

“WB calls for revising education policies:  
Urges govt to experiment 'out-of-box' reforms | Private schools mushrooming in Punjab”

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By Mohsin Babbar

ISLAMABAD: A new report released Thursday by the World Bank called for a re-evaluation of education policies in the context of a dramatic increase in private schools for primary education in Pakistan.

The report presents facts and findings from a survey of all public and private primary schools in 112 villages in Pakistan's Punjab province, and lays out important policy options based on detailed data to facilitate evidence-based policymaking, says a statement issued Thursday.

The Learning and Educational Achievement in Punjab Schools (LEAPS), the result of collaboration between the World Bank and researchers from Harvard University and Pomona College, says for-profit private schools have a widespread presence in both urban and rural areas, providing parents another option to invest in their children's education.

Between 2000 and 2005, the number of private schools increased from 32,000 to 47,000, and by the end of 2005, one-third of enrolled children at the primary level was studying in a private school.

"This survey provides critical information on every aspect of the educational marketplace, including performance of all types of schools in Punjab," said Yusupha Crookes, World Bank Country Director for Pakistan.

"It documents dramatic changes in the educational landscape that have taken place in Pakistan in recent years," he added. The report provides an excellent starting point for guiding educational policies which needs to take into account the relative strengths and weaknesses of private and government schooling."

The report says a large fraction of rural Pakistani households no longer lives in a village with one or two government schools. Half of the population of rural Punjab lives in villages where parents can choose from 7 or 8 schools.

"Government schools, despite being staffed with better-educated and better-paid teachers, are now competing for the same segment of students, even in rural areas," said Tahir Andrabi, Associate Professor Pomona College and an author of the report.

"Some 18 percent of the poorest sends their children to private schools in villages. This is partly because private schools are cheap - one month's fee in a private school is

roughly the equivalent of one day's wage for an unskilled labourer. This emerging reality is an opportunity and a challenge for educational policy."

While overall enrolments increased by 10 percent between 2001 and 2005, the report says quality of education is lagging and children perform significantly below curricular standards for common subjects and concepts at their grade-level. Children in private schools score significantly higher than those in government schools, even when they are from the same village.

Better learning results in private schools do not arise from higher costs it costs half as much to educate a child in a private school (Rs 1000 per year) compared to a government school (Rs 2000 per year).

"Nevertheless, private schooling alone cannot be the solution," said Tara Vishwanath, World Bank Lead Economist and the author of the report.

"Access to private schools is not universal. Private schools choose to locate in richer villages and richer settlements within villages, limiting access for poor households. In contrast, a laudable feature of the government school system is that it ensures equal geographical access to schools for all. The policy imperative is how we ensure inclusion and quality education for all children in Pakistan," he added.

The report advances a modified role of the government for discussion and debate. This modified role of the government would focus on policies complementary to, rather than in competition with, the private sector.

One strand of this modified role would be for the government to provide information. The report suggests, for instance, that information on the quality of every school - public or private - would enable households to make informed decisions and increase beneficial competition between schools. The suggestion is based, in part, on the results of an ongoing Randomized Control Treatment Experiment.

It also proposes that the government corrects the imbalances arising from unequal geographical access to private schools, and ensures that all children acquire a set of basic competencies.

Lastly, it urges the government to become an innovator willing to experiment and evaluate 'out-of-the-box' reforms such as public-private partnerships where financial support is given to children regardless of the school chosen.

The report says that improving quality in government schools requires rethinking on teacher hiring and compensation in a fundamental manner. It presents a number of different options for teacher reforms from decentralizing teacher hiring to districts to decreasing additional duties such as attending workshops and administering polio vaccinations to performance-based pay.

The report clarifies that each option has its own strength and weaknesses. The report says educational policies need to recognise that there are weaknesses and strengths in both sectors.

The relative strengths of the government sector are a better educated and trained workforce that is equitably distributed. The relative strengths of the private sector are the ability to cut costs by paying teachers according to local conditions and performance and eliciting higher levels of effort from their teachers.