

The K-12 Reform: We Must Stay the Course

[Panel Discussion Contribution. 2017 Philippine Educational Conference, SMX Convention Center, Pasay City, 28 Nov. 2017.]

Fr. Joel Tabora, SJ

Where we had only required ten years of basic education, the K-12 reform was effected to put us on par with other nations whose basic education consisted of twelve years.

Our reform was to add a mandatory Kindergarten and two years of senior high school to our existing ten years.

We originally wanted to decongest the 10-year curriculum, to give the learners more time and space to learn fundamentals. We also originally wanted through this reform to acknowledge that not all of our graduates need to go to college, but that many of them would want to join the mainstream labor force after graduation from basic education.

In the course of our reform, however, courses formerly taught in college were pushed down to basic education. What had been decongested was re-congested. And the original insight that not all students have to go to college, gave way to a scruple that a basic education system that does not prepare all students for college is a substandard basic education system.

So when the CHED articulated its college readiness standards, meant originally to guide the SHS experience of those opting to go to college, the entire SHS was eventually designed to make all graduates of SHS college ready.

Private sector education supported this reform in the interests of the educational needs of our youth. But it paid heavily. It lost years of enrollment in college last year and this year as senior high school was being introduced mandatorily; it will continue to suffer college underpopulation as those enrollment vacuums travel to 3rd, 4th and 5th year. But it also suffered because of the lack of respect for the complementarity between public and private education. The public side upped its compensation to close to twice the amount affordable in most

private schools causing a migration of teachers to private schools. The public schools got their teachers. But well-functioning private schools, especially those serving the poor, were crippled.

As we come to the close of the implementation of first batch of universally-required senior high school, perhaps it is not out of place to congratulate ourselves that through our focus on the need for this reform, the senior high school as such has been established and now enjoys wide acceptance throughout the nation. The reform has gained for us new respectability in the international arena. Because of this reform, our professionals abroad can now be recognized and appropriately compensated for their professional qualifications.

But I think it is only right that at a forum like this we take the time to take stock – even if only to agree on questions that must be asked in order to evaluate where we are, and what we have yet to do to shepherd our reform to success. Some of the questions may be as follows.

Did we make the right decision in demanding of our SHSs that they prepare all their learners to be college ready? Do we not over-demand academic courses of those who should be better trained for the workforce in vocational education? Do we not thereby weaken the focus on preparing those committed to go to college even as we hinder those wishing to work to get the skills necessary for them to be welcomed into the labor market?

At the same time, with all the good will that went into the design of a senior high school that would develop the general and specialized potentials of the learners, have we created a SHS program that with its multiple tracks and strands, its learning outcomes and performance tasks, is unnecessarily complex, difficult to manage, and exhausting not only for the learners but for the administrators and teachers as well?

Are our and DepED personnel, teachers and administrators trained enough to tackle the academic and formative challenges of SHS harmoniously and productively? Our attempts to provide In Service Training especially through PEAC are laudable. But they also reveal gaps in teacher competency and preparedness to achieve the cognitive and practical learner outcomes of SHS.

Are we managing the complementarity between public and private schools optimally? In the beginning of the reform when DepEd worried that there would not be enough senior high schools, DepEd encouraged the private sector to invest in SHSs. To do so, it said that it would restrain its provision of SHS. But when the private sector started investing in SHS and the public compensation scale for SHSs was published, the DepEd seemed to forget its commitments to restraint. Activity on the ground proved very different from policy in the center. We were told that in Region XI for every ten existing high schools, only one would be designated to develop a SHS. When the private schools began investing, news of more and more public SHSs was dismaying. Public school principals, intent on populating their own SHSs, were even withholding information from learners about their ability to opt for a public or for a private school given the vouchers that has been developed. To make matters worse, SUCs were forced to provide SHSs, while basic education is not their proper mandate as public HEIs. Up to today, the SUCs wish to be relieved of SHS, but they are still forced to provide it, even though private sector provision is undersubscribed.

Finally, the quality assurance question: how can we assure ourselves and others that what we undertook to achieve in SHS we are actually achieving. Will we subject our graduates to a standardized exam for college readiness? But then how would the results of such an exam be handled? Shall it be possible to fail this exam? Even if failure in this exam shall not be possible, and learners either just do poorly or do well, what consequence would doing poorly have for their futures in career or college? Would we use the results of such an exam to improve the design of our SHSs?

A culture of QA would help us develop the quality of our SHSs, but also of our entire basic and higher education. The ASEAN QA Network, of which the PH is a member, demands of quality assurance - that is best when it is private, autonomous and voluntary - that there be an external quality assurance agency (EQAA), EQAA-Standards and Processes comparable with international standards and processes, functional Internal Quality Assurance (IQA) mechanisms, operating within the Philippine Qualifications Framework (PQF). How could the quality of our SHS be assessed by truly external quality assurance bodies

following appropriate standards and processes? Do all of our SHSs have IQA mechanisms that respect the National Qualifications Framework?

Finally, let me say that all beginnings are difficult. In the K-12 reform, we have made a good beginning. Now we must stay the course, listen to one another, learn from our errors, and undertake to improve ourselves. To do so we must work together in genuine public and private complementarity.