[Khurram Mateen](https://www.thenews.com.pk/writer/khurram-mateen)

February 15, 2021

**Quality education**

The federal government is finally going ahead with its ambitious plan to align the parallel education systems in the country with its much-vaunted Single National Curriculum (SNC) in August this year.

The initiative, which promises to do away with imbalances in the learning system and is characterised as a panacea by the prime minister to cure the classism in Pakistani society, has been the centre of much debate.

The arguments mainly square on the SNC’s emphasis on religion and whether it can reform the education models in seminaries, besides the medium of instruction in schools. It remains to be seen how far this move will be able to reverse the rot that has hollowed out the education system over the decades.

If the objective is to truly reform the education system in its entirety – and not just another half-hearted attempt to mainstream seminaries to check extremism and increase tolerance in conformity with new security and political dimensions – this move alone is unlikely to offer the desired results that the architects boast of. To achieve this, an overarching reforms programme would have to be actively implemented alongside the SNC, with state schools in sight.

Boosting resources and efficiency to improve the quality of education and to facilitate students in public-sector institutions should be the areas of focus. Such challenges have already been noted in the National Education Policy Framework put forward a couple of years ago. Scaling up literacy rate and bridging the gender gap is another major challenge.

Education has no doubt become a class issue, with the affluent sending their children to expensive private schools and then abroad. These children return to the country to better opportunities than those who went to public schools, seminaries, or cheap ‘private’ schools – the in-betweeners – with questionable credentials that dot the educational landscape to fill the perceived gaps in the country’s public education system. So why do people opt for the latter?

State schools at the moment are considered the least favourable option by many parents. Talk to any parent, and they will tell you the same thing: public schools are in shambles. Parents prefer to send their children to private educational institutions because state schools are cash-strapped and neglected. The country spends just little over two percent of its GDP on education. This miniscule amount translates to a lack of quality of education and basic facilities.

While some non-profit organisations are playing an important role towards educating the less privileged, those NGOs are just crutches for the limping public-sector education system. So where do the (relatively) low-cost private schools come in? Parents opt for these not just due to a shortage of public schools. While quality of education is a factor, social pressures also likely contribute to the thriving ‘industry’ of such schools.

Private education is not always a choice for many inflation-ridden lower- and lower-middle class households. They are forced to compromise on other necessities of life to educate their children. So, what can the government do besides the SNC to change the fate of the country’s underprivileged?

For real change, efforts need to be made by provinces to uplift the standard of education at government-run educational institutions, besides ensuring basic facilities. As education has become a provincial subject after the 18th Amendment, provincial governments are now mainly responsible for leading on this front. The PTI has governments in Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Gilgit-Baltistan, so it makes it easier for the ruling party to implement educational reforms.

When no quick fix seems in sight to overcome perennial resource constraints in the education sector, public schools can at least channel their energies towards quality teaching and discipline through efficient utilisation of the available human and material resources. All they need is effective teacher training and a robust monitoring system. An exclusive online application on the pattern of the Pakistan Citizen’s Portal can help track the progress of educational institutions. Lack of merit in the hiring process and political interference in operational matters has been one of the major root causes for low efficiency in institutions, and the education sector is no exception.

So, the success of the latest initiative hinges on how well the government deals with the massive task of teacher training and efficiency, and how it manages political and administrative challenges to improve conditions at public schools. A sophisticated mechanism would have to be put in place to sift out ‘unfixable’ and ‘ghost’ human resource.

Moreover, private schools should no more be a compulsion but a personal choice for parents to educate their children. However, minimum quality standards will have to be ensured in private schools through regulations, while managing the adverse impact of such an intervention which commonly results in more corruption. Turning a blind eye to a substandard school is akin to letting a quack play with the lives of unsuspecting patients – here the future of the next generation is at stake.

After all, the success of any initiative depends on how it moves from rhetoric to action. Political will is a prerequisite for defeating ignorance and restoring trust in education in the public sector.

The writer is news editor on the London desk, The News.

Email: khurram.mateen@gmail.com