**Teachers plight**

BY N O M A N A H M E D 2020-12-08

GIVEN the surge in Covid-19 infections, the provincial and federal governments want schoolchildren to stay at home. School managements have been directed to conduct academic activities online. Schools were already operating under SOPs. The present call has added to their challenge.

Private schools are the worst hit. Delays in receiving school fee, extra costs in the facilitation of online classes, salaries of teaching and non-teaching staff, rentals, utilities and incidental expenses are taking a financial toll. Most schools have partially passed on the financial burden to the most vulnerable in this set-up, ie the teachers who are asked to purchase their own hardware and internet resources for online classes. From being fired without notice, to being subjected to a 50 per cent (or more) reduction in their salaries, they are being treated ruthlessly.

With few exceptions, smalland mediumscale private schools in lowand middleincome neighbourhoods hire female teachers. Economic compulsions, locational advantages (in some cases) and the social acceptability ofteachingas a profession are among the reasons they teach.

Usually, private schools aim to generate enough revenue to satisfy the expectations of investors and managers. Young women with average educational credentials are given the entire task of handling the pupils.

As it is, they are overworked, moving from class to class without a breal(. During the pandemic, school managements have given their academic staff a heavier teaching load. They believe that sitting in one spot and instructing via a computer can achieve greater content delivery a debatable idea.

Imagine a teacher who gives eight online lessons to a corresponding number of classes with an average of 25 students in each class. Even if she has only to deal with homework, it would mean that she has to digitally assess 200 documents everyday. If classroom worksheets are to be digitally assessed, it means twice the number a humanly impossible task. With this kind of work, the teacher is unable to do justice to her responsibility. Poorly assessed worksheets and not giving homework impacts the students` learning. In such a setting, the teacher finds it better to `please` every stakeholder, and adopts the path of least confrontation. When pupils receive exaggerated praise for little or no effort, they and their parents feel satisfied. The school management also remains happy. The casualty is education which is downgraded further.

The salary and emolument structure for these teachers are below desirable levels.During the pandemic, citing financial challenges, the emoluments have been further downgraded. In one example, a full-time primary school teacher in a bungalow school of Karachi`s North Nazimabad area was paid Rs15,000 per month an illiterate employee in a government department is paid more than twice this amount! Salary structures are not encouraging even in some of the better outfits. And many schools do not pay an extra sum to teachers for procuring digital resources for online classes. There is no provision for paying for extra work, such as conducting online parent-teacher meetings on behalf of the school. A frustrated and demotivated teaching cadre is the result.

Apart from the pandemic challenges, school teaching on its own is not the profession of choice for the brightest. Teachers do not possess a career path to pursue in their professional lives. If they develop their capacities and skills through self-drive and effort, they are able to acquire better prospects. Otherwise, the scenario remainsstatic for a sizable number of them.

There are a few attempts by some school managements to invest in teachers` training and periodic capacity building.

But when thathappens,the teachers are either charged or the cost is adjusted against their salaries.

Thusteachersloseinterestintheirupgradation and development.

As private-school teachers are not organised on an effective bargaining platform, they are unable to raise and negotiate common demands.

The scenario requires a drastic overhaul at several levels. School managements require facilitation and assistance in the delivery of essential work. Knowledge of proper management with regard to the academic, operational and financial aspects of running a school can bring about change.

While private schools are justified in functioning as profitable concerns, it is important to pay appropriate salaries to the teaching staff. Assistance can also be taken from well-established, trust-based schools and resource centres to devise programmes for capacity and skill development. It is essential to strike a balance among all stakeholders at all times, and especially in this phase of a world crisis.  The writer is chairman, Department of Architecture & Planning, NED University, Karachi.