[Syed Umair Javed](https://www.thenews.com.pk/writer/syed-umair-javed)

March 31, 2021

**Reforms at the FDE**

In the first part of this series, ‘Challenges for the FDE’, published on March 19, 2021, some major challenges before the FDE (direction, management capacity, fiscal, and delivery of quality education) were discussed. In this part, the reforms undertaken at the FDE to address those challenges are discussed.

The Ministry of Federal Education & Professional Training (MOFEPT) realized in early 2019 that the FDE had to be taken out of the leadership crisis for normal functioning. After careful analysis and consultation, it decided to reposition the director general as a fixed-term contractual BS 21 level position open to internal and external competition. Changing the recruitment rules took considerable time and effort – almost 1.5 years and countless consultations – but was made possible by the support of the federal education minister. As a result, the first competitively selected DG joined the FDE in October 2020. This is a first for any educational department in the country.

The restructuring is not limited to the top position alone. Discussions with the Establishment & Finance Division are ongoing to: (i) open up more positions at FDE for competition so that relevant experts & professionals can be brought in; and ii) reduce support staff redundant positions that take up a large chunk of the budget but provide limited dividends. Political economy requires that the decisions pass through all stakeholders, including pressure groups, for broad-based ownership and therefore this process is taking time. Having said that, the change in recruitment rules is inevitable.

To free up time and capacity, an agreement was finalized with the Punjab Information Technology Board to obtain their suite of e-solutions that would take care of high volume time intensive administrative tasks. Provincial education departments have made successful strides in this direction already. By August 2020, crowd-sourced data entry was underway and hopefully the system will be fully operational soon.

Simultaneously, the FDE rolled out the National Information Technology Board’s e-Office suite. By July 2020, over 80 percent of the record had been scanned and 100 percent of daily processing was on the e-Office system. Educational institutions are now being connected to this system. This has been possible due to an alignment in MOFEPT & FDE goals, incentives for system adoption, and appreciation by employees of the ease the system provided.

On the financial side, the FDE needed to manage its resources better and find new sources as well. Till 2018, while the FDE knew the total budget its schools received, it had no idea how much each school spent. With support from the Finance Division, budget heads were created for all schools and colleges starting FY 2019-20. Resultantly, the FDE now better understands how the money flows and is able to plan annual budgets better.

To compensate for the loss of fee revenue after the Right to Free Education Act, 2012, a project was prepared to provide small amounts of money for maintenance and extra-curricular activities at the school level through community led committees. Similar funding is available to schools in provinces; has made a lot of difference to their functioning. Simultaneously, the Education Code – which governs how schools operate – is in the process of being amended to allow schools to undertake certain fund-raising activities.

To increase access to public education, the FDE started building seven new schools in Islamabad’s periphery areas in 2019. Out of these civil works has been started on three (G-13, G-15 and Pakistan Town) and contracting is underway for the remaining four sites. The plan is to add new schools every year under the PSDP. These schools will have to be supplemented through models like the Punjab Education Foundation where low cost private service providers get funds for education delivery outcomes. Nevertheless, adding new public schools is absolutely crucial given the population growth. To begin addressing the issue of out of school children, 60 learning centers within FDE schools imparting accelerated learning programs were operationalized with support of JICA and Alight, and 7000 plus children were successfully enrolled.

Lack of science/math instructors is a big impediment to better learning outcomes. In 2019, for the first time in over a decade, the FDE initiated the process of recruiting over 600 mathematics and science teachers with a 50-50 gender balance. While this won’t meet all of the FDE’s needs, it will plug important gaps. With a more long-term perspective (quicker recruitment, attracting quality candidates, lower cost to exchequer) the FDE developed a four year long Education Fellowship project which entailed enlisting assistance of renowned not-for-profits to engage 250 fresh graduates of leading universities to teach mathematics, science and English in Islamabad’s peripheral schools.

The project has a dual purpose: raise learning levels at below average institutions and gather evidence for alternate recruitment/training methods through a monitoring and research framework. The project was developed after observing the quality, determination and positive peer-to-peer effects of Teaching Fellows placed at FDE schools by Teach for Pakistan. With the help of the Pakistan Alliance for Math and Sciences, the FDE is also piloting cluster-based teaching where neighboring schools draw upon common math and science teachers to overcome shortages. Both these initiatives are novel and will inform wider reforms nationally.

To give STEM education a push, the FDE is starting two development projects this year. One will set up project/maker spaces labs in 30 secondary schools where students will learn about the world around them through collaborate hands on projects. The other will introduce varied e-blended learning in over 200 classrooms where traditional methods of teaching and assessment will be complimented by emerging education technologies. To design these projects, the FDE drew upon observations and findings of several Ed-tech and STEM interventions carried out by partners (eg Knowledge Platform, Developments in Literacy, Teach the World Foundation, Moawin Foundation, Taleem Foundation, Teletaleem etc.) in FDE schools since 2019.

Technology was employed to narrow the training gap for teachers. An arrangement with the American Board allowed FDE teachers to enroll in an internationally recognized teacher certification course for free. With some encouragement, over 3000 teachers made use of Edx and Coursera to refresh/improve subject understanding. At the same time, the MOFEPT used the Federal College of Education and Pakistan Management Institute for courses in classroom practices and school leadership. More importantly, an induction and in-service training program has been developed for the first time.

Lack of teaching staff and good school heads at Islamabad’s periphery schools has always been a major contributor towards inequity. To address the issue, 68 posts of senior teachers in urban schools were moved along with budget to rural schools after wide consultations with stakeholders as a starting point with more to follow. A point-based transfer policy approved in 2020 ensures that teachers serve both urban and rural schools. Further, a consolidated project of over Rs6.8 billion is also underway to provide missing facilities (washrooms, labs, water etc), repairs and new classrooms in over 170 rural schools.

Skills and education have long been viewed as two separate paths, with students having to forgo one for the other. Within the Skills for All initiative of the MOFEPT, five FDE schools will start offering Matric (Tech) next year in partnership with the NAVTTC. This stream will enable students to acquire technical skills and basic education without having to compromise on either.

Despite being restricted to the capital, the FDE continues to hold a unique status within education departments. It provides first-hand experience of public education delivery to the federal government post the 18th Amendment. It also serves as a model test-bed for new education initiatives – big enough for results to matter, small enough for quick pilot roll outs, and diverse enough to encompass most test parameters. The FDE has recently undertaken exciting projects – competitively hired leadership, alternate recruitment methods, STEM maker spaces, e-blended learning, cluster-based teaching, introduction of Matric Tech – that can inform reform nationally.

The FDE lost out to almost a decade of progress in the overall reform process provincial departments benefited from. The interest of the MOFEPT in the past two years has brought the FDE back on track and it is now ready to focus on improving learning levels. The effects of any reform in the education sector take over a decade to manifest. It is crucial, therefore, to build incrementally but consistently on reforms.

The writer is a public servant who has served as joint secretary, Ministry of Federal Education & Professional Training and director general, Federal Directorate of Education.

Twitter: @SyedUmairJaved