

Making all schools the best school

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The Government has embarked on a project to make the nearest school the best school to provide every child with quality education and to reduce competition to get into elite schools in Colombo and other urban areas. However, major resource constraints, especially around teachers, will make this a very challenging goal.

According to research carried out by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), the lack of qualified and experienced teachers is particularly prevalent in the areas of science and mathematics. A key problem that has plagued the public school system for decades is the disparity between 'big' schools and 'small' schools. Unsurprisingly, the study has shown that the lack of qualified teachers is particularly prevalent in the latter.

The number of teachers in privileged schools, according to IPS, exceeds the number of recommended teachers, while underprivileged and low-achieving schools did not have enough teachers, leading to an inequitable allocation of teachers. O/L performance is significantly lower in schools that do not offer science subjects for the Advanced Level and schools that terminate at Grade 5 or Grade 8.

Though Sri Lanka has a surplus of teachers at the national level, IPS points out in its findings that there is a dearth in qualified and experienced teachers at both the national and sub-national levels, especially for the subjects of Mathematics, Science and English (in that order), in schools across the country. This is a major reason for quality issues between schools.

Considering the Government is focused on improving STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) education at the university level, it goes without saying that schoolchildren, particularly at the all-important O/L juncture, ought to receive a sound foundation in these field-relevant subjects if those students are to pursue higher studies in the STEM fields.

The IPS has correctly called for urgent attention in improving science and mathematics education at the school level with this goal in mind. Any education reforms that may be on the cards then must prioritise advanced teacher training, particularly for these highly technical subjects, if the Government is serious about its goal of improving STEM education at the tertiary level.

Tertiary level teacher training in Sri Lanka, experts point out, does not cater to the needs of the country's education system, what with only two out of the 17 state universities housing Faculties of Education and only three with their own Departments of Education. This is an area the Ministry of Education needs to look into when formulating plans for reform.

There is also a large shortage of qualified teachers (both novice and experienced) for mathematics and science that is apparent in all provincial schools. According to IPS, shortages of English teachers exist in the Northern, Eastern, North Central, Uva and Sabaragamuwa provinces.

It is clear that this shortage of teachers has led to a frustrating status quo that does not bode well for the country's future. It is time those tasked with reforming the education system take this reality into account and take immediate steps to train teachers, both in their relevant subjects and in teaching those subjects.

While elite Colombo schools maintain their status based on reputation, many other schools can build good names for themselves by providing quality education and may eventually edge out their more illustrious counterparts.

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