Declining secondary school enrolment demands urgent reforms



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Views expressed in this article are the writer's own.

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A sharp decline in secondary school enrolment reported by the education statistics bureau, BANBEIS, has brought to public attention the many problems within our public schools. The total enrolment declined by over 4,00,000 in just one year—falling from 90.6 lakh in 2024 to 86.4 lakh in 2025. This amounts to about a 5-percent decline in overall student enrolment at the secondary level, on top of about one-third of enrolled students dropping out between Classes 6 and 10. At the same time, madrasa enrolment increased by about 2 percent. Enrolment at English-medium schools has also been on the rise. The overall decline and the pattern of change in enrolment at different types of institutions signal long-standing and deep systemic issues that need to be addressed.

Education analysts, drawing on available evidence, suggest that the causes behind the shift range from household economic crises to flaws in the education system. There are immediate and longer-term factors which influence parents' decisions and prospects for children's education.

Among immediate causes, family financial hardship is likely to be the most serious impediment. Education Watch reports for 2022 and 2023 by the Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE), alongside other recent studies, suggest that rising poverty and high out-of-pocket education costs may have forced families to withdraw children from schools or seek less costly options at madrasas. Economic stress drives boys into the labour market, while girls are pushed into child marriage. A Dhaka Secondary and Higher Secondary Education Board investigation revealed that nearly 41 percent of candidates who missed the 2025 SSC exams had been absent because they had married recently. Around 97 percent of these students were girls.

At the same time, learning losses incurred during pandemic-related school closures have never been recovered. Many students fell further behind as they were automatically promoted to higher grades. Climate shocks—such as floods, storms, waterlogging, and the creeping salinity in coastal groundwater—affects children and families at home and school, while political shifts of recent years disrupted school continuity.

Mainstream education has also suffered due to poorly managed institutions, massive teacher shortages, lack of monitoring, and corruption in school management committees. Many classrooms are also overcrowded, and while schools having a Monthly Pay Order (MPO) system are allowed to have a second section for a class only if the number of students exceeds 55, even that rarely happens because of teacher and funding shortage.

An overloaded curriculum cannot be translated into effective learning activities in classrooms by overburdened and poorly qualified teachers. The result is students' heavy reliance on guidebook memorisation and private coaching classes rather than real learning. Assessment within public examinations also end up testing set and memorised answers rather than evaluating students' actual range of knowledge and skills.

An estimated two-thirds of schools, including government and private high schools, have not had a permanent head teacher for prolonged periods, running up to a decade or so in some cases—leaving schools without effective management and leadership. Shortage of teachers has indeed become a chronic issue across the country. Over 80,000 teaching positions, one in five of all teachers, remained vacant in secondary schools, said the education minister in parliament on April 23 this year. Among secondary schools, 3,861 remain without ICT teachers, 2,744 without math teachers, and 2,625 without English teachers.



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FILE PHOTO: **RASHED SHUMON**

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Consistent underfunding has plagued the system. The government has consistently allocated less than 2 percent of its GDP to education (with actual spending being substantially less), failing to meet the Unesco-recommended 4 percent to 6 percent. This leaves the majority of secondary schools with issues such as inadequate staff numbers; unqualified teachers; and insufficient classrooms, laboratories, libraries, clean toilets, and proper ICT infrastructure and connectivity.

The recent madrasa preference of many parents deserves a closer look, and so does the increase in the number of both high-end English-medium schools (following an international curriculum) and the mushrooming of relatively low-cost "kindergartens" of uncertain quality in small towns.

While general secondary schools have to do much more to integrate modern STEM frameworks, advanced computing, and market-driven skills for work, madrasas are even less responsive to contemporary requirements. By drawing low-income children away from mainstream secondary education, students' economic mobility is limited early on, determining low-wage jobs or informal labour markets as the destiny for many. The outcome is a divided society and a workforce lacking in soft skills, language abilities, and technological literacy.

Although female students have historically had higher enrolment rates in Bangladesh's secondary education, mainstream dropouts heavily affect girls who are subjected to child marriage. For girls who are diverted to madrasas, access to formal jobs, tech-based employment, and STEM fields shrinks, setting back progress in women's empowerment.

The current BNP government is clearly struggling to respond to declining enrolment and various long-standing problems in the school system. Interventions such as expanding midday meals, providing students with uniforms and school bags, and emphasising sports activities will be implemented in phases to reach all students. More complex measures to restructure the curriculum such as expanding ICT with the "one-teacher-one-tab" initiative, compulsory vocational courses in general secondary schools, and stricter student assessment are underway. Steps have also been taken to recruit headteachers and teachers, but appear to be proceeding at snail's pace, without the urgency this situation demands. Free textbooks and modest stipends for the majority of students remain in place. The government has also pledged a gradual increase in the budget allocation for education to 5 percent of GDP. Its first budget for FY2026-27 has modestly increased education's share of GDP.

Will the measures initiated by the government halt the decline in enrolment and even result in a turnaround? Educationists and civic leaders ask if the initiatives are adequate or "too little, too slow"—devoid of a holistic vision, a comprehensive framework of sustained change, and a sense of urgency? Indeed, there are no "quick fixes" to the myriad structural and operational problems within our school system. While physical infrastructure has grown somewhat, the core issues of quality, cost, and governance remain largely unresolved.

Last year, a consultative committee headed by this author on secondary education, upon appointment by the past interim government, examined many of the issues noted throughout this article. The committee made recommendations regarding immediate and longer-term actions. A total of 118 recommendations covering pedagogy and learning assessment; handling curriculum and learning content; rethinking teachers' role, status, and career path; management of individual schools and system governance; and adequate and efficient education financing were provided. These were categorised by the possibility of early, medium-term, and long-term actions.

But recommendations are of little value unless they can be implemented. And failure of implementation has long been the Achilles' heel in education reform efforts. The aforementioned committee had made specific suggestions about the pathway, administrative steps, and timeline that could be followed to break this trend. The committee's recommendations, following extensive dialogues and field visits, are not necessarily the last words on what should be done, but they deserve serious consideration, especially given the prevailing and emerging challenges in our education sector.

Key priorities for Bangladesh to pursue at COP31



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The 31st United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP31), set to begin on November 9 in Antalya, Türkiye, convenes a significant test of international cooperation and climate justice against the backdrop of geopolitical unrest, ongoing armed conflicts, an unprecedented energy crisis, and ambiguity about the United States' commitment to climate action. It is quite contradictory that the biggest producers of greenhouse gases (GHGs) and military spending in the world devote far more funds to defence than to international climate finance, with military spending sometimes having surpassed climate support by as much as 5,000 percent in recent years. Hence, COP31 must become a platform for demanding climate reparations, equitable finance, and accountability from historically culpable nations—an obligation anchored in the premise of "Polluter Pays".

Facing the impacts of climate change in real time, COP31 offers a window for Bangladesh to negotiate not just for climate finance but for climate justice, economic security, technological transfer, and protection of the vulnerable community. The prime concern for the country is to effectively use the conference to get tangible pledges from rich nations and international climate organisations that result in opportunities, resources, and protection for Bangladeshi citizens. In his speech at the UN General Assembly in September, Prime Minister Tarique Rahman urged more international action on climate justice, climate financing, and adaptation help. This is a good place to start when creating the COP31 negotiation agenda.

First, Bangladesh ought to put emphasis on climate funding when negotiating at the climate conference. The country needs significant investment to strengthen climate resilience, safeguard vulnerable groups, and achieve sustainable development because it is a developing nation that is vulnerable to climate change. But depending too much on loans to address climate consequences risks adding to the country's financial load, especially when resources are also required for infrastructure development, healthcare, job creation and education. So the country ought to promote highly concessional financing when appropriate, as well as predictable, accessible grant-based climate finance from developed countries.

It should also demand more funding for community-driven adaptation projects, streamlined application processes, and open reporting of climate finance pledges and disbursements. The fundamental condition should be that, under the UN climate regime, international climate funding must represent the values of justice and shared but distinct duties and capacities. The success of COP31 should be determined not only by the amount of money committed but also by the amount of finance that is actually delivered, how quickly it reaches its intended communities, and whether it lessens climate vulnerability.

Loss and damage is another priority agenda for Bangladesh. The nation still experiences catastrophic effects from cyclones, floods, river erosion, salinity intrusion, and rising sea levels despite efforts in disaster preparedness and climate adaptation. In addition to inflicting non-economic costs such as deterioration of cultural assets and disruption in communal life, these effects have the potential to destroy homes, agricultural land, fisheries, infrastructure, and livelihoods. Bangladesh should strive for more responsive finance arrangements for climate-vulnerable nations, simplified access procedures, and substantial and consistent contributions to the Fund for Responding to Loss and Damage (FRLD). It should also stress how crucial it is to assist with both monetary and non-monetary losses, such as community rehabilitation and livelihood recovery.

Over the years, Bangladesh has seen an increasing number of displaced people due to climate change, especially in riverine villages and coastal areas that are impacted by erosion, heavy rainfall, and salinity intrusion. Displacement can put more strain on housing, work, healthcare, education, and urban infrastructure when individuals lose their homes, farmland, or means of subsistence. Despite that, a universal legal status that automatically provides refugee protection to all those affected by climate change has still not been established by international climate negotiations. In order to resolve displacement while upholding current legal frameworks and human rights duties, Bangladesh should seek effective international collaboration.



A drone view shows people carrying the roof of a house in a village in Kurigram, a district in northern Bangladesh that loses farmlands and houses to river erosion every year, forcing the locals to relocate.

FILE PHOTO: **REUTERS**

At COP31, the country should also advocate for international financing that supports renewable energy deployment, modernisation of power grids, energy storage, and cleaner industrial production. It should also seek technical and financial assistance for workers and communities affected by changes in energy production and industrial processes. Green employment should be an integral part of the transition, with investment in skills development and opportunities for young people to work in renewable energy, energy efficiency, and climate-resilient industries. Further emphasis should be placed on the urgency of climate policies considering energy affordability and reliability while supporting a gradual reduction in dependence on imported fossil fuels.

International climate finance's efficacy is contingent not only on the quantity of funds available but also on who may access them and who benefits most from their use. Accessing resources, taking part in decision-making, and recovering from climate-related shocks might be particularly difficult for women, young people, smallholder farmers, fishermen, and workers in the unorganised sector in Bangladesh. For instance, women in coastal communities that are vulnerable to climate change may face more challenges in obtaining clean drinking water, sustaining their livelihoods, and gaining access to necessary services during emergencies. Bangladesh should promote gender-responsive climate finance, more robust support for locally driven adaptation, and significant involvement of youth and impacted communities in climate planning at COP31.

For Bangladesh, COP31 must be more than just another diplomatic endeavour to obtain international commitments. It should be an opportunity to pursue accessible climate finance, climate action that safeguards people, and international collaboration that yields quantifiable outcomes. The country should use evidence-based ideas, explicit funding requirements, and workable implementation methods in addition to its moral and legal justifications for climate justice in its negotiation strategy. It can seek greater collective support for the priorities it shares with other climate-vulnerable countries by collaborating with the Climate Vulnerable Forum, the Least Developed Countries group, and other pertinent negotiating coalitions.

In the end, the effectiveness of Bangladesh's climate diplomacy should be assessed by how well the pledges protect coastal communities, preserve livelihoods, increase access to clean water, improve preparedness for disasters, and open doors for future generations. Let's hope for the best.