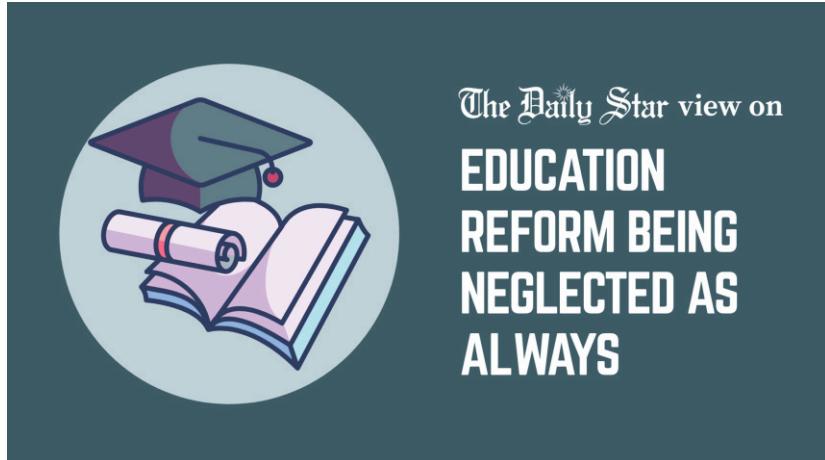


# Education must be steered back on track

A priority for the next government

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The quality of education has been the biggest casualty of institutional apathy and misgovernance in Bangladesh. Despite lofty rhetoric about the importance of education, precious little has been done to bring about qualitative reform in the system. As a result, it continues to drift without a clear destination. At a recent policy dialogue on SDG 4, educationists and civil society representatives warned that decades of policy reversals, weak implementation, the absence of a long-term education plan, poor learning outcomes, and low investment have resulted in the country falling behind on its most fundamental development goal: quality education for all.

It is an absurd conundrum that for decades education has been treated as a secondary issue rather than a national priority. Curricula and assessment systems have been frequently revised and changed, creating confusion, with students, teachers, and parents bearing the consequences.



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## After decades of failure, can we finally fix our education system?

While enrolment has gone up, it has not translated into better-educated citizens. Literacy levels remain as low as 50 percent. How can we hope to be ready for a technological future with such deficiencies? Poverty, child labour, child marriage, displacement due to climate change, shortages of teachers, and infrastructure gaps serve to push the most disadvantaged children—especially girls—out of school. Unless these obstacles are addressed, it will be impossible to make any real change in educational outcomes. Education spending, meanwhile, has persistently remained far below the internationally recommended 4-6 percent of GDP. As a result, teacher development, nutrition, school facilities, and foundational learning have all been severely neglected.

It is puzzling why the interim government, otherwise so vocal about reforms, failed to set up an education reform commission, which should have been a priority. Moreover, the sudden announcement of a draft Education Act, despite being just days away from the national election, only confirms the lack of attention paid to this sector. It is, however, encouraging that the draft aims, among other things, to regulate institutions and phase out coaching centres and guidebooks. But the way the process was rushed, with no significant departures from existing rules and regulations, suggests an attempt to preserve the status quo rather than reform it. As experts have pointed out, the draft does not include a rights-based approach to education, resource mobilisation, per-student allocation benchmarks, or clear mechanisms to ensure equity in education.



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## Bangladesh needs life-centred education reform for students

Bangladesh needs a stable education system that is protected from political volatility. This requires a permanent education commission to prevent policy shifts with the changes of government. Both primary and secondary education must be brought under a unified planning framework to ensure universal schooling. Investment in education must be increased to 4-6 percent of GDP. Introducing a universal mid-day meal programme at the primary and secondary levels, strengthening the capacity and status of teachers, and ensuring basic literacy and numeracy at the primary level are recommendations that the next government must take seriously.