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**Eliminating private school competition**

Our politicians are fond of portraying themselves as populists by brushing aside concerns of private school going children with the argument that those are the concerns of a small elite.

Contrary to this characterization, 41 percent of students in Pakistan attended private schools in 2016-17. Even in the poorest households in Punjab, one in five opt to pay for private schools over public schools where the option exists. While the state has failed to deliver on children’s right to an education in terms of access and quality, the private sector is picking up a lot of that slack - there are 120,273 private education institutions in Pakistan, about 37 percent of the total.

Development of the Single National Curriculum, in partial fulfilment of the PTI’s pre-election education policy, has been chugging along since this government came into power in 2018. Early on, the stated goal of the SNC was the “elimination of class differences” and the disbanding of parallel and competing school systems.

Among the early key features of the SNC being reiterated in public appearances and debate were: 1) A switch to Urdu as the medium of instruction, up to high-school and, longer-term, in higher education; 2) mandatory enforcement of the SNC (and textbooks) in madrassahs, public and private schools; and 3) eventually, a single examination system, putting an end to internationally recognized alternatives widely offered by private schools – Cambridge IGCSE, O/A-levels, International Baccalaureate.

Reporting on the SNC was sporadic in the early period, but in Spring 2020, the leak forced the Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training (MOFEPT) to release the SNC for primary school grades, which had been developed without any public input. It was a kick in the head for the public that had not been paying any attention. Even then there was no shortage of party-loyalists cheering on the SNC.

As news finally began paying attention and public pressure and criticism began to build, the government had to climb down from that last claim; Minister MOFEPT Shafqat Mahmood had to announce that private schools teaching students for foreign examinations would be allowed to continue to teach their own curricula, as long as the SNC would be its subset. Private school parents heaved a sigh of relief; That would make only madressahs and public schools casualties of the SNC.

By summer end, the primary school SNC was declared finalized and the process of preparing ‘model textbooks’ had begun. Phase 1 of the SNC, covering primary school grades, will come into effect in the coming school year. February is upon us, exams have been pushed to May/June. Next academic year will start in August; yet, neither the schools nor the public has seen these new textbooks that promise to employ discovery-based learning and will foster creativity, problem solving and critical thinking.

The SNC effort is being spearheaded by the MOFEPT; however, education being a provincial matter post the 18th Amendment, provinces are free to develop their own textbooks and decide for themselves what medium of instruction to use.

Punjab has jumped on the SNC train. The Punjab Curriculum and Textbook Board (PCTB) has approved adoption of 30 model textbooks for primary schools (14 in English and 16 in Urdu) and has mandated that they be used by not just public but private schools as well. The PCTB also announced that schools will not be granted early access to new books. There is a vague commitment to establish an as of yet unspecified process for approving other textbooks for the 2022-23 school year, which will be notified at an unspecified later date. However, for 2021-22, all schools will be forced to use government textbooks, without exception.

Schools opting to use supplementary online teaching resources will need prior approval, too. Furthermore, inexplicably, the minutes expressly forbid the use of textbooks for computer studies, robotics, etc, and classify them as ‘supplementary reading.’

Put simply, the PCTB has tossed a live grenade into the private school sector; Textbooks are not ready, have not been shared with schools, and neither public nor private schools will be permitted to use any other textbooks.

A private school principal I talked to shared that they plan eight months ahead of the new academic year. At the moment, private primary schools do not know what they will be teaching next year, they have not been consulted or have seen the textbooks for the coming year. Publishers are not allowed to supply schools with other textbooks which are now, in effect, banned. Realizing this, the start of the next school year has been delayed to August.

SNC model textbooks for all subjects are either being prepared in English or in Urdu. The guiding principle here has been to keep Science, Math and English in English, while switching all other subjects to Urdu. That means that English-medium schools will now have to teach General Knowledge and Social Studies in Urdu. What arrangements have been made to accommodate international students or Pakistani children who have returned from overseas, however many there may be?

The PCTB has also resolved that it will approve in-house textbooks developed by schools prior to their inclusion in school curriculum and that it will take legal action against schools found teaching unapproved textbooks.

A couple of big textbook publishers I talked to shared that the cost of getting approval for a textbook from authorities may be around Rs. 150,000 per book. With multiple subjects and grade levels, that upfront cost becomes prohibitive for many small publishers. Any additional costs to the publisher will eventually be paid by parents. Adding costs and making publishers jump through hoops will reduce the number of textbooks available for schools to choose from.

Some view this as an excuse to weed out competition from small publishers from the lucrative textbook market. Many private schools that charge upwards of Rs4,000 per month rely on these textbooks. Moreover, in the past, securing an NoC for a book has taken as long as 2-3 years.

Phase 2 and Phase 3 will cover middle and high school grades and will come into effect in 2022 and 2023, respectively. Primary school grades may seem like many years away from high-school grades, but the foundations for doing well in Cambridge exams and IB can be built or ruined in those early years.

The public school system is so weak and its reputation so poor that even lower middle-class households are willing to pay to escape it. Yet, at least Punjab will be forcibly holding back all students for at least the coming school year. Historically, Punjab has been at the forefront of educational reforms among provinces in Pakistan, but for once other provinces would do well to hang back, watch and learn from the train wreck they are about to witness.

A key finding of the Learning and Educational Achievement in Pakistan Schools (LEAPS) study is that the gap in learning outcomes between private and public schools is 8-18 times the gap between socioeconomic backgrounds. According to ASER 2016, only 29.3 percent of children at grade 3 level can do 2-digit subtraction, only 14.7 percent can read a sentence in English, and only 41.6 percent can read a sentence in Urdu/Pushto/Sindhi at the same grade level.

Essentially, if a child drops out of grade 3 today, he or she will most likely not be functionally literate or numerate. Despite all reform efforts, learning levels have not seen any significant change for the better in the past two decades. Elite or not, do any of these learning levels justify the government's obsession with handicapping students willing and able to appear in international high school exams?

It is beyond my comprehension how a government can turn all (primary) school education upside down in such a cavalier manner, without engaging stakeholders, without forethought or planning, just for the apparent purpose of a political win for the 2023 election campaign.

Why is it that in Pakistan smoking, which is proven to be harmful for health, remains an available choice and cigarettes just get a warning label slapped on them? But when it comes to education, the same people are deemed unfit to make a choice about what curriculum or medium of instruction their children’s school should follow. It is time for parents, particularly whose children attend private schools, to exercise their activism for issues beyond tuition fee hikes, but for quality and choice in school education.

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