

A Semester of Scandals in Education



BY RHODA VIAJAR

ON THE second half of 2007, a multi-billion peso project of the Department of Education was suspended after it came under fire amidst investigations of the controversial National Broadband Network (NBN) deal with ZTE Corp. of China.

Allegations of bribery and irregularities surrounded the approval of the Cyber Education Project and the NBN deal, prompting one legislator, Cagayan de Oro Representative Rufus Rodriguez, to call both projects the “twin sisters of anomaly.”

Just like the NBN deal, the P26.4 billion Cyber Education Project (CEP) was to be financed by concessional loans from China through an agreement forged between the Philippine and Chinese governments in April 2007.

Its critics point to a host of issues including anomalies over the approval, relevance and cost-effectiveness of the project, and illegitimacy of the debt that will be incurred. Meanwhile, Malacañang has hailed the project as one which would “make the country’s educational system globally competitive and Filipino students at par with those of the rest of the world.”



The Cyber Education Project

The CEP uses satellite technology that would link schools to a nationwide network that provides 12 video channels, wireless wide area networking, local area networking and wireless internet connectivity.

A total of 37,794 schools or 90% of all public schools nationwide would be connected in the next three years. These schools would receive live broadcasts featuring lectures and presentations from master teachers as well as coursewares on demand and other valuable resource materials.

“The program provides the quickest and most cost effective way of delivering the same high-quality education to all learners throughout the country,” Department of Education Secretary Jesli Lapus said.

Critics, however, hold a different view.

Cost-effectiveness and relevance

Calling for a Senate investigation on the issue, Senator Edgardo Angara was among the first to raise doubts on the project’s relevance and cost-effectiveness. He said the project is too costly that before any full-blown implementation, it should be first pilot-tested in depressed areas to find out whether it would indeed be effective.

The Freedom from Debt Coalition (FDC), on the other hand, sees a mismatch between what the project offers and what is needed by the education sector. FDC asserts the project does not address the long-standing problems of lack of classrooms and schoolhouses. For the debt watchdog, it seems ridiculous to provide for ICT infrastructure in every school, especially those in remote areas, when there is apparently a lack of school buildings to house the equipment.

In the same vein, the Philippine Business for Education (PBE) and the Foundation for Worldwide People Power (FWWPP) argued

that additional funding for education should prioritize the hiring of more teachers, teacher trainings, more classrooms, textbooks, and additional years of basic education.

“Cyber education is primarily a supplementary tool in education. Academic experts – both local and international – agree that such an input helps, but it is not necessary especially in the context of a system with very basic gaps,” the education advocacy groups said in a statement. “In fact, the value of supplementary tools is easily nullified in a context of inadequate facilities and ill-trained teachers; in such a situation, the project can therefore become a mere waste of our scarce resources.”

The Alliance of Concerned Teachers (ACT) likewise echoed this concern, arguing that the “TV-based instruction delivered via satellite is touted as a ‘one-size fits all’ solution to be imposed on all schools regardless of the actual needs and conditions of each throughout the archipelago.” It also pointed out that the same educational content of 15-20 minute lessons by the best teachers can be delivered through much cheaper ‘playback technology’ such as DVDs and VCDs rather than through live satellite broadcasts.

With the CEP’s huge budget of P21.7 billion, many groups argued that government could already construct 51,913 classrooms, hire nearly two million new teachers, acquire 434 million new textbooks, purchase 336 million chairs, or fully fund more than a million four-year college scholarships.

Lacking a backbone

A most significant critique against CEP and NBN was an economic analysis titled “Lacking a Backbone” written by UP Professors Raul Fabella and Noel de Dios. In the paper, the two economists found no sound economic rationale for the government to invest in the telecommunications systems.

According to another UP Professor, Men Sta. Ana (who was among those acknowledged in the paper), the paper laid down the conditions that justify state provision or ownership of infrastructure





to address market failure, such as attaining scale economies and preventing congestion. In both the CEP and NBN projects, the conditions that allow state provision or ownership were found to be absent.

First, there are already two existing technological infrastructures by the private sector which compete with each other. Thus, there was no need for another backbone that would check predatory behaviour.

Second, the government's failed *Telepono sa Barangay* Project has shown that it is not competent in running a sophisticated communications system.

Third, rapid technological changes in telecommunications make it highly risky and very costly for government to operate its own IT backbone. Many observers are concerned that the CEP may just be another "white elephant."

White elephant

Several quarters sounded the alarm that the CEP would only turn into a white elephant, a project that would be of no use to its beneficiaries and only put the country in deeper debt.

According to FDC, even taking the debt burden aside, "the project costs of CEP are too expensive to be compensatory of their actual benefits." On top of the 14% or P3.71 billion that the government has to spend as counterpart to the project cost, it would still have to shoulder the continuing costs for maintenance.

Others are skeptical whether the Department of Education, which could not even ensure the correctness of its textbooks and address the most basic problems of the education sector, has the competence to implement such an ambitious project.

Emerging case of illegitimate debt

of P22.77 billion, or 86% of the total project cost, FDC has also identified the project as among the emerging cases of illegitimate debts.

Being a tied loan (with China's Tsinghua University as contractor), FDC also sees that the project would only bring additional indebtedness for the Philippines, while primarily benefiting China.

While President Arroyo and Secretary Lapus maintained that the project suffered collateral damage due to mere "political noise" over the NBN deal, critics have also pointed to the inherent flaws which make the CEP a candidate to the list of illegitimate debts. These are: absence of competitive bidding, lack of transparency and the lack of technical evaluation.

Buried or just delayed?

Even as the CEP has been suspended along with the cancellation of the NBN deal, the final outcome of the issue is yet to be determined. After all, the GMA administration itself continues to hail the advantages of the project despite the criticisms and the call for the project to be shelved.

Until final word of the project's cancellation, the public must remain vigilant and demand full transparency. Otherwise, we might be in for something far worse than the usual fanfare of textbook scams.

Call center controversy

Aside from the CEP scandal, another controversial project, this time involving the Commission on Higher Education (CHED), was stopped after a commissioner demanded a probe on the call center project known as the Integrated Multi-site Business Process Outsourcing-Incubation Contact Centers (IMBPO-ICC).

According to the Philippine Daily Inquirer (PDI), CHED Chair Romulo Neri ordered an in-house inquiry upon the request of CHED Commissioner Nona Ricafort, who cited charges made by militant teachers of a "rigged bidding," overpricing of the project cost by





an additional P200 million (from its original price tag of P300 million), and of alleged irregular cash advances amounting to over P75 million.

The P550 million-project, which aims to assist state colleges and universities (SCUs) establish call center training laboratories, is a flagship program of the Arroyo administration.

In a letter to Neri, Ricafort called for a probe into the involvement of CHED's Bids and Awards Committee (BAC), saying she was "totally misled and deceived" by BAC members as to the conceptualization, bidding and awarding of the IMBPO-ICC. "My approval signature carried a litany of imposed requirements which to date I have not seen implemented," Ricafort said.

The BAC members however dismissed Ricafort's claims as mere allegations and misleading "half-truths," arguing that the commission *en banc* approved the project "11 times since its inception, bidding and awarding."

The BAC members were accused of rigging the bidding in favour of a consortium composed of e-Services Global Solutions Inc., Drishti Philippines Inc., Information Transmission Computer Corp., and Hillmarc's Construction Corporation.

Meanwhile, according to PDI sources, the commission allegedly jacked up the cost of the project by allowing schools to build separate buildings for the call center laboratories.

The broadsheet's insiders said the state-run Polytechnic University of the Philippines got the lion's share, or P200 million, of the original P300 million budget. This is at odds with the original plan to set up call center laboratories in at least 25 SCUs nationwide.

Furthermore, the insiders alleged that the head of another commission attached to the Office of the President owned one of the firms that sealed a contract for the project.

P329 M textbooks unused

A 2006 audit report on the Department of Education revealed that some P329 million worth of textbooks, information and communication technology (ICT) products, computers and instructional materials are lying around in the offices of school officials or in stockrooms, destroyed by molds, according to the PDI.

The Commission on Audit (COA) disclosed that 2.5 million copies of textbooks or instructional materials costing around P186.96 million have not been distributed for reasons ranging from oversupply, deficiency in contents, to scarcity of funds and vehicles for delivery.

“Our inspection of storerooms located in selected schools or division offices in 15 regions disclosed that there were textbooks that were undistributed contrary to the department’s policy of ensuring that textbooks should be in the hands of students,” the COA was quoted as saying.

An inventory of these books showed that in Metro Manila alone, more than 580,000 copies amounting to P42 million have yet to be issued to students, while about 294,000 materials were still undistributed in Eastern Visayas (Region 8).

“The textbooks were procured even if these do not comply with the revised basic education curriculum. Thus, the use of scarce resources was not maximized resulting in an enormous waste of government funds in the amount of P186,963,539.90” the COA said.

Violence against teachers

As stakeholders contended with the anomalies over education projects involving huge amounts of money, teachers confronted other equally relevant issues in the second half of 2007

When a group of teachers, Action and Solidarity for the Empowerment of Teachers (Assert), got together in a rally on World





Teachers' Day, they found themselves victims of a violent dispersal usually enforced on demonstrators criticizing government shortcomings.

"I felt I was raped. I was really angry after that incident...we didn't expect the police to be so rude to us on World Teachers' Day," public school teacher Jane Farinas was quoted in a news report by the PDI.

Footage and pictures taken by mediamen showed part of Farinas' breasts indecently exposed after a "tug-of-war" between the police and the rallyists.

Clearly, from a human rights perspective, the manhandling of the teachers is a violation of their right to peaceably assemble and their freedom of expression.

Teachers' health

On another matter, the PDI has also reported that more than 1,000 public school teachers are afflicted by tuberculosis.

According to DepEd's Health and Nutrition Center (HNC), the "situation has improved" compared to the figures in the 1990s when the number of teachers suffering from TB reached 2,000.

Of the 150,000+ DepEd personnel who underwent chest X-rays in the first six months of the year, at least 1,821 showed "lesions suggestive of TB," said an HNC report. At least 642 of more than 1,000 TB-positive teachers underwent treatment.

The DepEd earlier signed a memorandum of agreement with the Department of Health which called for free medical treatment for teachers with TB.

"In the provinces, municipal and city health offices are handling their treatment. They're also being given free medicines," HNC Director Thelma Santos was quoted in news reports.





Photos by: TRACY PABICO







Meanwhile, in Metro Manila, teacher-patients can go to the Teachers' Pavilion of the Quezon Institute, located at the Philippine Charity Sweepstakes Office complex.

DepEd Secretary Jesli Lopus stressed the need to "take care of the well-being of our teachers because the state of their health directly affects the performance of our students."

However, teachers who are sick with TB are required to go on leave for a long period of time. And they do so without any pay while on leave.

The DepEd promised to do something about this by providing financial assistance to teacher-patients, by pushing for a pay program for teachers afflicted with TB. "Substitute teachers will temporarily take their place while they're on leave," Undersecretary Teodosio Sangil said.

Teachers' pay for election services

Several months after the May national elections, teachers who served as members of the Board of Elections have yet to get their honorarium and transportation allowances.

On October 5, 2007, at least 100 public school teachers trooped to the Commission on Elections (COMELEC) office to demand immediate payment for their poll services and air out their grievances.

"It is not about the payment itself, but the ways they treat us during elections. This minimal honorarium, which is delayed most of the time, is nothing compared to the physical exhaustion, anxiety and harassment we suffered," Benjo Basas, chair of the Teachers' Dignity Coalition, told the media.

A teacher who served as member of the Board of Elections is entitled to a P1,000 honorarium plus P500 transportation allowance. Based on a memorandum between the DepEd and the Comelec, half of the teachers' pay should have been paid before election day and

the balance to be given to them after their work is done.

Mobile teachers

Apart from the teachers who serve as Board of Elections members, there is a special group of teachers who undertake tasks beyond the call of duty. They are called Mobile Teachers and they hold special literacy classes under the shade of trees, among other outdoor sites.

“We double as social, health and rural development workers, community organizers and public information officers, among other tasks, to target learners and other disadvantaged groups not reached by the formal school system,” said Jasmen Barda-Molo in an interview with the PDI.

According to a feature article “Teachers risk lives in classrooms without borders” by Jerry Esplanada, which saw print in the *Inquirer* on June 27, 2007, these MTs travel long distances, at times trekking for hours just to reach their target students – out-of-school youth and adults, majority of whom can neither read nor write.

Some of them have been mistaken for military agents, if not rebel supporters, putting their lives and those of their loved ones in danger, the article said.

The MTs make up the DepEd’s Alternative Learning System (ALS), a parallel learning system that provides a viable alternative to the existing formal education instruction, covering both the non-formal and informal sources of knowledge and skills.

“Being multi-skilled is a must for MTs,” said Amorsolo Adre from Mindoro Occidental. “At times we also function as family counsellors.”

Dr. Carolina Guerrero, head of the newly established Bureau of Alternative Learning System (BALS), likened the MTs’ functions to that of the US Peace Corps Volunteers.





With only 300 facilitators in 1998, the number of mobile teachers has grown to a little over 600 in five years.

The Bicol region tops the list with 71 MTs, followed by Central Luzon with 66, Southern Tagalog with 65, Western Visayas with 64, and Central Visayas and Eastern Visayas both with 54.

For 2007, the DepEd planned to hire an additional 507 MTs as the GMA administration has allocated some P230 million for the ALS program.

The amount is only 0.17 percent of the 2007 allocation for basic education (P134.7 billion), but three times bigger than the BALS budget of P76 million in 2006.

However, the Alliance of Concerned Teachers is unimpressed with the new developments, highlighting that “resources and capabilities are utterly inadequate”.

“The Arroyo administration has so far failed to come up with a response commensurate to the magnitude of the problem, considering that there are over 16 million functionally illiterate Filipinos,” ACT chair Antonio Tinio was quoted by the media.

Increasing drop-outs

According to a report by the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism (PCIJ), 66 will graduate from elementary out of every 100 children who entered Grade School in June 2007. Of those who finish elementary, 58 will enter high school. Of the 43 high school graduates, 23 will enter college, but only 14 will graduate.

This is the current survival rate of Filipino children in the country's educational system. The situation is made even more dismal considering the number of children who did not get to enrol at all. In 2006, 64.2 percent or 1.4 million of the country's six year olds did not set foot in first grade.

grade schoolers fare in school. Less children are able to hurdle their first six years of formal education and more repeat a grade before they graduate.

Sorry State of Primary Education

School Year	Cohort Survival Rate	Completion Rate	Drop-Out Rate	Repetition Rate
2001-2002	75.90	74.94	5.75	1.95
2002-2003	72.44	71.55	6.69	2.08
2003-2004	71.84	70.24	6.89	2.18
2004-2005	71.32	69.06	6.98	2.24
2005-2006	69.90	67.99	7.36	2.89

Source: DepEd Basic Education Information System (BEIS)

In addition, the number of children aged six to 11 who are out of school has grown steadily the past six years. From a low of 363,815, the number has ballooned to over 2 million in school year 2005-2006.

The bleak figures indicate that the government is least likely to attain its targets on universal primary education under the Millennium Development Goals. “Based on the indicators, the second of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) is the least likely to be attained in contrast to the other MDGs,” Dr. Nimfa Ogena, a professor at the University of the Philippines Population Institute (UPPI) was quoted.

Experts say poverty, malnutrition, the absence of schools in remote areas, the lack of teachers and support for classroom requirements are the biggest contributors to the dismal performance of the country’s grade school population.





Photo: TRACY PABICO

Philippine Education: **The Big Picture**

THE PHILIPPINES boasts a high adult literacy rate (those who can read and write): male, 92.5 percent; female, 92.7 percent. Education-related statistics, however, show a different picture.

- Functional literacy rate – those who can follow simple instructions – is 84 percent, but the DepEd admits the figure is overstated.
- In school year 2005-2006, 12,913,845 students were in elementary schools, including 931,383 in private schools; and 6,267,015 in high schools, including 1,287,985 in private schools.
- A recent UNESCO report ranked the Philippines 74th in terms of the Education Development Index, falling below Mongolia, 61st; Vietnam, 65th; Indonesia, 58th, and China, 38th.
- Fifty-one percent of Filipinos have had only elementary education. Only 14.13 percent of rural poor Filipinos graduate from high school or have higher educational attainment
- Results of the nationally administered National Elementary Achievement Test and National Secondary Achievement Test show that students gave correct answers to less than 50 percent of the questions.
- The Philippines performed poorly in the Trends International Mathematics and Science Study in 2004, ranking 41st in a field of 45 in Science and 42nd in Math.

SCHOOLS SHORTAGE

- At current prices, P16 billion is needed to deal with a shortage of 41,197 classrooms at 400,000 per classroom in 2007.



- A UNESCO study says the Philippines has a public elementary school average class size of 49.9 students compared to Malaysia's 31.7, Thailand's 22.9, Japan's 28.6 and India's 40. In the high school level, the Philippines has an even higher average with 56.1 students, while Malaysia has 34, Thailand 41.5, Japan 33.9 and India 39.

STATE OF TEACHERS

- In 2006, schools lacked 10,517 teachers, assuming a 1:45 teacher-student ratio.
- Almost two-thirds or 62 percent of public schools are without principals to provide instructional leadership.
- More than 59 percent of non-Science and non-Math majors are teaching Science and Math at high school level. In Physics, 73 percent of teachers are not majors in the subject.
- Mean performance scores in Licensure Examination for Teachers are below 50 percent.
- Teachers work an average of 1,176 hours per year in classes of over 50 students, according to the International Labor Organization.
- The Alliance of Concerned Teachers estimates that a teacher at entry level receives a gross monthly salary of P9,939. The labor department says a family of six needs P17,820 a month to survive.

Source: Philippine Daily Inquirer, Senate, Dep Ed

Conclusion

The events concerning the state of education in the second half of 2007 proved disheartening. Amidst the perpetual problems of the education sector, scandals proliferated implicating the very agencies that are supposed to deliver on its obligations on the right to education. At the same time, teachers who are the bedrock of education were shown to have been suffering from miserable conditions. Add to all these, certain statistical indicators on the state of education have not improved and in some cases have gone from bad to worse.

Human rights instruments provide that every individual has the right to education and the State has the obligation to respect, protect and fulfill this right. Meanwhile, citizens have the responsibility to defend and fight for the fulfillment of their right so as to compel government to make good on its obligations enshrined in



international laws and in the Philippine Constitution.

Given the situation of the education sector, it is important that government agencies are closely monitored. Shady deals should not be allowed to be forged. Those who are found to be involved in anomalous agreements should be held accountable through just and appropriate penalties.

Meanwhile, as the key movers in the educational system, teachers should be given the much-needed support to enable them to be effective in their profession. This should be done while other problems such as inadequate classrooms are also being addressed. Education, after all, plays a crucial role in the country's development as well as in human development. Its importance cannot be overemphasized. In resolving the problems and issues in education, government needs to fulfil its obligations while the citizenry has to remain vigilant and responsive to the situation.

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