

Dilapidated, overcrowded public schools in the Philippines

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Public schools across the Philippines began a new school year this month. An estimated 21 million children are enrolled in a public school system that, after decades of deliberate starving of funds by successive governments, is nothing less than atrocious.

Newspapers reported that in Metro Manila 82 percent of the 764 public schools in the metropolis were congested, and were conducting classes in two shifts. The first shift starts as early as 6 a.m. and the second ends as late as six in the evening. There were reported to be as many as 80 students in each classroom. School authorities resorted to cutting classes in half and cramming the excess students into “science labs, libraries, corridors and even the principal’s office.”

In Tacloban city, devastated last November by Typhoon Haiyan, a local newspaper reported that in one school, hundreds of children endured the searing heat, reaching 30 degrees Celsius, in three temporary classrooms with walls of corrugated iron sheets.

“It is pitiful to see them packed like sardines,” the *Sun Daily* quoted Gina Villamor, who was waiting for her two children, aged 6 and 10.

Typhoon Haiyan damaged 3,100 schools, with 20,000 classrooms needing to be either rebuilt or repaired. An estimated 1.4 million children are affected. Seven months after the typhoon, however, only 35 percent of classrooms, that were totally damaged, and 53 percent of those that were partially damaged, have been rebuilt. Nearly half a million children are holding classes in over 4,000 so-called “learning spaces”—tents or sheds made of corrugated metal and wood.

In Davao city, 16,000 students are expected to attend two public elementary schools and one secondary school. The schools are conducting classes in shifts. Local education officials admitted a shortage of over 1,000 classrooms for elementary schools and another

500 for secondary school.

According to the IBON research foundation, in 2011 the Philippine public school system was short 152,569 classrooms, 150,000 water and sanitation facilities, and 13.23 million school chairs. It also lacked 95 million books. IBON reported a shortage of approximately 100,000 teachers.

These terrible conditions have taken a massive toll on the education of children. Only 68 percent of sixth grade students nationwide achieved a passing score in Mathematics and Science, according to the government National Education Research and Testing Center. The results for secondary students were even more dismal. Barely 50 percent passed satisfactorily in the same subjects.

Wracked by endemic poverty and a decrepit education system, children drop out of school at an alarming rate. More than 6 percent of students leave before reaching Grade Six, and nearly eight percent left school before they reached their fourth year of secondary education.

According to government statistics, 5.59 million children between the ages of 5 and 17 were working in 2011, with 2.9 million of these employed in hazardous working conditions.

Unsurprisingly, the conditions for public school teachers are equally severe. The basic monthly salary for a public school teacher is 18,549 pesos (\$US424) before taxes. This amount is barely twice the abysmal official poverty line for a family of five.

Last month, President Benigno Aquino rejected demands from teachers for a monthly salary increase of just 6,000 pesos despite the fact that the last pay increase was in 2009. Aquino insisted that the Philippine government had no money.

That same month, the Aquino administration

announced the allocation of 500 million pesos to rehabilitate Oyster Bay naval base on the island of Palawan in preparation for its occupation by US military forces as part of the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) basing deal. EDCA has effectively transformed the Philippines into a forward base for US military forces.

The lack of books and other school materials compels teachers to shell out money from their meager income to cover the cost of photocopying books for students, to purchase additional visual materials and even to buy chalk.

The average teacher to student ratio is one teacher for every 36 elementary students and one to every 35 secondary students. The *Manila Bulletin*, citing a United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) report, stated that classes in the Philippines had 43.9 students on average. This is nearly three times what is regarded as the ideal class size.

The political establishment in the Philippines pays lip service to the claim that education is vital for the development of the country. The Philippine constitution mandates that the budget for education be the largest of all government allocations. Public elementary and secondary education is free. President Aquino has repeatedly boasted that the 336 billion peso budget allotment for education in 2014 is the largest in Philippine history.

The reality of public education in the Philippines is a nightmare for the working class and oppressed masses.

The state serves the ruling elite. In the 2014 national government budget of 2.3 trillion pesos, debt servicing—and not education—is the largest allocation. More than 793 billion pesos, or 35 percent of the budget, is being channeled directly into the coffers of international finance capital. The portion of the budget allotted for public education amounts to less than 15 percent.

The 2014 budget for education, which Aquino presents as unprecedented generosity from the state, amounts to an annual allocation of just 16,000 pesos for every student in the public school system. This is a daily allocation of 61 pesos. To put matters in perspective, a small cup of coffee at a local Starbucks costs 95 pesos.



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