

EDUCATION IN SRI LANKA



AN ECONOMIC PERSPECTIVE

Education in Sinhala or Tamil medium has been free in Sri Lanka since colonial days, but, a quality education in English medium was available only in a few major cities to those who could afford. *Kannangara* reforms of 1943 attempted to make education truly free by establishing at least one English medium central school in each electorate for the secondary education of gifted children who have completed their primary education in a school close to home.

Today in Sri Lanka we have come back full circle to a situation where a substandard education in Sinhala or Tamil medium is available free to all, but, access to better learning opportunities with exposure to English is limited to a few who are privileged with access to a little over 100 'Top Schools' concentrated in major metropolitan areas.

TOP SCHOOLS: If the Grade V cut-off marking scheme published by the Ministry of education for 2007 is any indicator, there are 106 schools that are coveted by those successful at the scholarship examination. These 'top' schools are located in only 33 out of 93 education zones in the country.

1947 50 out of 50 electorates of the State Council in the country had at least one Central School as a quality school

2008 Only 33 out of 93 education zones in the country have at least one 'Top School' in each



Policy Brief 09



ACCESS TO TOP SCHOOLS: The Grade V scholarship examination offers a mirage of hope for all, but, since most of these popular schools admit children from Grade 1 based on non-merit criteria, the places available to scholarship holders at Grade 6 are limited. Furthermore, the issue of admission to Grade-1 at Top Schools has led to some disturbing social phenomena.

Parents forge bundles of documents to "prove" that they live within the stipulated distance from the schools of their choice and children are trained to memorize and utter blatant lies to cover up that crime at the interviews, where they are debriefed by teachers and principals to check whether their parents are lying! (Supreme court decision S.C.(FR) 10/07, 11/07, 12/07, 13/07)

EFFICIENCY, EFFECTIVENESS AND EQUITY: The net effect of the competition for 'top schools' is felt across the education system and the whole society. Overall what we have today is an education system that is free in name only. A closer look shows us that what we have, in fact, is a system that is **Inefficient, Ineffective and Not at all Equitable.**

Equity is not the only reason why Governments should provide equal opportunities in education to all children. Economics tell us that education of the young at public expense provides net benefits to society as a whole. Social benefits of education diminish from primary to secondary to tertiary with private benefits outweighing social benefits in tertiary education. Therefore it is good economics that a government provides education to all children as a public service

When a government fails to deliver its education services efficiently and effectively, well-to-do and the influential find ways and means of making the system work for them or by-passing the system. The poor and the powerless on the other hand have no recourse but stay in a dysfunctional public education system. Their exclusion from a quality education is society's loss while their private loss is a gross inequity inflicted on them by society.

In essence, the greatest culprit of inequity in education is a public education delivered inefficiently and ineffectively.

Therefore is it extremely important that any discussion on education reforms begin with the efficiency and effectiveness of the public education system.

EFFICIENCY

A service would cost us more if the provider is a monopoly and it is using its resources including its manpower inefficiently. It is also clear that we need not pay twice for a service. The Education system in Sri Lanka manifests both these inefficiencies.

- The average student to teacher ratio is one of the lowest in Asia at 19 but often the right teacher is not at the right place

- Curricula, text books and examination materials are delivered late or delivered under sub standard conditions
- The state spends twice for education administration, first for a central bureaucracy and second for a provincial bureaucracy.
- Parents spend twice for the delivery of same education content, first through taxes spent on delivery at school and secondly through fees paid to tuition masters for the delivery of the same material.

Public choice theory in economics tells us that the principal-agent problem causes inefficiencies in the delivery of public services. In education, parents are the principals and elected officials and public servant are their agents. When there are layers of intervening agents between the parents and the education desired by them for their children, delivery of services is affected inevitably.

EFFECTIVENESS

Buildings, teachers, books and curricula are means to delivering a quality education experience to the children.

Economics tells us that the market place is the best mechanism for assuring quality of service but education is not a typical service. Education of children is a social necessity, and compulsion is often used by governments to assure that all children receive an education.

School attendance rates in Sri Lanka are above the regional average with 85% completing Grade 9, but we have no data on the quality of the education received. However, some results of achievement tests at Grade 6 and results of the GCE O/L examination suggest that **50% or fewer of those completing compulsory education may not have the required knowledge and skills.**

EQUITY

When government services are inefficient and ineffective, the hardest hit are the poor and the vulnerable in society. For an education system that claims to be free, the inequities of the system are glaring.

Basic needs of most schools are not met with poorer schools hit hardest

There are provisions in the current law allowing school authorities to raise additional funds through various welfare programmes. The monies are used to make up for expenditures that are not covered by government. For example, the typical allocation of funds for electricity or telephones does not cover the minimum needs of a school.

Percent Expenditure Borne by parents at Kotahena Kanishta Vidyalaya

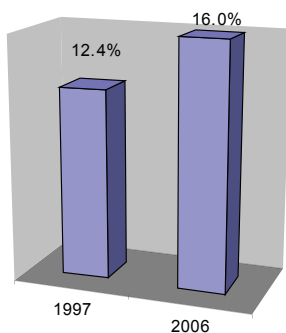
Electricity	20% of Rs: 91,884 per year
Telephone	65% of Rs: 41,589 per year

An adequate primary education is not available at a reasonable distance from many homes

Making a five year-old child travel several hours each day to and from school would be considered child abuse under normal conditions, but some parents in Sri Lanka do just that, obviously because they don't consider the neighbourhood schools as adequate. When some parents opt out of an inadequate school it leads to further deterioration of that the school. The phenomenon is reflected in the diminishing enrolments at schools.

In 2007, 1,549 schools (16.0 percent) had less than 51 students compared to 1,253 (12.4 percent) schools in 1997.

Percent of Schools with less than 51 Students



Talented Students from 60 out of 93 education zones have to move elsewhere to receive an adequate education

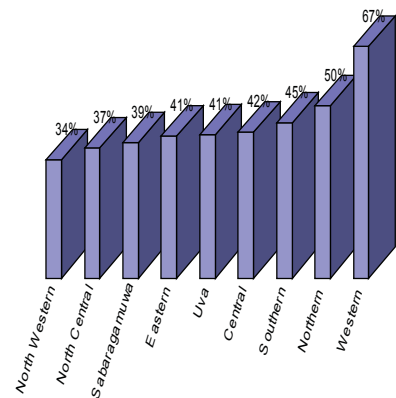
In place of the central school system established during 1943-1947 for secondary education of rural children, there

has emerged a system of 106 super schools concentrated in 33 out of 93 education zones. (Seven zones including Colombo, Kandy, Galle, Matara, Kurunegala, Bandarawela, and Gampaha: 59; Twenty six other zones, 47; Sixty other zones, 0)

Availability Science and Commerce streams are limited, with rural schools affected more

Only some of the schools in the country offer facilities for studying Science or Commerce in Grades 12 and 13 with the percentages varying from 67% in the Western province to a low of 34% in the northwestern province.

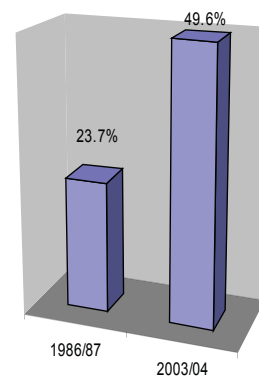
Students Studying Science or Commerce in Grades 12-13



Need for private tuition means that parents spend twice for the same service

The consumer and household finance survey conducted by the Central Bank reveals that the private household education spending is 30% to 35% of the total education expenditure. Of this private expenditure 45% is spent on private tuition and the rate of students attending private tuition classes has increased over time.

Percent Students Attending Tuition Classes



PROPOSALS FOR A TRULY EFFICIENT EFFECTIVE AND EQUITABLE SYTEM OF EDUCATION IN SRI LANKA

1. **Rationalize the existing public school system**
that gives equal opportunity to all, especially the rural poor



6771 stand-alone primary schools
each admitting 48 students on average to Grade 1 each year and providing quality education services to families with small children living in the vicinity of 1.5 km of each schools

163 senior secondary campuses
each admitting 2000 students on average to Grade 12 each year. Some of the current national schools and technical colleges as well as private colleges offering professional programs can be included in the mix of choices available.

2708 secondary schools
each admitting 120 students on average to Grade 6 each year from among students completing Grade 5 in 2-3 primary schools in the area and offering a full range of basic courses in arts, science and commerce

2. **Enable a parallel system of private schools or public private partnerships**
to provide services for parents who do not wish to abide by the geographic limitations of the public school system, by lifting the ban on private provision of education
3. **Decentralize education administration**
with power devolved to the provinces as per the 13th amendment, by establishing a national commission with responsibility for national policy, standards, syllabi, and examinations and a parliamentary committee for education serving as the ultimate oversight body and reallocating all other line ministry resources to the provinces.
4. **Empower parent-teacher communities**
consisting of school development societies (SDS) from each school organized as SDS collectives, by strengthening and reinforcing existing rules and regulations in a new education act.
5. **Set up an accountability mechanism**
where education authorities are required to report annually to their respective legislative bodies about the efficiency, effectiveness and equity in education in their jurisdictions.

About the Authors

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Sanvada

The Sanvada (dialogue) programme of the Pathfinder Foundation is aimed at critical analysis and debate on proposed or likely legislative initiative impacting the economy and the society in Sri Lanka. We look forward to your feed back.

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