

# Punjabi Reforms

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## **One Foot Forward**

The United Nations Development Programme recently gave Pakistan the worst “education ranking” of any country outside Africa, and it’s easy to see why. Barriers to educational success usually begin with underinvestment and tail off in a long line that includes absent teachers, empty schools and a national literacy rate that barely exceeds 50 percent.

At the provincial level, the results are none the better. In the Punjab, where 60 percent of the population reside, only 45 percent of school aged children were enrolled in 2003. One in five teachers never showed up for work, one in ten schools had no building to teach in and with little or no access to school, only a third of girls were able to sign their names.

Since its launch in 2003, the Punjab Education Sector Reform Program (PESRP) has produced astounding results and is steadily charting a road to reform that the rest of the country has already begun to follow. Instead of focusing on just one aspect of educational change, the program has tackled multiple educational problems within the Punjab as well as identifying the core issues that connect them.

Over the past four years, an additional 2.4 million children have been enrolled in school. Girl’s enrollment has increased from 43 to 45 percent overall and from 43 to 46 percent at the primary level. Sixty One percent of kids are now completing primary school and enrollment figures across the state have increased by 13 percent. These are no small increases for such a short period of time.

PESRP is part of a wider effort at poverty alleviation in the Punjab based on “three pillars” of support.

1. Public finance reforms – to enable the Government to practically spend more on education and pro-poor development.
2. Devolution of power – to the district level to make local councils accountable to local needs.
3. Quality of education – to improve the quality of teaching, schooling and the governance of the education system.

Backed by the political commitment of the Punjabi Government and the financial muscle of the World Bank, the PESRP has worked hard to create a system that listens to the people and have the ability to respond. By 2007, education reforms had achieved a number of victories in several key areas:

### *Better human capital*

In 1998, there were 18,000 teachers in the Punjab collecting a wage but failing to show up for class in the morning. So called ‘ghost teachers’ seldom lost their jobs

due to a lack of accountability and high corruption in the system. Local poverty and poor facilities/wages meant many teachers felt abandoned by the Government.

Under the guidance of UNICEF and the National Rural Support Programme (NRSP), PESRP has given teachers high priority in its new reform programme. To meet surging demand, an additional 50,000 teachers have been hired since 2003, (20,000 last year alone), and a further 100,000 given refresher courses in more child-centred teaching practices.

Teachers are now deployed in home districts with jobs tied to local areas through school specific contracts to make monitoring easier and reduce absenteeism. Wages and qualifications have also been increased and increased Government support extended to teachers through local resource centres and teaching aids kits to every school.

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*“Improvements in education outcomes in Punjab have the potential for country-wide impact,”*

**John Wall, World Bank Country Director, Pakistan**

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#### *Improved facilities*

As of Jan 2007, half of the Punjab’s total of 60,000 public schools had received ‘toilets, boundary walls and additional classrooms’ to some degree as well as one thousand ‘ghost schools’ reopened. A project has also been initiated with the German Government to establish school libraries across the province – though progress seems to be wanting at present.

#### *Superior support*

For many parents in Pakistan, education forms a large part of their yearly expense. School fees, travelling costs, text-books, uniforms and stationary all add up and with only one source of income for the average family of 6, it’s usually girls that miss out so that the boys can have an education, especially as they get older.

Whilst a distant dream for many Governments, the Punjab has effectively declared school fees to parents null and void for children in classes 1 to 12. Text books have been issued to 11 million students under grade 10 and stipends of 200 Rupees each given out to 300,000 secondary school girls in the most illiterate districts of the province.

#### *Funding increased*

Arguably the most important factor in sustaining these reforms have been improvements within the public finance of the province itself that has allowed the Government a freer hand to respond to public needs. The World Bank has also been instrumental through a US\$600 million interest free loan package extended in paid instalments until 2009.

### *Better monitoring*

Involvement of local communities, schools and society at large has been crucial in ensuring educational reforms are carried out and progress properly tracked. With the help of non-government organisations (NGOs) nationwide, 43,000 school councils have been set up across the Punjab. Independent organisations have also been involved in PESRP for the first time to let the Government know if “anything goes wrong.”

### **Remaining Challenges**

Although enticing progress has indeed been made over the past four years, it's important to remember that education is still a long term investment, requiring decades of political commitment that the Punjab may not be willing to make. Whilst it's certainly encouraging to see continued World Bank support for PESRP, the responsibility ultimately lies with the provincial Government to maintain it's momentum after external funding dries up.

Quality is still a major issue across the province, with some organisations accusing the Punjabi Government of 'enrolment focussed' policies that concentrate on progress by numbers and not progress by exam results. Millions of children today learn in elbow to elbow conditions on premises that still lack the proper facilities to teach them and the problem will take years to right.

A survey conducted by UNICEF found that only 34 percent of Punjabi teachers could pass the 'primary school competency exams' and of the pupils, only one third had understood the curriculum properly. Dropout rates of up to 50 percent also continue to plague the system. For girls that begin school in some districts of Punjab, only 1 in 4 will make it to class 4 and the drop-out rate to class 10 stands at 87.75 percent.

However, the future still looks promising. Education funding in the Punjab for 2007-8 is up 72 percent on last year at US\$ 378 million and continued support by the World Bank is encouraging. While the country is highly unlikely to achieve the Millennium Goals by 2015, operations like the PESRP have all the hallmarks of a successful education system and the biggest hope now is that the Government can maintain its commitment towards a bright future for the Punjab and for the whole of Pakistan.

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