

Children, primary education and teachers



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A new cadre of government officials, to be called "Bangladesh Civil Service-Primary Education," is about to be established. This long-awaited measure will allow the sprawling system of primary education to be managed by people who are recruited and trained for this purpose, rather than by college professors and administrative service personnel temporarily placed in

primary education management. The adviser for primary and mass education, Rasheda K. Chowdhury, expressed the hope that this step would "improve the teaching standard and bring more accountability at all levels of primary education" and thus "help bring back discipline to the huge establishment." (*Daily Star, June 8*) "The primary education department has failed to improve the overall academic quality due to a lack of bright career for officials.

Meritorious students will join the service if the new cadre is created," said Khondaker M. Asaduzzaman, Director General of Primary Education. Let's hope that the sensible step about to be formalised will fulfill the expectations regarding professionalism, good management and accountability in primary education. In principle, with the establishment of the new cadre, a primary school teacher can, by proving her/his ability through compe-

titution and good performance, aspire to be the director general of primary education. Miserably poor learning achievements for too many students, extremely high dropout, and lack of access for many children, in spite of a major expansion in primary education, are not news. The Secretary of Primary and Mass Education, M. Mosharraf Hussain Bhuiyan, said on June 1 at the launch of Halkhata 1415, a review of the state of primary education, that dropouts had come down, but not to an acceptable level. Moreover, he admitted that precise statistics about dropouts were not available to the government. What responsibility does the large primary education teaching force of some 300,000 bear for the state of primary education, and what can the teachers do about it?

No one can dispute that what happens in a classroom depends very largely on the teacher. No one will disagree that the teachers, especially at the primary level, deserve better remuneration, professional support and supervision, better training opportunities, and opportunities to advance professionally on a career ladder. A pertinent question is what the teachers, as a professional community, have done or can do to help themselves do their job better and, by doing so, improve their professional prospects and status. It appears that several leaders of the associations of government and non-government primary school teachers have just shot themselves in the foot. Leaders of four associations of government and non-government primary school teachers demanded cancel-

lation of an in-service training program for teachers proposed to be offered by Brac in several upazilas in the country. At a press conference on May 27, Mohammad Shamsul Alam, President of Bangladesh Non-Government Primary Teachers' Association announced: "If necessary we will go for a tough agitation program, including closing down all the schools across the country, to protest against the government's decision to launch the Brac-sponsored training program." (*New Age, May 28*) "We came to know that Brac, a non-government organisation, will train all the teachers of government primary schools in 30 upazilas. We demand cancellation of the program, as it will ruin the quality of education," Mr. Alam told reporters. It defies reason that assistance in

training teachers from Brac, an organisation that has earned international praise for its work in pioneering an innovative primary education approach to serve disadvantaged children from poor families, should upset the teachers' association leaders. "The government, through the Directorate of Primary Education, offered the explanation that the training program was part of the government's effort to improve the standard of primary education by involving national and external organisations under the auspices of the primary education development program (PEDP II). The government press note further explained that the pilot program with Brac in 20 upazilas was a part of a plan to raise attendance of students, reduce dropout, and improve student performance. Brac-assisted training would be

carried out on holidays without interrupting on-going regular training programs and normal educational activities, it said. Reforms in education cannot happen if the teachers become averse to change. The leaders of the teachers' association need to be on the side of the much-needed change in the system, and thus help their colleagues and raise the professional esteem and status of teachers. The initiators and designers of development activities, including the government authorities and their partners, such as Brac, also need to engage the teacher community in dialogue as the activities are planned, designed and implemented. The ultimate criterion must be the interest of children.

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