

## Faltering education is a national emergency, fix it now



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The 2010 education policy adopted during the second Hasina regime was the only one that was approved by the national parliament, though with little debate, on the last day of the session in December 2010. To what extent did this policy, which is still in effect, reflect the aspirations for education reform and change? Politics and statecraft in Bangladesh since its birth have failed to subsume the spirit and aspirations that inspired the liberation struggle – equality, human dignity and social justice as inscribed in the proclamation of independence, and democracy, nationalism, socialism and secularism, as enshrined in the constitution. As mentioned, this failing has affected state operations including the education sector.

### REFORMS – EXPECTATIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES

Total consensus cannot be expected in policy for a complex and multi-faceted area such as education. The 2010 Policy is replete with compromises, and to a degree, it contains contradictions. For instance, the 2010 policy departed from the Khuda Commission recommendation of the primacy of Bangla as the medium at all levels of education. The policy accorded legitimacy to educational developments that emerged during the military and military-backed regimes from 1975 to 1990 – such as the rapid growth of the two types of madrasas as a parallel education system from pre-primary to university, and the acceptance of the multiple streams of schooling with quite different objectives, learning content and learning experience for the young people of our country. The policy mentioned the critical role of

teachers in the education system and the need for major change in enhancing skills, capabilities, incentives and status of teachers. It recognized the problems of an over-centralized education governance and management and the importance of responsive and decentralized planning and decision-making. It recommended substantially larger public investment in education in line with the state's obligation for children's education. However, the policy did not indicate specific strategic steps that would redirect the trajectory of reform and thus, contradictorily, acquiesced to the continuation of the existing structure.

Education reform is complex and difficult, requiring alignment on many fronts for sustained progress. A 2010 policy recommendation was to set up a permanent high-level education commission that could guide, monitor and inform the public about the course

of education reform. The political and administrative decision-makers were averse to acting on this proposal. Arguably, they were content with the status quo and concerned about their authority and control being contested or challenged by an independent body answerable to the public.

The July '24 uprising and the Interim Government (IG) in the wake of July '24 had raised expectations for significant change in education as in other spheres of national development. High-level commissions were set up in key areas of political, economic and social issues. It is an irony that there was no commission for education reform, even though discrimination in education outcome in respect of job quotas was the spark for the uprising. Soon, the long-accumulated problems in various subsectors of education led to protests and demonstrations that spilled out on the streets. Some response from the government could not be avoided.

A consultative committee was set up in October (2024) last year, tasking it to present reform recommendations for primary education within a timeframe of three months. The Chief Adviser personally received the report of the 9-member consultative committee

Education also appointed a 10-member consultative committee this October (2025) for making recommendations on secondary education, again allowing a three-month timeline. The committee is hard at work and expects to submit its recommendations based on consultation with stakeholders, visits to schools in different parts of the country and review of relevant research and analysis.

The Interim Government, with its tenure coming to a close and being burdened with its routine functions, as well as with setting the stage for the national referendum and election, does not have much opportunity to consider the suggestions of the two consultative committees on the two stages of school education. Had the IG established an education sector reform commission along with the other commissions, progress could have been made towards much-needed education reform. That opportunity has been lost.

The upcoming election and a newly elected political government will offer another opportunity for resuming the deliberation on education reform. The work of the consultative committees on school education is not necessarily

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on 10 February (2025) this year, promising due attention and action on the recommendations. The education community is disappointed that the report has not yet prompted a systematic consideration of reform actions.

A year later, the Ministry of

the last word on reform in this area, which is the foundation for the total edifice of education. But the work already done can be the take-off point for a serious and systematic rethinking about the whole education system. That opportunity must not be lost.

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