

## GOVERNANCE REFORMS IN EDUCATION

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THE education policy announced recently envisages a big jump in the allocation of public expenditure on education from the current level of two per cent of the GDP to seven per cent over the next five years.

Many well-meaning commentators, political leaders and external agencies also believe that the problem of education deficiency in Pakistan can be attributed to the lack of funding. However memories are short and we have forgotten that a multi-donor, multi-million dollar project — the Social Action Programme in the 1990s — was a failure. It did not increase enrolment rates or achieve any other goal; in fact, it left the government with a higher debt.

We should avoid making the same mistake again and putting the economy in further jeopardy. The total expenditure on education by all tiers of government would jump by almost 50 per cent in one year if we raise it by one per cent of the GDP only. As much as Rs400bn would become available for spending in one year. Unless we pay attention to the serious governance problems facing our education sector we will end up with more ghost schools, ghost teachers, greater absenteeism, misuse of grants to private schools, inflated building contracts and other leakages and waste.

The availability of funds for education from donors is also not a constraint as almost all external donors are vying with each other to finance education projects. The duplication, overlap and competition among the suppliers of funds would add to the already poor state of governance in our schools, colleges, universities and educational administration.

Does this mean that we should not pursue the target of higher allocation for education? No, but there are some prerequisite governance reforms that have to be undertaken before the allocation is stepped up. The National Commission for Government Reforms had carried out a two-year study, field visits and consultations with stakeholders and produced practical recommendations for improving the quality of governance in the education sector. There are at least 10 critical reforms that have to be put in place.

First, there is a clear need for delineating responsibility for the provision of education among the three tiers of government. The federal government should deal with curriculum and higher education financing, standards and regulations. The provincial governments should be responsible for college education and technical and vocational training while the district governments should take charge of primary, secondary and high schools.

Second, to bring about coordination, ensure uniformity in the standards of public, private and non-profit schools, a district education board should be established in each district. The board must consist of eminent persons enjoying a good reputation and the district education officer act as the secretary of the board and implement the decisions taken by it. The detailed terms of reference of the board have been developed.

Third, like the Sindh and NWFP governments, there should be separation between management and teaching cadres in other provinces and the federal government. While the selection to the management cadre would be open to teachers with the requisite aptitude, all teachers could progress in their teaching careers to higher grades without becoming headmaster, principal or education officers.

Fourth, teachers' cadres should be de-linked from national pay scales. Educational levels in backward districts will not improve unless the compensation package is aligned with local market conditions. If, for example, a science teacher in Musakhel has to be paid Rs15,000 per month to attract her to work in this backward district, she should be given that package.

In contrast if qualified science teachers in Karachi or Lahore are available at a salary of Rs12,000 per month, they should be paid that amount. Otherwise the present distortions — teachers appointed in backward districts are transferred to big cities because of political influence — will continue to persist.

Fifth, all teachers should be appointed from among the candidates domiciled in a district through a test conducted by the Public Service Commission on merit alone. These posts should be non-transferable. Other posts for which suitable candidates are not available locally can be filled from outside the district. The powers of recruitment, transfer, promotion and disciplinary action must reside with the district education board.

Sixth, the school management committees (SMCs) and/or parent-teacher associations (PTAs) should be empowered to effectively oversee the internal management of a school, i.e. keeping the school infrastructure in good shape, ensuring teachers attend school and managing other problems. Budgetary resources would have to be given to the SMCs but they would be accountable to the district education board for results.

The head-teachers/principals would be given appropriate administrative authority to carry out the day-to-day operations of the school. They would also be given powers to initiate action against recalcitrant teachers.

Seventh, the district education board should be allocated funds annually for carrying out the approved infrastructure projects, operations and maintenance and training of teachers in all schools. The training would be delivered by the provincial governments, who would also test the competency of the teachers and the learning achievements of the students on an annual basis. Funds allocated to the district boards must be audited regularly.

Eighth, children from low-income families should be given the option of going to private schools provided these schools meet prescribed eligibility criteria. These schools must be given per capita grants for the students from low-income families. The activities of the education foundations in the provinces should be expanded and supported to find other suitable means of fostering public-private partnerships.

Ninth, a decentralised and empowered education network can function efficiently only if it is

monitored continuously. A management information system (MIS) should help the district boards in monitoring the performance of the schools. For example, if a primary school is producing a constant stream of pupils for enrolment in higher classes, the upgrade to elementary school could take place immediately.

Finally, all talented students from poor families and backward districts who secure admissions to private schools, professional colleges, business administration institutes and institutions of higher learning should be awarded scholarships for pursuing their studies. Eligibility criteria must be announced beforehand and advertisements placed inviting applications for scholarships.

These reforms would take some time to take root and must be initiated before the spigot of money for education is opened.

The writer was the chairman of the National Commission for Government Reforms.