

Education system must be built on proficiency, not pass rates

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'To truly reform Bangladesh's education sector, it is important to ensure that the curriculum must be realistic and teachable and students' class progressions must reflect their actual learning.' FILE ILLUSTRATION: BIPLOB CHAKROBORTY

In Bangladesh, education certificates often promise more than the learning they represent. Many conventionally successful students struggle to read with confidence, mathematics feels too mechanical, and concepts memorised for examinations fade quickly. This is hardly a failure on the children's part, but a predictable outcome of an ineffective system.

Bangladesh achieved remarkable progress in expanding schooling over the past two decades, with more children entering classrooms, more schools built, and increasing participation in public examinations. Yet, the deeper gaps students have in weak foundational skills in subjects like science and mathematics have not been addressed.



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The system revolved around measuring what was most convenient, even if superficial, such as enrolment, grade completion rate, pass rate, and syllabus coverage. Thus, stakeholder behaviour adapted accordingly. Teachers had to focus on completing overloaded curricula, rather than ensuring understanding; examinations emphasised predictable recall; and students progressed even without a proper grasp of the courses they took. Similarly, households responded in predictable ways—those who could afford it, turned to private tutoring and the responsibility for actual learning shifted from the system to families. Social and income inequality widened and trust in institutions eroded.

A government review of secondary and higher secondary education examined these patterns and it reached a direct conclusion: as long as progression, certification, and institutional performance are considered a more reliable measure of success than demonstrated learning, weak outcomes will persist. So, one of the toughest challenges for the new government is to ensure just educational opportunities for over four crore young people.

The way BNP's election manifesto covered pledges involving education—signalling increased public investment in education, stronger teacher capacity, expanded primary support, credible assessment, digital tracking, and wider access to technical and vocational education—is promising. And for these promises to materialise, incentives that shape everyday behaviour in schools have to be aligned with learning at its centre.

Any new education policies must keep in mind that a system cannot deliver high-quality technical education if students progress without foundational mastery and examination credibility cannot be restored if results are expected to remain stable regardless of actual performance. At the same time, digital tools cannot improve outcomes if teachers lack the time, support, and incentives to respond to learning gaps.

To truly reform Bangladesh's education sector, the curriculum must be realistic and teachable and students' class progressions must reflect their actual learning. Assessment must be credible and institutions must ensure that any students with a comparatively weaker academic standing are receiving timely support. These principles do not conflict with the new government's stated commitments, but makes them all the more achievable.

Every proposal placed before the BNP administration should therefore be judged by a single question: does it strengthen real learning and the system's ability to respond to gaps in real time? If the answer is yes, it deserves priority. If the answer is no, it must be reconsidered.

For example, the BNP's stance to prioritise digitalisation in the education sector—presenting “One Teacher One Tab” together with “Edu-ID”—reflects a forward-looking approach. These initiatives will advance learning only if they are implemented to help teachers see where students are struggling and adjust their instructions and support accordingly. However, if not tied strictly to actionable practices, these tools will risk being tokenistic, rather than transformative.

Bangladesh is nearing the end of its demographic dividend. The students now in school will soon form the core of the labour force. If they enter adulthood with solid certificates but fragile skills, the cost will be felt in productivity, social mobility, and trust in public institutions. The diagnosis is clear: Bangladesh must realign incentives, restore credibility, and enforce standards that put learning at the forefront. The current government has both the chance and the obligation to bring about this change.

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