**Reinventing basic education**

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Wednesday, Feb 21, 2024

In Pakistan, there is a rare consensus across political divides and among citizens concerning the dire state of education. Whether it is primary, secondary, or tertiary education, the system’s deficiencies are glaring.

At present, there are a staggering 20 million children out of school, representing 40 per cent of the school-going age group. Also, there are nearly 20 million children who attend public-sector schools or low-quality private schools, where learning outcomes are far from satisfactory.

The literacy rate in Pakistan remains stagnant at 58 per cent, compared to 78 per cent in India and 75 per cent in Bangladesh. Despite the insertion of Article 25A through the 18th Amendment, which made it a constitutional obligation of the state to provide compulsory free education to all citizens aged five to 15, Pakistan continues to lag behind.

According to the World Economic Forum’s Global Human Capital Report 2017, Pakistan ranks 125 out of 130 countries in terms of education and skill development.

Failures in the education system persist despite significant empowerment through the 18th Amendment and the transfer of major resources to the provinces through the seventh National Finance Commission Award. While the rest of the world strides into the fourth Industrial Revolution in the age of artificial intelligence in the 21st century, Pakistan still struggles and will majorly lag behind the targets set by the UN’s Sustainable Development Goal 4 on education by 2030.

The current centralized and bureaucratic government school system that manages approximately over 115,000 schools by federal and four provincial governments has proven to be totally ineffective, largely due to inherent limitations in public-sector governance and the reluctance of federal and provincial authorities to instigate meaningful change.

Administrative and financial powers are centralized in distant federal and provincial capitals, leading to disconnected decision-making. Political appointments dominate positions of authority, with bureaucrats lacking long-term commitment to education, hindering sustainable progress.

Governance is hampered by bureaucratic red tape, outdated manual communication methods and a complete lack of accountability. Centralized decision-making processes, coupled with ineffective communication systems, stifle innovation and policy implementation.

The existing archaic system of budgeting and release of funds, with no linkage to performance or outcomes, results in a huge waste of resources. There is absolutely no system of accountability, whereby the political leadership and bureaucrats are held to account for poor outcomes or for not meeting even reasonable targets and conversely rewarding better performance.

There have been several education policies and plans, but the results have rarely matched targets, and despite non-performance, no one has ever been held accountable. The customers (parents and students) have no choice or say in the system, and are ignored in policy- and decision-making.

Clearly, if Pakistan has to progress, it must aim to substantially improve its learning outcomes in basic education to ensure that its youth is well-equipped to progress and compete in the new world. For this, we have to accept the reality that business-as-usual which has not worked for over seven decades will not work.

Therefore, it is not difficult to conclude that the existing business-as-usual approach to education will not deliver any tangible results.

In order to bring about a positive change for moving towards universal education that leads to significant improvement in the quality of our human capital, the most important asset of the country, and to achieving targets of UN sustainable development goals on education, the following strategy is proposed for consideration of new governments that are about to be formed post February 8 elections:

Charter of education: A national consensus among political parties is imperative to declare an education emergency, prioritizing funding and focusing on improving learning outcomes. This would signify a critical commitment to elevate education as a national priority, akin to the Charter of Democracy already signed between two major political parties.

Raising budget allocation to 5.0 per cent of the GDP: Gradually raise budget allocation for education from the current low of 2.0 per cent to 5.0 per cent of the GDP over five years, starting at 2.5 per cent in year 1 and incrementally increasing each year.

This incremental approach is necessary to accommodate the country’s economic realities while signalling a firm commitment to enhancing focus and resources for education.

Public funding private execution: It is proposed that all expansion in basic education should be through successful public-private partnership models like the Punjab Education Foundation (PEF) and the Sindh Education Foundation (SEF), which have demonstrated improved outcomes and cost-effectiveness.

The basic concept of these models entails payment of the cost of education by the state to private schools only if such schools are providing quality education to the children with robust monitoring mechanisms.

Therefore, the investment is made directly in learning outcomes, rather than paying salaries to teachers and other staff irrespective of learning outcomes. There are two major benefits of adopting this strategy: a) cost per child under this system reduces significantly to one-fourth in the case of Sindh and one-third in the case of Punjab. For instance, in the case of the SEF, the cost per child per month comes to Rs1,200 compared to over Rs4,800, and b) learning outcomes of private schools funded by the SEF were found to be 100 per cent better than that of the schools run by the Sindh government’s school education department, and the same principle applies in the case of the PEF in Punjab.

Leveraging this public-private partnership approach can enhance efficiency and innovation in delivering quality education, given the right governance and robust accountability mechanisms which must be established in such organizations.

Education departments, due to the inherent limitations described above, are the root cause of the poor state of education. Consequently, governance in education needs a radical overhaul by transforming school education departments into corporate entities named basic education organizations (BSOs).

These BSOs should be overseen by a board comprising appropriately qualified and dedicated individuals, including independent professionals, education experts, corporate leaders, and government officials.

BSOs must be guided by a clear objective of enhancing learning outcomes in public-sector schools, utilizing necessary human capital and enabling technologies, and employing professional management practices that include appraisal systems and oversight of schools and teachers. This structural overhaul is essential to break free from bureaucratic inertia and foster a culture of performance-driven governance.

Developing a comprehensive five-year national education plan with quarterly targets, publicly reporting outcomes, and updating the plan annually based on experience and emerging technologies is necessary. This iterative approach ensures adaptability and responsiveness to evolving educational needs and challenges.

Furthermore, there should be periodic third-party audits and reviews of governance and outcomes of aforementioned institutions undertaken by reputed organizations which must be made public.

Finally, the most critical reform needed to enhance learning outcomes is to increase investment in teachers. This includes ensuring merit-based recruitment, offering market-based salaries, implementing continuous professional development programmes, fostering innovation in teaching methodologies, leveraging enabling technologies, and establishing accountability measures for outcomes.

However, these reforms are unlikely to be effectively implemented by education departments alone due to the inherent limitations outlined earlier. Therefore, governments should explore the options of leveraging the private sector and remunerating based on outcomes, a concept referred to as public funding for private execution.

Models such as the Punjab Education Foundation (PEF) and the Sindh Education Foundation (SEF), which are widely recognized as exemplary public-private partnership models, are well-suited to achieve these objectives.

Improving basic education is pivotal for Pakistan’s progress in the 21st century. By embracing bold reforms and prioritizing learning outcomes, Pakistan can chart a path towards achieving universal education and enhancing the quality of its human resources, thereby laying the foundation for sustainable development and growth.

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