



Upgrading Sri Lanka's Secondary School System



Colombo - Since independence in 1948, Sri Lanka has provided all children with free primary, secondary, and tertiary education, producing literacy levels of 92% and primary school enrollment of 95%. This is a major achievement in a region where 25% of children are not even enrolled in primary school, and remarkable considering that Sri Lanka's education system has been held back by decades of underfunding and 20 years of civil conflict.

Although the island nation's graduates have strong literacy skills, many lack the skills in information and communication technology (ICT), science, mathematics, and English language on which many economies thrive. By 2004, unemployment among those with advanced-level qualifications was around 18%.

Government underspending likely contributes to the problem. Sri Lanka spends only about 2.8% of its gross domestic product on education, compared with a 3.5% average in the rest of Asia.

In the last few years, however - with help from two ADB-supported projects - Sri Lanka's government has begun to put things right. The Secondary Education Modernization Project (SEMP), the first phase of which was completed on schedule in June 2006 and the second phase of which began under a \$35 million ADB loan, has already established computer learning centers, improved and expanded the number of schools offering a full curriculum for the first time in decades, and provided extensive teacher training.

To date, electricity has been supplied to 62 schools. Computer learning centers have been installed in 1,006 schools, and A-level science laboratories in 141 schools. Work to establish O-level science laboratories in 41 schools, to upgrade libraries in 30 schools, provide water supply to 136 schools, to convert science rooms in 43 schools, and to provide and sanitary facilities in 349 schools is ongoing.

Along with these, support for improving the quality of teaching and learning, and capacity development in school planning and management is ongoing. Master trainers and zonal facilitators have been trained in several areas, such as ICT, and are tasked to provide on site support to schools and teachers in their respective areas and zones. Scholarship programs have been granted to 17,000 teachers, and a scholarship program for 12,000 students from disadvantaged families qualified for A-level science or commerce class is ongoing.

The project's managers can already point to improved student performance since the start of the first phase, although they caution that it is difficult to pinpoint one single factor for that improvement. Nonetheless, they say that the first phase of SEMP underscores the importance of such things as computer-based and activity-based learning systems, private-sector involvement, decentralized management, and school-based assessment systems for improving student performance.

Starting from Scratch

Work began from scratch in 2001. "At the time we went into the system around the year 2000, only about 15-20 schools in highly urbanized environments had information and communication facilities open for kids. So we went into an almost total vacuum," said Anura Dissanayake, project director with the Ministry of Education.

As Mr. Dissanayake pointed out, school day ended at 2 p.m., and computer technologies were simply not on the agenda.

Education in Sri Lanka is free in government schools, which make up about 94% of the total, and in state-run tertiary institutions. About 10,000 government schools educate around 4 million students, but low investment means disparities in quality - leaving young people poorly qualified to fill the demands of the market for skilled laborers.

The SEMP's goal is to help young people graduate with useful knowledge and skills to compete in and benefit from modern society and a modern economy. Generally, it aims to improve the quality of secondary schools through modern teaching methods and assessment, with a focus on ICT to improve learning and increase educational opportunities for poor students. It also aims to improve the delivery of educational services.

Among its myriad components, the project management the establishment of over 1,000 computer learning centers in

schools around the country as one major success - about 200 more than originally planned, with another 351 almost completed - and nearly 2,200 multimedia units, equipped with televisions, video cassette recorders, screens, whiteboards, and cassette players. The aim was for effective training and learning facilities covering all of Sri Lanka.

Computer learning centers are critical for connecting schools to the vast resources of the online world and the array of new teaching and training resources available for computer users.

Involving the Private Sector

An agreement between SEMP and Sri Lanka Telecom helped provide 1,200 schools island-wide with broadband Internet access. Through its work with the telecommunications provider, said Mr. Dissanayake, the project has encouraged the extension of Internet access into remote communities where it might have been slower to arrive otherwise.

Training of teachers and principals was given full consideration. Through an "e-citizen guide," 1,398 principals were trained in basic computer-related skills. Some 23,960 teachers were trained using the International Computer Driving License courseware. According to an independent assessment, both numbers are on or close to target.

SEMP also harnessed the potential of the private sector in its teacher and student training. A Microsoft-sponsored competition offered 40 cash prizes for teacher and student-developed education software, and helped the education ministry train another 10,000 teachers. Through a partnership with Intel, 100,000 teachers are being trained in computer education and in facilities management.

The private sector is seen increasingly as a valuable source of funds and ideas for getting resources to the people who need them, in particular, through public-private partnerships. Indeed, such arrangements, which can take many forms, can provide an effective means for reaching the poorest members of society.

Expanding the Curriculum

Another SEMP success was the expansion of the Sri Lankan curriculum. The project provided materials designed to promote activity-based learning, teaching, and evaluation, as well as application of knowledge. The project then incorporated these materials into the senior secondary curriculum in science, mathematics, environmental studies, technology, commerce, and English.

It provided textbooks on ICT for O-level students, information technology for students at more advanced levels, and CD-ROMs for both levels. Books in Sinhala and Tamil were provided on a range of subjects, including mathematics and social studies.

SEMP also began introducing a full, modernized curriculum in more schools, including English as the medium of instruction, in about 300 schools for the first time in many decades. While Sri Lanka has an extensive network of schools, senior secondary science education, for example, is offered in only 20% of schools. In 2003, 550 Sri Lankan secondary schools offered a full range of courses.

By mid-2006, that number had increased to more than 650 schools and, by 2009, according to Mr. Dissanayake, "we should have 750 schools providing full curriculum at the advanced level. This is a breakthrough; the number was static since 1960."

In particular, by making a full curriculum available in more rural areas - no easy task in Sri Lanka where some areas remain difficult to staff and service due to ongoing civil unrest - the project is improving access to quality education for poor and remote students.

Meanwhile, stipends are being used to try to increase rural students' educational opportunities. As in many countries in the Asia-Pacific region, Sri Lanka's rural young are often tempted to leave school early to help on the family farm. In Sri Lanka, the dropout rate rises markedly after Grade 9. SEMP offered a scholarship program for 12,000 disadvantaged students who were qualified for A-level science or commerce classes. Scholarships have been promoted and received support from companies such as Microsoft and Redhat. To ease the transition from school to the workforce, an awareness program regarding career guidance units is ongoing in 50 schools, although the Sri Lankan Ministry of Education remains limited in its ability to expand this program due to a lack of capacity.

School-Based Assessment and Management

The project also successfully launched school-based assessment to complement the national examinations system and better monitor performance. Through publicity campaigns, the Government helped "sensitize" employers to the implications of school-based assessment.

School-based management, introduced system-wide in phase one of SEMP, was more controversial. Introduced to decentralize control of the school development to a board that includes principals, parents, community members, senior

students, and others, he said it raised concerns that the private sector was creeping into school management.

After consulting with the concerned parties, the name was changed to "Programme in School Improvement," with a categorical assurance that no private companies would be represented on the board.

Signs of Life

Originally, SEMP's goal was to see an additional 1 million students pass their O-level exams. At the time of design in 1999, about 31% were passing the exams to enter advanced levels. "For every 100 students through our system, 70% were failing. We wanted to lower that to 50% (about 1 million) by 2007," said Mr. Dissanayake. In the 2006 results, the passing rate was 49%, putting the target in sight.

He was cautious not to attribute the gain to any one factor, but pointed out that in the past, in science and mathematics, or English, for example, the system was using the "blackboard-and-chalk" method of teaching.

Using computer-based and interactive methods, the teachers enhance their performance and more students become involved in lessons. The multimedia units also helped. "All of it helped break the traditional classroom learning environment. Teachers now have to be better; kids have to listen and cannot just sit back and play," said Mr. Dissanayake.

Related

- [33245-013: Secondary Education Modernization Project](#)
- [35192-013: Secondary Education Modernization II](#)
- [More on ADB's work in Sri Lanka](#)

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