**[Education apathy](https://www.dawn.com/news/1698311/education-apathy)**

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LAST year, the Sindh education minister said at a press conference that 5,000 “unviable” primary schools in the province would be closed and their premises used for community welfare purposes.

The race to open schools had started in the mid-1980s under PM Junejo. It accelerated during the Musharraf era, when more powers were devolved to the district level. District nazims enjoyed unprecedented powers, but were inexperienced in administration and development and vulnerable to local pressure. Many schools — mostly one-roomed — were sanctioned and constructed over the years on the recommendations of influential persons. Multiple schools would crop up regardless of whether there was a need for more than one school in the same village. The motive was to create jobs for family members or voters and many schools were actually being used for ceremonial purposes.

The decision to close these schools was based on a report by the Reforms Support Unit (RSU) of the Sindh Education Department, which was assigned the task of conducting a survey of non-functional or dysfunctional schools. The list of schools proposed to be closed was published in newspapers to invite any objection. Many of the schools listed had been functional for more than half a century, but had fallen into a state of disrepair.

The havoc wreaked by political pressure and teachers’ associations on the schooling system has been unimaginable. There was a much-publicised story recently regarding the severe beating given to biometric staff by college teachers in Government College Pir Jo Goth. This was not an isolated incident: threats and harassment of biometric staff and refusal of teachers to use biometric machines are common problems.

Schools cannot be described as ‘unviable’.

In the initial years, results from biometric attendance machines had exposed thousands of teachers who were habitual absentees. The majority of those who had reached the pensionable service threshold had decided to retire. Those who had opted to continue rarely focused on teaching, and instead, maintained a formal presence in school. In such a scenario, how could families expect children to benefit from going to school? Dropout rates rose as a result.

The RSU would have known this if it would have engaged in dialogue with locals to ascertain the actual causes of desertion in schools, instead of simply recommending their closure on the presumption that parents are not willing to educate their children. A former RSU head confided that the survey staff never even surveyed school-age children within the vicinity of the village, as they should have before recommending the closure of their schools.

One may not disagree with the argument that some schools would have to be shut because the school-going population in a village or surrounding areas was less or enough for one school only. However, did policymakers in the Sindh government ever consider population growth over the last 30 or 40 years in those villages? Can a single example of a village be given from where the entire population has migrated? No doubt there is seasonal migration, specially from Thar, Kachho (Kirthar range) and the coastal belt to upper Sindh and southern Punjab, but that should not justify the closure of schools. Rather, school-age children should be given incentives to stay back to complete the academic year. One may also agree with the former head of the RSU, who said: “There is no justification for six schools to be operating within a two-kilometre radius.” But it is also a fact that rural taboos in Sindh still hinder co-education. Hence, more than one school can be taken as a blessing and girls can be placed in a separate school.

Similarly, the system of ‘split-up’ education, in vogue in some primary schools in the UK, can be replicated. Under this system, students are grou­ped according to the infant level and junior level ages and placed in separate classrooms. In the case of Sindh, the introduction of this system requires serious thought as compulsory schooling age has been raised to 16 years. Another option could be that, instead of placing all students from nursery to Class 5 in one classroom, students in senior classes can be placed in a nearby village/ mohalla school, and vice versa.

The school is a place of learning and growth, and can therefore never be described as ‘unviable’. It will be needed tomorrow, if not today. Till such time, vacant buildings may be converted into computer learning centres and stocked with reading material. Sadly, the Sindh bureaucracy has always been shy of interaction with the locals, as is evident from the fact that communities were not consulted at the local or District Reforms Oversight Support Committee level, let alone at the provincial level. This is the root of education apathy in Sindh, nothing else.

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