

Philippine government presides over schools in crisis

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The 2012-13 school year opened in the Philippines this month and an estimated 21 million youth trooped into the country's elementary and secondary schools. On display were the worsening problems of an education system grossly underfunded, dominated by the profit demands of private corporations, and aimed at producing skilled cheap labor for both the local and international labor markets.

The Batasan Hills National High School is just a few kilometers from the Philippine House of Representatives in Quezon City. According to the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, it is attempting to squeeze over 13,450 students into just 116 classrooms this year. It will do so by compelling 3,000 students to be home-schooled. These students from working class homes with both parents undoubtedly at work are expected to learn their lessons using modules based on the regular curriculum while meeting their teachers only on Saturdays.

The remaining students will be crammed into classrooms at a ratio of 90 students per room, more than twice the UNESCO recommendation.

All in all in Quezon City, the biggest public school district in the country, an estimated 10,000 students are scheduled for compulsory homeschooling as the district can no longer accommodate them in regular classes. Many of those who have a place in a classroom are now required to supply their own seats, under the government's "Bring your own chair" policy.

Due to the lack of school facilities and teachers, public schools in the cities of Cebu and Mandaue are implementing night shifts for secondary level students. Last year, 18,574 high school students attended classes at night. In Mandaue city, according to a *Sun Star* report, 8 percent of elementary and 10-12 percent of secondary schools will conduct classes in double shifts.

The education department has stated that, for this year, it was short of 47,584 teachers, 19,579 classrooms and 80,937 sanitation facilities. A spokesman for the Teachers' Dignity Coalition, placed the numbers even higher, saying that the country actually lacks 132,564 teachers, 48,802 classrooms and 106,604 toilets.

The administration of President Benigno Aquino boasts that it has boosted spending on elementary and secondary education since it came to power in 2010. This year, the education budget increased to over 214 billion pesos (\$US5 billion), up by 11.4 percent from last year.

Of these funds, however, only 17.4 billion pesos have been allocated for the construction or repair of basic facilities. Of this amount 5 billion pesos or 29 percent is earmarked to pay off the year's amortizations to private businesses for the construction of an estimated 30,000 classrooms under Aquino's Private-Public Partnership program. The remaining 12 billion pesos is to be divided up for the repair or rehabilitation of existing facilities across the country.

By way of contrast, the interest payment on the government's external debt, which is automatically appropriated, is estimated to be over 180 billion pesos. This sum alone is enough to fund four times over the education department's estimated requirements for classrooms, teachers, and sanitation facilities.

This year, the Aquino administration is implementing its so-called K-12 program, extending primary and secondary education by two years. Kindergarten attendance will now be mandatory, and the first year of high school will be re-designated grade 7. In the school year 2016-2017, an 11th grade will be added and in the following year a grade 12.

The government is selling its K-12 program as a plan to improve the quality of education. According to a 2011 Senate Economic Planning Office (SEPO) report, the

National Achievements Testing conducted yearly showed the results of secondary students for mathematics, science and English deteriorating over the four years to 2010. In addition, in international tests conducted by the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) in 2003, the Philippines ranked 23rd out of the 25 participating countries.

The real aim of the K-12 program, however, is to train cheap labor for business process outsourcing, electronics and semi-conductors, agriculture, infrastructure and tourism. As outlined in the SEPO study, the adjusted curriculum will now include foreign languages, technical-vocational education, agriculture, fisheries, arts and trades. In Grade 11 and 12, work and business ethics are to be taught. At the end of the basic elementary education, “students are already prepared for employment, entrepreneurship, or middle level skills development and can thus lead successful lives even if they do not pursue higher studies.”

The K-12 program is being implemented in response to the growing disconnect between the labor and skills demanded by local and international markets and those developed under the current education system. The Department of Labor and Employment conducted a nationwide series of job fairs last month in which a total of 283,865 overseas jobs and 74,352 local jobs were available. However, only 5,101 job applicants were hired on the spot.

The Philippines is heavily reliant on the export of cheap, skilled labor. In 2011, it sent out over 2 million contract workers overseas. Over 8 million Filipinos are either immigrants or contract workers in other countries. Last year, these workers sent over \$US20.1 billion back to the Philippines. This year, remittances are expected to grow by as much as 6 percent.

The re-engineering of basic education dovetails with the general assault on tertiary education. Aquino is gutting subsidies to state colleges and universities while refusing to regulate the tuition and matriculation fees of private tertiary institutions.

This year, subsidies in real terms for state universities and colleges have been reduced by 1 percent, following an 8 percent reduction last year. Capital outlays for public tertiary institutions remains at zero for a second year even as enrollment grows at a faster rate than for private institutions. In 2010, the public enrollment rate was up 10.2 percent compared to 2.7 percent for the private system.

Last year, Budget Department secretary Florencio Abad warned that state universities and colleges had to meet definite criteria—including serving private businesses, means-testing enrollees, and allowing in only the “deserving poor”—for future financial support and to be designated “regional universities”. He emphasized that “tertiary education was really a privilege.”

In the private sector, Aquino, for the second successive year, has refused to regulate or halt the unabated increases of tuition and matriculation fees. The fees for the 256 leading private universities and colleges will increase by between 7 to 15 percent this June. Annual tuition alone, excluding fees charged for the use of libraries, laboratories and other school facilities, will cost an estimated \$US403.2. In Metro Manila, tuition for tertiary institutions will average US\$818.28 dollars a school year.

For the country’s poor, it is impossible to provide a decent education for their children. The National Statistics Office reported that in 2009 the bottom 30 percent of Filipino families earned just \$US1,467.80 a year, spending nearly 60 percent of their income just on food and barely 2 percent on education. The number of families living under the official poverty line of \$US1,993.96 was estimated at 3.6 million families or, using an average of 5 family members, some 18 million people.

Far from helping working people, Aquino’s “reforms” will put education even further out of reach for millions of children, who will be forced to learn in schools that lack enough teachers, classrooms or even toilet blocks.



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