

# HOW TO GET THERE **FROM HERE**

Lessons in Education Reform for  
Pakistan from Around the World

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Published by the Pakistan Education Task Force as part of its March for Education campaign, raising the profile of the education emergency in Pakistan.

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One

# Two Possible Futures

**I**magine Pakistan in mid-21st century. Currently, it has 180 million people; by then it will be 340 million and, unlike India and China, its population will still be rising. It will be a young country at a time when most of the rest of the world will be ageing.

In one future, the opportunity this offers will be seized. It is possible to imagine Pakistan as an economic powerhouse, helping to fuel sustainable, global economic growth. Of course, there is another future for Pakistan in which the size and youth of its population become a burden rather than an asset - a threat not an opportunity. This second future, it goes without saying, would be devastating for Pakistan and deeply problematic for the global community.

What will determine which of these futures for Pakistan will unfold? A number of factors will play a part,

including regional and global geopolitics, but what has struck me so forcibly in conversations I have had with business, community and political leaders in Pakistan over the last year is that, with one voice, they say the single most important factor will be education.

At present, Pakistan is without a good education system. Indeed, if we are to speak plainly - as the times require - we must admit that the current education system is very poor indeed. Consider the following facts:

- One-third of primary age children, a larger proportion of girls than boys, are not in school at all.
- Around 35% of those children who do attend school and make it to grade 3 cannot do single digit subtraction.
- Each day around a quarter of the country's teachers do not turn up to school.
- Government school facilities are very poor 60% have no electricity, and 34% no drinking water.

- The low-cost private sector delivers better performance than the government schools at around a quarter of the unit cost.
- Karachi, a city of around 16 million people and four million children of school education age, has just 600,000 children enrolled in public schools and up to two million more in low-cost private schools. This suggests perhaps a million children unaccounted for; Karachi, it seems likely, can lay claim to the unenviable title of the worst educated megacity on the planet.

Of course, even against this desolate background, there are isolated examples of wonderful public schools such as the one I saw in the dusty, litter-strewn Karachi suburb, Gadap, where a principal of 17 years was sustaining high standards through sheer force of personality. But we have known for years the individual hero head, while wonderful, can never be, by definition, the solution to a system's problems. And the system, according to global rankings, is far behind the developed world. It ranks 163rd (out of 177 countries) on the UN's index of education

systems. It is also behind its own regional neighbours, some of which, at independence, shared a similar starting point.

However poor Pakistan's education system may be now, it would be perfectly possible to successfully transform it over a generation. The fatalism that grips too many of Pakistan's leaders when they consider the education system

needs to be swept away. Recent history provides an ever-increasing number of success stories around the world; stories of invigorated education systems

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where sustained reform has liberated and empowered millions of people and transformed economies.

Singapore's remarkable story is too easily dismissed as that of a small city-state but the equally remarkable stories of Korea, Estonia, Poland, Minas Gerais in Brazil, and the progress over the last decade in India - particularly in some very large states such as Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh - cannot be dismissed.

Based on evidence from around the world, we now know not just that it can be done, but also *how* it can be done. To seize the opportunity at mid-century, 340 million people will need to be well-educated, able to imagine and innovate, construct and create. It is plainly the case that without a good education system, this will not be possible. Pakistan's leaders need not just to learn lessons from around the world, but to act on them if, this time, it is going to be different.

Two

# Learning Global Lessons

**I**t is only recently that we have been able to answer the question: “how does an education system improve?” We know that most education reform programmes fail to deliver results, and that they squander scarce resources and political will along the way.

But what distinguishes those reforms that succeed from the rest? In recent years, my colleagues and I have been studying twenty school systems that have managed to make sustained improvements in the standard of education they offer children. At the end of last year, we published a major report that sets out lessons that the world’s most improved education systems can teach countries that wish to design their own reform programmes.

Our research explores the experience of school systems that embarked on their reform journey from a variety of different starting points. For Pakistan, most relevant is the experience of those systems in our sample that have successfully moved from poor to at least fair performance. From our analysis, three lessons can be drawn.

First, when education quality is very low, sharply defined programmes are needed to support students in achieving basic standards of literacy and numeracy.

Second, reforms must be sustained over time, with standards only improving if a critical mass of interventions is applied across the system, and with consistency, rigour, and discipline.

And third, the reform process must itself be *ignited*, whether in the wake of a crisis, or after a high-profile report exposes how serious failures are, or when an energetic and visionary leader takes personal responsibility for delivering change.

Quality is important even in countries such as Pakistan that are still far from offering schooling to all children. Even in the poorest countries, we know that the

moment parents see the possibility of a good education for their child, they seize it. The extraordinary growth of the low-cost private sector across Asia and Africa in the last decade reveals incontrovertibly that as soon as parents have the marginal extra income to afford these low-fee schools, that is what they do if the state is failing to provide.

In Pakistan, as in other countries with failing education systems, the reason so many children are not in school is not lack of will on the part of parents; it is a failure to provide the standard of education families demand:

- Poor school facilities - of course, if a school has no toilet, parents will be reluctant to send their children, especially girls, there;
- Poor location - of course, if children, especially girls, have to walk far, parents will be anxious;
- Poor experience - of course, if when the children do get to school, there is no teacher present, why would we expect parents to keep sending their children there? And, if there is a

teacher there but the quality of the teaching is very poor, again why should we be surprised if parents' (and childrens') enthusiasm wanes?

## **Getting the basics right**

It is a statement of the obvious, but it bears repeating: ultimately parents send their children to school because they want them to learn.

They are unlikely to remain enthusiastic about a school system that fails to deliver even basic standards. That is why the starting point for reforming a poor school system is setting a goal to ensure that every child learns to read, write, and do at least basic mathematics. Systems on the journey from poor to fair performance:

- Provide teachers with the motivation and support they need to deliver rapid gains in literacy and numeracy. That means offering scripted teaching materials, coaching on the curriculum, incentives for good teaching, and more classroom time for teaching basic skills.
- Ensure all schools meet minimum quality

standards, by setting minimum targets for learning and monitoring them regularly; making sure facilities are good enough to allow children to learn; giving all students decent textbooks; and providing extra help for low performing schools.

- Making sure there are places available for all students, while providing for students' basic needs (meals, clothing, transport, toilets, etc.) to bring more children into school, while cutting drop-outs and absenteeism.

The results from a determined programme of reforms are remarkable.

Minas Gerais, Brazil's third largest state, has half a million children in primary school. In 2006, an assessment found that fewer than half of 8 year olds had reached the recommended standard for reading. The governor set a goal for improving this to 90% in just four years, with this target translated into school-level targets which were widely communicated to the public. Teachers were provided with lesson plans and workbooks for all their students, and offered sizeable bonuses if their school met its target. 73%

of children met the reading standard in 2008 and 86% by 2010. In just four years, Minas Gerais achieved the best student outcomes of all Brazilian states.

Madhya Pradesh also took a regimented approach when the state's Chief Minister launched its 'Learn to Read' programme in 2005 after it discovered that literacy standards in its schools were very low. It rolled out a standardised teaching model across its system of 138,500 schools, while mandating that the 17 million students in those schools should spend two hours a day on literacy. Again, the results were impressive, with the proportion of 11 year-olds who could read a story increasing from 86% to 95%. At the same time, Madhya Pradesh offered school meals and free uniforms to encourage poor students to enrol, and bicycles to allow them to get to school.

Ghana provides another example of a country that began its reform journey by attempting to drive standards up to a minimum level. It also made rapid strides in increasing access. In 2004/05, only 59% of children went to primary school, a similar level of enrolment to that seen in Pakistan today. By 2008/09, 89% of children were in school, while almost all

children had text books, student health had been improved, and free meals were given to poorer students. If Pakistan's education system was to expand as quickly as Ghana's, a million additional children would need to receive primary schooling *each year*, with universal access to at least a basic education achieved well before 2020.

### **Igniting reform**

So we can say with certainty that rapid progress is possible, even in a dysfunctional education system like Pakistan's. But what begins the process of reform?

Our research suggests that countries that have ignited reforms, and implemented them faithfully over time, rely on at least one of three events to get them started. A political or economic crisis may force a rethink, as governments scramble to carve a new path to a prosperous and secure future. A ground-breaking report can bring home the seriousness of a country's educational challenges, shaking the status quo and leaving the government with 'nowhere to hide'. Or an energetic and visionary leader can take upon him or herself the duty of driving reform. Of all these factors, leadership, whether political (President, Prime

Minister, Chief Minister) or strategic (Minister or Secretary of Education), is by far the most important.

In Pakistan, leadership for education has historically been lacking. It is striking that the country has devoted a much smaller proportion of GDP to education than many comparable countries. While the government's recent commitment to increasing that proportion to 4% is welcome, the

current level remains, unacceptably, below 2% and has not risen since the commitment was made. The pitiful truth is that the state fails to collect even a fraction of the tax revenue it should and then spends too little

of that meagre amount on educating its people.

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Despite this, I strongly believe that there is a genuine prospect of successful education reform now and that this time it really could be different. While inevitably the floods and the security situation have dominated Pakistan's attention in the last year, crisis

has created a recognition that unless progress on security is matched by improvements in the basic services the state provides to the people, sustained development - economic, social and political - will not be possible. Moreover, the global economic crisis has sharpened the understanding among Pakistan's leaders that the country's economic prospects depend more than ever on vastly improving the school system, while awareness is growing of the seriousness of the education emergency facing Pakistan.

Three

# Rising to the Challenge

**I**n any existing system, however poor, there are entrenched interests benefiting from the status quo which can be expected to resist change actively or passively. Experience tells us, not just in education, that it is much easier to block change than to make it happen, much easier to identify the risks of change than the risks of doing nothing, much easier to destroy than create.

It is these circumstances that make courageous political leadership essential for sustained education reform. Transforming Pakistan's education system will, for example, require effective performance management of teachers and principals. The best teachers and principals will no doubt welcome it; however, the teachers who collect a salary but rarely go to school will inevitably resist - and in some cases they will be

well-connected. Similarly, government school teachers, who often earn more than twice their private sector equivalents, are likely to oppose government funding for low-cost private education precisely because of the threat it poses. Moreover, habitual political practices that stand in the way of progress, such as the appointment of education administrators on grounds of politics rather than merit, will have to be swept aside. Indeed, the sheer turnover of senior administrators prevents progress. In the year I have been involved in Pakistan's education, there have, for example, been three or four different secretaries of education in each of Sindh and Balochistan. These examples are not untypical.

The phrase is easy to use but what does "sustained political will" look like in practice? For a start it is never a question of just one person; the demands of education reform require what I have called, taking a phrase from John Kotter, "a guiding coalition" - seven to ten people in key positions who share a commitment to reform and an understanding of what it will require, including facing up to home truths such as the need to move to appointment of administrators strictly on merit and to tackle endemic corruption. Such leaders also need to be willing to

take risks to overcome the deadweight of decades of failure.

Above all, national and provincial leaders need to persist in their strategy because, if education reform in Pakistan is to make the required difference, it will take a decade at a minimum. For this reason the guiding coalition needs to build ever-widening circles of leadership; more and more people inside the system who share the sense of mission and the understanding of what it requires; more and more people outside the system - business leaders, for example - willing to provide the necessary public support, particularly when the going gets tough.

## **Coherent Strategy**

In 2010, the Pakistan Education Taskforce identified seven key strands in the 2009 National Education Policy, which offers a disarmingly honest review of the terrible problems facing the country's public education system.

Our plan can be explained simply and easily, both to those who work in the education system and to the citizens who depend upon it for their future

learning. As the global evidence suggests, the Task Force's account combines accountability and capacity-building or, in simpler terms, pressure and support. This combination, if put in place and sustained, will work.

The pressure for change will come from three sources. First, there should be clear standards for all students in Urdu or the mother tongue, in English, and in Maths and Science. Similarly there should be clear definitions of "good" for schools, districts and provinces.

Second, simple, clear processes for monitoring performance should be put in place at every level. With USAID and the World Bank's leadership, the National Education Assessment System (NEAS) needs to be reinvigorated and become routine. Regular student assessments (as Punjab has already embarked upon) as well as school reviews and district reviews are essential.

Third, a major national public advocacy campaign is needed so that every community and, indeed, every parent, becomes aware of what they should expect of the schools in their local area. They have a right

to a school which is open on a minimum of 180 school days per year, has effective teachers who are present every day, has the necessary basic facilities and has textbooks for every child. Moreover, it should be easy for parents and communities to complain when these conditions are not met, perhaps, for example, via a free-phone line. The Sindh Education Foundation, for example, has signboards outside the schools it funds and, according to Anita Ghulam Ali, the remarkable veteran educator who leads it, parents use the mobile phone number on the sign to call her, sometimes even in the middle of the night!

The increase in media attention for education in the last year is encouraging but we need to see the level of citizen pressure taken to a new level. Now media organisations are considering creating a major campaign to mobilise citizens and put pressure on government to prioritise education as, for example, Geo has done so successfully on a range of social issues in the past. This is potentially transformative; if it is successful there will be no hiding place for corrupt officials or absentee teachers and principals.

The support for change should have four aspects. First, drawing on models such as the Punjab Education

Foundation, a public-private partnership that has put 800,000 students into school, the state should seek to expand rapidly the number of school places in the low-cost non-government sector, whether private or not-for-profit. Where non-government schools accept state funding certain obligations should apply, including quality assurance arrangements. In this way, provinces could rapidly provide many more good school places. For example, given the dire state of affairs in Karachi, it is clear that there is no solution without something along these lines; the moribund government sector has neither the quality nor the scale the crisis demands.

The second aspect of support focuses on ensuring that teachers have the skills necessary to teach the curriculum. This requires high quality professional development and the curriculum materials, especially good textbooks and teacher guides, to enable each teacher to teach each lesson well. Here again there are models that work all over Pakistan, even while the vast majority of the provision is ineffective. The keys to success, therefore, are to ensure that professional development and text books are aligned with standards and assessments and that the system learns from known successes. For example, good

practical teacher guides would really help teachers achieve basic standards of performance. Meanwhile, successful professional development involves coaching and modelling by effective practitioners working in classrooms alongside teachers - not sending individuals to dreary courses unrelated to daily reality.

The third aspect of support recognises that, however much the non-government sector may expand, the vast majority of school places across Pakistan will remain in the traditional public schools for the foreseeable future. This makes it essential to improve the quality of management and administration at every level, from the school, through districts and provinces, to the federal government. In the jargon, this is a challenge of capacity- building - the capacity of head teachers to improve school performance, of district administrators to manage quality and of federal and provincial administrators to translate policy into practice and strategy into delivery. Unannounced visits to government schools, even in well-reputed districts, reveal massive inefficiencies such as absent headteachers, absent teachers and poorly managed facilities.

The definitions of “what good looks like” mentioned

earlier, should inform well-designed capacity-building at each level in the system. Even more importantly, political leaders need to ensure all key appointments are based not on patronage but on performance.

The fourth and final aspect of support is the obvious, but essential provision of good basic facilities - buildings with water, electricity, toilets, boundary walls, desks and chairs and good text books, universally available. The absence of such basic provision across large swathes of Pakistan in the early 21st century is frankly scandalous. Too often this failure is attributed solely to the absence of resources; in reality it should also be attributed to the absence of effective administration. For instance, among low-cost private schools in Karachi, over 95% have electricity whereas, among the government schools, only 50% do, even though the capital investment in the latter is many times greater than the former.

## **Implementation**

If these seven strands of reform were advanced in combination, the performance of Pakistan's education system would improve steadily and significantly.

Needless to say, setting them out on paper is the easy part; the real challenge is getting it done. That is why the government of Pakistan and each provincial government must make a highly visible commitment to its people - constantly reiterated - that they are resolved forcefully to tackle the education emergency. I was impressed in a recent meeting by the willingness of the Chief Minister in Balochistan to make such a commitment.

The second step should be for the entire international community, especially the major donors, to get behind the strategy and to integrate their support. Too often around the world, including in Pakistan, the major donors - no doubt each with the best of intentions - have offered such a bewildering array of uncoordinated programmes and projects to support an education system that it often seems as if, to adapt a phrase of Michael Fullan's, "The helping hand strikes again and again and again." The result has been confusion and fragmentation rather than whole system reform. Balochistan's leaders have eloquently raised precisely this problem with me and in response the Task Force has sought to improve donor co-ordination around a Balochistan Education Action Plan.

If the provincial government embarked on delivering the strategy described here and all the major donors integrated their support behind it, the prospects for success would be vastly enhanced. The emerging close collaboration in support of this strategy among USAID, DFID and the World Bank is a significant step forward, which needs to be deepened and sustained.

But the biggest challenge of all which - to hammer home the point - is implementation, implementation, implementation.

As Michael Fullan and I say to governments around the world, getting the strategy right is difficult but only 10% of the task; the remaining 90% is getting it done. At the federal level, and in each of the provinces, the basic ingredients of driving delivery need to be put in place - clear goals and priorities, delivery plans, trajectories, routines for monitoring performance and problem-solving capacity.

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So far only Punjab has begun to do this in a systematic way. The Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif recently adopted a Roadmap for education reform based explicitly on the model proven in Minas Gerais in Brazil. His willingness to learn lessons from global experience should be a model for other provinces.

Every month, the Chief Minister personally reviews progress and ensures problems are identified early and resolved, meeting with his top ten education administrators to ensure they share his commitment to his Roadmap. Moreover, he and his Secretary of Education have committed to ensuring that key administrative appointments in the province, such as the 36 Education District Officers (EDOs) will be made on merit. Administrators at every level will also be given training in how to manage the system, not purely for survival, but to deliver results.

In other words, the Chief Minister and his team are dealing firmly with some of the binding constraints that have held Pakistan back in the past. There is every reason to think their strategy will deliver improved results within a year.

## Conclusion

All of this - political leadership, the strategy and the Approach to implementation - will create the conditions for change.

But there is one further barrier to overcome: the barrier in people's heads. The story of education reform in Pakistan is an unhappy one. Let me give just three examples. The first five year plan in 1956 set a target of universal primary enrolment in five years. It did not happen. In 1979, another target of 68% enrolment by 1982 was set. It did not happen. In 1988, yet another target was set, this time for universal enrolment by 1992-93. Again, it did not happen. And, as we have seen, universal primary education has still not happened.

With this track record, no wonder Pakistan's education leaders are skeptical that this new venture will succeed. They need to suspend disbelief, to have the courage to start and to develop confidence as early progress becomes visible. They need to believe the lessons from around the world and apply them systematically. They will work. Nothing succeeds like success. In

2010, we saw the first steps in the right direction; in 2011 we will see real progress on the ground. People will begin to believe success is possible in Pakistan too. Not before time.

## About the Author

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As Head of the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit he was responsible for the oversight of implementation of the Prime Minister's priority programmes in health, education, transport, policing, the criminal justice system and asylum/immigration. After leaving government, he was appointed as head of McKinsey & Company's Global Education Practice.

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