[**Why bother about education?**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1678210/why-bother-about-education)

[Faisal Bari](https://www.dawn.com/authors/568/faisal-bari)Published March 4, 2022 - Updated a day ago

The writer is a senior research fellow at the Institute of Development and Economic Alternatives, and an associate professor of economics at Lums.

ARTICLE 25-A on ‘Right to Education’, was added to the basic rights section of the Constitution of the country through the 18th Amendment in April 2010. Almost 12 years later we still have around 20 million five- to 16-year-olds out of school. Our assessments of child learning also tell us that, barring a small number going to elite public and private schools, most school-going children in Pakistan, are getting a poor quality education. Why is this state of affairs persisting?

Think of any ‘reform’ related to the education sector — free books, no tuition, stipends, meal programme, afternoon schools, monitoring system, performance incentives, merit-based teacher recruitment, school councils, management committees, school-based recruitment, non-salary budget — and we have tried it. Yet the needle on meeting goals for universal education of a minimum standard has not really moved by much. In fact, in some provinces and for some years, we have lost ground on issues related to quality of education.

**Read:** [*The missing third — An out-of-school children study of Pakistani 5-16 year-olds*](https://www.dawn.com/news/1643918)

It is true that our public-sector education system is underfunded. Spending less than two per cent of GDP on education will not get you quality education for every child. But it is also true that the system a) does not spend money very effectively, and b) has a limited capacity to absorb more. So, with the demand for more resources, we have to make the system more efficient too, otherwise even doubling the money will not get us results.

So, what is it? Is it that the people of Pakistan do not value education? They do not want to give quality education to their children? This does not seem to be the case. People are voting with their feet. Those who can afford to, even at the cost of cutting other essential expenditures, send their children to private schools in the hope of them getting a quality education. Demand is not the issue. The larger answer seems to lie in the political economy of education. Why should political parties, politicians and bureaucrats care about providing quality education to every child in the country? What is their incentive to do that?

It is harder for the politicians to talk about how they improved the quality of education.

Politicians respond to electoral pressures — what will get them elected, what will make their coalition stronger and what will give them visibility and credit. Given how elections take place in the country, the aggregation of voter choice, with respect to fairness, is an issue in itself. But, even if we put aside that matter, the provision of quality education does not come up as a top issue in our elections. Provision of local services (roads, water, sewerage, gas and electricity) and access to jobs are usually considered more important. Constituents might be concerned about jobs as teachers or school staff, but the concern is not about access to quality education for all children. Maybe, the electorate has given up on the idea that the state can provide quality education.

It is also the case that ‘quality’ aspects are always harder to see. Access and infrastructure aspects are easy to see and verify, and they are more attributable too. So, even if there is pressure to provide education, the metric is more about opening new schools, upgrading existing ones and/ or providing infrastructure like boundary walls, classrooms, bathrooms and electricity and water connections. Politicians can talk about how they got another school for their area or had a primary school upgraded to middle or high school, obtained infrastructure for the school and even had teachers posted at the school. But it is harder for the politicians to talk about how they improved the quality of education in a school or in schools in their area.

Quality changes also need time for implementation and for their impact to become known. If the quality of education gets better, you will eventually see it in the results of children in public examinations, in colleges the children go to post graduation, in the jobs and salaries they get. But this will take time to become visible. Politicians work according to electoral cycles. They worry about the next election which is at most five years away. The electoral cycle and the quest for quality education do not align with each other.

**Read:** [*The Analytical Angle — Do children really learn in schools in Pakistan?*](https://www.dawn.com/news/1634880/the-analytical-angle-do-children-really-learn-in-schools-in-pakistan)

Politicians are the ‘principals’ for the bureaucrats who are ‘agents’ (using the notion of ‘principal agent’ in economics). If the principal is not interested in the delivery of quality education, why would the agent do it? If principals were interested even then it would be hard to design an effective delivery system, but when it is not even a priority for the principal, why would the agent spend any time, beyond the bare minimum necessary to maintain the status quo, to do anything? This is exactly how education has been treated, usually by provincial bureaucracies. Though education departments are mostly the largest departments in terms of the number of employees and salary expenses, they are not the posting of choice for bureaucrats.

**Read:** [*Out of school, out of sight*](https://www.dawn.com/news/1496257)

There is some evidence, even in Pakistan, that when politicians’ priorities change, it can have a strong impact on the system. From 2012 to 2018, when Punjab was using methods that saw the chief minister and chief secretary holding deputy commissioners of districts accountable in the exercise of meeting educational targets, we did see significant performance change. The targets were still largely about access and infrastructure, and not quality of education, but some evidence is there.

Political accountability of politicians by the polity is weak in Pakistan. Given this fact and the problems of making ‘access to quality education’ a visible target for politicians, it is not surprising that 20m children are out of school and the quality of education is poor. If politicians are not bothered about providing quality education, why would bureaucrats be? But this equilibrium can be altered. The alteration would include major changes in how politicians are held accountable. This is going to be difficult. But access to quality education for all is not going to work if we do not hold politicians accountable.

*The writer is a senior research fellow at the Institute of Development and Economic Alternatives, and an associate professor of economics at Lums.*

*Published in Dawn, March 4th, 2022*