

# Ghost schools arithmetic

By Naeem Sadiq

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THERE is finally some good news regarding the issue of ghost schools in Sindh. On April 5, 2009 the miscreants who had occupied the Shaheed Zulfikar Ali Bhutto School at Goth Qaim Kharrul of the Dadu district decided to move out.

After remaining closed for 27 long years, the school opened its gates to the children of the area. What happened to the two or three generations of children who were deprived of education may be explained by the many gun-toting 14-year-olds freely roaming around in the town.

Kudos to Sindh's education ministry. One was expecting a special newspaper supplement (paid for by taxpayers' money) with large photographs of Shaheed Benazir Bhutto and smaller photographs of the education minister announcing this titanic favour to the people of Goth Qaim Kharrul. After all, with the 'de-ghosting' of one school, we have only 6,479 more ghost schools to worry about. Simple arithmetic tells us that if we continue at this rate it will take us exactly 6,479 more years to eliminate all of them. While we seem to be moving in the right direction, it is vital that we assess the dynamics of this phenomenon which may help expedite the process.

Ghost schools fall under numerous categories. Some were constructed not for the sake of children but as money-making endeavours for those involved in unscrupulous activities. Then there are schools located in far-flung or unattractive locations. Children may be willing to go to these but teachers want to avoid them. Also local influential people often find various ways of making use of these vacant buildings. This utilisation ranges from turning them into cattle pens, camps for flood-affected people, fodder storage centres and *autags* (guest houses).

If one goes by government records, most of these schools appear to be functioning whereas in reality the schools are closed and used for other activities. The teachers employed for these schools stay at home or pursue other gainful professions. The entire process is facilitated by bribing the concerned superiors to ensure 'round-the-year uninterrupted payment of salaries (UPS)'.

Readers who peruse news articles know that over the past many years, education ministers have given different figures for the number of ghost schools in the province. This number varies from 5,000 to 7,700. Despite the argument that it is not a good idea to take foreign funding for merely counting our schools, the World Bank-supported Sindh

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A World Bank-aided project has come out with an exact figure for ghost schools in Sindh. It is 6,480.

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Reform Support Unit has finally come out with an exact figure of 6,480 ghost schools in the province. (List displayed at [www.accountability-watch.org](http://www.accountability-watch.org) under the caption 'The Ghost Schools'.)

Assuming that this is the accurate and final figure, the education ministry needs to come out with the list of teachers who received salaries and the details of disbursement of funds to these schools over the years. Clearly both the education department and the local politicians are to be blamed for this despicable combination of incompetence and corruption. The people of Pakistan have a right to know where and why their money is being pilfered and misused. Can the guilty be called any different from those who bomb girls' schools in Swat?

Action can be taken to put an immediate end to this 'ghostly' phenomenon. The government should stop giving funds to ghost schools even if the recipients are their supporters. It should hold all concerned officials of the education department accountable for being a party to this. If this is not done, the disease will promptly reappear and the schools will be reoccupied.

Student truancy-monitoring systems are in place in schools in many western countries. These can track and report the absence of a student not only for the day but even one period. The least we can do is to be able to track the presence of teachers and students. Why can't the province of Sindh place all facts and information relating to all its schools on a website? This could include the names of schools and teachers, addresses, number of students, number of classrooms, yearly expenses, academic performance assessments and other relevant information.

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Community-based school monitoring and reporting systems could be instituted. Any citizen should be able to file a complaint about the absence of teachers or if any other irregularity is found. The education department's budget for placing political advertisements should instead be spent on informing citizens on how they can monitor their local schools and make a complaint through an email, phone call, fax or letter.

Key performance indicators need to be created and reported by each school every month. The current method of school inspection and monitoring has collapsed and needs to be completely revamped. A public debate should be initiated and a consensus should be reached on how to address the issue and prevent functional schools from becoming ghost schools in the future. Can we ever compensate those thousands of children whose future has been destroyed because we siphoned millions from the state exchequer — funds and resources that were intended to keep schools functional for them? The guilty must be held accountable. ■