**[Education and manifestos](https://www.dawn.com/news/1810559/education-and-manifestos)**

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DO party manifestos show intentions? Going by past record, they do not. Hardly ever have parties adhered to manifestos. But manifestos do show what parties want the people to know or think about their intentions.

Should party manifestos be judged on the basis of what is being promised or should there be some assessment of whether or not the promises are realistic and what plans, however rudimentary, have been shared about how promises will be fulfilled?

If we go with promises alone, a party with no intention of fulfilling them can promise the moon in their manifesto. If realism is the test, the more realistic plans will look too modest compared to those promising the moon. The best option seems to be to have some idea of what the promises are, while keeping in mind our current position, and examining the ways parties are suggesting for fulfilling their promises. Since worked-out plans are not shared in manifestos, it remains a bit of a guessing game.

I had the opportunity to look at the education sections of the manifestos of four political parties: the [PML-N](https://www.dawn.com/news/1809059), [PTI](https://www.dawn.com/news/1809422/pti-unveils-manifesto-as-police-disperse-several-rallies), [PPP](https://www.dawn.com/news/1809195) and the [Jamaat-i-Islami](https://www.dawn.com/news/1800566) (JI).

All four have promised they will raise government expenditure on education to four to five per cent of GDP. Current government expenditure is well below 2pc of GDP. So, all of them are promising at least a 100pc increase in education expenditure. Four per cent of GDP is what is usually recommended as minimum expenditure on education that countries should commit to.

But we have never really gone above 2pc, despite many manifestos promising this in the past as well. When the country raises only about 9-10pc of GDP in taxes, how can education spending reach 4pc? Are all parties just parroting what they are expected to say about education expenditure? Seems to be more than a possibility.

The promise to raise education expenditure to 4-5pc of GDP is an old one.

The PPP seems to be the only one that has given some thought to the implementation of the right to education. The say they will ‘implement Article 25A of the Constitution in letter and spirit’. And they do talk about ensuring that a primary school can be reached within 30 minutes and secondary school within 60 by every child (however, one is not clear if this is the walking distance or distance travelled by other means).

The PML-N manifesto is disappointing. It does not talk of 25A; it just mentions that it will expand a lot of its initiatives from the Punjab 2013-2018 period including scholarship schemes, Daanish schools and public-private partnerships.

It is good to see the PTI move away from its insistence on having a ‘single’ curriculum to a [‘common core’ syllabus](https://www.dawn.com/news/1572130). They also mention midday meals and free textbooks. But there is no discussion of 25A.

JI’s manifesto is quite elaborate but the most disturbing as well. They do say they want education to be for all but they also say they will have a uniform system of education for everyone. They do not elaborate on what this means.

They want education to be a federal responsibility and not a provincial subject. They want to put Islamic and Pakistani ideology at the centre of our curriculum and want to ensure that all education is in accordance with the requirements of the Quran and Sunnah. They promise to do away with co-education.

Islamiat and Pakistan Studies are already compulsory subjects. The PTI’s last government added a lot of new content to these subjects. The Single National Curriculum added religious material to the curricula of other subjects such as English and Urdu. Nazara Quranic recitation was made compulsory. For higher grades, the teaching of the Quran with translation was also added.

What more does JI want? How do we make education more Islamic and Pakistani? There are many educationists who say that we have already turned mainstream schools into madressahs.

For higher education, it is all about more universities. The PTI and PPP promise a university in each district. There is, again, no discussion on how this is the best way to serve the cause of higher education. We already have 250-odd universities in the country and a fairly high unemployment rate amongst educated youth. Should improving the quality of existing institutions not be a priority, instead? And if expansions are needed, many of the 250 institutions can expand readily; why are brick-and-mortar commitments so important?

On the whole, the manifestos are a disappointment. The promise to raise education expenditure to 4-5pc of GDP is an old one and has never been implemented. Given our current economic situation, it seems unlikely that any government will be able to do that in the foreseeable future.

All parties, other than JI, mention they will use public-private partnerships more extensively for improving educational access and the quality of provision.

This is one area that requires more attention and we have had some success here (the Punjab Education Foundation, Sindh Education Foundation), but there are also fears that such partnerships might be used by the government to avoid its responsibilities in education provision and/ or to introduce privatisation under the guise of partnership. Parties will need to remain vigilant against these dangers.

There is no real commitment to implementing Article 25A other than by the PPP and JI. The PPP is the only party that makes the commitment explicit. Most of the initiatives mentioned in the manifestos of the PML-N, PTI and PPP are from their respective stints in government. But those initiatives did not do a whole lot for education access or quality improvement even then. How will they do better now?

If these manifestos represent the best thinking of these parties on education issues and proposed solutions, education will remain a neglected area and 26 million children will continue to stay out of schools and the majority of children who are in schools in Pakistan will continue to get poor-quality education.

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