or will the government create a new national curriculum? Will the government rebrand the SNC as a minimum standard curriculum and allow more flexibility to the provinces and schools to have greater variation around and beyond minimum standards?

All these options and more are open. Though there were initial indications that the SNC might not be continued, it now seems there may be a ‘conference’ to discuss and decide the issue and the way forward. These things are hard to decide in conferences. However, we await its outcome.

The stated objective of the SNC — the reduction of inequity in society generally, and particularly in education, is too big for an instrument like a single curriculum. There have been issues with the curriculum objectives as well as the books based on the SNC. There have been major issues of implementation too. These points have been made repeatedly. We look forward to hearing from the government how it plans to address these issues.

But, aside from the SNC, we need to have a much deeper and more foundational look at education issues. These issues are for the K-12 (kindergarten-Grade 12) sector as well as the higher education sector. I will come back to higher education issues another day.

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What do we as a nation want to achieve in the education sector over the next decade? Do we want all children to get 10 years of at least minimum quality education? This is the promise enshrined in the Constitution through Article 25-A added as part of the 18th Amendment. But no government has worked on this. Even today, we do not have universal primary enrolment or completion. Instead, we have very high dropout rates. By some estimates, about 20 million five- to 16-year-olds remain out of school. Do we want to make the promise of Article 25-A a reality?

Similarly, we have plenty of evidence that the majority of children in school in Pakistan — most of those enrolled in government schools and in low-fee private schools and madressahs, and these make up some 95 per cent of all children enrolled in schools in Pakistan — have to endure a poor quality of education. Plenty of test, examination and assessment results establish this fact. Do we want to prioritise the issue of quality of education?

I have little hesitation in saying that Pakistan has probably one of the most iniquitous and differentiated education system in the world. There are divisions based on the income of parents, gender, geography, caste, religion, culture, language, examination systems and books. What education a child gets, if she, indeed, gets any, depends on many or all these factors. Is creating equity a goal for society and state? This question is much bigger than the single national curriculum issue.

We know that Pakistan’s future depends on what happens to the children and youth of today. If they stay uneducated, unskilled and/or illiterate, the future — for them, their families and the country — cannot be bright. We have ambitions of development and achieving a sustainable high-growth trajectory. This cannot happen if the children today and those born in the next few years do not get quality education. No amount of short-term economic stability and/or level of support from other countries and multilaterals will put us on a medium- to long-run high-growth trajectory if we do not have human capital to underpin growth and sustain it.

So, if the answers to the questions here are in the affirmative, we have a lot of work to do. How are we going to move from where we are in, say, a five-to-10-year period, to where we want to be? That will require a lot of planning, commitment and support and it has to come from all areas of society.

But this task is beyond what one government can take up. It requires prioritisation, agreement and attention from successive governments. It is an agreement that society and state have to drive. The PML-N and its coalition cannot do it — not only because there is uncertainty about how long this government is going to stay but because there is also a need for a broader consensus.

What can be suggested is that this government should set up a commission for creating this commitment. This should be a high-powered commission but one with a clear end date of 12 to 18 months. The terms of reference should be simple. The commission should work out our educational priorities for the next 10 years and provide a plan for how these priorities can be actualised. It should also provide a way for reaching consensus in society regarding the commitment to these priorities and the need for implementing them. It is thus important that the commission have eminent educationists and representatives of all mainstream schools of thought as its members. The commission should have experts but the report of the commission — and this should be a task for the commission before it is disbanded — should have the endorsement of all mainstream political parties. The education issue must be above partisan and party-based debate.

Education issues are too broad and deep and too important for our survival as a nation to be left to one government, one party or even to be left at the party level. To address the issues, a government must establish a body that allows dialogue to happen across political lines. A commission with specific terms of reference and a timeline might be one way to start this dialogue. I hope the current government gives the issue some thought.

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