

How to monitor schools

By Zubeida Mustafa

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EDUCATION in Pakistan is a subject people never tire of lamenting. The problem lies with the public-sector institutions, especially schools, which have fallen into a state of decay over the years. Since they cater to the needs of the majority, the crisis in education must be addressed earnestly.

Despairing of its own ability and political will to provide education for all, the government now wants the private sector to help. That is how private entrepreneurs are being enlisted in the micromanagement of government-funded schools. This public-private partnership as it is dubbed is now the buzzword in official circles.

The concept has many critics because prima facie it absolves the state of its basic responsibility of educating the child. But others who are pragmatic feel that this at least provides an opening when the government can't or won't do much with its limited resources.

Against this backdrop, a new project was launched recently under the auspices of the Sindh Education Foundation (SEF). Called Promoting Low-Cost Private Schooling in Rural Sindh (PPRS) and funded by the World Bank this programme seeks to aid 1,000 private schools in the rural areas of the province mainly in the poorly served districts. Recently, SEF held a symposium to introduce the project and 200 of the would-be school owners who had been selected by balloting were invited to Karachi to attend the meeting.

On paper the scheme seems to be theoretically plausible though some teething problems can be expected. Any educator with suitable school premises and a minimum of 77 children on the rolls and with two teachers qualifies to apply for assistance. If selected, a school would receive Rs350 per student per month on the condition that it charges no fee. SEF is to provide free textbooks, and spon-

always been above suspicion, reinstated as the MD of SEF, at least some transparency can be expected.

SEF will be responsible for the process evaluation which will be ongoing. It will entail monitoring the schools and their enrolment, testing children's performance, providing teachers' training, receiving monthly pro formas from school proprietors and paying visits to different institutions.

This responsibility will be undertaken by SEF's head office in Karachi and its five regional offices spread over Sindh. Anita Ghulam Ali is firm on this count that any school found to be defaulting in its performance — the results of SEF's six-monthly tests for students will be the criteria — will lose its grant. No chance for ghost schools there!

The World Bank has taken on itself the responsibility of impact evaluation to assess how parents and the community take to this experiment in education. Since this is a pilot project for four years designed to open 1,000 schools and educate 250,000 children, the degree of its success will determine its future prospects.

Given the state of the education sector in Pakistan, any project that seeks a solution to the gargantuan problem of ignorance in the country should be given a chance. But it is also important that questions should be asked to alert project managers to the pitfalls they may encounter. With five million children estimated to be out of school in Sindh, the PPRS model will need another Rs14.25bn per annum simply to put all the children in school.

This is the cost per head and does not include the cost of monitoring that is an integral element of this system if we do not want ghost schools in the private sector as well. In 2008-09, SEF's budget is Rs100m while Sindh's revenue budget for education is Rs15bn. Can we realistically expect the government to put every child in school in Sindh adopting this model?

In the context of academic quality, teachers' training will

free textbooks, and sponsors hope to reach out to 250,000 children in the five to nine years age group in four years.

But will this work where others have failed? The main reason for the state's failure to make any headway in educating its citizens is the massive corruption that is eroding the education system making it dysfunctional and destroying an entire generation. The teachers and administrators that are products of this rotten system only serve to perpetuate the rot and a vicious cycle has set in. Meanwhile, the growing amounts that were pumped into this sector opened the floodgates of further corruption.

Hence the key question to ask is how will the PPRS stem this rot that characterises social-sector governance in the country? The best of schemes have floundered because the implementation strategy was not addressed. The World Bank now wants to focus on the monitoring aspect since it feels this will introduce transparency and accountability — the surest way of checking corruption. Hence PPRS provides for an elaborate monitoring mechanism.

Even though the word 'corruption' did not figure explicitly in the proceedings of the symposium, its dark shadow loomed large in the background. After all, a few years ago a visiting World Bank mission even refused to visit Sindh because it was not happy with the state of bank-funded SAP projects in the province. With Anita Ghulam Ali, whose integrity has

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be the key element of this project. This can be a problematic area in view of the teachers' reluctance to attend in-service training programmes as the concept of continuing education is quite alien to our society. The trainers will be handicapped from the start given the poor intellectual level, knowledge and pedagogic skills of the people they will be called upon to train. Examples of teachers not being able to solve simple mathematical problems are legendary.

Nevertheless a beginning has to be made and the sooner it is done the better. But the real advantage of the new experiment in the rural schools programme lies in the opportunity it offers our educators to develop and test a school-monitoring mechanism.

This is something we had in the early years of Pakistan but that was destroyed at some point in our history. If SEF manages to develop an independent system of inspection of schools it would have served a useful purpose by offering a model for a monitoring mechanism that could be used to revive all public-sector schools and run them efficiently. ■

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