



PAKISTAN'S EIGHT GREAT
EDUCATION DEBATES

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Background

Pakistan has declared an education emergency. A taskforce put together by the government has released a report highlighting the dismal state of education in Pakistan. The report has, for the first time in Pakistan's history, elevated education to the level of a national crisis. The startling figures in the report have galvanized Pakistani concern over the conditions of schools and schooling in the country. It has also triggered a national campaign to sign a petition demanding an end to the emergency which in turn has generated momentum in mainstream electronic and print media about education in Pakistan.

However, the debate generated by the education emergency report and the petition to end the education emergency seems to have fixed on issues of access and staying away from the thornier issues of educational quality and governance. Despite the efforts of the education task force, what seems to be lost in popular debate is that Pakistan confronts a number of serious policy challenges in the formation of its education policy. There isn't one education emergency to confront. The sector faces a multitude of emergencies; each one equally critical and crucial to the creation of an efficient and effective education system.

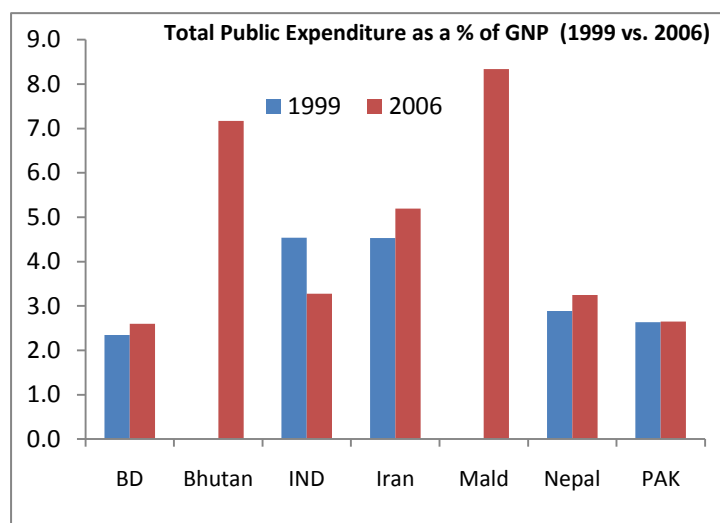
Informed debate on these policy challenges and informed recommendations stemming from this debate are essential to the success of any reform effort. What is even more important is sustained political engagement that goes beyond usual lip-service, cuts across party lines and is sustained across regimes with single minded commitment. While stirring public sentiment and encouraging debate is an important part of bringing about change, informed leadership from the education sector must first determine through technical consultations and political involvement the direction of substantive change. Similarly, while signing a petition online to end the education emergency is a well meaning effort that is helping education get the importance it deserves in the public domain, it is unlikely to end any of the emergencies confronting the sector.

Before signing petitions to mitigate the crisis, Pakistani citizens need to be informed of the methods that will be used to tackle this emergency and the policy directions being adopted. Citizen participation should not be limited to the passive act of signing an online petition. Citizen energies and concerns should be harnessed in active ways and efforts should be made to link concerned citizens with organizations working in the sector that require volunteers.

Citizen demand for reform will always be an important driver of change. And while education is and always will be a cause for national concern, citizen participation in its rehabilitation will also be necessary. While education is a cause for concern for everyone, its management, its content and its execution should be the domain of trained technical experts. Training for planners, managers and educators should be given the specialized attention it needs and deserves. The neglect of the education sector is in large part to blame for the challenging socio-economic conditions Pakistan finds its self in today. If Pakistan is to achieve the miraculous turnaround in this sector that it needs, it needs to start with answering the following critical questions confronting the education sector today:

More Spending vs. Smart Spending

“Less than 1.5% of Pakistan’s GDP is spent on the public education sector” – Education Emergency Report



Source: UNESCO Statistical Tables 2009 on Education

Low levels of budgetary allocations to education are an effective indicator of how low education has been on the priority list for successive governments. The sector clearly suffers from a lack of resources. Pakistan has one of the lowest spending rates on public education in the region.

The launch of the Education Emergency Report has acted as a catalyst for lobbying citizens to demand greater focus on the education sector. In the aftermath of the report, citizens and activists have begun to demand an

increase in education budgets at best and no cuts to it at worst. **While Pakistan is one of the lowest spenders in the region, demanding an increase in the supply of money to the sector might not be the wisest strategy. According to the Education Emergency report, some provinces spent less than 60% of the budget allocated to them. Therefore the capacity to utilize funds allocated to education remains low. With provincial educational budgets lapsing each year without being spent in their entirety, the problem in the Pakistani education sector does not seem to be one that can be solved at this stage by increasing spending but by improving the ability of the educational infrastructure to utilize the resources allocated to them.**

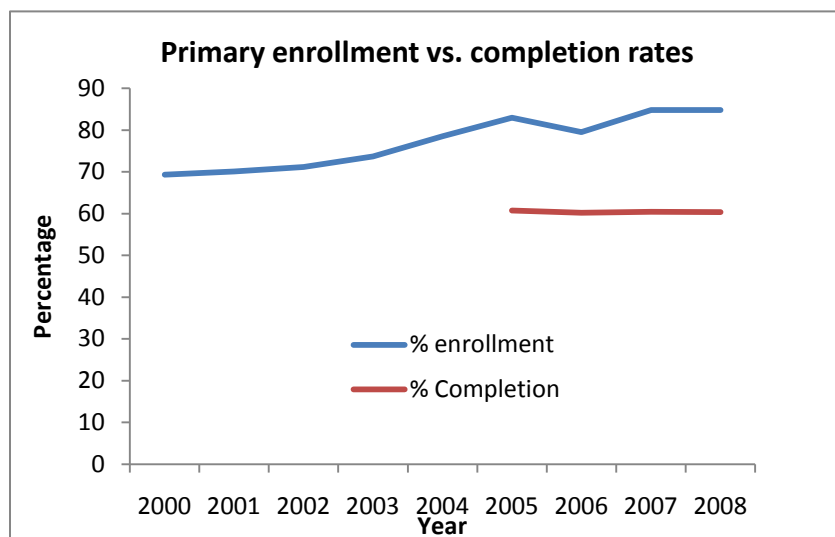
Instead of spending more on education, Pakistan needs to be spending smarter. Developing a system of improved financial planning for the educational sector is critical. A system that accurately identifies and prioritizes projects for funding needs to be implemented. Given that hundreds of schools in Pakistan lack basic facilities and infrastructure, there is no dearth of worthy projects where educational budgets can be utilized.

Enrollment vs. Retention

“Ensure that, by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling” – Education MDG

Pakistan is far from achieving the MDG target of Universal primary education for all children. According to the Education Emergency Report, “at least seven million children are not in primary school” and

“Pakistan risks not achieving Universal education to the age of 16 in the lifetime of anyone alive today.” While working towards the goal of universal primary education is an important one, pushing for increased primary enrollments in the current educational environment is probably not the best utilization of resources or citizen activism. More important that enrolling children in school is ensuring that children stay in school once they have been enrolled.



Source: World Bank Data Tables on Education (WB EDSTATS)

According to data from the last few years, while enrollment rates have been rising, retention rates have been decreasing. **More children are enrolling in school but a smaller proportion of those enrolled are completing primary school. Therefore, in order to yield the full spectrum of social and economic benefits, Pakistan must ensure that children are not just enrolling in school but completing school as well.**

The quality of schooling, its perceived benefits and other social externalities determine completion and retention rates. Therefore, a comprehensive series of reforms aimed at the education sector as well as social attitudes towards education will have to be affected in order to rectify the problem. While efforts to enroll more students in school should not be slowed down; efforts to investigate and rectify the problems that compel students to drop out should also not be ignored. Otherwise, a substantial percentage of expenditure on enrollment activities will become a sunk cost.

Quantity vs. Quality

“Although all children in Pakistan may be enrolled in primary schools by 2015, many may complete their education functionally illiterate and innumerate.”¹

After spending four years in the education system in Pakistan, at the primary level, the majority of students are unable to perform simple mathematical functions or utilize language skills effectively. A study conducted by the World Bank reveals that children enrolled in the third grade in Pakistan are barely able to fulfill the prescribed benchmarks for the first grade;

¹ Das, Jishnu, Pandey, Priyanka and Zajonc, Tristan, Learning Levels and Gaps in Pakistan (November 1, 2006). World Bank Policy Research Working Paper No. 4067.

“In Pakistan, a bare majority (65 percent) can subtract single-digit numbers (8 – 3), and less than one-third can subtract 3-digit numbers.....Most children (86 percent) could recognize and write an

alphabet when spoken and 70 percent could fill in a blank alphabet in a sequence (D _ F) but less than 50 percent could complete basic words like BALL or FLAG when given a picture and asked to fill in 2 blanks (BA_ _) or a single blank (FLA_). Indeed, for the latter only 29 percent were able to correctly fill in the blank. Again, the test went on to check children’s ability to construct more complicated words and sentences as well as paragraph comprehension, but as in Mathematics, these concepts were too advanced for 90 percent of the children tested.”²

Therefore, increasing the quantity of children in school is unlikely to fix the more pressing problem of educational quality. The majority of the primary and secondary schooling system in Pakistan (particularly in the public sector), does not equip children with the levels of learning that would enable them to become competitive in international or even local labor markets. Children educated in the public school sector find themselves unable to compete with students from the private schools, particularly students from the urban elite private schools.

If Pakistan continues to ignore the quality emergency in its schools and its propagation of the socio-economic divide, Pakistan will be confronted with a series of social challenges. Many challenges are beginning to manifest themselves in the form of greater radicalization and increasing violence amongst young people.

Improving the quality of education is likely to result in increased enrollment as well as retention. Studies

TABLE 4. COMPARING QUESTIONS AND PERFORMANCE ON SIMILAR EXAM QUESTIONS

| Exam Question | India | Pakistan | India | Pakistan |
|--------------------------------------|-----------|-----------|-------|----------|
| Complete the addition problem: | 55+12 | 36+61 | 87% | 86% |
| Complete the subtraction problem: | 640-112 | 238-129 | 53% | 32% |
| | 8803-4213 | | 39% | |
| Complete the multiplication problem: | 2*11 | 4*32 | 77% | 50% |
| | 12*45 | | 50% | |
| Complete a sentence with the word: | Home | Beautiful | 41% | 33% |
| | Message | School | 27% | 31% |

Notes: This table presents several questions from the Pakistan and India exams that are roughly comparable. The third and fourth columns state the actual question. The fourth and fifth column shows the percentage of students who answered the question correctly. This table is meant to show absolute not relative level of performance. The questions, while comparable, are not equivalent, and class three children were tested in Pakistan compared to class four children in India.

Source: World Bank Policy Research Working Paper No. 4067, “, Learning Levels and Gaps in Pakistan (November 1, 2006).

² Das, Jishnu, Pandey, Priyanka and Zajonc, Tristan, Learning Levels and Gaps in Pakistan (November 1, 2006). World Bank Policy Research Working Paper No. 4067.

show that even uneducated parents are discerning consumers when it comes to the education of their children. They are willing to pay more for their children to attend a school where they feel the child will have access to a better quality of education. Therefore, just increasing access to education is no longer the requirement of the Pakistani parent. Increasing access to quality education is the more pressing need and demand of the masses. In an order to meet international commitments, such as the MDG targets, Pakistan must not ignore the needs of its own citizens.

Uniformity vs. Diversity

The education system in countries ranging as far and wide as the United States to Europe to East Asia has been used as a tool for national integration and building a sense of citizenship and civic responsibility. However, the education system in Pakistan has failed to deliver on this account as well. Pakistan's education system and syllabi were carefully crafted to promote a sense of unity and nationhood derived from a common Muslim identity.

Ironically, while trying to develop a sense of united nationhood through an imposed and imagined sense of religious unity, the Pakistani syllabus has ignored and failed to celebrate the religious and ethnic differences in the country. This short sighted policy has resulted in a deeply divided state rather than a united one. Sectarian and ethnic tensions have been on the rise and often resulted in violent clashes.

The rise of religious and sectarian violence in Pakistan has often been attributed to the rise in the popularity and enrollment in Madrassahs. However a study by (Andrabi and Khawaja) shows that the increase in enrollment rates in Madrassahs since the 1990s is as low as 1% whereas there has been an explosion in the private education sector. **Therefore, given the rising levels of violence and intolerance in Pakistani society, it is erroneous to believe that Madrassah's are the only promoters of a curriculum laced with bias that prevents students from developing a healthy respect and appreciation for the religious and sectarian diversity within Pakistan.**

The public and the majority of the private sector that caters to a far larger number of students fares no better in this regard. The curriculum and textbooks used in these schools are also riddled with biases towards, non-Muslims and members of various ethnicities.

In a study done by Tariq Rahman in 2004, students from three different types of schools were interviewed; the Madrassahs (commonly thought to promote extremist views), Urdu Medium Schools (that cater to the majority of Pakistani society that falls in the lower income and lower middle class bracket) and English Medium Schools (that cater to the more affluent classes of society). The survey revealed that a sizeable number of students across school types condoned violence and war and did not think equal rights for women and minorities were necessary.

Figure1: Equal rights for women?

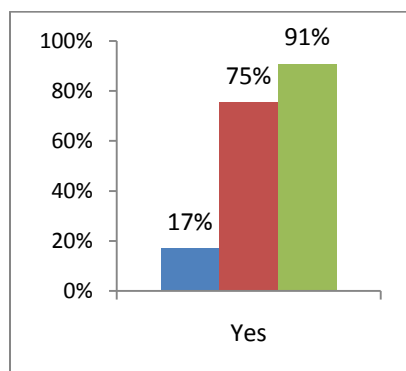


Figure 1: War in Kashmir?

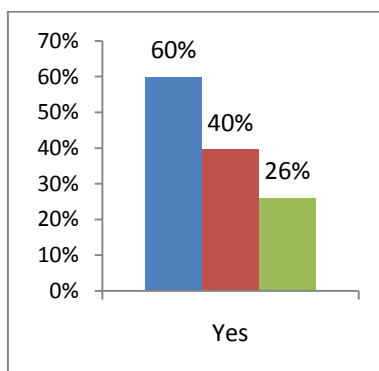


Figure 2: Use Jihadi groups in Kashmir?

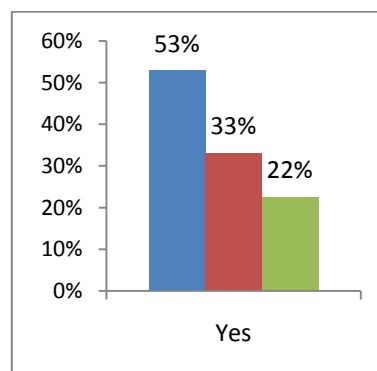


Figure 3: Equal rights for Ahmedis?

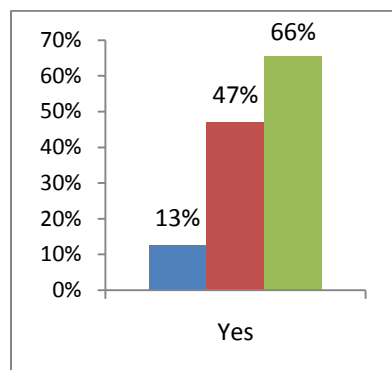


Figure 4: Equal rights for Hindus?

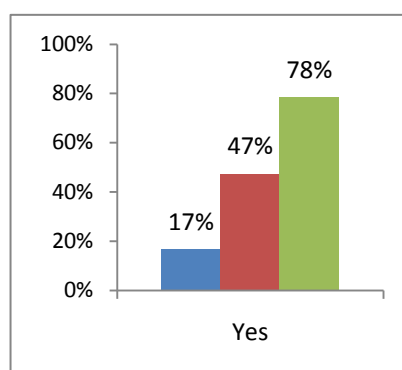
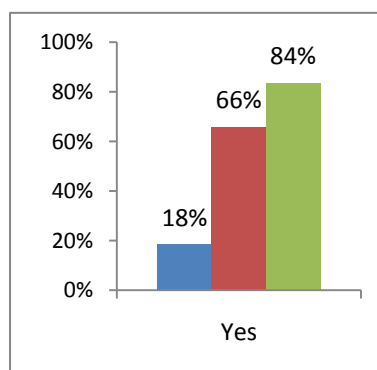


Figure 5: Equal rights for Christians?



■ Madrassah ■ Urdu Medium School ■ English Medium School

Source: "Denizens of Alien Worlds: A Survey of the Education System of Pakistan" ³

The views of the dominant Sunni-sect are the principal views conveyed through textbooks and lessons in schools leading to the marginalization of students from minority religions and sects. **However, it is not merely marginalization that occurs through this biased curriculum. By failing to acknowledge, discuss and explain religious and ethnic diversity schools fail to equip their students with a healthy respect for difference especially when it comes to matters of religion.** When faced with these differences in the real world students are unable to grapple with them. Some respond with violence and others with intolerance. Many choose to continue to ignore and shun the diversity of religion around them. Others respond by supporting hardliner groups that re-enforce the ideology that they subscribe to. While most just continue to perpetuate the cycles of bias thought to them in their homes and communities leading to an ever increasing polarization of Pakistani society making it more susceptible to violent conflict.

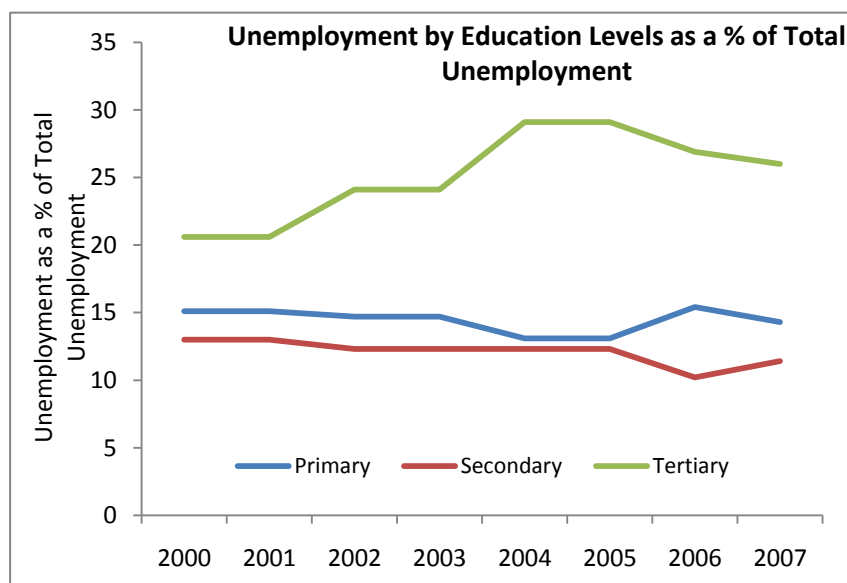
³ Rehman, Tariq. (2004) "Denizens of Alien Worlds: A Survey of the Education System of Pakistan" Islamabad: Oxford University Press

There is need for major curriculum reform within the public and private school system along with an urgent need to revamp the educational material provided to students as learning aids. Both the syllabi and textbooks being taught in these schools are not helping bridge religious and sectarian divides but exacerbating them.

The Academy vs. the Economy

*Pakistan's population will grow by around 85 million in twenty years (roughly the equivalent of five cities the size of Karachi). The economy must grow by 6% a year to meet the needs of its growing population. 36 million new jobs are needed in just ten years.*⁴

Providing an education to every child under the age of 16 is the responsibility of the government of Pakistan as enshrined in the constitution of the country. **While the provision of employment is not the explicit duty of the state, a youthful population without access to employment or livelihoods, is likely to become a challenge rather than a dividend.** With the majority of its population under 30, Pakistan is soon going to be confronted with its greatest challenge; providing suitable employment to its young and preventing them from turning to violence or extremism to achieve their goals.



Source: World Bank Database on Education Statistics (WB EDSTATS)

Education planning must therefore map onto economic priorities and directions. The construction of schools that can deliver quality education is of paramount importance. However, the academy cannot exist in isolation from the broader political and economic context in the nation. In a country where unemployment levels are high and actually increase with the levels of education, serious efforts need to be geared towards thinking about the disconnect between educational achievement and employment. **Of the educated segments of the labor force, people with a tertiary education form the highest proportion of the currently unemployed. This trend has also persisted over the last ten years, thereby indicating that those with tertiary education are not finding employment.**

This trend is alarming. **It either indicates that tertiary education in Pakistan does not equip students with the skills required to enter the labor market or there are no jobs in the labor market that could**

⁴ Next Generation Report by The British Council Pakistan, 2009

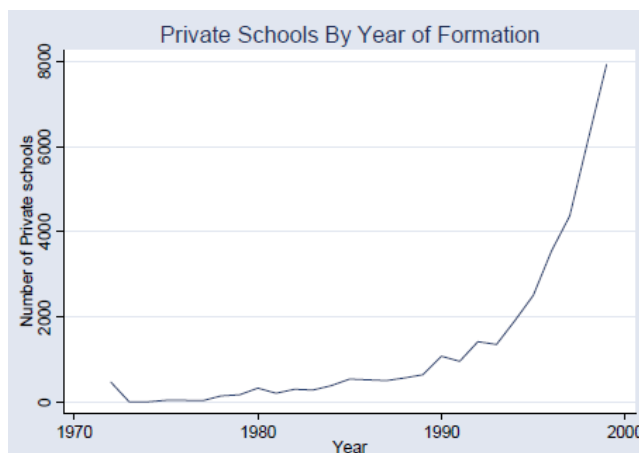
utilize the expertise of graduates. If the crisis of quality could be controlled in the education sector, Pakistan's education planners will still need to prioritize academic areas of focus and such decisions will need to be made in conjunction with Pakistan's economic needs and the trends in its labor markets.

Given the levels of poverty in the country and growing price and inflationary pressures, Pakistan's educators will have to deal with the harsh reality of families relying on their young to contribute to family income. Large numbers of Pakistani youth are involved in work either inside or outside the home to supplement family income. This is either done either in conjunction with some form of education or at the expense of an education altogether. And while Pakistan must continue to build new schools and improve existing ones, it must also use its schools as grounds to train its young with marketable skills that will allow them to become self or otherwise employed. Given the state of the economy, Pakistani schools cannot afford to rely on providing students with purely academic options. Technical training and skill development in a variety of areas should be made available to students where needed so that schools can become relevant to the needs of individual students and their families as well as the national economy. Schools can be powerful engines of growth and universities can be dynamic centers for research and human resource development if they are guided by a long term vision. It is imperative for Pakistan's educational institutions to develop in tandem with its economy and act as engines for growth.

Public vs. Private

Over the last 30 years, Pakistan has seen a rapid increase in the number of private schools, particularly in the rural areas.⁵ **Increasingly, parents in both rural and urban centers have opted out of sending their children to government run schools in favor of local private schools.**

The increase in popularity of private schools is positively correlated with the decline in the public school system. Public school infrastructure, particularly in the rural areas is of exceptionally poor quality. With a number of school buildings in a state of disrepair and decay, high student to teacher ratios and a high degree of teacher absenteeism in public schools has made these schools unattractive choices for discerning parents who want a better education for their children. According to a study published by the World Bank in 2006, enrollment in private schools has grown rapidly in rural and urban centers. The largest growth in the private sector has

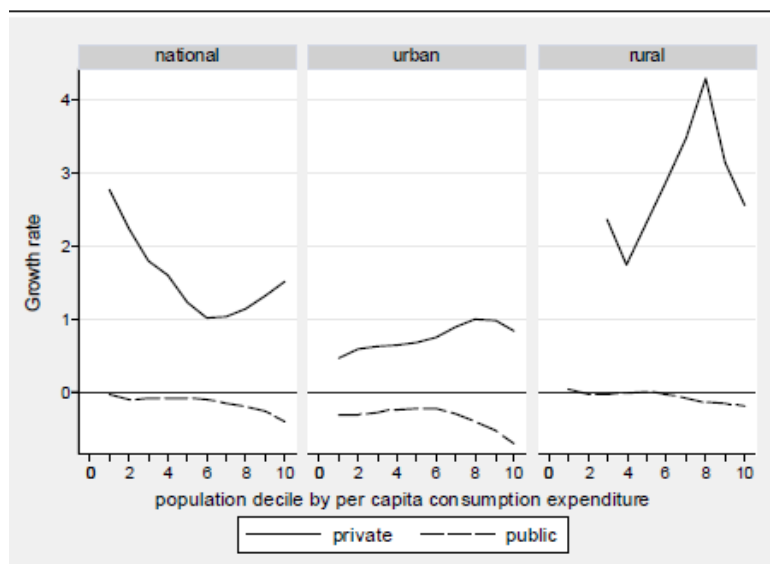


Source: World Bank Policy Research Working Paper 4066 "A Dime a Day: The Possibility and Limits of Private Schooling in Pakistan" 2006.

⁵ Andrabi, Tahir, Das, Jishnu, Khwaja, Asim Ijaz, "A Dime a Day: The Possibility and Limits of Private Schooling in Pakistan" 2006. World Bank Policy Research Working Paper 4066

been seen in the rural areas of Pakistan where local service providers, having identified the gaps in the market, have set up low cost private schools that guarantee a basic minimum of education services and teacher presence. Private schools in rural areas, employ local women with a secondary education at

Figure 2: Growth Rate of enrollment in public and private schools



Source: World Bank Policy Research Working Paper 4066 "A Dime a Day: The Possibility and Limits of Private Schooling in Pakistan" 2006.

much cheaper rates than government schools and are therefore able to minimize costs and reduce tuition fees for parents.

The bulk of these private schools cater to primary level students and the expertise required for secondary or tertiary education is not available amongst locally educated women that have been critical to the success of primary level private schools in rural areas and has enabled them to provide education services at lower costs. Therefore the burden of secondary and tertiary education falls largely on the public sector which has been underperforming in providing

access and quality in education.

Even though the public sector has been falling behind, it remains the largest owner of educational infrastructure in the country as well as one of the largest employers of human capital in the public sector. Despite its dilapidated condition, millions in Pakistan depend on the public sector for the provision of education. A national policy that recognizes, reconciles and leverages these two different but complimentary sectors for providing better education to the average Pakistani citizen is necessary. **The unregulated mushroom growth of private education providers, for which there is no quality control, could lead to a disaster of educational quality in the future.** Regulation of the private sector and a revamping of the public sector are essential for improving the health of the education sector in Pakistan.

Centre vs. Provinces

Under the 18th amendment the provision of education is a provincial matter and sole responsibility for this function is set to be devolved to the provinces. **Some experts have expressed concern over the capacity of the provincial governments to handle this responsibility. While concerns for provincial capacity are valid, more central to the debate is defining the exact roles and responsibilities of provincial education departments and how these are to be executed so that large disparities do not occur amongst the provinces in terms of education quality or service delivery.** Even once the issues of capacity have been resolved and the education portfolio devolved entirely to the provinces, a forum for

inter-provincial coordination needs to be set up and maintained to allow exchange of information and ideas across the provinces. The scope of work of the center and the provinces has to be clearly defined.

Employment of teachers, the upkeep of schools and local level examinations are subjects that the provincial governments have experience of handling. However, questions such as curriculum reform, quality control, standardization of educational standards across the country and education finance are areas that will require national consensus and oversight. Once the devolution of the education sector is complete, which bodies or authorities will take on the ownership of such tasks remains to be decided. Stakeholders in the sector must hash out what levels of government are responsible for what kind of service delivery. The distribution of these roles and responsibilities is a contentious issue in Pakistan as it has been exemplified by the ongoing debate on the devolution of the Higher Education Commission. Debates of the nature that are happening around the role and performance of the HEC in the context of devolution are necessary for all levels of education.

The governance of the education sector at every level needs to be strengthened. Education sector managers need to be trained in the technicalities of education reform but also in the skills required to engage political and local leadership to champion the cause of education and to avoid conflicts between the work and the jurisdiction of various government institutions working together.

Technicalities vs. Political Realities

The nuts and bolts of the education system (syllabi, teacher training, curriculum planning, student assessments, etc) are highly technical and specialized subjects. While non-physical educational infrastructure will be created by technical experts, its implementation is largely dependent on non-technical politicians and bureaucrats.

Technical experts often have little appetite or patience for the slow moving political and bureaucratic process which is essential for the success and sustainability of any reform effort no matter how technically sound. The creation of the Education Taskforce has been one innovative way to bridge the gap between technical experts and those engaged with the political and bureaucratic process as well. However, with the implementation of the 18th amendment, the future of the taskforce beyond this year remains uncertain. Education reform will be a long and slow process and will require consistent and engaged leadership in the technical and political arenas to lead the reform process.

Given the frequent bureaucratic shuffles in the country as well as the limited lifespan of democratically elected governments, those lobbying for reform must work to create champions across party lines, across age, ethnic and geographic groups. Returns to education reform are slow to materialize and technical and political leadership that is cognizant of this fact, patient and committed to reform must lead the way.

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