

K-12 Education Reform: Problems and Prospects

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Abstract

The K-12 Basic Education Program proposed by the Department of Education adds two years of secondary education to enable graduates to pursue one of three tracks: employment after graduation, higher education, or entrepreneurship. The reform faces challenges in redesigning the curriculum, in deploying and training teachers at the start of the program's implementation, in ensuring the sustainability of the program, and in meeting the required infrastructure. These issues should be addressed soon for the well-meant, timely, and much needed program to benefit not only the individual students, but also the country, in general.

The strength of a nation greatly depends on the strength of its education system. The Philippine government ideally adheres to this belief. A revisiting of the 1987 Philippine Constitution reminds us that the organized machinery of the State gives primacy to education as a basic human right. The following are some of the provisions, which serve as the fundamental framework in ensuring that indeed education is rightly valued.

“The State shall give priority to education, science and technology, arts, culture, and sports to foster patriotism and nationalism, accelerate social progress, and promote total human liberation and development” (Section 17, Article 2).

“The State shall protect and promote the right of all citizens to quality education at all levels, and shall take appropriate steps to make such education accessible to all” (Section 1, Article 14).

“The State recognizes the complementary roles of public and private institutions in the educational system and shall exercise reasonable supervision and regulation of all educational institutions” (Section 4, Article 14).

“The State shall assign the highest budgetary priority to education and ensure that teaching will attract and retain its rightful share of the best available talents through adequate remuneration and other means of job satisfaction and fulfillment” (Section 5, Article 14).

Based on the above-cited constitutional provisions, there is no doubt that education is of primordial importance to the well-being of the people and consequently creates a positive impact on the overall status of the country. Various indicators, however, reveal that the quality of Philippine education continues to be in decline: poor performance in international comparative tests in science and math, unpreparedness of some, if not most, high school graduates to take on the rigors of academic life in college, and skills and competencies of graduates that inadequately match industry needs.

Standing alone and in comparison with others, Philippine education has been under serious threats of deterioration. A lot of factors can be considered as causes, including (a) no broad political support for real reforms, (b) weak institutional environment for change, and (c) rapid population growth (von Amsberg, 2003, p. 4).

In the past, four special bodies had been created by the government to assess the quality of education in the country, identify the problems, and recommend effective solutions. These were the Congressional Commission on Education (EDCOM) of 1991, the Philippines Education Sector Study (PESS) of 1998, the Presidential Commission on Educational Reform (PCER) in 2000, and the Presidential Task Force for Education created by virtue of Executive Order 625 on July 10, 2007. All these bodies reported their findings and recommendations but most of these were not carried out.

With the new administration of President Benigno Aquino III, new reforms have been declared. With a promise that his admin-

istration is serious about bringing change, cautious optimism calls for a favorable regard to what he will do and hope that this time, education will truly be insulated from politics.

In an attempt to yet again create substantial and sustainable reforms in the education sector, President Aquino proclaimed as one of his priority areas a redefinition of basic education through the K-12 education reform.

At one point in his campaign, the President was called the “Education President,” given his leaning towards education as a primary area for change and as an indispensable factor in the growth of our nation. Without question, such bias towards education earned him the approval, respect, and votes of equally-minded people whose only desire is to allow the young generation to enjoy the merits of a much-improved quality of education.

Five months after he was sworn into office as the Chief Executive of the Philippines, his alter ego in the Department of Education (DepEd), Bro. Armin Luistro, launched the K-12 educational reform and called on the various stakeholders to consider the merits of the reform and consequently support the same.

Starting October 5, 2010, DepEd engaged in an aggressive awareness campaign along with consultations at various levels—local, regional, national—with the different stakeholders—academe, parents, students, business, and industry—in the hope that their inputs will contribute significantly to filling-in the framework of the K-12 with the necessary details.

A closer look at the K-12 model

As things currently stand, basic education in the country refers to ten years of academic and practical formation of pupils. Of the ten, six years is devoted to elementary education while four years is for secondary education (*Education Act of 1982*, 1982). The K-12 seeks to change such a definition of basic education.

According to a briefer released by DepEd (2010a), the K-12 Basic Education Program refers to Kindergarten and the 12 years of elementary and secondary education. Specifically, DepEd chose to work on the K-6-4-2 model. Such a model requires a compulsory year of Kindergarten, six years of elementary education, four years of junior high school, and two years of senior high school. As the briefer further discusses, the two years of senior high school “intend

to provide time for students to consolidate acquired academic skills and competencies.” The additional two years after what now stands as high school is designed to have three tracks: (a) employment right after graduation, (b) higher education, and (c) entrepreneurship.

As can be gleaned from what is currently implemented and what DepEd seeks to implement effective next year, there is an additional two years in the basic education of all pupils. The notion of an additional two years of schooling does not seem to be appealing to parents who literally struggle to send their children to school. Worthy to examine is the rationale behind the introduction of the K-12 reform as enunciated by DepEd.

A holistic human development is at the heart of the K-12 basic education program. It envisions a graduate who has a mastery of core competencies as well as a solid training on work and life skills. The K-12 desires to address some of the long standing problems in basic education such as a congested curriculum, the ineptitude of a lot of graduates of the current basic education model and consequent lack of preparedness to take on the rigors of college life, the incapacity to work of high school graduates due to age as they are usually 16 year-old individuals who are still incapable of legally entering a contract, the mismatch between the curriculum and the skills that the industry needs, and the difficulty of seeking equivalency or accreditation abroad for those graduates who intend to pursue studies elsewhere since most countries, especially in the Southeast Asian region, require 12 years of basic education (see Table 1).

From where the program stands along with an appreciation of its vision and goals, there seems to be no other plausible option for the state to take but the road towards the eventual implementation of the K-12 program. However worthy the program is, a more prudent way of proceeding is to look into its preparatory, transitory, and actual implementation requirements. This leads us to the discussion of the challenges that the program poses which consequently demands urgent and expedient action if its phased implementation starting next year is intended.

Table 1

Comparative data on pre-university education in Asia

Country	Basic Education Cycle Total
Brunei	12
Cambodia	12
Indonesia	12
Lao PDR	12
Malaysia	12
Myanmar	11
Philippines	10
Singapore	11
Thailand	12
Timor Leste	12
Vietnam	12

Source: Adapted from SEAMEO-INNOTECH (DepEd, 2010b)

Challenges to the K-12 education reform

Curriculum design

The discussion paper released by DepEd (2010b) when it first announced the K-12 states that the program's primary goal is to enhance the basic education curriculum. It is the contention of DepEd officials that the current curriculum is too congested since its contents are supposed to be delivered in 12 years, like most basic education programs. However, in the country's case, they are covered in 10 years. With the new program, it is DepEd's desire to appropriately tweak out, polish, and streamline the curriculum for its most effective delivery and to lay the contents of basic education within a period of 12 years.

Furthermore, the 12-year basic education curriculum that the DepEd seeks to design is one which hopes to address basic inadequacies of the current curriculum, particularly, to equip the students with the indispensable skills that will prepare them to face the world of work after the end of the 12 years. In addition, the new curriculum will also correct the deficiencies of a good number of high school graduates who pursue higher education ill-equipped with the basic tools to face its rigors.

The ideal way of proceeding is to have a collaborative effort among the three education agencies (CHED, DepEd, and TESDA) along with the other stakeholders such as the academe and industry. It is indispensable that the basic education curriculum be a seamless and coordinated whole taking into account the different terminal goals of a graduate—work, entrepreneurship, and higher education. At the locus of the enhanced curriculum is a special leaning towards liberal education that fosters analytical and critical decision-making, formation of sound judgment, and an informed citizenship.

DepEd has created a steering committee to undertake the complicated mandate of putting in the details in the K-12 framework it has initially established. For months, the two other agencies—TESDA and CHED—were not involved in the formulation of a curriculum until recently. The Technical Working Group, comprised of representatives from the three different agencies, met but since the first meetings have not yet met again because of logistics-related concerns and an unquestionable problem on coordination. This poses an insurmountable problem in the eventual implementation of the policy considering that what the K-12 envisions is a well-coordinated, well-thought out, seamless and integrated basic education curriculum that equips the graduate for work, technical education, or higher education. If TESDA and CHED would be left out in the planning and curriculum formulation, there is a great likelihood that the curriculum will not feed in seamlessly to either technical education or higher education.

Dr. Isagani Cruz, an education expert, noted that changing the curriculum is a daunting task. He enunciated that “it is not just a matter of adding a subject here and removing a subject there” (Cruz, 2010) or introducing a new strategy but it involves a more holistic approach that takes into consideration a lot of factors such as the duration, the content, and the competencies expected, among others.

To date, there has been no proclamation yet of any finalized K-12 basic education curriculum. This missing element will create a spill over problem with the target implementation for next year. The curriculum still has to be subjected to serious evaluation and pilot testing in order to test its effectiveness and viability. The target date of initial implementation for next year will not be plausible.

There appears to be a structural failure in the three agencies

which impedes the advancing of curriculum design. Unless this problem on coordination is addressed, at most, only DepEd will have the full hand in the formulation.

Human resource

With the intended implementation of the K-12 program, teacher training and deployment are also serious concerns that need effective intervention before their implementation. In the regional consultation conducted in Naga City involving academicians and administrators in the Bicol Region from both public and private sectors, it was observed that the deterioration in the quality of education in the country is strongly attributable to the weakness or inadequacy in the academic and practical training of teachers. This concern has been a perennial problem in the education sector and implementing a new policy will not be successful unless an aggressive move to solve this problem is seriously made.

According to DepEd (2010a), the K-12 program would require 103,599 more teachers. Even without the new program, there is already a shortage of teachers due to budget constraints. Hiring more in preparation for the implementation of K-12 will be met with even more difficulties.

From the point of view of the private education institutions, an identified concern is the loading of some teachers in the tertiary level, especially those assigned to handle general education courses, once the two years of senior high school are already implemented. Since there will be two years, during the transition phase, that there will be no freshmen in the tertiary level, some general education college teachers will then have to be given teaching load in the senior high school. These teachers who will be given assignments in the senior high school cannot just do so without the adequate training.

The question of which education agency will administer the implementation of the senior high school is also crucial as it will define certain key aspects such as professional requirements for teachers. If the additional two years of senior high school will be under DepEd, then a safe assumption would be that teachers who would handle students' academic formation during the two years should be licensed teachers. This then, will create a problem among schools, colleges, and universities who will laterally transfer their tertiary level general education teachers to teach in the senior high school. This is partic-

ularly true since, in college, a license to teach is not a requirement.

Still another area that merits attention and careful study is the training of teachers who will execute the changes in the curriculum of basic education in conformity with the K-12 program. It has been noted in various studies that the poor professional and academic preparation of teachers is one of the reasons the quality of education in the Philippines suffers. Such a problem has been receiving a lot of attention and intervention from DepEd as well as from some private organizations but the improvement is still largely to be seen.

Apart from the additional training for teachers who will handle senior high schools, there is also a corollary requirement to reevaluate the curriculum for the teaching profession. Needless to say, the reformulation of the teacher curriculum shall have to be addressed once a new K-12 curriculum has already been finalized.

Ensuring sustainability of the program

As noted earlier in this paper, one of the reasons the problems in education still remain unaddressed is the weak political support for needed reforms. The changes in the personalities and, correspondingly, the leadership styles at the top post of the three key agencies create a consequent interruption in the sustainability of sound education policies. The difficulty then will be felt not only by the government agency concerned but also by the education providers—public and private. Furthermore, once new leaders are appointed, they have a strong tendency to terminate programs initiated by their predecessors in order to establish their presence and, consequently, leave their own legacy.

One of the ways by which the above-mentioned problem can be addressed is to have programs legislated to ensure continuous implementation regardless of the change in administration.

However, since the program was announced by DepEd Secretary Bro. Armin Luistro on October 5, 2010, there has been no enactment yet of a law that creates a stamp of relative permanency and sustainability to the program. Although there are already two pending bills on K-12 enhanced basic education in the House of Representatives, made possible through the advocacy work of the Coordinating Council for Private Education Associations, particularly the National Advocacy Commission of the Catholic Educational Association of the Philippines, still these bills remain at the earliest

stage of legislation and have not gone past committee level. One such bill is House Bill 4199 or “An Act Enhancing the Curriculum and Increasing the Number of Years for Basic Education” and the other is House Bill 4219 titled “An Act Enhancing the Curriculum and Increasing the Number of Years for Basic Education.”

The current status of the bills signals a concern on the sustainability of and full support to the program by the legislative branch. Without a law mandating the shift from ten years of basic education to twelve years, the subsisting Education Act of 1982, which mandates a ten-year basic education, should be followed.

In his campaign, President Aquino was unequivocal in his declaration to add two more years to basic education but there is no guarantee that such a reform will be honored and sustained by the next president, unless there is a law institutionalizing the change. The likelihood that it would be carried, notwithstanding a change in the administration, depends to a large extent on the legislative mandate. Once legislated, permanence is more or less assured since laws are not easily amended.

Required infrastructure

From the government’s end, implementation of the program would require funds amounting to 150 billion pesos for 153,569 classrooms, 103,599 more teachers, 95.6 million more books, and 13.2 million seats (DepEd, 2010a). Based on the General Appropriations Act of 2011, DepEd has a budget of 192,087,002.00 pesos. Considering the annual budget of DepEd, implementing the K-12 program faithfully appears to be a very daunting task.

The classroom requirement alone is an enormous challenge. As things stand now, there is already a substantive shortage in classrooms as well as in other facilities. Adding two more years in basic education—a government mandate—will increase the shortage even more.

Proposals have been made in anticipation of the problem on needed infrastructure to support the K-12 program. One viable option is to allow private schools to provide the needed infrastructure to the government by financing private education of those students who can no longer be accommodated by public schools due to their physical limitations. Such an option can be done through the education service contracting, where students enroll in private high schools but

the government provides the funds. This option is in keeping with the constitutional mandate on the government to provide free basic education to all while at the same time helping private schools survive.

Conclusion

The K-12 program is not only timely but also much needed considering the increased mobility among students and professionals across national borders. A basic education that is of comparable content, duration, and goals to those given in other countries would not only benefit the individual students but also the country, in general.

The K-12 would make high school graduates better equipped, ready, and competent to take on any of the significant life choices after their preparation from basic education. Graduates of K-12 will become more equipped with the skills and competence to work. They will be more confident to go out of the country to pursue studies or work, since the problem on accreditation or recognition will already have been addressed. They will be more ready to pursue higher education given the adequate training and academic preparation that the basic education promises.

However well-meant the K-12 is, without the required legislation, the sustained collaboration among various stakeholders, the unflinching commitment of the President backed up by the hardworking team of implementers, and the full support of the industry and the parents, it is more likely to face the fate of other programs which ended when the term of the main proponent expired. A long-term solution, such as the K-12, is undoubtedly most daunting but, once implemented, is sure to bring the best rewards.

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