

Many hands make light work: Solving the Philippines' ailing educational system

Convergence of efforts of all stakeholders is the most viable solution to the Philippines' education woes.

Convergence through SFI

As one nugget of wisdom says, "Many hands make light work," Philippine Department of Education (Dep Ed) Secretary Abad, speaker of the recent SEARCA weekly Agriculture and Development Seminar Series, affirms this wisdom, by simply practicing it. And putting it in practice, he introduces the **Schools First Initiative (SFI)**.

SFI's main goal is for the Philippine educational system to rise above mediocrity and perform at par, if not, better than other countries. First line item to be tackled is the "declining real per student spending for basic education." This budget is still based from that in 1988, when the country first implemented free secondary education.

Today, Secretary Abad laments that "we only spend about US\$ 150 per student, while Thailand spends US\$ 950."

SFI's framework calls for "performing" while "reforming".



Dep Ed's role will focus on policy advocacy to convince lawmakers to earmark more budget. With more budget, the department can provide standards and policies, school infrastructure, and technical support.

Convergence with Local Government Units (LGUs)

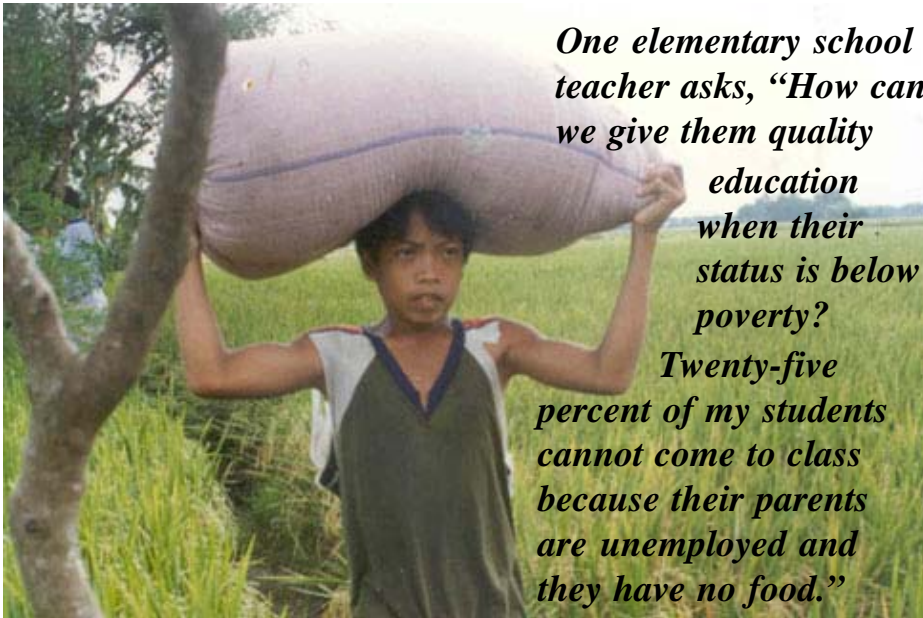
To make LGUs appreciate more of its role on education and participate in securing quality education, Dep Ed will connect with them for widespread ownership of SFI. It will contract with them on services such as how to come up with better basic education outcomes, particularly those on early childcare development services, feeding

centers, quality teachers, equity and deployment of teachers, and other basic concerns.

During the discussion, Dr. Fernando Bernardo raised two questions: rich cities paying more for free education, and how to increase the quality of teachers.

On **equitable sharing**, Secretary Abad reported that this is already taking place. LGUs are "sharing the burden of improving the quality of education." Pasig, Makati, and Quezon Cities, for example, have huge educational funds."

On **quality of teachers**, Secretary Abad said, he would



adopt SEARCA's approach of giving teachers each a one year tenure.

On **employment**, an elementary teacher asked "How can we give them quality education when their status is below poverty? Twenty-five percent of the school children cannot come to class because their parents are unemployed, they have no food, etc.

Secretary Abad quoted that about 38% of our elementary children are undernourished, an impact of poverty. One approach that government is doing, is putting its acts together by working together to address poverty. "It's difficult to put on new taxes if there are no changes; because then, people would be telling government that it is not responding to people's situation. If we make reforms (e.g. livelihood), it is not only at the province or anywhere, but measures must be done directly to 5,000 households with impact on participation, dropout problems, etc.

"Our most important challenge is to make communities share in educating our children... Lope de Vega, a school in the remote town of Northern Samar, garnered the top performing school nationwide because families, communities are providing support to the school; and the school is still at the core of interest among the community members...

I really think that those who have the greatest stake in the education of children, in the development of children should have as much say... in the local communities. That is not happening in our community today... Sometimes it's not just a question of money... Even the isolated rural schools are doing better than city schools in Makati. You look at those and the top-performing schools and they are not up there, in terms of performance. It's a good subject matter for research.

Two months ago I visited the top-performing school in this country. Lope de Vega in

Northern Samar, one among our poorest regions infested by NPA. And what do I see there? Poorly constructed buildings, nothing really much by way of facilities. But you see, families and communities are still functional, and the school providing the community's interest. I think that is really important in terms of improving the learning outcome. That the school has the mission of strengthening learning outcomes...

...a school in Dinagat Island in Surigao, I see the same: parents, students focus on learning; teachers focus on teaching. You know they would identify the ones weak in reading and after an hour they would take care of this. Saturdays they would take remedial classes in Mathematics, Sciences, and English. In fact in the border of Agusan del Sur, they even teach on Sundays, and they really take it to heart. It's really a session where parents and teachers [meet]; and you know, it's the no. 2 performing school in the country. And so I always tell those in the Dep Ed that the fact that you don't have the resources should not be a hindrance in delivering better learning outcomes."

Dep Ed sees convergence approach as potentially powerful instrument for increasing demand for schooling by poorest households and most disadvantaged communities. **(Lorna C. Malicsi and Randy A. Foronda, KMU; Layout by Althea Joyce T. Aragon; First photo courtesy of DepEd)**