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POLICYINSIGHTS

INSTITUTE OF POLICY STUDIES OF SRI LANKA

Learning from Asian Best Practices in School Education

SRI LANKA STATE OF THE ECONOMY 2014

Rising Asia:
Opportunities and
Challenges for Sri Lanka

 INSTITUTE OF POLICY STUDIES OF SRI LANKA

With the global competition for skilled workers, countries are increasingly looking at means of improving the performance of their school systems. The most recent Programme for International Student Assessments (PISA) results – a tool for assessing students across countries, released in December 2013, revealed that most of the best performing school systems are situated in Asia. Shanghai-China was the best performer in Mathematics followed by six Asian countries including, Singapore, Hong Kong-China, Chinese Taipei, South Korea, Macao-China, and Japan. Yet, this result was not limited to Mathematics. The release of PISA results has unleashed a plethora of articles that seek to understand the reasons behind the success of the Asian countries in teaching children. In this backdrop, countries have turned greater attention to

improving their own education systems, and to look beyond their borders to learn from best practices in education.

Asian Education Practices

One key feature that differentiates teachers in high performing school systems from the others is the quality of the teachers. In most of the successful school systems such as in South Korea and Singapore, teachers are highly respected, and teaching is a highly sought after occupation – partly due to relatively high compensation received by teachers. However, the selection process for recruiting teachers and for promotions is also very rigorous, thus, only the best are able to get access to the teaching profession.

In addition, in many of the better-performing Asian countries, having well defined career paths, compensations and promotions based on performance, and special incentives to encourage teachers to teach in difficult areas and challenging schools have resulted in encouraging the best candidates to enter the teaching profession, and allocating them across the system to achieving best results.

Another key aspect that is different in successful school systems is their willingness to assess, learn, and improve. Transparency in school performance is one means of ensuring accountability. In China, the public can easily obtain information on various parameters used for assessing school performance. As such, the public can easily determine performance of schools based on a variety of factors. In South Korea, schools are evaluated annually by external monitoring groups according to guidelines and standards set by the Ministry of Education. The evaluations examine the teaching and learning processes, as well as curriculum and student needs.

Most successful school systems do not stop with recruiting the best candidates. They also invest in training and developing those chosen for teaching to do their best

The Sri Lankan Education System

Sri Lanka has long enjoyed the accolade for being one of the most literate countries, despite being a low income country. But, the country's education system has not been able to keep up with the global changes in education.

In Sri Lanka, the distribution of teachers according to need has been a problem facing the country over a long time. Teachers are often recruited only taking into account the availability of teacher vacancies. But, often these vacancies are for specific subjects at specific grades. Further, teachers have limited opportunities for self-development in the Sri Lankan system. Teachers in urban schools have very large classes, and as a result, teachers have to spend a considerable amount of time correcting student assessments. Many rural schools experience teacher shortages, thus, the available teachers have to undertake an extra workload. In addition, in Sri Lanka, school performance tends to be measured on the basis of the performance of students at national exams at various stages. Often, the schools producing the most successful children are rewarded, without considering the performance of the school, based on its ability to teach all children.

However, Sri Lanka has already established some of the key features of the best performing school systems in Asia. For example, the system for recruiting teachers through National Colleges of Education and Departments of Education in universities are similar to the way teachers are recruited in the best performing countries. Although, the selection process for these programmes can be improved to match the personalities of selected individuals for teaching, the existing mechanism for teacher recruitment is competitive and encourages the best students to enter the teaching profession. However, the ad hoc recruitment of individuals to the profession through other means has reduced the quality of teachers available in the system. It has also made it difficult to plan the supply of teachers to match the demand according to need.

Apart from the aforementioned, there are other mechanisms used by best performing schools in Asia which Sri Lanka can make use of to further improve the school systems in the country. For instance, the system for developing, appraising and promoting teachers in Sri Lanka is not well developed. Maintaining the quality of



teachers cannot be achieved only by recruiting the best. Once recruited, the system needs to support and encourage the development of the recruits so that they improve their performance and keep up with changes taking place globally. Although Sri Lanka has a system of teacher appraisal, it is not functioning effectively. This is partly due to financial and time constraints, and partly due to the limited emphasis given for teacher appraisal. The system should place more attention for encouraging and supporting teachers to develop themselves, and recognize and promote those who perform well.

(This Policy Insight is based on the comprehensive chapter on 'Learning from Asian Best Practices in School Education' in the 'Sri Lanka: State of the Economy 2014' – the flagship publication of the Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka. The complete 'State of the Economy 2014' report can be purchased from the publications section of the IPS, located at 100/20, Independence Avenue, Colombo 7. For more information, contact the Publications Unit on 0112143100.)

A challenge faced by most school systems is encouraging better teachers to move to rural areas and to teach in more challenging schools.



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