



The Philippine Education System in Crisis

By Marielle Filoteo – September 26, 2021

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The new school year has already begun, with problems from the previous school year carried over.

It is an understatement to say that the education crisis continues to be a great challenge for students, teachers, and parents alike, especially for those living in poverty. This crisis is [not news](#) — it has been around for quite some time. But the pandemic has spotlighted the cracks in the system and the widening gap between socioeconomic classes. Education in a time like this has demanded so much from its constituents, but at what cost? The effort to meet these demands has ironically kept many families in poverty, negatively affected academic performance as well as overall well-being, and worst of all, held millions of students back.

We did not need a pandemic to tell us that the learning outcomes of our education system have long been declining in terms of quality and accessibility. It has obviously failed to evolve and innovate into one that is resilient and that can continue to place learners on the path to progress.

[As of July 1, 2021](#), 16.6 million public and private school students, or just 59 percent of the 27.7 million enrollees in 2019, have enrolled. In 2020, the [education budget was slashed](#). The Department of Education (DepEd) budget decreased by PHP 21.9 billion, while the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) budget decreased by PHP 13.9 billion. The effects of these budget cuts, among others, trickled down into the education system and its benefactors: none other than our students.

The Decline of Philippine Education By the Numbers

Philippine Business for Education (PBEd), an education advocacy group, held a press conference, entitled *Philippine Education in Crisis: State of Education Press Conference*, to present data that could put the education crisis into perspective.

Since 2018, public expenditure for basic education has been alternately plateauing or dipping, while public expenditure for defense and infrastructure has increased in comparison. PBEd also reported that local government units have not been fully utilizing their education funds. In fact, the average Special Education Fund (SEF) utilization rate was only 67.8 percent in 2020.

These figures dovetail with COA reports of [CHED allegedly underutilizing education funds](#) under Bayanihan 2. Youth leaders have taken to social media to call out to CHED for an explanation in support of [various groups who have been lobbying for cash subsidies](#) for students.

In terms of financial constraints, PBEd has stated five problems that result in poor learning outcomes that need to be urgently addressed: (a) implementation inefficiencies; (b) malnutrition; (c) lack of textbooks; (d) school connectivity; and (e) teacher quality. These are especially tough to deal with for students from low-income families, who experience a combination of these challenges daily. They are forced to choose

between food or education when both are their fundamental rights. It is unsettling that their families must decide between putting food on the table or enrolling them in school.

In 2017, it was [estimated](#) that there were 3.5 million out-of-school youths. In SY 2020–2021, [close to four million students were unable to enroll](#). Of that number, around 50 percent of out-of-school youths were found to belong to families who were within the bottom 30 percent of the population in terms of income.

Poor quality of education has resulted in low proficiency levels among students. The [2018 Programme for International Student Assessment \(PISA\) results](#) show that 72 percent of Filipino students performed lower than expected at their academic level. Filipino students scored an average of 340 points in Reading against the OECD average of 487. In Mathematics and Science, they scored an average of 353 points and 357 points, respectively, against a 489-point OECD average for both.

[Some studies](#) have shown a correlation between school funding and student outcomes. Low-funded schools are not as equipped and don't perform to their full potential since they lack resources and access to technology. This affects how efficiently they can implement reforms and update curricula.

[Similar studies](#) have shown that when governments cut their per-pupil funding rates, this subsequently lowers the number of educators in a school. For instance, in public schools in the Philippines, it has been a [years-long effort to bring down the number of students per classroom to an acceptable level](#). As such, imbalanced teacher-to-student ratios, shortages in classrooms, and large class sizes have perennially plagued the sector. Imbalanced teacher–student ratios decrease the interactions between teachers and students and lessen learning time. The lack of face-to-face classes has worsened this, and there have been many anecdotal accounts of student disengagement.

It doesn't help that we have a long way to go in terms of the curriculum itself, as it was only in [2016](#) that K-12 was fully implemented nationwide. Four years on, K-12 continues to be implemented using unclear standards for assessment, a congested curriculum, and inadequate resources, among other issues. A [study](#) from the Philippine Institute for Development Studies (PIDS) shows this. This has also been a [major concern for blended learning](#). The instability of K-12 and the challenges of blended learning continue to place the burden of delivering quality education on schools themselves, in order to make up for inadequacies in the program.

The pandemic has shown that we need to continuously innovate in education. But how can we move forward when the government is [only spending PHP 723 per head for the continuing education of teachers](#) annually? How can our teachers stay motivated when they have [yet to receive increases in their meager salaries](#)?

Acknowledging that the Philippine Education Crisis Exists

Following the [World Bank's release of its findings on the country's education system](#), Vice President Leni Robredo [suggested](#) the declaration of a “crisis in education” due to overall instability in the current setup. Although the [Department of Education \(DepEd\) has disputed these findings](#), it cannot be denied that they come from a very real place on-ground.

It is about time that we acknowledge that the education crisis exists.

PBEed Executive Director Love Basillote says that it is critical for the education system to start putting learning at the heart of its decisions and interventions.

PBEed has proposed building a new “schoolhouse of reform” that aims at participation among all sectors of society, and that calls for a multi-sector [Educational Commission \(EdCom\)](#) to address the learning crisis. EdCom hopes to tackle and enact strategic, long-term policy reforms. Because it takes a multi-sector approach, it can bring about a consensus among policymakers, experts, and the public.

The main points of PBEed’s proposal include:

1. Increasing budgets and resources to “widen the pie” for education;
2. Implementing reforms such as the Philippine Plan of Action for Nutrition, pre-primary education, Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE), and Teacher Education Scholarship for Achievers (TEACH Bill);
3. Establishing an autonomous assessment agency to provide insights on improving curriculum and bridge learning gaps;
4. Enhancing complementarity between the public and private sector for educational governance; and
5. Providing lifelong learning outside of formal education through the Jobs Next Bill.

“There’s always some other urgent crisis, some other more important issue. Something that always shoves education off the table and sets it aside.... The impacts of any major reform won’t really improve the country’s situation [until] 30 years later.... So if we don’t start today, it will always be moved further and further,” says PBEed President Dr. Chito Salazar.

In COVID-19, the policy “no student left behind” rings more like an ideal — something that has yet to be achieved. PBEed Chairman Ramon del Rosario, Jr. sums it up, “We are ignoring the depth of the problem and underinvesting in the very people who will build our path to economic recovery.”

It’s about time we went beyond vision statements. Inclusive education reform is the only option: one student left behind is one too many.