**Public schools Dissecting the reforms**

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Education sector reforms, because of the change in attitudes, beliefs, and repertoire that they require, are by necessity a series of gradual reforms rather than one grand reform. There is simply no silver bullet. While it is difficult to assess the gains from each individual effort, we had seen some encouraging and steady improvement in several educational performance indicators in the pre-Covid-19 era. Teacher absenteeism was on the decline. Ghost teachers were constantly being rooted out. Student attendance had been improving. Enrolment of girls as a proportion of their school going age had been steadily increasing. Provision of school facilities (water, electricity, toilets, classrooms, and boundary walls) was constantly improving. Support for teachers was on the rise—in the form of provision of supplementary material and continuous professional development. There had been a visible gravitation towards investing in early childhood learning. Mechanisms were being set up to rationalise posting of teachers and administrators based on needs. By and large, there was a general mobilisation and sensitisation of the public sector education provision that seemed to herald into access and quality.

[Adnan Qazi has left audience spell bound in his next music video venture](https://nation.com.pk/26-Sep-2021/adnan-qazi-has-left-audience-spell-bound-in-his-next-music-video-venture)

While the pre-Covid-19 momentum generated by the abundance of reforms deserves appreciation, one must introspect to see what could have been done better. Four shortcomings are conspicuous in our education reforms landscape of the first quarter of this century. Firstly, teachers who are the frontliners in teaching and learning are left out of the process of designing reforms. Their input is not given the weight that is due and their commitment to the reforms is taken for granted. After all has been said and done, the effectiveness of any school hinges on what the teachers think and do. When teachers are not part of the reform design, the resulting reforms make erroneous assumptions about the needs, opportunities, and constraints.

This alienates the teachers, resulting in complete disengagement at worst, and low morale at best. This is probably the reason why despite improvement in hiring practices and accumulation of highly qualified teachers in public schools, the learning curve among students is yet to make any significant headway. Secondly, reforms are in essence political in nature: the content, design, and priorities are expected to reflect political needs too, in addition to the academic. In other words, reforms are expected to shoot two birds with one stone. Having to fulfil this dual-purpose, reforms lack the vigour which comes with absolute commitment to designing based on needs, data, and logic. Thirdly, and relatedly, many reforms that appear contemporary and appealing fail to translate into outcomes because of the fundamental flaw in approach: the crafters design them based on what is possible rather than what is needed. If a school has 100 kids and one teacher, providing a tablet or a multimedia may be possible but providing a teacher is needed.

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Sans a clear prioritisation of learners and learning, crafters of the reforms go for exotic and contemporary changes that look great but do nothing. The lure of gimmicks at times trumps what is dictated by the needs and logic. Fourthly, the reform efforts are, at times, disconnected and do not complement each other. Given the complexity of the interlinkages between stakeholders in the teaching and learning process, any disjointed efforts that ignore the wider ecosystem will produce unsustainable, sub-par outcomes. As a result, the reforms do not create a synergy that creates a multiplier effect. For instance, one province has put in place mandatory classroom observations. While an excellent idea prima facie, there is a complete absence of buy-in for the exercise by the officials tasked with doing the observations. There is no effective parallel mechanism to use the feedback from the observations to improve pedagogy. It may happen eventually but why not right away? A step in the right direction, if followed by a deep, long slumber, loses its significance, and takes away the steam.

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Pakistan has seen a profusion of educational reform efforts since the turn of this century. We have seen the fruition of these reforms in, among other things, improved attendance, better provision of school facilities, and transparency in hiring processes. Given the tremendous amount of effort in terms of time and money that has gone into the reforms, the results, although encouraging, are far less than optimal, especially as the learning crisis seems to persist. For better translation of reforms into learning outcomes, future efforts must be guided by what is needed than what is possible, should involve teachers in the reform process, and address the first order issues first.

Policymakers must bear in mind that while change can portend improvement, not all changes can be equalised with improvements. With a plethora of reforms already undertaken and many currently underway, any future reforms must first critically assess the previous undertakings, developing a cogent institutional wisdom that progressively improves policies, inputs, and outcomes.