



# EDUCATIONAL REFORMS AND IMPLICATIONS ON INEQUALITIES

## Overview on educational inequalities in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka, although known for its high literacy rate and commitment to free education, suffers from decades of educational inequalities. These disparities are rooted in the complex and stratified nature of the school system, which divides institutions into national and provincial schools, and further stratifies schools by classification on subjects and grades offered. The educational landscape is further fragmented by socioeconomic factors, where children from poorer households face higher dropout rates and limited access to educational opportunities. Geographical disparities exacerbate these issues, as students in remote areas encounter significant barriers to quality education. This context applies to both general education and early childhood. This multi-layered inequality creates a system where a student's place of residence and economic background significantly impact their educational prospects. The National Education Policy Framework 2023-2033 (NEPF) and associated reforms attempts to address these inequalities.

## SOME KEY ISSUES WITH THE CURRENT STATE OF EDUCATION

- Lack of cohesive policy and support for Early Childhood Education.
- Inequitable distribution of public funds and private funds between National and Provincial schools.
- Inequitable resource allocation (especially teachers) between different types of schools, which does not address local needs.
- Mismatch between educational pathways accessible at schools and employment opportunities in the labour market.

## KEY SUGGESTIONS FROM THE PROPOSED NEPF REFORMS 2023-2033

- Clustering of schools by geographic proximity
- Digitisation of and industry-linked education
- Placing all schools under provincial council management
- New resource allocation formula

## GAPS IN THE PROPOSED REFORMS

- Lack of emphasis on sports and co-curriculum.
- Lack of transparency in funding allocation.
- Failure to consider the limited access to digital infrastructure across the country.
- Insufficient provisions to address the educational needs of differently-abled students.
- Insufficient emphasis on early childhood education.
- Absence of a regulatory system for private tuition.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Reduce hierarchies in the schooling provision by promoting single administration responsibility.
- Ensure clustering strengthens resources in disadvantaged schools through needs-based allocation.
- Involve all stakeholders in the implementation of the reforms to ensure wider acceptance.
- Address teacher shortages, especially in rural areas, through targeted incentives and career development.
- To ensure holistic educational equity, Sri Lanka should address the needs of differently-abled students, prioritise early childhood education, and implement regulations for private tutoring.



## EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION (ECE)

Early childhood education has not received adequate attention or resources in Sri Lanka. Many preschools operate without proper oversight, resulting in inconsistencies in the quality of education provided. There is no standardized training for pre-school teachers. Additionally, there is a lack of comprehensive policies and coordination between national and provincial authorities.

Financial constraints pose a significant barrier. Public funding for ECE is limited, and most preschools are run privately, making it difficult for children from low-income families to access it. This situation exacerbates inequalities, as children from disadvantaged backgrounds miss out on early learning experiences.

## NATIONAL VS PROVINCIAL SCHOOLS

National schools, typically located in urban areas, receive more government funding and resources. They boast better facilities, qualified teachers, and strong alumni networks. They tend to outperform provincial schools in national exams and university entrance rates. In contrast, provincial schools (especially in more remote locations) suffer from inadequate physical, financial and human resources.

These disparities and lack of resources tend to result in higher dropout rates among students from poorer households, particularly those over the age of 14, and limits access to higher education for students from rural and underprivileged backgrounds, thereby reinforcing social and economic disparities.

## CLUSTERING

NEPF proposes grouping 8-12 schools with 2,000 to 5,500 students to share resources and expertise. This model categorises schools into primary, junior secondary, and senior secondary, moving away from classifications of national and provincial schools and type 1-3 (based on subjects and grades offered).

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However, clustering poses several challenges. There is a concern that resources may be diluted. A transparent, needs-based allocation system is crucial for equitable resource sharing. Building trust and collaboration between schools with different resource levels is essential. Further, curtailment of some of these provisions by the parliamentary oversight committee risks limiting the potential benefits to educational equity.

## DIGITISATION OF AND INDUSTRY LINKED EDUCATION

The reforms suggest Sri Lanka's education system to move beyond traditional classrooms and equip students with a range of digital tools. These include online content, artificial intelligence (AI)-powered platforms, and virtual learning environments. This shift caters to diverse learning styles, which would foster a more inclusive educational experience for all students. AI and analytics is to play a crucial role in monitoring student progress, providing valuable insights to improve learning outcomes.

Additionally, the reforms propose embedding industry linkages into the school and vocational curricula to help students acquire skills required in the labor market. This initiative aims to bridge the gap between education and employment by ensuring that students gain practical, job-relevant skills through internships, apprenticeships, and partnerships with industries

A major challenge for this suggested reform is the lack of digital infrastructure and lack of clarity on industry partnerships. Unequal access to technology and the industry creates possible disparities in the implementation of this reform, possibly further exacerbating the divide between the urban and rural schools. Further, implementation of these policies would require training and upskilling teachers, a mammoth task given the shortages prevalent in teacher recruitment. Additionally, internet access and owning of digital devices can be a burden for low-income families and lack of digital literacy at home could create further disadvantages for these students.