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How pandemic causes thousands of school dropouts

Unfortunately, the proposed budget for the forthcoming fiscal did not also include any measures to bring back the dropout students and save the vulnerable ones

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The scourge of school closure has already dealt a heavy blow to our education system.
Photo: TBS

- **23 lakh registered in Class IX for the SSC exam**
 - **Nearly 19 lakh finally filled up forms to attend them exam**
 - **Some 4 lakh dropped out from here**
 - **Those who assumed to be failure did not fill-up the forms, says Dipu Moni**
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Young Shahinul Kabir, who once dreamt of prospering in life with academic education, was forced to abandon studies and take up work during the prolonged closure of schools in 2020 amid the soaring casualties of Covid-19. His badly-off father was struggling to manage the family's daily expenses after losing his job.

"I was supposed to take part in the SSC exam this year but I could not do so only because of the pandemic," he lamented while talking to The Business Standard. He said that he is now working to support his family. "Once I wanted to be a doctor, I was hopeful I could succeed, but my fate did not allow me to do that," the young boy added.

Shahinul Kabir is one of thousands who left school permanently amid the pandemic due mainly to their social and financial conditions. The number of such dropouts is still uncounted. Moreover, educationists fear further losses of students as many of them are failing to cope with new class lessons.

Unfortunately, the proposed budget for the forthcoming fiscal year of 2022-23 did not also make any measures – either policy or budgetary allocation – to bring back the dropout students and save the vulnerable ones, despite repeated calls from experts.

"We have been asking the government to take the initiative to check dropouts since Covid-19 hit the country. But the government did not respond," said Dr Manzoor Ahmed, professor emeritus of Brac University.

"The dropout rate might have crossed all previous records. Unfortunately, the government is yet to chalk out a plan for saving them. It does not even know the actual picture [number of dropouts]," he told The Business Standard.

Forming upazila-level committees for identifying the needy students and helping them if necessary is imperative, he believes.

Professor Siddiquir Rahman, former director of the Institute of Education and Research at Dhaka University, told TBS that it is the failure of the government that it could not check dropouts. "The authorities should not delay any more in taking steps to save those students who are on the way to dropping out of school."

According to the Education Ministry, nearly 19 lakh students filled in forms to take part in the secondary school certificate exam – widely known as SSC – slated for 19 June, although over 23 lakh were registered in Class IX in 2020, meaning that some 4 lakh, more than half of them females, have already dropped out.

A good number of students, who assumed that they would not pass the exam, did not fill in the forms for the exams, Education Minister Dipu Moni recently said. "It is a regular phenomenon. We will look into the actual factors," she said.

Meanwhile, the advocacy organisation Campaign for Popular Education in its recent survey found that only 57-69% of secondary school students and 65-86% of primary students came back to classes after the reopening of schools, while a major segment yet remains out of school.

The absentees have little chance of coming back to normal learning, the study noted. "Students are now facing difficulties in understanding and learning lessons and challenges in socialising with others," it observed.

Talking to TBS, Professor Nehal Ahmed, director-general of the Directorate of Secondary and Higher Education, said the authorities have already asked officials to identify the needy students as well as the dropouts. "Hopefully, we will get a clear picture soon."

Many still at high risk of dropping out

Experts have warned that many more students could drop out in the coming days as the unprecedented school closures and subsequent learning losses have made education difficult for many.

Besides, the lack of necessary facilities to access education, poor social and financial conditions, early marriage of girls and other obstacles can contribute to the feared dropouts, they added.

"Students who cannot cope with the new classes might drop out," Syed Manzoorul Islam, former professor of English at Dhaka University, told TBS. "They were not fit for the previous classes and so how will they continue their study in new classes?"

"The government must formulate a specific plan and allocate sufficient budgetary allocation towards a recovery of learning losses," Prof Manzoorul Islam suggested.

According to surveys by Unesco and Unicef, the education of around 37 million children in Bangladesh has been disrupted due to school closures, while another survey by the Brac Institute of Governance and Development said as many as 7.86 million – 22% of primary and 30% of secondary school students – suffered learning losses caused by the pandemic.

The World Bank in its latest report noted that 76% of children will not attain minimum reading proficiency at the end of primary school – an indication of a dropout owing to difficulties in learning.