[**On autopilot**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1723181/on-autopilot)

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‘AUTOPILOTING’, in everyday terminology, is to rely on and trust an object’s functional accuracy to perform as needed. An example is a plane in which aircraft systems ensure that a flight plan is followed, speed and height are stabilised and the direction maintained, without direct pilot control. However, human backup is there in case the mechanical autopilot malfunctions.

In social terms, autopilot could be used to describe trust in a system and leaving it to the latter’s predefined capability to achieve the target. The critical question is whether, in the absence of clearly defined procedures, roles, monitoring, checks and balances and accountability mechanisms, the goal can be met.

Education, as a social endeavour in Pakistan, if analysed using the autopilot analogy, is easy to grasp. Any education system is defined and redefined through certain measures. The enactment of legislation by lawmakers, strategic direction and policy formulation by policymakers, and planning and implementation with integrated monitoring and evaluation by those tasked to enforce them, are examples of such measures.

Legislation appears to be the key force behind educational ambitions. Legal parameters are established to pursue the goals while avoiding divergence from the law so that the desired impact can be achieved. However, it is a fact that the formulation of laws in Pakistan is generally considered the ultimate solution, and as in other sectors, the gap between education laws and their implementation is widening with the passage of time.

There is no certainty in our education system.

In the legislative arena, for example, with the passage of the 18th Constitutional Amendment, the curriculum became a provincial subject, but has been developed by the National Curriculum Council under the watch of the Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training, aka the Ministry of Education before the amendment. Moving a step ahead, the NCC took on the responsibility of developing textbooks, even though this was not the case before the 18th Amendment, when the curriculum was a central subject. Though they are developed as model textbooks, they are by no means justifiable under the 18th Amendment.

Similarly, access to education under the Constitution’s Article 25-A and the provincial right-to-education acts make education a fundamental human right that is free for all children from ages five to 16 years. Despite these laws, public sector education has costs. For example, examination boards, as autonomous bodies, charge fees under different heads. These can include the examination fee, the late examination fee, DMC charges over and above the actual amount, DMC reprint charges, etc. In some provinces, Grade 5 and Grade 8 examinations have also been standardised and made compulsory, with students charged for examinations and certificates. Is school education actually free, and isn’t charging such fees a divergence from the law?

The implementation of policies devised in line with legislative obligations is still a pipe dream. Policies on teachers’ professional development in some of the provinces, for example, has been revisited several times. In one province, a policy is being formed to waive the requirement of professional qualification for teachers’ appointments, and instead, to provide short-term in-service courses to become ‘true’ professionals. Imagine appointing a doctor without an MBBS degree or a lawyer without an LLB degree and building their capacity through a short course once they enter the profession. This shows the worth of education in the eyes of the policymakers.

Also, in most scenarios, we witness the emergence of new plans that cancel the previous ones, causing serious uncertainties at the implementation level. A follow-up on the implementation of a plan took evaluators by surprise when respondents linked ineffective implementation with uncertainty, as a new notification could render the existing plan obsolete at any point. The approach was that there was no need to be serious about the implementation of the current plan. Similarly, we have witnessed frequent transfers and postings of education officials, despite clearly defined procedures regarding such administrative changes.

Thanks to the uncertainty of long-term and sustainable reforms, our public education system has been put on autopilot. We are made to believe that legislation, policymaking and plan development are what is required. However, the implementation is lacking. The reason? Because implementing a plan that could make a difference in the lives of common citizens would hinder the privileges of our elite and their progeny. Our public education system has been adjusted in a way that passengers believe they are flying, but only end up at the point where they commenced their journey.

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