

“World Bank says Punjab showed impressive increase in student enrolment”

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By Khalid Hasan

WASHINGTON: A new World Bank report on education in the Punjab released on Thursday showed that student enrolment in Pakistan had gone up by 10 percent between 2001 and 2005, with the highest increase of 12 percent having occurred in Punjab.

During this period, the number of private schools increased from 32,000 to 47,000 and one in every three children at the primary level was in a private school. Since 1995, the report showed, 50 percent of all new private schools had been set up in rural areas.

According to the report authored by Tara Vishwanath, there have been dramatic changes in the educational landscape of Pakistan in the new millennium. Secular, co-educational and for-profit private schools have become a widespread presence in both urban and rural areas. These changes represent an opportunity and a challenge for educational policy in the country. A large fraction of rural Pakistani households no longer lives in a village with one or two government schools - half the population of rural Punjab, for instance, lives in villages where parents routinely have 7-8 schools to choose from. This new educational landscape is an active educational marketplace with m

The report says that from evaluating policy reform to understanding how the private sector can help educate the poor, the rise of such schools represents a significant opportunity and challenge, not only in Pakistan but also in the wider South-Asian context. With enrolments looking up, debate is likely to shift to what children are learning in school. Enrolment, the report cautions, does not imply learning. Measuring what children are learning in public and private schools and understanding how the educational marketplace can foster learning is a first step towards formulating policy in the new millennium.

The Vishwanath report shares the findings of first round of the Learning and Educational Achievement in Punjab Schools (LEAPS) survey carried out in all the public and private schools offering primary-level education in 112 Punjab villages. The survey includes learning outcomes for 12,000 children in Class III in Urdu, English and mathematics together with detailed information on the beliefs and behaviour of schools, teachers and parents. The report presents findings from the first round of the survey in 2003 along with trends for a few key outcomes between 2003 and 2007. A further report will incorporate all other information from the four rounds collected between 2003 and 2007. The findings shed light on the relative strengths and weaknesses of private and government schooling. Because of higher teacher salaries, government schools require twice the resources to educate a child compared to private schools. Furthermore, children studying in private schools report higher test-scores in all subjects, partly because their teachers exert greater effort.

Private schooling alone, says the report, cannot be the solution. Access to private schools is not universal as they choose to locate themselves in richer villages and richer settlements within villages, limiting access for poor households. In contrast, a laudable feature of the government school system is that it ensures equal geographical access to schools for all. Since children who receive less attention and educational help at home are also more likely to be enrolled in government schools, government school reform could ensure that no child is left behind. The report proposes a modified role for the government for discussion, suggesting that it should be one that is complementary to, rather than in competition with, that of the private sector. The government should be a provider of information on the quality of every school, public or private, which will enable households to make informed decisions and increase beneficial competition between schools. It should also correct the imbalances arising from unequal geographical access to private schools and ensure that all children acquire a set of basic competence. The government should also act as an innovator willing to experiment with and evaluate “out-of-the-box” reforms such as public-private partnerships where financial support is given to children regardless of the school chosen.

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