[**Education priorities**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1685106/education-priorities)

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DURING the years that Shehbaz Sharif was chief minister in Punjab, especially in the 2013-2018 period, there was a lot of emphasis on improving the quality of service delivery in two sectors: health and education. The education sector saw significant inputs in the areas of school infrastructure improvement, changes in teacher recruitment methods, higher grades/salaries for teachers, emphasis on monitoring and evaluations to improve student and teacher attendance, school enrolment drives and, towards the end of the period, there was some emphasis on the quality of education.

Educational outcomes did show improvements in a number of important variables. Student and teacher attendance became better. Some of the learning outcomes also showed some improvements. But, most importantly, the emphasis that education got from the chief minister’s office, and hence the chief secretary’s office, made achieving the educational target a very important goal for deputy commissioners and district educational authorities. Some of these practices, like periodic stocktakes, have become a regular practice at the district level. In a way, district authorities, for the first time, came to know how targets are set (though this was done from Lahore) and how accountability functions with setting the target.

Former chief minister Usman Buzdar did not accord the same priority to education as did Shehbaz Sharif. The chief minister office’s stocktakes went away. Though systems have remained in place and there is some emphasis still on district-level stocktakes, the pressure that was there to meet educational targets subsided after the change of government. Shehbaz Sharif is the prime minister now. It is not clear how long this coalition government is going to last. But potentially, it could stay for more than a year before the next elections.

Education is a devolved subject so Shehbaz Sharif cannot carry out the kind of programme in education that he could as chief minister of Punjab. But education still needs the kind of emphasis and urgency that he was able to create for it as chief minister. He really needs to bring that kind of energy to education at the federal level as well.

There are many issues in education that need the prime minister’s immediate attention.

A lot of time and effort has been spent by the previous government on the Single National Curriculum. A single national curriculum does not make sense for a child population that is as diverse as in Pakistan. Setting of standards and ensuring a minimum level of quality of education for each and every child is important. The prime minister needs to ensure that the SNC is reoriented in the direction of setting standards and maintaining quality.

But an even bigger issue that the federal government could help provinces think through is the issue of out-of-school children. By some estimates, some 20 million-odd children, between the ages of five and 16 years are out of school in Pakistan. Can the federation come up with some collaborative programmes with the provinces to start tackling the issue of out-of-school children? If we are going to tackle an issue as large as this, we need buy-in from the very top and we need the kind of energy and administrative acumen that Shehbaz Sharif showed in Punjab to be able to push this issue to the top of the education agenda for the country. Right now, the PPP is a part of the coalition as well. If there is a commitment to tackle the issue of out-of-school children from the prime minister, and if he can take some coalition partners along with him on this commitment, even though this government might only be around for a year, the conversations and possibly the programming that they start might continue to shape things for subsequent governments as well.

There are many issues in education that need immediate attention. But if the prime minister can focus on out-of-school children and on setting minimum standards for quality and ensuring the implementation of these measures, it would be a more than worthwhile agenda to have on the school education front for this government.

The other important area in education that needs the prime minister’s immediate attention is higher education. The Higher Education Commission has not been functioning for the last 18 months or so. The PTI government handled HEC issues very poorly. The presidential ordinances have undermined the authority and work of the HEC substantially. The battle to get the incumbent chair out and to install other favoured people in the HEC has made the commission completely non-functional. This needs to end. The HEC Act needs to be restored. And the commission needs to be reconstituted. The chair, whether it is the incumbent or someone else, needs to come in with a fresh mandate and legitimacy and with the backing of a new commission. The current commission has too many internal divisions and cannot function effectively. This can be done easily and needs to be done fairly quickly. One hopes the prime minister will look into the HEC’s issues soon.

Shehbaz Sharif has many years of experience of managing a province and he has a reputation as an effective administrator. The specific programmes that were implemented at the provincial level cannot and should not be transplanted to the federal level. But his administrative experience and energy will be needed. This coalition government might not have much time before the next election comes around and there are a lot of issues that are demanding immediate attention from the new prime minister. But, hopefully, he will be able to give some attention to education issues as well. And in this field, if he only starts to tackle the larger issues of out-of-school children and set minimum quality standards for education at the school education level, as well as reset the HEC at the higher education level, it would be contribution enough.

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