

“Schools in Punjab”

*Dawn*, Pakistan

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KARACHI: A NEW report released by the World Bank calls 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 the Punjab province and lays out important policy options based on detailed data to facilitate evidence-based policy-making.

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 become a widespread presence in both urban and rural areas, providing parents another option for investing in their children’s education.

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 live in villages with one or two government schools. Half the population of rural Punjab lives in villages where parents can choose from seven or eight schools.

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 to 2.5 years of additional schooling to catch up where private school children are in Class III.

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 (Rs1,000 per year) compared to a government school (Rs2,000 per year).

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

One, the report suggests, the government should provide information on the quality of every school — public or private — to 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.

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

It also 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 says that improving quality in government schools requires rethinking teacher hiring and compensation in a fundamental manner. It 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 discussions are required to inform the way forward.

Finally, the report says that 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.

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Document Title: Schools in Punjab

Document Source: Dawn (Pakistan)