

# Is education a budgetary priority?

Henna Ahsan | 15<sup>th</sup> June 2025

Education is not a luxury but a necessity. But does the government view it as such?



Pakistan faces a great challenge with respect to access, equity and quality of education. Minimum public financing for education and its poor effectiveness are some of the main obstacles in overcoming these

challenges. To address this problem, there is a need to generate demand and stir policy response for enhancing the efficacy of public spending on education. We have a youth bulge that is likely to continue till 2050. The youth can only bring continuous dividends for the country and for themselves only if they are properly educated. The world doesn't simply need a labour force; it needs an educated, skilled labour force— one that understands and can put to use the latest technologies. Before going forward, we need to look at our current education statistics which are not very encouraging.

- The literacy rate is currently around 59 percent, one of the lowest in South Asia.
- Nearly 26 million children (age 5-16) are not attending school, i.e. 36 percent of the age group.
- The student-teacher ratio has increased from 56:1 in 2016 to 67:1 in 2022 (UNESCO, 2024).
- Learning poverty is 77 percent, 18 percent higher than the average for South Asian Region (World Bank, 2022).

In 2016, the UNESCO reported that Pakistan was among the eight countries with the direst shortage of primary school teachers. The trend has persisted. We have a higher pupil to teacher ratio than in 2016. If this trend continues, we may not be able to achieve the UN sustainable development goal (SDG) of quality education for all by 2030.

The quality of education is closely linked to the quality of school facilities. Well-designed classrooms and well-maintained equipment can improve teaching and learning outcomes. Infrastructure and school facilities are essential components of a comprehensive education system. However,

according to the Pakistan Economic Survey 2025-2026, around 33 percent public schools lack electricity and 24 percent lack access to safe drinking water. 22 percent of public school have no toilets and lack boundary walls.

The allocation for education has remained around 2 percent of the GDP, far below the UNESCO recommendation of 4-6 percent. Since 2019-2020, it has decreased further and was now around 0.8 percent of the GDP in 2024-2025. More than 80 percent of the funds are allocated for current expenditure. The share of development expenditure has decreased from 17 percent to 12.9 percent over the last two years.

Access to quality education is one of the major pillars of the URAAN programme, structured around the 5Es framework and considered the foundation of the National Economic Transformation Plan (2024–2029). However, the allocation for education in 2025-2026, is Rs 111,080 million, only 1.4 percent more than the previous year's Rs 112,683 million. The budget allocated to pre-primary and primary education has increased by just 0.49 percent; for secondary education the increase is 1.91 percent and for tertiary education it has declined from Rs 84,651 million to Rs 82,012 million, a 3.1 percent decrease. The development expenditure has decreased from Rs 73,760 million to Rs 55,824 million from 2024-2025 to 2025-2026 (Federal Budget Statement, 2025-26).

Any discussion of these issues should also focus on the moral responsibility as education is a fundamental right of every child. A poorly educated population hinders economic growth. Fair allocations for education can ensure sustainable investment in human capital. Pakistan must meet the global benchmark for spending on education as a percentage of the GDP to attain inclusive and equitable access to quality education for all. While the government has made some allocations for initiatives like expanding the network of Danish Schools, considering the dismal situation of education in our country, it is far from enough. The

government needs to come up with alternative solutions such as public-private partnerships and donor interventions to address the challenges in education on a war footing.

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