[**Our failure to educate**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1727670/our-failure-to-educate)

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IN my [previous column](https://www.dawn.com/news/1725278/what-we-need-to-grow) I briefly described five out of six pillars required of a new social contract that delivers growth and development. They were population planning, local government autonomy, fiscal and exchange rate policies leading to low budget deficits and balanced current accounts, change of policy away from import substitution to export promotion, and finally, improvement in agricultural yields that increase incomes of the rural poor.

My sixth pillar for growth is education. Let’s review some statistics that make clear the abysmal states of our literacy and education.

The federal and provincial governments together spend about Rs1,000 billion on education annually. That’s almost twice the cost of running the civilian federal government and by far the biggest item after defence and debt-servicing. And that’s just public-sector spending.

Private spending is more than this number. And what do we get from all this money? Nothing.

Unfortunately, 75 years after independence, almost four in 10 Pakistanis remain illiterate, consigned to a life of hardship and poverty. Worse still, literacy rate isn’t even improving.

In 2020, our net enrolment rate in primary schools was only 64 per cent — down from 67pc in 2015. Punjab and Balochistan maintained their ratios at 70pc and 56pc respectively. Yet Sindh’s net enrolment actually went down from 61pc to 55pc and KP’s ratio (even excluding the former tribal agencies) went down from 71pc to 66pc. Half of all school-aged children are not in school.

No amount of money will improve our education outcomes under the existing system.

Punjab spends about Rs31,000 per child annually in its government schools, KP spends Rs38,000, Sindh Rs40,000 and Balochistan Rs61,000. And for all this money, what do we get?

A [study](https://www.aku.edu/news/Pages/News_Details.aspx?nid=NEWS-002679) conducted by Aga Khan University across Pakistan showed that the average score of our students in science and mathematics was a failing grade. Only 5pc of the kids in Class 8 could answer a simple arithmetic question and just 10pc could answer a basic science question.

Most kids in Class 5 read and do sums at the level of pupils in Class 1. Which is to say that these kids, after five years in school, are functionally innumerate and illiterate. Hence, if truth be told, we get nothing from the money we spend on education.

It’s fair to say that provincial education ministries — especially in Sindh and Balochistan — are not set up to educate kids. Their primary purpose seems to be to provide jobs to teachers and benefit administrators. Education is a mere byproduct.

Although we don’t spend enough on education, no amount of money will improve our education outcomes under the existing system. To improve education outcomes in Pakistan, we must shut down this system of patronage and build anew.

Where possible we should privatise and intelligently regulate education and empower parents in the running of schools. Of course, governments should fund the education of all poor children, which is a basic right of citizens.

Many different approaches are possible, one of which I present here. First we should give a voucher to every poor child to attend at least a low-cost private school.

All private schools should be required to have parents on an advisory board. Second, in rural areas, if there are no private schools, government schools should be handed over to local school boards composed of parents and local elders, and governments should continue funding those schools.

Each school should have the right to hire and fire its own teachers. Thus we will have teachers who are actually qualified and responsible for teaching, and finally our kids will become well educated.

But we need to do more. I have written earlier that only 30,000 or so children in the A-level stream get a proper education and are able to compete globally. These aren’t the smartest kids, just the luckiest.

Sure, a few of these kids would be among the smartest ones — such as Harvard professor Asim Khawaja, Princeton professor Atif Mian and MIT professor Nergis Mavalvala — but fully half of them will also be below average. Given that we are a resource-constrained, poor country, how should we prioritise education spending?

Just as the elite educate their children (especially boys) well, knowing this to be a great investment for their families’ future, so we as a nation would do well to carry out diagnostic tests and pick out the smartest eighth graders and give them the best education. This would be the best investment we can make for our future.

A friend and an excellent civil servant Rashid Langrial has worked out a scheme for finding raw talent across Pakistan and building Daanish-like schools in every tehsil. But given our limited resources we should at least pick 10,000 to 20,000 kids annually in Class 8 and send them to the existing best private schools and universities.

These smart kids would then form the basis of a smart, well-educated generation on which we can compete with the rest of the world.

Some of us bemoan the fact that our IT exports are only $3bn but India’s are $150bn. Many entrepreneurs ask our government to provide better incentives. Yet our tax on IT exports is only 0.25pc of revenues. We have also given a host of other incentives to the industry.

But no amount of incentives can make us an IT export powerhouse; the only thing that can produce IT exports is better education. But have we been able to produce qualified human resources in IT or any other field?

India set up its first Indian Institute of Technology in 1951, and set up four more in the next decade. These institutions today are considered some of the best undergraduate teaching institutions in the world. We on the other hand went through seven prime ministers in our first decade.

I will end with a prediction that may show the way to progress. If we can design a system whereby a girl from the urban slums or rural areas of Pakistan can grow up to teach in a Pakistani university and win the Fields Medal in mathematics, we will never again have to worry about abject poverty or foreign exchange reserves.

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