



A make-over for education **By** **Anjum Altaf and Samia Altaf**

Pakistan's public education system is sick and getting sicker. But what exactly is the malady? We employ this medical perspective to highlight the issues and to propose for consideration a radical yet feasible path to recovery.

The healthcare perspective comprises three essential steps: a description of the problem, a diagnosis of the cause and a prescription of the remedy. In the case of public education in Pakistan there has been no diagnosis, only descriptions and prescriptions. No wonder the health of the system has continued to deteriorate despite the numerous policy prescriptions over the years.

The problem is that by now the disease is so advanced that there is no time to be spared for diagnosis. Without an emergency procedure and some kind of transplant, the patient would expire, i.e. the system would implode.

Consider the following. In the five-to-19 years age group there are 70 million children, more than half of whom (42 million) are out of school. Over half a million children are added to this stock every year. Elementary arithmetic suggests that NGO-run schools cannot offer a solution. They cannot absorb even a fraction of the new yearly addition to the out-of-school population let alone address the stock of out-of-school children. Thus the scale of the problem is increasing rapidly, not decreasing.

Second, the children who do go to school, at least since the time of Zia ul Haq, are being indoctrinated rather than educated, one reason that intolerance in Pakistani society has grown so rapidly. Even highly trained professionals have suffered because acquiring skills and being educated are distinct phenomena.

Third, education has become an extremely politicised and fiercely contested domain in which all elements (employment, teaching, textbooks, and examinations) now involve issues of ideological influence, political patronage, criminal involvement and economic rent.

Finally, the problem has acquired such a scale that an across-the-board prescription to fix all public schools is rendered virtually infeasible. Neither financial nor human capital resources will prove sufficient and would be spread so thin as to be ineffective. Furthermore, there is little chance that unqualified teachers could be laid off or new ones familiar with modern content and pedagogy trained in sufficient numbers to make a difference in the short term.

Given the above, the traditional remedy of attempting to nurture a sick system back to health will fail. A transplant is needed that would allow starting over with the core of a fresh and healthy programme. This core should have the ability to grow rapidly attracting healthy cells away from the diseased body of the old system thereby itself becoming the de facto system over time.

We propose establishing around 1,000 magnet schools, between five and 10 per district, in the first phase. These schools would enrol especially gifted and talented children, selected on the basis of tests that discount the advantages of social and economic status, in order to fast-track nurturing the most promising human capital in the country.

The schools, an investment in the future of the country, would be fully subsidised for all to eliminate the negative psychology of distinctions between children and to initiate a process of social integration. While it is important to provide the poor a channel for upward mobility, anything that is exclusively for the poor is stigmatised as second-rate in Pakistani society. The schools should be of such quality that all families would want to enrol their children in them.

Each magnet school would serve as the hub in its area for the provision of distance education to a number of public schools that might wish to affiliate with it voluntarily. This initiative would leverage both old and new technologies to improve education in the satellite schools. Leading firms would be invited to pilot new approaches with attractive licensing incentives and awards for particularly relevant innovations. Expatriate Pakistani entrepreneurs should find this opportunity of special interest.

A new examination board built around revised content and pedagogy would certify students graduating from the magnet schools with non-magnet schools having the option to affiliate voluntarily with the new board. Certification by this board would carry privileges that would generate pressure from below for other schools to switch to it thereby initiating a non-coercive and non-confrontational path to curricular and teaching reforms.

Competitive contracts would be employed for awarding the rights to set up the magnet schools grouping districts to ensure an optimal number of contracts. NGOs active in education and private school chains would be logical contenders bidding on subsidy required per student.

Competition amongst winning bidders and prospects of further opportunities in subsequent phases would generate positive incentives for efficiency and good performance while comparative performance would also provide valuable data for benchmarking and monitoring the programme.

A natural corollary would be upgrading a selected number of teacher training institutions to build capacity for staffing the magnet schools. In-service teachers would be eligible to sit for the certification examinations in order to create an incentive for voluntary improvement of skills to become part of a merit-based elite cadre of teachers.

A number of independent auditors would be associated with the programme to monitor the initiative and provide public disclosure of progress at the magnet and satellite schools. These auditors would have access to information about school budgets, project timelines and interim milestones.

At this stage we are refraining from prescribing details of how exactly such an initiative might be implemented. We are interested in suggesting a radical but feasible new dynamic in public education to trigger an intensive debate amongst Pakistanis and friends of Pakistan outside the country.

We believe that the essential features of this initiative and its transformative potential are such that it should appeal both to Pakistanis and to donors who are keen to invest in the future of the country. Collective deliberation should help to shape it into a package that would ensure ownership by all those interested in the future of public education in Pakistan.

Anjum Altaf is an economist; Samia Altaf is a public health physician.

Anjum Altaf and Samia Altaf, "A make-over for education," *Dawn*. 18-10-2010.

Keywords: Education, Educational policy, Education system, Education-Pakistan, Schools, Teachers, Institutions, Textbooks, Examinations, Students, Children, Children rights, Population, Pakistan, NGOs