

PUNJAB EDUCATION SECTOR REFORMS

What the future holds



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Summary

- In the past two decades, Punjab has seen significant education reform, aimed at improving the quality of education and learning outcomes. Punjab Education Reforms have included a focus on better accountability mechanisms and key areas of improvement in public schools.
- In comparison to other provinces, Punjab had the highest number of reforms and the lowest proportion of out-of-school children. In 2016, Punjab reported 13.6% Out of School Children (OOSC), compared to Balochistan's 34.8%, Sindh's 21.6%, AJK's 66.7% and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's 14.1%.
- The success of Punjab's education reforms was driven by various factors, including a collaborative approach between development partners, bureaucrats, and political leaders — this alignment of stakeholders allowed for a focused reform agenda.
- Punjab's commitment to reform persisted through political transitions, leading to reform continuity and increased capacity to adapt responsively to emerging challenges.
- However, since 2018, reform momentum has slowed and the role of institutions and coordinating bodies — such as the Punjab Monitoring and Implementation Unit (PMIU) — has started to diminish.
- The COVID-19 pandemic and the nationwide debate over the Single National Curriculum have posed significant challenges to Punjab's education reform agenda.
- Policymakers need to find ways to focus on school leadership and school transformation as key elements and build reform around them, learn from the case study of Punjab reforms, and commit to the continuation of the reform agenda during future political transitions in all provinces.

Introduction

Tabadlab's latest series *Islahati Jaiza* seeks to explore and examine past reforms from across Pakistan in key policy areas, including education, health, gender, and social protection. In the inaugural episode, an expert panel of guests traces the legacy of Punjab Education Reforms over the past two decades. The panel analysed the factors contributing to the impressive momentum of education reform in Punjab and unpacked the involvement of various stakeholders in the education ecosystem, including the bureaucracy, political leadership, and development financing partners. The conversation also addressed the slowing down of the reform momentum, paying particular attention to the role of the Covid-19 pandemic and the controversial Single National Curriculum in distracting policymakers from substantive progress.

This policy brief outlines the key insights and recommendations from the panel discussion.

Key Takeaways

Punjab's Reform Trajectory: The key factor that allowed Punjab to have a different trajectory than other provinces was increased attention to delivering against focused targets. For instance, the shift towards merit-based recruitment of teachers was a distinctly measurable goal that proved to have a transformative effect for many schools. It also allowed the government to foster goodwill in a demanding electorate that wanted to see results, and improved public perception of policy efforts tied to the reform agenda. Despite the focus on key target areas, the province also demonstrated an adaptive capacity to respond to emerging needs and challenges, assessing the landscape to shift its priorities which ultimately helped maintain continuity of reform across transitions of power.

New Government, Old Reforms: In 2018, the new government launched a deal that retained the existing reform agenda in its essence, but repackaged and rebranded. For instance, under Punjab Education Sector Reform Programme (PESRP), cash stipends were handed out to families of adolescent girls as a part of the Female School Stipend Program (FSSP) which was pivotal in encouraging middle and secondary school girls to attend school — the new government continued this with a slightly different approach.

Slowing Momentum: Since 2018, education reform in Punjab has not retained the dynamism and momentum of earlier years. Reform-minded thinking from political leaders has plateaued, leading to a reduction in the pressure to innovate and slowed down the pace of reform, but reforms have not completely disappeared, and continue at a slower pace below the surface. More concerningly, the role of key institutions that acted as hubs for coordination among stakeholders has dwindled, especially the Programme Monitoring & Implementation Unit (PMIU).

Technical Assistance: Attributing the success of the Punjab's educational reform to stakeholder alignment indicates a significant role played by development partners, both in terms of financing and technical assistance. In the last few years, however, external funding in the form of grants and loans has been limited. In the absence of both this cash inflow and particularly the decrease in technical assistance, established routines have continued but with fewer means to assess their quality and integrity.

Stumbling Blocks: Covid-19 and the Single National Curriculum (SNC)

After 2018, there were two major distractors from the momentum of the education reform agenda in Punjab:

- The **Covid-19 Pandemic** led to country-wide school closures and the social and economic disruptions led to an increase in the number of out-of-school children, along with a significant drop in children's learning levels.
- The **Single National Curriculum (SNC)** was a controversial deviation from the existing reform agenda, absorbing the country's policymakers into a futile and inconclusive debate that pulled the reform conversation away from learning outcomes.

Public-Private Partnership: While public-private partnership in the education sector does not need to be a permanent solution, public sector dependency on private actors will continue until the government finds a way for children to enroll and stay in public schools. There is an argument that the Punjab Education Foundation (PEF) is cannibalising government school enrolments, but that conversation can only seriously happen when the government stops depending on the private sector to provide quality education in areas where public schools fail to deliver.

Recommendations

1. Establishing Reform Continuity

Continuity of policies despite political transitions helped Punjab make large gains in education between 2007 and 2018. Commitment to the continuation of the reform agenda and encouraging ownership of the reform agenda (especially within the bureaucracy) will allow stakeholders to focus on achieving results, demonstrate program effectiveness, and improve outcomes.

2. Concurrent Reform Implementation

For the education ecosystem to get the overhaul it needs, several concurrent reforms must simultaneously be built around a single broader goal. For instance, improving children's learning outcomes will take more than a single reform, and can only be brought about by the continuous and concurrent implementation of several reforms over a period of time.

3. Focusing on Schools and Empowering School Leadership

Policymakers need to find ways to focus on school leadership and school transformation as key elements and build reform around them. Policies rolled out by the secretariats lose their effectiveness in improving learning outcomes at the school level because of varied needs and diverse circumstances. Learning outcomes won't improve by decentralising power to communities, but by decentralising power to school leadership hence, the education reform agenda should be school-focused and headteacher-centric. The education reform agenda should simultaneously emphasise on merit-based teacher recruitment accompanied by robust monitoring and evaluation systems to ensure the delivery of quality education in schools.

4. Using Quality and Robust Data

Policymakers should ensure that a targeted, data-driven approach for evidence-based allocation of free resources and scholarships is adopted so that schools can be the anchor of reforms with quality interventions. The use of data for monitoring and evaluation of programmes is crucial in ensuring that policies and reforms are effective. It is imperative to adopt new technologies in the market that could improve data collection mechanisms and leverage the use of data for planning and tracking purposes.

5. Strengthening the Role of Institutions

Before 2018, Punjab's Education Reforms were more institutional-led thought processes with a significant role played by institutions including the Punjab Education Foundation, Punjab Examination Commission, and especially the Programme Monitoring & Implementation Unit (PMIU) as drivers of education reform policies. Since 2018, the role of institutions has started to shrink. Given the earlier success of greater institutional investment, policymakers need to reinvigorate institutional-led thought processes for education reform to allow for more consistent reform outcomes.

6. Cohesion Across Stakeholders

A successful reform agenda requires stakeholders, systems, and institutions across the implementation cycle to be aligned. This includes political intent to deliver, the technical ability to convert manifestos into sustainable programmes, a monitoring and evaluation system, a data collection regime, budgets, feedback mechanisms for improvement, and finally a bureaucracy in place with a tenure given to them to deliver.