

FEATURE STORY

Target: Fully Harnessing the Special Education Fund

Marikina City often hugs the limelight as the origin of quality footwear. In recent years, Marikina takes pride as the exemplar of a well-managed local government unit, and a fast growing and progressive community.

Lately, though, the massive flooding brought about by typhoon Ondoy made a wasteland of a vast portion of the city. Many of its schools were in various state of decrepit while others were used as evacuation centers. The schools and the school children demand the city officials' attention.

Mayor Marides Fernando and the city council remained on top of the situation, though. While resources are disposed-off to meet the needs of the flood victims, maintaining the operations of the schools in the locality requires equal attention.

As the city's chief executive, Mayor Fernando is also the chairman of the Local School Board (LSB). She has been exerting all efforts to put to optimum use Marikina's Special Education Fund (SEF). They have allocated some of the SEF funds to rehabilitate the schools damaged by the floods.

But even before Ondoy struck, the Marikina City's LSB, a total of P54 million have been allocated for the construction of additional school building at St. Mary's Elementary School, SSS Village Elementary School and the Sto. Nino National High School. "This will help a lot in decongesting our public schools" said Schools Superintendent Dr. Eduardo Lopez. "Classroom instruction is more effective when there are lesser students in a classroom," he added.

The Board has also allocated funds from the SEF for the creation of 180 positions for secondary school teachers. This will augment the existing teaching force and lighten the burden of overloaded teachers. "Pag maliit ang klaseng hawak ng teacher, nagiging mas effective siya," Lopez said.

Marikina also spends part of the SEF to purchase instructional materials and equipment for use in the public schools. "We make teaching more interesting and effective through the use of computers by the students and the teachers," Lopez shared.

"Through the efficient use of the city's SEF, local leaders get meaningfully involved in the education of our young," Mayor Fernando said.

In big cities like Makati and Quezon City, the fund can be as high as one billion pesos a year. This can have immense impact in addressing the school needs at the local level.

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“But even with the lesser amount allocated to the fund in the small provinces and municipalities, this can still be effectively used to address concerns in education like shortage in classrooms, chairs or teachers, “ Education Secretary Jesli Lapus explained.

The SEF was created through Republic Act No 5447 in 1969 and amended by RA 7160 or otherwise known as the Local Government Code of 1991. The Act also created the LSB.

In the province, the LSB is co-chaired by the Governor and the Schools Division Superintendent. At the city or municipal level, it is co-chaired by the Mayor and the city Superintendent of Schools or the District Supervisor.

Members include the chairman of the Education Committee of the Provincial or Municipal Board, the City or Municipal Treasurer, representatives of the youth federation and organizations of parent-teachers, among others.

The LSB’s main function is to determine the allocation of its budget and to authorize the local treasurer to disburse funds from the SEF.

According to the provisions of the Local Government Code, the SEF shall be used for the construction, repair and maintenance of school buildings and other public elementary and high school facilities. It shall also be used for the establishment and maintenance of extension classes where necessary, including non-formal, remedial and summer classes and the payment of salaries and other authorized allowances of public school teachers.

If the national government’s appropriation for education is limited only to what is provided for in the national budget, there is little that can hope for to address many education concerns.

“The good thing is there is this special fund that can be tapped in addition to the assistance of those who have the resources in the community,” Lapus noted.

The education chief added that “it is necessary that people in the community know that there is such a fund so that the education program of the government need not suffer a snag.”

At the provincial, city or municipal levels of government there is an SEF administered by the LSB. As shown in the Marikina experience, this fund can be used to construct new school buildings or fund the operation and maintenance of schools in the locality, among others.

DepEd Assistant Secretary for Special Projects Jonathan Malaya said “Our dream is that the SEF will be more effectively used through proper planning using statistics as basis in allocating the fund.”

In some cases the fund is not properly used based on its original intent. There are instances when the SEF is used to refurbish the office of the school official or the purchase of cellular phones, among others.

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When the governor, city or municipal mayor have sufficient grasp of the needs of their schools, they always have a sympathetic ear to the pleadings of the school officials.

Although the SEF is not a fund source that is unlimited, there can be other ways to supplement it. “When the fund is depleted, the LSB can engage the business community. The school officials can solicit the assistance of the local businessmen to share their resources through the Adopt-a-School program”, Malaya said. There is always a means where investing in the future through education can become a reality.

To be more responsive to the needs of local school, DepEd believes that there is a need to reconstitute the composition of the Local School Board. Asec Malaya suggests that the composition of the LSB include other education stakeholders in the community such as the business sector as they can contribute to the realization of development programs.

In the case of Naga City, the LSB structure has been changed to ensure good governance where there is transparency, accountability, participation and predictability. The LSB membership has been expanded to include representatives from the academed, business, religious, alumni associations and non-government organizations.

As a result, a system has been institutionalized and its operations are transparent. Education officials are now more accountable to the public. The school board uses local resources efficiently and there is collaboration among the various stakeholders. They can now address major problems of the public school system.

“Since the fund is administered by the LSB, it is of prime importance that the Governor or Mayor and the Schools Superintendent communicate regularly. Dapat well-informed ang LGU sa education situationer sa lugar niya para magamit ang pondo sa dapat puntahan nito” emphasized Malaya.

Studies show that there are instances when the fund is allocated for expenditures that do not help improve the delivery of education services in the locality. “If many of the provinces, cities and municipalities do this, a lot of,” fund is practically being misused. And we know who suffers in the end, Malaya noted.

Although it is sourced from the tax collection of the province, city or municipality, there is no existing government body that looks into the SEF. “Kaya nga dapat lalong bantayan ng taong-bayan ang SEF,” he stressed.

The SEF can renew the face of education at the local level depending on how well it is put to optimum and responsible use.

If all the local government units practice proper planning and use of the SEF, the goal of making quality education accessible to all becomes not anymore a remote possibility.

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