Education: Still a non-priority

IN HER previous pronouncements, President Gloria Arroyo said that quality and accessible education to all Filipino children and youth of school age "is top priority" of her administration. But the situation of the country's education system shows otherwise. The first two quarters of 2005 witnessed the persistence of problems surrounding the educational system that leads to its continuing deterioration. For one, education has been put at the margins of government budget allocation priorities.

Shrinking budget

Our Constitution mandates that education should get the largest share of the national budget but the government has failed to do so. This has resulted in the declining quality of classroom instructions and the worsening shortages in educational materials, facilities, and infrastructures. There is no wonder why public school students perform poorly in various achievement tests.

Among government basic services, education enjoys the biggest budget allocation of around P102.62 billion or 11.30 percent of the 2005 annual national budget. But the amount is still a far cry from the P301.7 billion that the government automatically allots for debt payment services, which is significantly higher than the combined budgets for health and education.

Worse, the measly education budget continues to shrink. The Department of Education's (DepEd) approved budget declined from P107.50 billion in school year 2004-2005 to P102.62 billion for 2005-2006, reflecting a 2.32 percent decrease. Although such decline paints a disturbing reality, it does not really come as a surprise since the budget for education for the last 10 years has not significantly increased to match the ever increasing student population and much needed reforms in the country's educational system.

On a per capita basis, the government spends an estimated $100-138 per student/pupil each year. Although DepEd claims a higher figure of $150 per

student/pupil each year, this does not change the fact that the Philippines is among the lowest spenders in education. In fact, the $150 per capita allotment is one of the smallest in Southeast Asia. For instance, Thailand spends $950 per child per year and Singapore $1,582.

Former DepEd Secretary Florencio Abad admitted that with the meager budget for education, with almost zero increase every year, the agency could hardly cope with the increasing student population and the rising prices of textbooks, desks, chairs, and additional classroom and teachers. According to him, the department needs at least an eight percent (8%) increase in its annual budget to be able to effect reforms in the educational system.

The department's financial deficit has continually been considered the major culprit behind the perennial shortages in the number of teachers, textbooks and classrooms, which hardly match up with the estimated 2.5 to 3 percent increase in the student population every year.

Exodus from Private to Public Schools

DepEd figures show that the number of public elementary students this school year rose to 12.23 million from 12.04 million last year while the number of high school enrollees increased from 5.04 million to 5.31 million, resulting in a total of 17.54 million public school enrollees for school year 2005-2006.

The continuing increase in the annual enrollment in public elementary and high schools is largely due to the exodus of students from private schools because of tuition fee increases. The same is true with state universities and colleges. The Commission on Higher education has reported that about 10 percent of students in private colleges and universities have transferred to cheaper state institutions due to the continuing tuition increases and other miscellaneous expenses this school year.

For this school year, the CHED reported that 206 or 17 percent of the 1,342 private education institutions in the country have filed requests to raise their tuition by an average of 15 percent. This shows that quality education in the Philippines is increasingly going beyond what average-income families could afford.

Meanwhile, transferees to public schools may have escaped the costly private education by allowing themselves to be trapped in miserable learning environment. In public schools, they have to adapt to overcrowded classrooms, cope with shortages in learning materials, learning facilities, and infrastructures.

Accumulated Shortages

Today, public schools have an accumulated shortage of 34.7 million textbooks, 3.48 million chairs, 57,930 classrooms, and 49,699 teachers. With these huge shortages, one could only wonder how learning takes place in an unfavorable learning environment that public school students are subjected to.

Over the years, these unfavorable conditions have eroded the quality of education public school students get. As a result, students around the country have consistently showed low performance rates in academic subjects in various national performance tests.

For instance, an overwhelming 97.9 percent of graduating students who took the National Achievement Test (NAT) in 2004 failed, with 90 percent of them scoring less than 50 %. The results of the High School Readiness Test (HSRT) reveals a similar distressing picture: 92 percent of the examinees failed of which 50 percent scored below 30%, while only 7.9 percent of the students scored 50% and above, and 0.6 percent got a score of 75%.

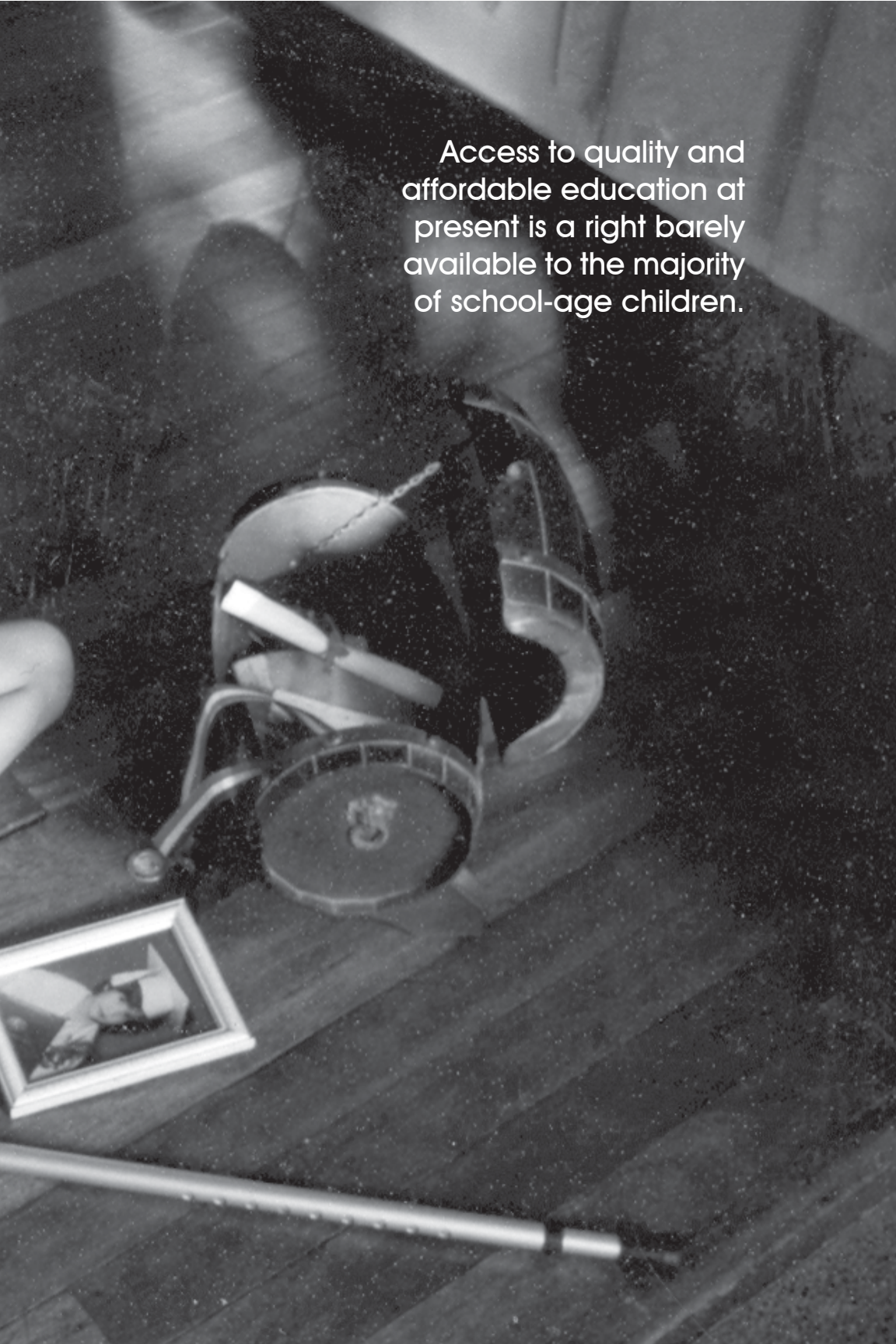
Low-quality instructions

These results clearly point to the deteriorating quality of Philippine education which could be attributed to the huge shortages in school materials and facilities and to the low quality of classroom instructions in the country's education system.

Although the Philippines produces enough education graduates capable of filling up the shortage of teachers in the public schools, it is not certain whether these graduates are well-trained and are qualified to be in the teaching profession. **The 2003 Licensure Examinations for Teachers (LET) only registered a 26 percent passing rate or, conservatively, 26,000 of the 100,000 examinees – for both elementary and secondary education.**

Even the competencies of those who have passed and have since been taken in to teach have been proven wanting. In the Self-Assessment Test for English (SATE) administered by the DepEd in May 2003, only 19 percent of the country's 53,000 public school teachers scored 75 percent or higher. This figure points to a low level of competency among public educators in the use of English.

This incompetence of public school teachers points to the inept educational system that is supposed to produce competent teachers for the country. Even former DepEd Secretary Florencio Abad had raised concern over the stagnant and poor systemwide outcomes. He stated that "our educational system's failures are coming back to haunt us because many of our underachieving graduates come back as underqualified teachers seeking to teach in our schools… all these incompetent Filipinos were students or graduates of our public schools."


Access to quality and
affordable education at
present is a right barely
available to the majority
of school-age children.

Low teachers' wages

But what is more disappointing is that even those who passed the LET and actually doing their work well as teachers are not compensated equal to the tasks and responsibilities they have to fulfill. Overloaded yet less paid, teachers of public schools are victims of unashamed government neglect that underpins the continuing deterioration of Philippine education.

The salary of government employees, including teachers, has remained stagnant since 2001. The last salary increases were in 2000, a 10 percent increase amounting to P440 and five percent increase of P242 in 2001. At present, public school teachers get P 9,939 as starting monthly salary. The amount is slightly higher than the minimum wage in Metro Manila but way below the average family living wage pegged at P18, 542.70 per month for a family of six. This amount of compensation obviously does not correspond to the average 1,176 working hours teachers are required every year and the average of 50 students per class they have to handle.

Given the existing measly salary of teachers and the government's inability to accord legitimate and appropriate compensation and other benefits, it is not surprising that many public school teachers are abandoning their profession in favor of other jobs available, here or abroad.

Perfect Formula for a Sinking Education System

Education is considered a fundamental and indispensable human right in the exercise of all other human rights and in improving the people's quality of life. As an empowerment right, education has been a vital instrument in the economic, social, and political development of peoples and nations. The right to education is embodied in various international human rights instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Right (ICESCR), and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) which explicitly require state parties, like the Philippines, to provide free and compulsory quality basic education for all.

The Philippine Constitution and other domestic laws acknowledge the State's obligations to protect and promote the right of all citizens to quality education at all levels and to take appropriate steps to make education accessible to all (Article XIV, section 1 of 1987 Philippine Constitution). In addition, the Philippine Constitution provides that education shall be assigned highest budgetary priority [Article XIV, section 5(5)]. Despite all the commitments made by the government under international human rights treaties and local legal instruments in providing quality and accessible education for all, the current administration has not only failed to pursue the progressive realization of such right but deliberately relegated it to the sideline.

The government's continued misappropriation of the national budget favoring debt servicing has compromised needed education budget that caused the accumulated shortages in classrooms, teachers, textbooks, chairs and desks, consistent poor school performance of students, and low quality of teaching in the public school system. By doing so, the government is, in effect, violating one of its human rights obligations to provide accessible and quality education to its citizen, consequently jeopardizing the development potential of its people and of the nation as well.

Quickstats on Education

ENROLMENT

SCHOOL YEAR	ELEMENTARY	HIGH SCHOOL
2003-2004	12.06 M	4.83 M
2004-2005	12.08 M	5.04 M
2005-2006	12.23 M	5.31 M

NATIONAL BUDGET FOR EDUCATION

	Nominal Value	Real Value
2003-2004	P 105.92 B	P 56.14 B
2004-2005	P 107.50 B	P 56.98 B
2005-2006	P 102.62 B	P 54.39 B

DEPED'S BUDGET CUT

2003-2004	13.24 percent
2004-2005	13.62 percent
2005-2006	11.30 percent

ACCUMULATED SHORTAGES

Classrooms	57,930
Seats, Chairs	3.43 M
Textbooks	34.7 M
Teachers	49,699
Barangays with no elementary schools	445
Towns with no high school	6

TEACHERS' BURDEN

Public school teacher I salary	P 9,939
Living Wage	P 17, 820
Last Salary hike	2001
No. of hours put in a year	1,176
Interest rates on loans by teachers	From 36% to 108%

Source: Manila Standard citing Office of Rep. Teddy Casiño, member, subcommittee on teacher's and student's welfare

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