

# Apology for lottery-based school admission



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UP UNTIL 2010, children were admitted to schools through gruelling admission tests which forced the children into an academic marathon long before they understood the immediate rewards and long-term repercussions. This admission system, later, fell into disfavour as educationists identified major limitations in it and expressed concerns. Consequently, the government introduced the lottery-based admissions to Class I in 2011. Worried parents and their anxious children were relieved to have gotten a satisfactory alternative. But when it comes to their children's education, Bangladeshi parents' happiness is short-lived.

The education minister's recent statement over school admissions and the ministry's gazette issued on March 16, 2026, confirm the abolition of the lottery system from next year and reintroduction of tests in school admissions. The new move has resurfaced the old debate. Metaphorically speaking, should we filter our children through sieves or give everyone a chance to flourish?

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While the lottery-based admission process is not a perpetual policy, it remains a more educationally sound process given the current realities. The lottery-based admission process has psychological, sociological and pedagogical benefits as it alleviates admission anxiety among children, ensures fair access for all candidates and enhances teacher responsibility and classroom socialisation.

One of the compelling arguments for the lottery-based admission process is psychological as it relieves children of the stress and strain of the admission test. This process ensures all children have an equal opportunity for enrolment. Here children do not make unfair comparisons between those who succeeded and those who did not. On the other hand, in a test-based system, parents persuade their children — aged five to seven — to pass the test, but persuasion most often turns into coercion which exerts cognitive and emotional pressure on the child.

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Actually, no one wins in this admission-test red race. Those selected for admission equate learning with the painful memorisation of de-contextualised facts, attributing their success largely to coaching centres. Under the façade of ‘success’, top-scoring students fail to realise that they are not significantly better than those who could not make it due to a faulty admission process. Conversely, those who fail the test begin to underestimate their own potentials. Many linger in this belief for years.

In addition, findings in educational research identify a clear correlation between stress levels and learning success. A learner’s emotional disposition greatly impacts learning. They hold that lower anxiety levels result in better outcomes and when learners are in a relaxed and comfortable state of mind, they learn more in a shorter period of time. This is evident in so-called ‘merit-based’ admission

tests, where children have to learn under high stress and anxiety for an instrumental gain and the learning quickly evaporates once the goal is reached.

From a sociological perspective, the lottery system ensures equitable access to school admissions, as students from both urban and rural areas remain equally hopeful about getting into their desired schools, whereas the test-based admission process is inherently discriminatory. Unfortunately, admission tests and coaching centres are synonymous in our country. The coaching centres, which have mushroomed over the decades, lurk like predators as admission tests approach. These centres often teach test-taking tricks to pass the exams, inculcating in the students an unhealthy competition, which may ultimately result in jealousy and self-centredness at such a tender age.

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Driven by their desperation to admit children to 'good schools,' parents send their children to coaching centres and pay large amounts of money. This coaching spree deeply disappoints the low-income parents, particularly those in the periphery. Moreover, commercially arranged coaching classes not only divide students along financial lines but also undermine the importance of learning outcomes in their current schools. The lottery system, on the other hand, removes this financial dimension inherent in admission tests and reinforces the principle that all children have the right to attend their desired schools and this should not be determined by discriminatory admission tests.

The lottery-based admission, which I argue for, has pedagogical advantages as well. As this process allows mixed-ability students to attend the same class, teachers feel encouraged to use convenient techniques and strategies to support different learning needs. Simultaneously, a mixed-ability class provides ample opportunities for students to learn from one another; it allows less-experienced learners to learn from 'more knowledgeable others.' The spirit of collaborative learning inspires peer support, builds empathy and develops shared values.

In contrast, the test-based admission creates a homogeneous classroom making it less diverse in terms of cognitive capacity. As a result, teachers remain complacent assuming that their students are already capable of independent learning. Students, instead of classroom instructions, heavily depend on the external coaching. When Secondary School Certificate Examinations results are published, for instance, renowned government schools often show better performance; but teachers can claim little

to no credit for this success. A heterogeneous class, which is possible through the lottery-based admission, offers a more engaged learning experience and an inclusive environment that fosters collective growth and socialisation.

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Critics of the lottery-based admission, however, think that better students should be filtered through tests at the elementary level in order to maintain the quality of education and that lottery does injustice to ‘meritorious’ children. Both arguments are misleading and misconstrue the purpose of schooling. Education or schooling, per se, is not about imparting knowledge only to few high-performing students; rather, it should provide equal opportunities to all and aim at developing the potential of every child. Furthermore, we need to be cautious about using the word ‘meritorious’ at the elementary stage because some children, like flowers, bloom early, while others are simply late bloomers.

Finally, the ministry of education’s recent gazette to return to admission tests in primary and secondary schools from next year requires careful reassessment through informed discussions. The government, as many educationists have already suggested, should aim to adopt a catchment system for school admissions which requires upgrading of the weaker schools across the country. Before that is achieved, the government should adhere to the lottery-based admission system as it reduces children’s stress about admission, provides equal opportunities for all candidates and encourages teachers to take greater responsibility and fosters better socialisation in the classroom.

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