

# Education for all

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Philippine Daily Inquirer  
First Posted 00:12:00 06/15/2008

ANNUALLY, WHEN SCHOOLS OPEN, THE Department of Education gets a bashing. Though this year's opening was relatively smooth, some regions still reported shortages of classrooms, books, desks, teachers, and pupils who were unable to enroll. The militant Alliance of Concerned Teachers (ACT) says that 41,905 new classrooms are needed to attain a 1:45 classroom to student ratio.

Problems of education. The Commission on Audit deplored that "information and multi-media equipment packages costing at least P667.95 million were neither utilized nor maximized for classroom instructions" in various public schools last year. They were "either defective or distributed to schools which were not strictly selected in accordance with the approved criteria..." COA also lamented ineptness in funds allocation. Thus, "acute classroom shortages" in 2,929 schools were not addressed. However, construction projects worth P597.796 million were implemented in 1,329 schools that did not need them.

In the front pages again is the festering criticism of Antonio Calipjo Go about many "error-filled" textbooks. To resolve the malady, Education Secretary Jesli A. Lapus issued an order last May 19 banning the use of a series of textbooks infested with "conceptual errors, factual errors, misleading or wrong illustrations, and insufficient discussions."

Not to be overlooked is the perennial clamor to change the medium of instruction from English to Filipino, ignoring the current language advantage of our people, especially those employed in overseas jobs and in call centers, as well as those aspiring for higher education abroad.

Then, there is the overarching critique that the Philippines is the only country on this planet that still maintains a 10-year basic public education program. All the rest of the world use the 12-year standard—seven in elementary and five in high school. To address this problem, many elite private schools have made Grade 7 compulsory. Considering, however, that 87 percent (or 18.81 million) of the 21.6 million elementary and high schoolers are enrolled in public schools, this private effort is not enough.

Lack of resources. Secretary Lapus agrees that the country should conform to the global 12-year standard but pleads lack of resources to do so. He rues that the Philippines allots only P6,354 per student compared to the equivalent of P47,700 in Thailand, P56,846 in Malaysia, P123,200 in the United States and P293,440 in Japan. While Unesco estimates that 6 percent of the GDP should be set aside for education and while the World Bank notes that developing countries spend 20 percent of their budgets for the same purpose, he deplores that the Philippines allocates a meager 2.53 percent of GDP and only 12 percent of its national outlay to education.

Lapus is unfazed by criticisms. Citing Sec. 1 of Art. XIV of the Constitution requiring the State to “promote the right of all citizens to quality education at all levels,” he confidently adopts Unesco’s “Education For All” as his mandate. Accordingly, he envisions making all Filipinos “functionally literate ... able to read, write, compute and apply these skills in their daily lives.” Anyway, after completing basic education, most graduates go direct to the workplace or develop vocational skills. Only 14 percent get to college.

DepEd programs. To achieve his vision, Lapus pursues two basic programs. First, he aims to enroll and to keep enrolled as many kids as possible. He hopes to trim the 20 percent dropout rate by making 5-year-olds take up kindergarten. “Worldwide studies point to preschool education as the best foundation to make children and their parents embrace schooling,” he says.

Presently, however, our Grade 1 readiness rate is only 35 percent. The “unready” 65 percent need “an interesting and fun-filled early childhood education” to prevent them from dropping out, and to finish Grade 6. To achieve his goal of literacy for all, he prefers in the meantime to devote DepEd’s limited resources to preschool education rather than to launch Grade 7. His priority is to arrest the dropout rate.

His second major program is “alternative learning system” (ALS) for the functional literacy of out-of-school youth and adults who have never enrolled. These “dropouts and stay-outs” were estimated in 2004 at 16 million or 20 percent of the entire population. ALS is flexible, “an anytime, anywhere learning.” Implementing it are 1,300 mobile teachers and private service providers contracted by the DepEd.

Versatile visionary. When Lapus was appointed, the education community was aghast, because he was not a book-bearing educator. The same “who he?” greeted him when he became president of the Land Bank of the Philippines 15 years ago, because he was not known as a banker. In the same manner that he turned around the Land Bank and many private firms, he is now—two years after taking office—acclaimed for the Pulse Asia rating of DepEd as the most credible government office, and for getting World Bank kudos for his innovations. Surely, he can easily solve the COA and ACT concerns.

With a versatile banking, management, legislative, education, diplomatic, engineering and accounting visionary at its helm, the DepEd—the biggest employer (550,000 workforce) with the largest direct clientele (over 21 million) in the country—can look forward to blessings, no longer to annual bashings. That done, Lapus can now focus on the 12-year global standard and the pupils’ preparation for college.