

Challenges for the new ministers

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Dr Dipu Moni has been named the minister of education in the new Cabinet led by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina for the third consecutive term. Md Zakir Hossain is the new state minister responsible for primary and mass education. The education community and concerned citizens look to them with great expectations to deal with the challenges of the most critical area of public policy and service for the future of the nation.

A question that arises is whether there will still be two separate ministries of education which bifurcate the management of school education (pre-primary to 12th grade, K-12), unlike the practice worldwide. Academics and researchers in education have pointed out the problems of continuity, articulation, and the need for an integrated approach in curriculum, pedagogy, teacher management, and student learning assessment. An obvious victim of this situation is the failure to extend universalisation of education up to grade 8, despite the education policy provision and repeated government pledges to achieve this goal.

The imperatives for an aspiring middle-income country and the global SDG 2030 commitment are to aim for universal and free secondary education by 2030. The governance and organisational rethinking required for this purpose calls for a unified ministerial leadership for school education more urgently than ever.

Moving forward to fulfil the national aspirations and achieve the education agenda of SDG 2030 presents formidable challenges. This writer, jointly with Dr Sadeq Ahmed, Vice Chair of the Policy Research Institute and formerly of World Bank, presented a set of specific policy and reform priorities in education (“Addressing the gaps in education policy for middle-income Bangladesh,” Financial Express, April 4, 2017). It merits re-capitulating and being given serious consideration at this juncture.

The policy and reform options identified included the following.

First, stuck at around two percent of gross domestic product (GDP) in recent years, public spending on education is low and inconsistent with the government's targets for the sector. This level of spending is amongst the lowest globally and must be reversed. Within a medium-term timeframe (five years or so), the proportion of GDP for public education budget should be raised to at least four percent.

Second, no specific universalisation plan exists yet for education beyond grade 5. Steps have to be taken to reconcile the global target of universal full secondary education by 2030 with the national school education plan and targets.

Third, the highly centralised structure of education governance with decision-making and management concentrated in the capital city for a student population of some 40 million, 200,000 institutions, and a million teachers, remains intact as government education delivery strategy. Education resource mobilisation, budget-making, management and service delivery can be strengthened by decentralisation involving upazila and district based-planning and management of primary and secondary school education.

Fourth, new thinking about teachers is needed. By far the largest expenditure item in education is the teaching personnel. Finance and budget measures have to provide for a sufficient number of teachers and ensure effective teaching and learning. Teaching has to be one of the first career choices for talented young people, rather than the last one.

A ten-year plan could be adopted to bring about this transformation, learning from high-performing countries including those in East Asia. Four key elements in this plan would be: (a) the creation of a National Teaching Service Corps (NTSC) with high remuneration and prestige; (b) attracting bright young people with stipends and the lure of a NTSC job to a four-year teacher preparation track after higher secondary; (c) introducing in the four-year general degree programme (BA or BSc) education as a subject; and (d) ensuring high quality of this degree programme by enforcing quality standards in at least 100 government degree colleges in the country.

Fifth, the unacceptably low quality of degree colleges (with three-quarters of tertiary enrolment in these colleges, which also are the suppliers of primary and secondary school teachers) creates a vicious cycle in education, which must be addressed with urgency.

Sixth, non-formal alternatives for out-of-school children have to be effectively funded. Three to four million children of primary school age are still out of school, either because they have never enrolled in school or have dropped out early. A second-chance programme must be a part of the main strategy for universal primary education in order to serve out-of-school children of all kinds—dropouts, working children, those in remote areas and those in other special circumstances.

Seventh, besides expansion of pre-primary education with acceptable quality, early childhood development for younger children also needs to be expanded, for which the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs is the focal point. No specific target for early childhood development below pre-primary has been set; only scattered activities for young child development, mostly by NGOs, are in existence.

Eighth, lifelong learning has to be supported with literacy as the first step. The principles and practice of lifelong learning have come to the fore again in the context of SDG 2030/SDG 4. To make lifelong learning a reality and expand functional literacy for youth and adults, a network of community learning centres (CLCs) offering relevant learning activities and supported by essential resources, complementing formal education, must be built up.

Ninth, supply-driven skills development with low quality and market relevance, and minimal attention to apprenticeship and needs of the informal economy (though it accounts for over 80 percent of employment) need to change, as anticipated in the National Skills Development Policy.

Tenth, all school education should be brought under one national administrative jurisdiction. School education divided under two ministries creates problems of curriculum continuity, student assessment, teacher preparation and supervision, and developing, guiding and implementing an overall quality-with-equity strategy in the national education system.

Finally, a permanent statutory National Education Commission, anticipated in Education Policy 2010, can be a mechanism for guiding, exercising oversight and assessing progress and impact of education reforms.

The assumptions, targets and implementation mechanisms of the education subsector plans now in the works for primary, secondary and non-formal education remain largely confined to present structures and patterns of planning and management. The system remains trapped in ineffective

habits and practices. The new ministers at the helm of the education system now have the opportunity to ask the right questions and act accordingly.