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**Holding up half the sky**

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In the global fight against illiteracy, there is some good news. Enrollment rates are rising worldwide. Here, in Pakistan, enrollment rates in primary schools have broken through 95 percent. But there is a caveat – learning levels have stagnated.

The Centre for Economic Research in Pakistan (CERP) conducted the Learning and Educational Achievements in Pakistan Schools (LEAPS) study in 2008 and surveyed student achievement levels in Math, English and Urdu of third graders. The results were both disappointing and eye-opening. In Math, only 47 percent students could answer simple counting questions, only 32 percent could subtract 3-digit numbers and only 19 percent could divide a 3-digit by a 1-digit number.

In English, only 11 percent could form a coherent and grammatically correct sentence using the word ‘school’ and only 20 percent could spell the word ‘girl.’

In Urdu, only 31 percent could form a coherent and grammatically correct sentence using the word ‘school’; 30 percent could answer basic questions after reading a short paragraph; and only 12 percent were able to pluralize a given word.

If you think 2008 was too far back in the past, consider the ASER study conducted in 2016 which surveyed learning achievement in the same three subjects. Less than 30 percent of students could do 2-digit subtraction, less than 15 percent could read a sentence in English and less than 42 percent could read a sentence in either Urdu, Pashto or Sindhi. What this means is that a student that drops out of Grade 3 is functionally illiterate.

Between 2000 and 2015, 69 policy reforms were passed nationally and in Punjab – covering everything from teachers, basic inputs, school finance, school autonomy & accountability, student assessments, private sector engagement, early childhood development and school health and school meals.

Despite that, data shows that from 2004, to 2006, to 2011, the performance of public school students in Math, English and Urdu assessments has not budged. The same analysis on private schools between 2004 and 2014 shows very small improvements.

Nevertheless, LEAPS data shows that private school children perform better than their public school peers. The median percentage of correct answers given by public school children in Math, English and Urdu range between 25 and 35 percent. For private school children the range of median scores for the same subjects is between 40 and 50 percent. Another study showed that the gap in learning outcomes between private and public schools is between 8 and 18 times larger than the gap between students from rich and poor socioeconomic backgrounds. As a qualifier, let me add that this does not mean that every private school outperforms every public school. We are looking at aggregate statistics here. The bottom line is that, on average, private schools are outperforming public schools by significant margins.

If you go by the noises coming out of the ministry and departments of education lately, you might think that greedy private schools are the culprits and stand to blame for many of society’s ills. The concerns of private schools – all private schools – are swept aside as the interests of a small elite. How much truth is in these statements?

Let us consider some big numbers from a 2016 LEAPS survey. Of all the 47.5 million school going children, 42 percent (nearly half!) attend private schools. Of the 303,446 schools in the country, 37 percent (more than a third) are private. Of the poorest households in Punjab, one in five pays for (low-cost) private school education where the option exists.

A survey of rural areas in the Faisalabad-Gujranwala-Sialkot region shows that 40 percent schools charge a monthly tuition fee of less than Rs400, 34 percent charge between Rs400 and Rs600, only 15 percent between Rs600 and Rs800 and only 11 percent more than Rs800. So much for the private school-going elite. If we draw the line for low-cost at a tuition fee of Rs800 per month, that means 89 percent of private schools, in that area at least, are low-cost.

The myth that private school goers are ‘the elite’ must be put to rest. If it was not for private schools, almost half the school children in this country would not have a school to go to. Private schools are providing a vital service that the state has failed to provide for the last 75 years, and generally of better quality too. To borrow part of Mao Zedong’s phrase, private schools hold up half the sky in Pakistan.

Left to the federal and provincial governments, the rate at which new public schools are being set up – and given our population growth rate of around two percent – it would take many decades for public schools to bridge the supply-demand gap, if at all. The good news is that the private sector is willing and able to assist in meeting that demand. According to the 2016 LEAPS, Punjab alone saw the establishment of 66,000 new private schools, which is 66,000 schools that the government of Punjab now need not establish.

In recent months, government officials have been happily pointing at figures that show an increase in enrollment in public schools. It is worth investigating the reason behind these rising enrollment numbers, because a more than likely cause is private schools going out of business during the pandemic. There is already some anecdotal evidence of that happening. Some schools that received threats during the darkest days of Pakistan’s fight against the TTP but made it through those days have succumbed to Covid school closings. According to a news report that appeared in this paper on January 17, some 300 low-fee private schools had to shut their doors due to pandemic-induced financial constraints in Karachi alone.

It is less disruptive and less expensive in the long run to keep existing schools afloat financially than to let them close, and raise new ones again later. Private schools have been asking for state support in the form of low-interest or interest-free loans – but none came. Such support would have trickled down to schoolteachers and staff salaries and served the dual purpose of providing economic stimulus.

In addition to leaving private schools to their own devices, there are parts also where federal and provincial governments are overregulating. For example, in Punjab the rollout of the Single National Curriculum (SNC) is disruptive and is forcing all schools, public and private, to use SNC model textbooks for the coming school year.

The landscape I presented above is stitched together from a handful of credible sources, including CERP’s LEAPS study. The reason I must rely on independent studies for such basic figures is that the government lacks basic data about private schools operating nationwide, similar to the lack of madressah registration data. Sindh recently began a census to document the education landscape in the province. However, when it comes to a lot of essential data, the rest of the country is flying blind. It ought to document and map the private-school sector before coming down on it with constrictive regulations.

Contrary to how some government departments and politicians have been characterizing private schools as the root cause of social class differences – even treating them with disdain in some cases – they ought to show them some gratitude. For decades, private schools have been picking up the slack public schools could not, and been doing a better job at it too. That makes private schools partners in the government's efforts to provide schooling for all, not rivals.

I would like to conclude my argument by recounting a conversation I had with the headteacher of a public primary school. The headteacher was complaining to me about a newly opened NGO-run community school in their vicinity. It had the effect of siphoning off their students to the point where they were left with an overall enrollment of only 42 students. Their solution was that the NGO’s community school move out to some remote, underserved location away from them. Private schools do not exist to fill in for state schools – the opposite should be the case. Private schools, nonprofit and for-profit, will operate where it is feasible and/or profitable for them.

Instead of wishing away or handicapping private school competition by over-regulation (for example, by forcing its own textbooks on them), the state ought to be thankful to the private sector for easing its burden. It would do well to get its own schools in order and become competitive.