

Primary Education in Pakistan

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Primary education is the first stage of free and compulsory education in Pakistan. It has five grades of formal education for children of 5 to 9 years of age.

There are four types of primary schools in Pakistan—public, private, religious and self-help schools. The medium of instruction is English and Urdu. It is rare to find any learning trajectory of children from the pre-primary stage of schooling despite implementation of National Education Policy (NEP) 2009. The policy defines entry age for pre-primary or Katchi as 3–4 years with one year curriculum, one dedicated teacher, and a separate room.

Due to the lack of resources, there are no separate teachers for Katchi grades in 95 percent public schools. Most public schools do not have formal Katchi classes taught. Provincial governments have recently begun introducing Katchi classes in some public schools as per their provincial education plans. These Katchis are in a multi-grade setting so the teaching is very rudimentary.

Some Raw Statistics

According to various domestic and international reports, Pakistan has a total of 150,129 primary education facilities. 131,376 (88 percent) facilities are public, while 18,753 (12 percent) are run by private sector. At the primary level some 5 million children out of schools, with a gender split of 60 percent (girls) vs 40 percent (boys).

18.751 million children in Pakistan are enrolled at the primary level; which can be broken down to 11.461 million (61 percent) and 7.290 million (39 percent) enrolments in public and private sector respectively. Segregating data on total enrolment in primary education, we have 10.471 million boys (55 percent) and 8.280 million girls (45 percent) respectively.

Pakistan has 324,561 public sector primary school teachers (77 percent) and 98,236 (23 percent) from the private sector. According to the latest available data (2018) Pakistan has 78 percent professionally trained teachers at the primary school level against a global average of 89.1 percent. If we break down this percentage on a gender basis, a bias is clearly evident. 89 percent male teachers have had some kind of professional training, while 68 percent female teachers have had similar training.

Education and the 18th Amendment.

Primary education in Pakistan was devolved as a provincial subject with introduction of the 18th Amendment to the constitution in 2010. Strategy formulation for post 18 Amendment provincial education plans covers:

- Universal access to primary education
- Curriculum development
- Syllabus planning
- Resource allocation
- School management
- Infrastructure improvement
- Quality assurance of access to primary education
- Quality assurance of access to measures to improve learning outcomes

The role of federal Ministry of Education is now reduced to assisting provinces with curriculum development, accreditation and R & D. Concomitant with the 18th Amendment, Article 25-A was introduced to the constitution. Article 15-A makes the state responsible for providing free and compulsory education to all children of the age group 5 to 16.

Pakistan is one of the lowest performing countries of the South East Asian region in terms of access to primary education, its quality and the learning outcomes. This despite its constitutional assurances to make primary education free and mandatory

under Article 25-A. Literature on the status of primary education provides substantial evidence of unsatisfactory performance compared to regional comparators.

According to an ADB sector assessment report (June 2019), "Pakistan spends just 2 percent of gross national product on education, which is a far lower percentage than in comparable countries of the region." After the 18th Amendment, education became a provincial responsibility which expected more funding being available for primary education. However, additional resource allocation is not evident while capacity constraints at the provincial and district levels mean value for money in public expenditures on education is not materializing.

Sustainable Development Goal 4

Pakistan has signed the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); and Goal 4 of the SDGs relates to quality education and lifelong learning. Pakistan could not achieve the Education For All (EFA) agenda by 2015 despite invocation of Right to Education under Article 25-A of its constitution (Global Monitoring Report, 2015). In the region Pakistan ranked at the bottom with Bangladesh in the performance to achieve the EFA agenda. The Global Competitiveness Index (GCI) shows that Pakistan lags regional countries (India, China, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Malaysia) in competitiveness in provision of primary education services.

There is also a marked difference between urban and rural areas in terms of children's enrollment share between the public and private sector. Share of enrollments in private primary schools is much higher in urban areas—about 60 percent of total enrollments. Private sector includes low- to high-cost private and elite schools, stand-alone private schools, franchise schools, schools funded by government subsidies, and no-fee schools run by philanthropists and non-government organizations (NGOs).

However, no well-structured private sector regulation mechanism is in place in the country. There is also lack of authentic information about enrollments, exit and quality of education in the private sector. The data provided here is based on the last private school census which, in some provinces, took place in 2005.

Enrollment choices at public and private facilities suggests a clear shift in trends from opting for private sector to public sector schools (Annual Status of Education Report – ASER-rural, 2014-19). The report shows that enrollment in rural areas public-sector primary schools increased from 70 percent (2014) to 77 percent (2019). There was also a sharp decrease from 30 percent to 23 percent in private sector share. This reflects persistent government efforts over the past six years to improve public-sector facilities, ensuring teachers' presence and merit-based recruitment.

Conclusion

The state of primary education in Pakistan is dismal. We need a radical strategic shift on multiple fronts – from improving outreach to the quality of learning outcomes. We have to focus on ensuring full enrollment of out-of-school primary children with a retention policy of all enrolled children. It is important to introduce an overarching national action plan that outlines enhanced responsibility of provinces to implement pre-primary education in the spirit of the national education policy. Having a sound pre-primary education system to track and improve learning trajectories will improve primary level learning outcomes. This will require broadening and deepening reforms to reach the millions of children who are currently out of school.

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