

Why not one ministry for school education?



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THERE is sometimes a jostling about which of the two ministers of education should represent Bangladesh in any international forum for education, such as a Unesco meeting or a UN System consultation in relation to the SDGs.

Going by international protocol, the Minister of Education is invited and he, rather than the Minister of Primary and Mass Education, ends up attending these fora, even when the agenda concerns primary and basic education or literacy, which are often the focus of much of international cooperation in education.

Bangladesh is the only country in the world with two separate ministries managing school education.

The Ministry for Primary and Mass Education has the responsibility for the pre-primary to class five level while the Ministry of Education administers education for classes 6-12. Why do we need separate ministries for school education? This stands as a major obstacle to decision-making and implementation of essential reforms, as explained below.

The Ministry of Education (MOE) of the People's Republic of China, for instance, is the single agency that regulates the national education system including compulsory basic education, vocational education, and tertiary education.

The Ministry of Human Resource Development in India is divided into two departments: the Department of School Education and Literacy, which deals with primary, secondary and higher secondary education, adult education and literacy; and the Department of Higher Education, which deals with university education, technical education, scholarship, etc.

Some countries have a separate ministry-level agency for higher and professional education, but nowhere is the management of school education split between two national ministries. There is a good reason for this universal practice: the need to plan and manage school education in an integrated and holistic manner.

The separate Division of Primary and Mass Education was created in 1992 to provide a momentum

to compulsory primary education and adult literacy when the Education For All programme was adopted globally in 1990. But the division was turned into a separate ministry in 2002, driven by the age-old bureaucratic tendency that keeps an agency growing even when it has outlived its useful life span.

Of course, which minister should represent Bangladesh in international meetings is not the main problem. There are other more substantive issues. At least three kinds of complications arise from the divided planning and management jurisdiction for school education.

First, the global sustainable development goal regarding education (SDG 4) specifies equitable, inclusive, high quality and free primary and secondary education by 2030 for all children, as well as lifelong learning for all. Bangladesh would be missing a key feature of a middle-income country if it cannot ensure universal and compulsory primary and secondary education for all children.

It is essential to plan and manage school education as one unified effort instead of focusing on primary education only, which originally prompted the creation of the separate primary education division in the Prime Minister's Office, which later became a full ministry.

Second, compulsory education is still limited to schooling up to grade five, though education up to grade eight was recommended as the domain of compulsory education in the first post-liberation education commission in 1974. This was re-affirmed in the Education Policy 2010. However, looking at the task primarily as shifting the jurisdiction from one ministry to another, and a turf battle about resolving the related practical and logistical problems, stymied the effort.

Even half of the children in the age for grades 6-8 today are not completing this level of education. And little attention is being paid to improving school facilities, teachers and what students learn at this level. The idea of universal secondary education has not registered even on the distant radar sight of the authorities. The question can no longer be ignored, if SDG 2030 targets are to be taken seriously.

Third, a unified vision of compulsory basic education that extends to 10th grade, and eventually 12th grade, calls for a unified approach for the key

actions. These include designing the curricula with continuity and right sequence, preparing teachers in huge numbers and ensuring their professional quality, and assessing and monitoring learning both in school and through appropriate (and not too frequent) public examinations.

All of these tasks are now divided between two ministries without the much-needed holistic view—the way these things are managed in all other countries.

A central authority responsible only for the overall strategic changes, policy direction, setting national standards and consensus building should be the goal for transformation in education governance. Greater decentralisation and decisions closer to where the beneficiaries are—at the district, upazila and school levels—in a responsive and participatory way, should be the guiding principle. Thus, the one national ministry for education need not be over-burdened.

A certain way of thinking and set of habits have developed through a generation of the divided but over-centralised management of school education and a reductionist vision of education accepting grade-five primary education as the state's obligation. This is no longer acceptable.

A permanent and statutory education commission was foreseen in the National Education Policy 2010 to guide and maintain an oversight of transformation of the education sector to serve national aspirations and the challenges of the 21st century. It is high time to act on this proposal.

An education system that envisions universal primary and secondary education with quality and equity in line with the imperatives of a middle-income country and the SDG 4 education targets should be the pledge of the political parties intending to compete in the next parliamentary election.

Political commitment should be integrated with a holistic planning and management of the education sector through one national centre of authority. What can be a more important item in the political manifesto?

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