IS THERE A GLIMMER OF HOPE FOR PHILIPPINE EDUCATION?

By CAROLIZA TULOD-PETEROS

IT’S THE perpetual June refrain: images and stories about the sorry state of Philippine education. As depressing as the rains and the accompanying floods that mark the coming of June are the litanies of woe: overcrowded classrooms; lack of teachers, seats and textbooks; dilapidated schools, or in worst cases, makeshift classrooms under trees, bleachers or other open spaces.

Splashed on television screens or newspapers are faces of underpaid and overworked teachers, dutifully reporting for work and welcoming their students - some 50 per class for the lucky ones, as many as 123 for the hapless others; of organized students holding street protests against tuition fee hikes and budget cuts in public education; of tables and graphs showing increasing drop-out rates of students from elementary to college and the exodus of students from private to public schools due to the high costs of private education.

What else is new in this grim picture?

Of recent concern is the declining performance of students especially in Math and Science tests as revealed in the results of the international Trends in Math and Science Study (TIMSS) administered by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) under the US Department of Education.

Here are some of the test results for eighth graders (equivalent to second year high school in our system):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Filipino Students</th>
<th>International Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Math</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Algebra</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Earth Science</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chemistry</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to Professor Michael Tan, the tests are designed to probe the “PSI” or the Problem Solving and Inquiry Tasks of students, that is, how students are able to integrate information in various math and science fields. “The TIMSS results warn us that we could lose our edge for the overseas labor market, even as we stagnate with domestic development because the next generation won’t be able to tackle simple problems that require literacy in math and science,” Professor Tan said.

Former Education Under-secretary Juan Miguel Luz registered a similar concern when he said that “we as a country cannot allow this to continue if we are to build a foundation for development, growth and equity to deal with
our many problems that range from eradicating poverty to being internationally competitive”.

The challenge is tough

The best and the brightest of our math and science teachers have left the country for the US, with its attractive compensation package including relocation of the whole family. Indeed, who will not jump at this opportunity not only to earn dollars but also to relocate to what is ordinarily believed to be “the land of milk and honey”? A look at the applicants in the recruitment agencies is very telling: even those already holding administrative positions (such as principals and supervisors) are lining up for classroom jobs in the US. The number of teachers leaving their posts for greener pastures abroad has risen five times from 1992-2002. From 2002-2005, a total of 2,705 Filipino teachers were admitted to the US. Fifty more were employed by Japan. And it is projected to continue.

The recent announcement of the US that it needs 200,000 teachers annually certainly bodes ill for our education system.

Given the dismal budget in education, with only P102.63 billion or 11.30 percent allocation from last year’s national budget, is there hope that teachers will get their much deserved pay increase (the last one was in 2000 yet), if only to motivate them to keep their posts and help educate our growing up population?

Another factor is the lack of competencies of recently graduated teachers. In the 2003 Licensure Exams for Teachers, only 26% of the 100,000 examinees for both elementary and secondary education passed. If would-be teachers are flunking the tests, it is no wonder that the students are also not making the grade in international-standard exams. The role of teachers is the “single most influential factor” behind a student’s performance, a world bank study emphasized.

But what can one expect of the quality of instruction when teachers tasked to handle a science class for example, are not science majors?

Teachers tend to spend more time doing unnecessary exams and tasks, losing precious hours which could have been spent on in-depth lectures or problem-solving exercises according to a study by the Department of Education. This is not surprising because data from DepEd shows that only 42 percent of those teaching General Science are science majors; 44 percent in Biology, 34 percent in Chemistry and 27 percent in Physics.

Is there a glimmer of hope?

Government response

On the issue of classroom shortage, Senate and Congress reached a consensus to increase DepEd’s budget for 2006-2007 by P2 billion for school buildings. Lack of classrooms was highlighted when President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo scolded Acting DepEd Secretary Fe Hidalgo for admitting a backlog of 6,832 classrooms on a 45:1 pupil - classroom ratio. However, to address the real classroom shortage of 74,115, an estimated P29 billion would be needed, assuming each classroom would cost P400,000.

Another strategy adopted by government to address classroom shortage is “double shifting,” where a classroom is used twice a day. In some overly-populated schools, classrooms are used in three shifts. Through this, the classroom-to-student ratio became twice the ideal number of students per class. This was adopted as an “interim strategy” under Secretary Edilberto de Jesus. While this strategy effectively hides the appalling classroom shortage figures, it comes at the price of decreased instruction hours and inconvenient teaching and learning hours (imagine taking an algebra quiz at 5 in the morning, or a physical education class at 12 noon). Expanding the Government Assistance to Students and Teachers in Private Education (GASTPE) is another remedy. The fund, managed by the Fund for Assistance to Private Education (FAPE), is an annual subsidy to private high schools. It enables students from lower income families...
with an annual income of less than P72,000 to enroll in private schools. DepEd thinks this is less costly compared to building classrooms and hiring more teachers. Only P200,000 is spent for a class of 50 under GASTPE while P25,000 is needed to build a new classroom for 50 students, hire new teachers, and procure furniture and books. But there is a limit to the number of students that the private schools can accommodate. Eventually, the problem of lack of public classrooms would have to be faced, and solved.

To prevent state universities and colleges from raising tuition, President Arroyo ordered the Budget Department to release P285 million as a “tuition support fund”.

Initiatives from the private sector and citizens

In Dumingag, Zamboanga del Sur, the Parents and Teachers Association (PTA) of its National High School contributed money to pay for salaries of teachers as well as classroom renovation. They will also raise funds to pay for the construction of nipa huts as temporary classrooms while the DepEd makes good its promise to build two more classrooms this year. At a glance, such community initiative may seem laudable. It is a testament to the determination of parents who want to see their children get an education. However, such initiatives are also glaring manifestations of the government’s inability to provide education for its young population, not to mention the fact that it increases the burden on low-income parents.

The Federation of Filipino Chinese Chambers of Commerce and Industry, Inc. (PCCCI), the biggest and longest-running private donor of classrooms (it claims to have donated a total of 3,200 two-room schoolhouses since 1960), promised to make sure that Divisoria sells cheapest notebooks at P8.50 each.

Ayala Foundation, with its “Gilas” (acronym for Gearing

...The number of teachers leaving their posts for greener pastures abroad has risen five times from 1992-2002.

Lucio Tan that produced instructional materials for teachers. The Worldwide People Power Foundation has also a masterpiece program called “Mentoring the Mentors”, with modules to upgrade the skills of classroom teachers as well as boost their morale.

There are other initiatives on the ground like those addressing the educational needs of indigenous peoples and other sectors initiated by different non-government organizations. But citizen’s initiatives and private sector support strewn here and there can only shore up a collapsing education sector in the short-term.

Ultimately, the responsibility lies in government. Education is a right, and the government has the obligation to fulfill that right. The people must continue to creatively and consistently undertake proactive actions to put government on its heels to address this alarming state of the education, if we want to move forward and entrust the fate of our nation to ably-educated young people.

SOURCES:


Contreras, Volt. Teachers may be RP education’s weak link. Philippine Daily Inquirer, June 5, 2006; p. A22.


