

Pressures on public school teachers and implications on quality

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The chronically overworked state of public school teachers in the Philippines is well-known (Esguerra 2018). The workload of public school teachers is not only limited to teaching but also to other nonteaching tasks. Given this workload, actual teaching is increasingly being sidelined by the multitude of other responsibilities and roles that teachers play. Following the tragic suicide of two public school teachers in 2018, the Department of Education (DepED) has vowed to reduce teachers' workload, details of which have remained unclear (Mateo 2018).

This *Policy Note* reports on results of focus group discussions with public school teachers and interviews with school and division administrators in seven field sites around the country. In these conversations, the scope of the work of teachers is discussed alongside the potential impacts on student outcomes.

Duties of a public school teacher

Every public school teacher has a regular full-time teaching load and is mandated to devote a maximum of six hours of actual classroom instruction a day,

under the Magna Carta for Public School Teachers. In reality, however, several additional administrative or student support roles are assigned to each teacher. These include paperwork on seminars and trainings they are tasked to attend and additional designations in line with student guidance, budget, disaster response, and health. Teachers are likewise expected to participate in the implementation of various government programs, such as mass immunizations, community mapping, conditional cash transfer, deworming, feeding, population census, antidrug, election, among others.

However, according to the interviewees, these administrative tasks are not figured into the staffing patterns in public institutions. While private schools employ administrative staff to do enrollment, registration, records, daily operations, and janitorial services, among others, there is insufficient support and administrative staff, if any, for the teachers in public schools. This means that the teachers are doing the administrative work—a situation that while hidden from view of the normal metrics can erode teaching quality.



Aside from the regular full-time teaching load under the Magna Carta for Public School Teachers, every public school teacher also performs several additional administrative or student support roles. These include participation in seminars and training and the implementation of various government programs, such as mass immunizations, community mapping, conditional cash transfer, deworming, feeding, population census, antidrug, election, among others. These roles restrict time for actual teaching, which affects the overall quality of education in the Philippines. (Photo: Jon Mannion/Flickr)

If teachers are to be followed, they want to focus on teaching and have more time to speak with students, give guidance, and apply what they learned about differentiated teaching. Teachers fully realize what is needed, that is, to spend more time with students and innovate on classroom instruction, and to provide more focused individualized attention to students. Their main restriction is time. Salary was not mentioned in the interviews with teachers and administrators as a problem. Larger salaries, after all, do not create more time in the day.

The issue is workload, which subsequently restricts time for actual teaching. Teachers interviewed in this study all expressed concern about this. Other agencies seek the assistance of schools and teachers in implementing some programs given their efficiency in reaching large populations of children. This is an added workload for teachers aside from their teaching task.

An incentive system with perverse effects

Teachers have a well-defined system of promotions, performance evaluations, and performance bonuses at

individual, school, and division levels. With the state of out-of-school children (OOSC) in the country as the broader context (DepED et al. 2012; David and Albert 2015), this study focused on dropout rates and how the figures are used as a part of the incentive system for teachers.

The number of dropouts is reported by each teacher at the end of the school year. The data are then aggregated at the different levels of DepED, all the way up to the DepED Central Office. The exact dropout rate in each class can be traced back, therefore, to a teacher, whose performance is assessed in some part with dropout rates in their class as a metric.

There are many layers of formal incentives and institutionalized practices for teachers to push for zero dropouts, and in many ways this is positive. They have reason to pay attention to each student, figure out reasons for chronic absenteeism, visit students' homes, and discuss issues with parents to try to keep all children in their class. Teachers have the autonomy to promote students to the next level regardless of performance. Together, these layers have an unfortunate potential effect of eroding the quality of education.

The incentive signaling for zero dropout targets runs throughout the education system. Should a child flunk examinations or fail to attend the minimum number of school days, it is the teacher's duty to disallow the child's promotion to the next level or require the student to attend summer remedial classes. The teacher then needs to write a report to be presented before the principal explaining and justifying the status of each student. This system makes teachers feel like it is their fault when children get held back or dropped out and gives the impression that the system would rather push the children up the next school level rather than risk them leaving school should they fail.

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Teachers also raised the fact that their performance-based bonus, a yearly cash incentive given to government agencies and employees assessed as having met targets, is tied to the dropout rate. Looking across the chain of reporting described above, it appears that the dropout rate is traceable to a teacher and may be the only student performance metric that can be used to evaluate teacher performance. Achievement test scores cannot be linked back to individual teachers, nor can graduation rates, cohort survival rates, and enrollment rates.

At a more personal level, teachers usually have intimate knowledge of students' personal challenges. During home visitations, teachers learn how much of a challenge it is for students to come to school. There are cases when children are hungry, have to work, or are primary caretakers of their younger siblings. Teachers are personally affected as they feel bad for the children. They tend to give the students plenty of space to fail or skip school, then still promote them to the next grade level.

In the absence of other clearer student performance-based measure that can be traced back to the quality of teaching, dropout rates become the metric for teacher quality. This sends a problematic incentive signal to teachers as they are evaluated based on zero dropout rates and not on the actual quality of learning of students.

Interviews with teachers and principals revealed their common belief that mass promotion is a bad practice that should be stopped. While striking the correct balance between ensuring completion and securing good quality education is not easy, there must be bright lines that cannot be crossed along the way.

Mass promotion is the resulting behavior to this, wherein even students who failed exams or skipped half of the year's school days can get promoted. Some of these students will end up in seventh grade without knowing how to read for comprehension. The problem then gets pushed up to high school and higher education, where students start to exhibit attitude and motivation problems.

The push to report "zero dropout" has been perennially in the DepED system and is often blamed for the unofficial practice of "mass promotion". Calling it mass promotion is inaccurate as it creates the impression that this is an agreed-upon practice of schools, if not of the system itself. The real picture is a complex interaction of pressures from the formal incentive system and the relationship of teachers with students.

This is all connected to the finding in the national surveys that the reason why more than half of children of (lower) secondary level leave school is because of "lack of interest" (Albert et al. 2018a). Moreover, those at risk of dropping out are mostly children failing their classes, not following the lessons, and having trouble understanding their books and passing their exams. They eventually lose motivation to study because they would be sitting in class throughout the day not understanding anything.

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that should be stopped. While striking the correct balance between ensuring completion and securing good quality education is not easy, there must be bright lines that cannot be crossed along the way. Sending nonreaders to high school should be actively discouraged and elementary schools that allow this require close monitoring and supervision. Even without sanctions, the signaling from DepED that such action is poor practice needs to be stronger.

Recommendations

Address human resource distribution in DepED

The main and urgent recommendation to address OOSC and the poor quality of education children receive in many public schools is to address the human resources allocations of DepED. In particular, the department needs to study their human resources shortages and the Department of Budget and Management (DBM) should provide DepED requisite support to hire administrative staff and deload teachers of administrative and other duties unrelated to teaching. These posts will fill in for administrative tasks, such as registration and records keeping, secretarial work for the principal's office, financial reporting, guidance counseling, and other additional assignments normally distributed among regular teaching faculty.

Increasing plantilla positions is always a multiyear project. While DepED is working on rationalizing its staffing pattern, a more immediate solution at the school level is to channel offers of support from private donors like foundations and private citizens, as well as support from local governments toward providing administrative staff support to schools. Private elementary and high schools have regular nonteaching administration staffing, experienced people in the workforce who can do this kind of support work.

Alternatively, public schools may accept undergraduate students pursuing primary and secondary education programs to assist in administrative tasks as part of their on-the-job training, which may be a manner of providing a solution. This would need clear signaling from the DepED Central Office as an accepted and encouraged practice and must be coordinated with the Commission on Higher Education.

Increase salaries of guidance counselors

The need for qualified full-time guidance counselors should help not only deload work from the teachers but also provide real support for students having disciplinary and attitudinal issues, as well as those who have been victims of trauma and abuse. With a large cohort of students with parents working away from the home, schools need to provide stability and emotional support through nurturing environments and school staff focused on guiding and counseling students.

Under DepED's current staffing standard, all public and private primary and high schools are required to hire one guidance counselor for every 500 students, thus requiring nearly 47,000 registered guidance counselors (RGCs) (Valdez 2018). Since the first batch of licensure examinees in 2008, the country has had only slightly more than 3,000 RGCs as of July 2017.

Compounding the problem of the shortage in RGCs is the provision under Republic Act 9258, or the Guidance and Counseling Act of 2004, requiring a master's degree for licensure examinees in guidance counseling, compared to bachelor's degree requirement for Licensure Examinations for Teachers. Despite the higher academic requirement for RGCs, an entry-level guidance counselor only receives a salary of PHP 20,179 (Salary Grade 11), similar to an entry-level teacher. It is unclear at this moment if DepED's effort to work with DBM to raise the salary

of guidance counselors is nearing success (Andolong 2018). Aside from the salary issue, however, there simply are not enough RGCs to hire, although this may change if the DepED salaries are raised. Such increase in salary can signal a market demand toward colleges and more students will choose the proper courses to obtain a certification for guidance counseling.

Pursue evidence-based studies on teacher workload

Reducing teacher workload needs to be systematic and evidence based. A proper and rigorous time-use study can provide a clear picture of which types of work are necessary to be delegated to teachers and which have to be eliminated from their workload.

A more specific breakdown of the exact workload of a regular teacher, the sources of work, and the amount of time left for student contact and actual teaching will allow DepED to pinpoint the sources of the pressures.

The inordinate and cumulative workload placed on the DepED by other agencies deserves close scrutiny and auditing. If armed with evidence, the department can have clearer reasons for declining further assignments or to demand larger budget allocation and personnel to cope with noneducation assignments.

Rationalize teacher trainings


Teachers attend multiple trainings and seminars in a given year, an additional source of time use. These trainings also include a number of topic areas, from

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pedagogical techniques, technical writing for reports, to activities related to disaster risk reduction and management.

Training is supposed to address gaps in skills and competencies. While various international and nongovernment organizations want to offer trainings, it is unclear if DepED has a system for rationalizing and systematizing all teacher trainings, especially the massive ones. After all, there may be already too many of them. The net effect may be to distract teachers from their core function of effective teaching.

Training is certainly important for continuous improvement of teachers. However, time spent on training each year should be planned, limited, and strategic based on a career tracking system clear to the faculty corps.

In the end, teachers are meant to facilitate learning. As such, they should be models of lifelong learning, especially given the impact of emerging technologies of the Fourth Industrial Revolution on the vastly changing job market and the future skills required of the country's workforce (Albert et al. 2018b). 

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