



Left behind

By Boo Chanco – June 2, 2023

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A practice called “no child left behind” is a big reason why our country’s youth are being left behind based on international competency scores in basic subjects like math and reading.

DepEd Assistant Secretary Alma Ruby Torio said in a recent public event that they do not have a policy on mass promotion. DepEd is officially following a “performance-based grading system” policy and the passing grade for students in all learning areas should be 75.

But the reality on the ground is different. A study published by government think tank Philippine Institute for Development Studies (PIDS) noted that “While it has been denied that automatic promotion is the official policy, the test results showing a huge proportion of students not having the required competence of the school level they are in is a piece of compelling evidence that this may not be the case.”

According to PIDS president Aniceto Orbeta Jr. and research fellow Vicente Paqueo, the Philippines has the same level of school attendance as wealthier nations, yet the education system continues to struggle from producing high-quality outcomes.

“The country’s performance in international large-scale assessments confirms we have been in a learning crisis for a while now. A vast proportion of our students are below minimum proficiency levels in reading, science, and mathematics,” they said.

According to the World Bank’s Human Capital Index, the learning gap estimated for the Philippines is about 5.5 years, which is larger than its Asian neighbors. “This means an average Filipino student spends more time in school, but is less productive than his/her counterparts in other countries,” the PIDS authors said.

A recent study by the Philippine Business for Education (PBE) agrees. Basic education students are “not truly learning, but merely progressing” through the school system, the PBE study said. It also linked the “unofficial” policy of mass promotion to poor learning outcomes.

“Without a strong foundation in education, our workforce becomes less competitive on the global stage. It hinders innovation, productivity, and economic growth, limiting our potential for progress and prosperity,” PBE executive director Justine Raagas said at last week’s launch of the private sector-led advocacy group’s 2023 State of Education Report.

Raagas observed that there is an apparent misunderstanding of the concept of “No child left behind,” which “led to the literal practice of passing students” or promoting them to the next grade level regardless of their competencies.

The PBE executive noted that despite the lack of an official and written policy from the DepEd, the practice has been “culturally and administratively ingrained” in the country’s education system. Because learner outcomes are associated with performance-based bonuses for teachers or a school’s standing in regional rankings, there is “indirect pressure” on teachers to pass or promote their students to the next grade level regardless of school performance.

Apparently, the practice of mass promotion had been going on for a long time and even students themselves knew that it was happening.

“In fact, there are many anecdotes from teachers of students blatantly disregarding their work or copying answers, or worse, just easily giving up and saying, ‘It’s okay. I’m going to pass anyway,’” Raagas said.

This failure to master basic fundamentals, such as reading, writing, and numeracy, mass promotion, it was said, also caused unintended behavioral issues as students end up lacking in fundamental values, such as hard work, resiliency, teamwork, and respect.

Not too long ago, Albay Rep. Joey Salceda sounded the alarm over the World Bank report saying that more than 80 percent of Filipino children do not know what they should have learned in school. The report found that across the three global assessments, only 10 to 22 percent of Grade 4, 5, and 9 students in the Philippines posted scores “at or above minimum proficiency.”

“We will get through this pandemic. Economic crises come and go. But literacy and its permanent effects on growth and intergenerational poverty stay. That is why this report is alarming. Unless we make drastic changes to this situation, our actual economic growth will always be much less than our potential. And poor kids will likely have poor families and have poor kids,” Salceda said.

Salceda is pushing for a Comprehensive Education Reform Agenda to overhaul the country’s curriculum and a focus on functional skills, critical thinking, and good citizenship. Salceda should convince his idol, current VP and Secretary of Education to work on improving education outcomes instead of politicking.

“The lack of usable skills, especially in this hypercompetitive global economy, is a life sentence to poverty. We can’t let this pass,” Salceda added.

COVID-19 made things worse. DepEd’s so-called “blended” program that essentially uses online classes had been a failure. Most public school students are too poor to afford computers or buy internet loads. And many areas of the country have bad to no reliable internet signals.

Poor education quality, alongside financial pressures on poor families, contributes to loss of interest in schooling, which causes many students to drop out early, particularly among the poor.

By 2028, there will be 10 million more Pinoys, around half of them from poor families. Currently, we already have 28 million children/youth in basic education. Spending per student is a fraction of what other ASEAN countries spend. Also, many teachers are subpar, as the good ones go overseas.

Parents and politicians blame the K-12 system for the failure of their children to land jobs after high school as promised. That’s because high school graduates often lack the skills they need for the job market. About 80 percent of unemployed workers have completed secondary education or higher, yet one-third of employers in the Philippines reported unfilled vacancies because of a shortage of applicants with the necessary skills.

This should give the current Education Secretary more than enough things to do that should keep her from dabbling in premature political maneuvers or red tagging people. Her success or failure should be easily measurable by test results and feedback from hiring managers on competency of the graduates the public school system churns out.

With more private schools closing down due to financial difficulties, the onus is on the public school system to do a whole lot better.