

Classes begin in Philippines as education crisis worsens

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Millions of elementary and high school students in the Philippines began classes in the first week of June with the public education system in shambles. There were widespread reports of classroom overcrowding, teacher shortages and a severe lack of textbooks and teaching materials.

The start of classes ushered in the second year of President Benigno S. Aquino Jr.'s much-touted 'K to 12 Law' (Republic Act 10533), which has standardized one year of kindergarten across the country and added two years of senior high school, which previously ended at grade 10. College general education courses are being offloaded onto the inbound senior grades of high school. The new curriculum is being rolled out in stages, with full implementation expected by 2016.

Years of underfunding by successive administrations have left the public school system incapable of providing children with a basic education. Aquino, like his predecessors, continues to carry out a socially destructive austerity agenda to meet the demands of international finance capital to cut budget deficits and public debt.

Although the Aquino administration has played up its boosting of education spending to 232 billion pesos (\$US5.4 billion), an increase of 44 percent from 2010, this figure constitutes a mere 2.2 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) and falls far short of the UN recommendation of 6 percent. By contrast, the government spent P174 billion in just the first two months of this year to service its massive public debt, listed at a debt-to-GDP ratio of 51.4 percent.

Aquino has promoted K to 12 as a "positive reform" to address the deep structural problems of the public education system. Its real aim, however, is to train millions of working-class youth as low-wage skilled and semi-skilled labourers for local and international

markets.

The law was signed by Aquino just three weeks before the start of classes, after being passed in both houses of Congress with great enthusiasm. That it was met with near-universal acclaim from all the major political blocs speaks to the reactionary nature of the entire political establishment, which represents the interests of the business elite and landlord class. They view the country's young people, who make up one quarter of the population, as an untapped source of profit.

The glaring inadequacy of existing school infrastructure was on display when public schools across the country opened with a shortage of almost 33,000 classrooms. The Department of Education (DepEd) downplayed this figure and insisted that the construction of classrooms was underway. In the meantime, it instructed teachers to use school lobbies, hallways and covered outdoor courts as makeshift classrooms.

More than six million young people do not attend school at all. There is on average only one high school for every five elementary schools. In remote areas, the distance to the nearest high school makes regular attendance a virtual impossibility. Around 36 percent of children drop out after elementary school, and only 44 percent graduate from high school.

Classroom overcrowding is a chronic problem. On average, there are 40 students per classroom in elementary school and 51 in high school. The National Capital Region (NCR), which includes the capital Manila, has an average of 75 students per classroom.

DepEd Assistant Secretary for Planning Jesus Mateo blamed students and their families for overcrowding, claiming that late applicants place undue strain on schools. Given the lack of classrooms and teachers, this

is an outright falsification.

It is well-documented that schools nationwide force applicants into home study programs to artificially decongest classrooms. This practice, involving 10,000 students across the densely-populated Quezon City in the NCR, and thousands more across the country, unquestionably operates with the tacit approval of the DepEd.

The public school system faces a deficit of 70,000 teachers, which the DepEd is scrambling to fill by conscripting over 35,000 “volunteer” teachers, who are given inadequate training and paid only P3,000 (\$71) to P8,000 (\$190) per month. The DepEd is also hiring 49,500 teachers through local governments, to be paid lower wages. To staff its Alternate Learning System, which educates out-of-school youth, adults and those in remote areas, it is hiring 4,800 “mobile” teachers.

Teachers were given a five-day crash course to prepare for the new curriculum, and many reported receiving teaching manuals that were authored in a haphazard fashion and littered with mistakes.

Once in the classroom, teachers must contend with scant resources. During the last school year, students nationwide lacked 60 million textbooks. The DepEd recently admitted that schools would only receive their textbooks next month. A shortage of chairs, to the tune of 2.5 million, is another widespread problem, and over 5,500 schools operate without an available water supply.

The DepEd vowed to crack down on teachers who ask for financial assistance from parents, framing it as a protective measure from unscrupulous educators. This deceitful maneuver masks the reality—teachers resort to this degrading practice because of a lack of funding from the DepEd itself.

Promises made by the DepEd to repair the deep cracks in the education system hold no merit. The same pronouncements are made year after year. Last year, Aquino personally pledged to remedy all problems by the end of 2012.

The administration’s education platform is bent on gross profiteering. Aquino has used public-private partnerships to reward his political allies with lucrative school construction contracts. The administration has cynically utilized the lack of classrooms as a pretext to effectively grant subsidies to private schools, by redirecting one million students to these institutions via

a voucher program. In spite of high unemployment and stagnating wages, the administration approved tuition hikes in 903 private elementary and high schools, and 354 private colleges and universities.

The K to 12 scheme has been designed to serve the labour requirements of global capital. When he ratified the K to 12 Law in May, Aquino said: “Philippine youth can choose specialized tracks in academics, technical education, and sports and arts.” In effect, those who cannot afford a college education are being streamed into technical-vocational courses.

A list of curricula developed by the Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA) is geared toward low-wage occupations: bread and pastry production, care-giving, household services, agricrop production, animal production and consumer electronics servicing, among others.

The majority of those pushed into technical-vocational courses will be working-class youth. Amid massive unemployment and underemployment, they will graduate with only two options—working abroad as poorly-paid labourers, or enlisting domestically in one of the country’s sweatshop industries.



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