

“World Bank report calls for re-evaluation of educational policies”

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World Bank study report has called for a revaluation of educational policies in the context of dramatic increase in private schools for primary education in Pakistan.

The report on the Learning and Educational Achievement in Punjab Schools (LEAPS), released by WB, presents a number of different options for teacher reform - from decentralising 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 and debate and discussion are required to inform the way forward.

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

According to LEAPS, the result of collaboration between the World Bank and researchers from Harvard University and Pomona College, the for-profit private schools have become a widespread presence in both urban and rural areas, providing parents another option for investing in their children's education. Between the year 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.

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

While overall enrolments increased by 10 percent between 2001 and 2005, the report pointed out that the 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. In fact, it will take children in government schools 1.5 - 2.5 years of additional schooling to catch up to where private school children are in Class 3. 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 1,000 per year) compared to a government school (Rs 2,000 per year).

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 Randomised Control Treatment Experiment.

LEAPS proposed 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 with 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 mentioned that improving quality in government schools requires rethinking teacher hiring and compensation in a fundamental manner.

Finally, the report pointed out that the 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.

The public-private learning gap is much larger than that across children from different socio-economic backgrounds. Another way to benchmark the private-public gap in learning is to compare it to differences across widely emphasised parental dimensions, such as parental literacy and wealth.

The gap between public and private schools in English is 12 times that between rich and poor children. The gap between public and private schools in Mathematics is 8 times that between children with literate and illiterate fathers. The gap between public and private schools in Urdu is 18 times the gap between children with literate and illiterate mothers, LEAPS added.

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