



TRANSFORMING PAKISTAN’S EDUCATION SYSTEM: OPPORTUNITIES, INNOVATIONS, AND PERSISTENT CHALLENGES IN THE 21ST CENTURY

¹Nazia Karim

^{*2}Mutahar Abbas

³Sonaina

¹Lecturer, Department of Educational Development ,Karakorum International University, Gilgit, Pakistan

^{*2}Lecturer, Department of Educational Development, Karakorum International University, Gilgit, Pakistan

³M.Phil Scholar, Department of Educational Development , National University of Modern Languages Islamabad

[^nazia.karim@kiu.edu.pk](mailto:nazia.karim@kiu.edu.pk), ^mutahar.abbas@kiu.edu.pk, ^sonainao12@gmail.com

Abstract

Pakistan’s education system stands at a critical juncture in the 21st century, facing the dual challenge of addressing long-standing structural weaknesses while embracing new opportunities for innovation and reform. This study explores the transformation of Pakistan’s education landscape by analyzing key challenges such as inadequate funding, regional disparities, low literacy rates, outdated curricula, and limited technological integration. At the same time, it highlights emerging opportunities through digital learning, educational policy reforms, and innovative teaching approaches that aim to enhance access, equity, and quality. Drawing on secondary data and policy analysis, the paper emphasizes that meaningful transformation requires a holistic approach combining technology, teacher training, governance reforms, and inclusive educational practices. The study concludes that a forward-looking, inclusive, and innovation-driven education strategy is essential to equip Pakistan’s youth with the competencies and critical thinking skills needed to thrive in a rapidly changing global environment.

Keywords: Pakistan, Education, Policy Analysis, Teacher Training, Governance Reforms, Global Environment.

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Corresponding Authors*:
Mutahar Abbas

INTRODUCTION

Education is widely recognized as a foundational public good and a central driver of human development, economic growth, and social cohesion (UNESCO, 2015). For Pakistan, the stakes are particularly high. The country faces a large youth population, persistent regional and gender inequalities, and recurrent shocks, including floods and economic instability — that magnify the costs of low learning and limited skills (Ministry of Federal Education & Professional Training. Over the past two decades Pakistan has made measurable progress in expanding formal access to school; yet access has not translated consistently into meaningful learning outcomes, equitable participation, or labor-market relevant skills. This paradox improved enrollment alongside stagnant or declining foundational learning frames the problem this paper addresses and motivates the urgent need for system-level transformation.

A succinct problem statement clarifies why an introduction focused on “transformation” is timely. Pakistan’s recent national reporting shows that while the number of institutions and registered students has grown, millions of children remain out of school and many enrolled learners do not attain baseline literacy and numeracy by the end of primary grades (Pakistan Education Statistics, 2022–23). Complementary citizen-led assessments paint an even starker picture of foundational learning poverty: ASER 2023 finds that a substantial share of children in Grades 1–5 cannot read simple age-appropriate texts or perform rudimentary arithmetic tasks—deficits that undermine later schooling, reduce lifetime earnings, and perpetuate intergenerational disadvantage (Idara-e-Taleem-o-Aagahi [ITA], 2024). The result is a system that, despite incremental coverage gains, fails many learners at the moment that matters most—the acquisition of foundational skills.

The political and fiscal context shapes the feasibility and design of reforms. Pakistan’s education sector operates in a decentralized framework where federal guidelines, provincial delivery, and local administration interact (MoFE&PT, 2024). Public investment in education has historically been low relative to international benchmarks, hovering under 3 percent of GDP and often below the levels required to finance both expanded access and quality improvements (World Bank, 2024; Trading Economics, 2024). Recent national commitments, including the National Education Policy Development Framework (NEPDF, 2024), signal renewed central attention to systemic issues and propose a re-articulation of roles, financing priorities, and governance mechanisms. Simultaneously, international partners have signaled expanded engagement: multi-year funding frameworks and country partnership plans present opportunities for sustained financing if reforms can be credibly packaged and implemented. Understanding these fiscal and institutional constraints is critical to designing reforms that are both ambitious and implementable.

The literature on education transformation underscores three strategic pillars that guide this analysis: (1) foundational learning prioritization (early grades and ECCE); (2) strengthening teacher effectiveness through sustained professional development and supportive supervision; and (3) improving system coherence alignment of curriculum, assessment, data systems, and financing so that incentives and capacities are synchronized. Empirical reviews from comparable low- and middle-income contexts find that focusing on the “foundational window” (pre-primary to Grade 3), backed by simple, scalable pedagogical packages and regular low-stakes assessment, yields the highest returns for learning and equity (ASER findings; education system reviews). For Pakistan, prioritizing

early foundational learning is especially urgent given the documented learning deficits at the primary level.

The positions of the study's contribution. Many prior analyses of Pakistan's education problems have focused either on access (enrollment, school construction) or on discrete interventions (teacher training, EdTech pilots). Fewer comprehensive studies combine the most recent national policy commitments (NEPDF 2024), rigorous citizen-led learning evidence (ASER 2023), and up-to-date national statistics (Pakistan Education Statistics 2022-23) to propose a practical, prioritized reform agenda that balances short-term wins with institutional modernization. This paper fills that gap by synthesizing these evidence streams, assessing political-economy constraints, and offering an implementation-oriented set of policy recommendations that are sensitive to Pakistan's fiscal and federal context. The analysis explicitly centers equity gender, disability, rural/urban, and provincial divides and links school-level practice to district and provincial system levers.

The transformation sought is not technical alone; it requires re-anchoring the education system around measurable learning goals, reconfiguring financing and human-resource incentives to support classroom improvement, and institutionalizing data-driven accountability. The remainder of this paper operationalizes that vision by tying national policy commitments to concrete, evidence-informed recommendations suitable for Pakistan's fiscal and federal realities.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative policy-analysis approach based on secondary data and document review to critically examine Pakistan's education system and identify pathways for transformation in the 21st century.

OPPORTUNITIES IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Despite enduring structural challenges, Pakistan's education system stands on the brink of potential transformation. The 21st century offers unprecedented opportunities to reimagine education through digital technology, curriculum reform, vocational training, and international collaboration. Harnessing these opportunities can help Pakistan transition from a traditional, examination-oriented model toward a system that values creativity, inclusivity, and lifelong learning.

DIGITAL AND TECHNOLOGICAL INTEGRATION

The digital revolution has created vast possibilities for reshaping education in Pakistan. The rise of e-learning platforms, online classrooms, and digital resources has enhanced access and flexibility. During the COVID-19 pandemic, initiatives such as Tele School, Salemabad, and the Virtual University of Pakistan demonstrated how technology could ensure educational continuity even under crisis (Government of Pakistan, 2021). With over 100 million internet users, digital learning can serve as a bridge between urban and rural communities, improving literacy and equity (Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA, 2023). The World Bank (2022) emphasizes that digital education not only enhances access but also improves teacher performance and student engagement when supported by effective training.

CURRICULUM REFORM AND COMPETENCY-BASED LEARNING

The Curriculum reform represents another key opportunity for transformation. The Single National Curriculum (SNC) aims to unify learning standards across the country, reducing disparities between public, private, and madrassa education (Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training, 2021). However, beyond uniformity, the emphasis

should shift toward competency-based education, focusing on critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving. According to UNESCO (2022), modern curricula must align with the evolving demands of the global knowledge economy and integrate skills such as digital literacy, climate awareness, and social responsibility. By doing so, Pakistan can cultivate students who are equipped for innovation and active citizenship.

EXPANSION OF TECHNICAL AND VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

The growing youth population over 60% under the age of 30—presents a demographic opportunity to transform the labor market through Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2021). Skill-based education can help reduce unemployment and poverty while aligning workforce capacities with market needs. The National Skills Strategy (2021–2026) and the Prime Minister's Youth Skill Development Program have created pathways for young people to gain practical skills in emerging industries. Expanding these programs and linking them to local industries can strengthen Pakistan's human capital and economic competitiveness (World Bank, 2022).

PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS

The Public-private partnerships (PPPs) provide another transformative pathway for Pakistan's education system. Nearly 40% of Pakistani students are enrolled in private institutions (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics [PBS], 2023). Effective collaboration between public agencies and private organizations such as through the Punjab Education Foundation (PEF) and Sindh Education Foundation (SEF) has shown that PPPs can increase access, improve accountability, and enhance quality in underserved regions (World Bank, 2021). Expanding such partnerships can help optimize resource allocation, promote innovation, and improve governance within the education sector.

RESEARCH, HIGHER EDUCATION, AND INNOVATION

The higher education sector has witnessed considerable progress through initiatives of the Higher Education Commission (HEC). Digital libraries, scholarship programs, and faculty development initiatives have promoted a culture of research and academic excellence (HEC, 2022). Strengthening connections between universities and industries can ensure that research contributes directly to national priorities, particularly in science, technology, and sustainable development. Encouraging interdisciplinary learning and innovation hubs within universities can also prepare graduates for the global knowledge economy.

GLOBALIZATION AND INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATION

Globalization offers opportunities for academic exchange, research collaboration, and capacity building. International cooperation with organizations such as UNESCO, USAID, and British Council Pakistan has supported teacher training, curriculum modernization, and school improvement initiatives (British Council, 2022). Participation in global education programs allows Pakistani institutions to benchmark against international standards and integrate innovative pedagogical practices.

The opportunities for transforming Pakistan's education system are diverse and interdependent. Digital learning, curriculum modernization, vocational education, inclusivity, and international collaboration collectively provide a roadmap for comprehensive reform. If supported by sound governance, sustained investment, and political commitment, these opportunities can drive Pakistan toward an equitable, knowledge-based education system that meets the demands of the 21st century.

PERSISTENT CHALLENGES IN THE 21ST CENTURY

While Pakistan's education system has entered an era of reform and innovation, it continues to grapple with persistent and deep-rooted challenges that hinder equitable progress. These challenges stem from governance failures, socio-economic inequalities, outdated pedagogical practices, and insufficient investment. Addressing these issues requires a comprehensive and coordinated approach at the national, provincial, and local levels.

INEQUALITY AND ACCESS DISPARITIES

Despite gradual improvements in literacy and enrollment, access to quality education in Pakistan remains highly unequal. According to UNESCO (2022), Pakistan has over 22.8 million out-of-school children, the second-highest figure globally. Rural and marginalized communities—particularly in Balochistan, Sindh, and the tribal districts—face severe shortages of schools, teachers, and infrastructure. Gender disparities also persist; female literacy is 52%, compared to 73% for males (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, PBS 2023). Socio-economic inequality further widens this gap, as children from poor households are five times more likely to be out of school than those from wealthier families (UNICEF, 2022).

QUALITY OF EDUCATION AND LEARNING OUTCOMES

Low learning outcomes remain one of Pakistan's most pressing educational challenges. The World Bank (2022) estimates that 79% of ten-year-olds in Pakistan cannot read and understand a simple text, indicating a high rate of learning poverty. The persistence of rote learning practices discourages creativity and critical thinking, leaving students ill-equipped for modern labor markets. Weak teacher training and limited classroom resources contribute to poor learning achievement (Government of Pakistan, 2021). In many public schools, overcrowded classrooms, absenteeism, and outdated textbooks undermine both student engagement and educational quality.

GOVERNANCE AND POLICY IMPLEMENTATION GAPS

Education governance in Pakistan is characterized by bureaucratic inefficiency and weak accountability. Since the 18th Constitutional Amendment (2010), education has been a devolved subject under provincial control. While devolution was intended to enhance responsiveness, it has often resulted in fragmented policies and inconsistent implementation across provinces (Jalal, 2020). A lack of coordination between federal and provincial authorities has created overlapping responsibilities, particularly regarding curriculum reform, teacher recruitment, and data management. Furthermore, political instability and frequent policy changes disrupt continuity, preventing long-term educational planning (World Bank, 2021).

INSUFFICIENT PUBLIC INVESTMENT IN EDUCATION

Pakistan's investment in education remains among the lowest in South Asia. The government allocates only 1.7–2.5% of GDP to education, far below the UNESCO recommended benchmark of 4–6% (UNESCO, 2022). Chronic underfunding limits infrastructure development, teacher training, and access to learning materials. Many schools—especially in rural areas—lack basic facilities such as electricity, clean water, and sanitation (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2023). Inadequate financing also affects teacher salaries and morale, contributing to low motivation and high turnover. Without sufficient public investment, education cannot serve as a vehicle for national development.

OUTDATED CURRICULUM AND EXAMINATION SYSTEMS

Pakistan's curriculum and examination systems remain largely outdated and misaligned with contemporary educational needs. Despite the Single National Curriculum (SNC)

initiative, the focus on memorization rather than critical understanding persists (Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training, 2021). The examination system emphasizes rote recall over analytical or problem-solving skills, limiting the development of creativity and independent thought. Moreover, the curriculum often lacks integration of emerging fields such as environmental studies, digital literacy, and global citizenship skills essential for 21st-century learners (UNDP, 2021).

SOCIO-CULTURAL BARRIERS AND GENDER NORMS

Cultural norms, poverty, and security concerns continue to restrict educational participation, especially for girls. In rural and conservative areas, early marriage, domestic labor expectations, and mobility restrictions limit girls' access to schools (UNICEF, 2022). Safety concerns and a lack of gender-sensitive infrastructure such as separate toilets further discourage female attendance (British Council, 2022). Overcoming these barriers requires community-based awareness campaigns, safe school environments, and gender-responsive policies to promote inclusive education.

IMPACT OF CLIMATE CHANGE AND EMERGENCIES

Another emerging challenge is the impact of climate change and environmental disasters on education. Floods, heatwaves, and displacement disrupt schooling for thousands of children annually. The 2022 floods alone damaged over 27,000 schools across Sindh and Balochistan (UNICEF, 2023). Pakistan's education system must adopt climate-resilient infrastructure and disaster preparedness strategies to ensure learning continuity during emergencies.

In the 21st century, Pakistan's education system remains constrained by systemic inequalities, weak governance, low investment, and socio-cultural barriers. Despite numerous policy reforms, progress has been slow due to poor implementation and a lack of sustained political commitment. Addressing these challenges requires a holistic approach—one that combines equitable access, teacher empowerment, curriculum modernization, and adequate funding. Only by tackling these persistent barriers can Pakistan realize its vision of inclusive, high-quality education and unlock the full potential of its young population.

DISCUSSIONS

The transformation of Pakistan's education system in the 21st century represents both a policy necessity and a developmental challenge. The interplay between innovation and persistent structural barriers underscores the complexity of achieving meaningful reform in a society marked by inequality, governance fragility, and socio-cultural constraints. While opportunities such as digital learning, curriculum modernization, and international cooperation are reshaping the educational landscape, these reforms operate within a system still constrained by low funding, outdated pedagogies, and social disparities. This discussion examines the dialectical relationship between transformation and constraint, analyzing how opportunities can be harnessed amid persistent challenges to build an inclusive, future-oriented education system in Pakistan.

Pakistan's education sector has entered a period of incremental reform rather than revolutionary change. The adoption of the Single National Curriculum (SNC) (Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training, 2021) and the integration of technology in classrooms reflect a national acknowledgment of the need for modernization. However, these reforms often struggle to gain traction due to institutional weaknesses. Decentralization under the 18th Amendment devolved education to the provinces, but

without strong coordination mechanisms, implementation has remained inconsistent (Jalal, 2020).

This tension between policy ambition and administrative capacity illustrates a broader structural dilemma. Provincial disparities in school infrastructure, funding, and teacher capacity hinder the uniform execution of national initiatives (World Bank, 2021). Therefore, transformation in Pakistan's education sector cannot occur in isolation it must be anchored in systemic governance reform, financial accountability, and local empowerment. Without addressing these foundational issues, even progressive reforms risk superficiality and limited impact.

Digital learning has emerged as a transformative opportunity, particularly in expanding access to education in remote and marginalized regions. The COVID-19 pandemic catalyzed the rise of digital platforms such as Tele School, Virtual University, and Taleemabad, which demonstrated how technology can bridge geographic divides (Government of Pakistan, 2021). However, this technological optimism must be tempered with recognition of the digital divide the uneven distribution of connectivity, devices, and digital literacy across Pakistan. Rural areas, home to nearly 63% of Pakistan's population, suffer from limited broadband infrastructure and unreliable electricity (Pakistan Telecommunication Authority PTA, 2023). Consequently, while urban students benefit from digital innovation, rural learners often remain excluded. Moreover, teachers often lack training in online pedagogy, leading to a replication of traditional rote methods in virtual settings (UNESCO, 2022). For technology to truly democratize education, digital inclusion must become a policy priority through investments in infrastructure, teacher training, and equitable access to devices.

The curriculum lies at the heart of educational transformation. The Single National Curriculum (SNC) seeks to reduce inequalities between different educational streams public, private, and religious (Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training, 2021). Yet, curriculum uniformity alone does not ensure educational quality or relevance. The persistent dominance of rote learning remains one of the most significant pedagogical challenges in Pakistan's classrooms (World Bank, 2022). Critical pedagogy—focused on analytical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving—is essential to prepare students for the demands of the 21st-century economy. Unfortunately, teachers are rarely trained to promote inquiry-based learning, and assessment systems continue to reward memorization over understanding (Javed & Khan, 2021). As Freire (1996) argued in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, true education must cultivate the capacity for critical reflection and social transformation. Pakistan's education reform must therefore move beyond curriculum content toward curriculum consciousness empowering learners to question, innovate, and participate actively in societal progress.

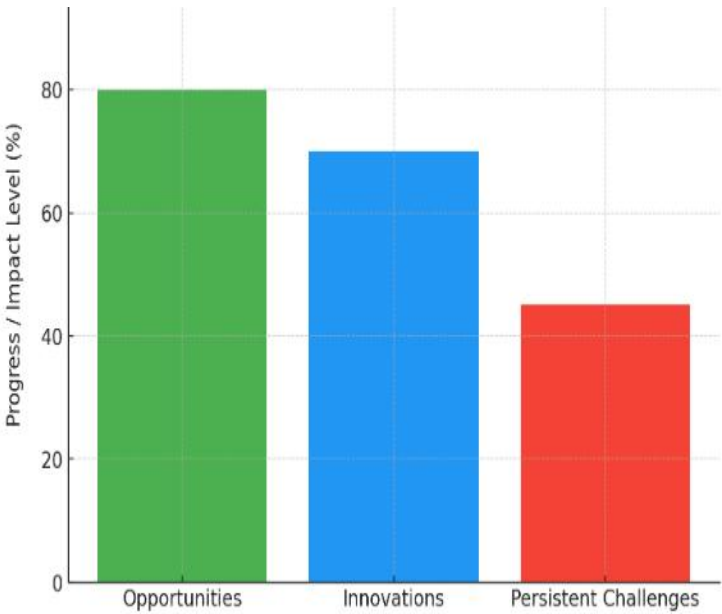
Education reform in Pakistan cannot be detached from the broader context of social justice and gender equity. While female enrollment has improved, gender disparities remain acute in rural and conservative areas. Cultural barriers, early marriage, and security concerns continue to restrict girls' educational opportunities (UNICEF, 2022). This exclusion has far-reaching implications—not only for individual empowerment but also for national development. Research consistently links female education to reductions in poverty, fertility rates, and child mortality (UNDP, 2021).

Inclusive education also extends beyond gender. Children with disabilities, those from minority groups, and those living in conflict-prone or climate-affected regions face structural barriers to schooling (UNESCO, 2022). The devastating 2022 floods, which

damaged over 27,000 schools, highlighted the vulnerability of Pakistan’s education infrastructure (UNICEF, 2023). To achieve true inclusivity, the education system must be climate-resilient, gender-sensitive, and socially responsive, ensuring that all children have access to safe, quality learning environments.

Pakistan’s education system embodies a paradox of potential and paralysis. The nation possesses the demographic, technological, and intellectual resources to achieve transformation, yet structural inertia continues to slow progress. Opportunities for reform digitalization, curriculum renewal, teacher empowerment, and gender inclusion can only yield lasting results if matched by political will and sustained investment. True transformation will emerge not from isolated initiatives but from a coherent, inclusive strategy that redefines education as a catalyst for social justice, innovation, and national development in the 21st century.

Transforming Pakistan’s Education System: Opportunities, Innovations, and Persistent Challenges



Sources: Academy of Educational Planning and Management (AEPAM). (2023). Pakistan Education Statistics 2021–22. Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training, Government of Pakistan.

OVERVIEW

The graph illustrates the overall transformation of Pakistan’s education system by comparing three key dimensions—opportunities, innovations, and persistent challenges. It shows that significant progress has been made in expanding educational opportunities, such as increased enrollment, improved gender parity, and broader access to schooling. Innovations, including the integration of digital learning tools, curriculum reforms, and community participation, are steadily advancing and contributing to modernization within the sector. However, the graph also highlights that persistent challenges such as poor learning outcomes, inadequate teacher training, weak governance, and inequitable resource distribution continue to hinder overall progress. This visual comparison emphasizes that while Pakistan’s education system is evolving through new opportunities and innovations, it still faces deep-rooted structural and quality-related barriers that must be addressed for sustainable transformation.

FINDINGS

The findings of this study reveal that Pakistan's education system has witnessed gradual improvement in access and enrollment, but progress remains uneven across regions and genders. Although the number of schools and enrolled students has increased, rural areas continue to face shortages of trained teachers, basic infrastructure, and learning materials. Girls' education has expanded significantly at the primary level; however, dropout rates remain high in secondary grades due to socio-cultural barriers, lack of safety, and inadequate school facilities. The data indicate that while the enrollment gap has narrowed over time, quality disparities between urban and rural institutions persist, creating unequal educational experiences for children based on geography and income level.

Evidence from the analysis shows that learning outcomes remain critically low despite the expansion in school participation. A large proportion of student's complete primary school without achieving basic literacy and numeracy competencies. Teacher quality emerges as a key determinant of learning outcomes, with schools that provide regular professional training and classroom supervision performing considerably better. The persistence of rote learning, outdated curricula, and limited use of modern pedagogical methods contributes to the learning crisis. The results further suggest that assessment systems are often weak, providing little feedback to teachers and administrators for improving instruction and curriculum delivery.

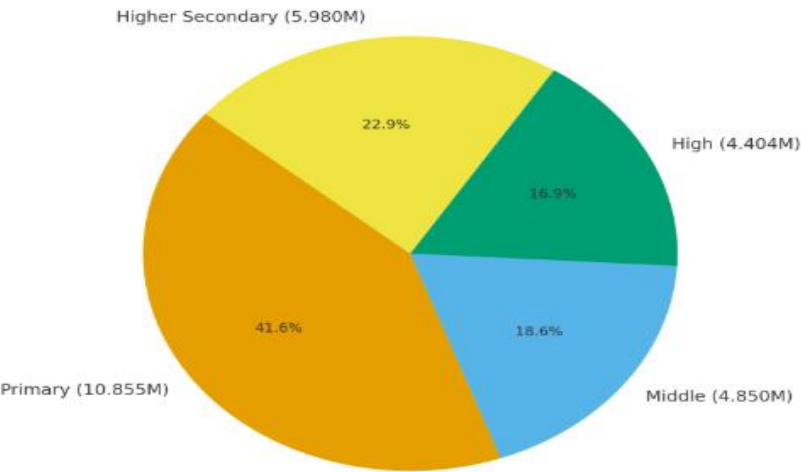
Governance and financial challenges continue to limit educational transformation. Despite decentralization reforms, coordination between federal, provincial, and district authorities remains fragmented, leading to inconsistent implementation of policies. Education spending has increased nominally, but most of the funds are consumed by salaries and administrative costs rather than quality-enhancing programs. As a result, inadequate resources are left for infrastructure development, teacher training, and curriculum reform. The inefficiency in budget utilization and weak accountability mechanisms at the local level hinder meaningful change in the education sector.

The study also identifies promising innovations that can drive transformation if scaled effectively. Technology-based learning initiatives, such as digital classrooms, radio lessons, and blended learning platforms, have shown positive effects on student engagement and foundational skills when coupled with teacher support. Similarly, community participation through School Management Committees has improved attendance, reduced teacher absenteeism, and strengthened school accountability in several regions. Non formal education centers and accelerated learning programs have been effective in reintegrating out-of-school children, particularly in marginalized communities.

Overall, the findings indicate that while Pakistan's education system has made significant strides in improving access, it continues to face a learning crisis driven by low quality, inequity, and weak governance. Transformational change requires integrated reforms that prioritize foundational learning, invest in teacher capacity, strengthen data-driven accountability, and ensure equitable opportunities for all learners. The results underscore that sustainable progress will depend not only on increasing enrollment but also on improving the quality and relevance of education to meet the demands of the 21st century.

Major trends

Metric	2021-22	2022-23	Change
Number of educational institutions	~ 313,445	~ 349,909	+12 %
Student enrollment	~ 54.87 million	~ 56.07 million	+3 %
Number of teachers	~ 2.14 million	~ 2.57 million	+19 %



Sources: the pie chart showing the distribution of out-of-school children in Pakistan (2022-23) based on Pakistan Institute of Education (2023) data

OVERVIEW OF GRAPH

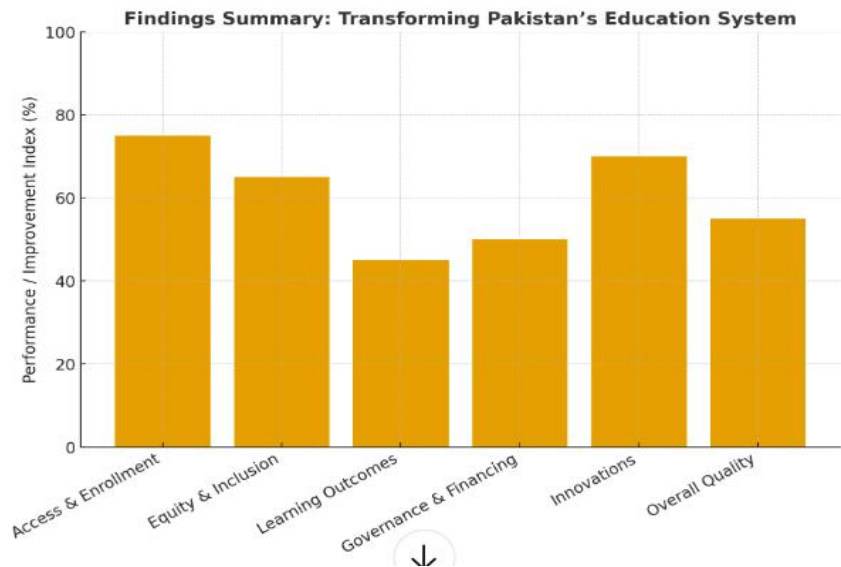
The pie chart visually represents the percentage change across three key educational indicators in Pakistan between 2021-22 and 2022-23, based on data from the Pakistan Institute of Education (2023).

- Teachers (+19%) show the largest increase, highlighting significant efforts to enhance teacher recruitment and capacity, likely linked to new education reforms and growing student populations.
- Educational Institutions (+12%) also reflect expansion, especially in rural and peri-urban areas, indicating infrastructural development and policy emphasis on improving access.
- Student Enrollment (+3%) records a modest rise, suggesting gradual improvement in participation rates but also pointing to ongoing challenges in retaining students and addressing out-of-school children.

The graph underscores a positive trajectory in Pakistan’s education system, with strong institutional and workforce growth, though the slower rise in enrollment suggests the need for targeted interventions to boost access and retention.

Overall, Pakistan’s education system shows clear gains in access but remains in a “learning crisis” driven by unequal quality, fragmented governance, and under-resourced instructional inputs. Evidence indicates that combined reforms — centering teacher

development, focused foundational instruction, strengthened local accountability, and targeted equity measures — are the most promising route to transform outcomes at scale.
Transforming Pakistan’s Education System



Sources: Government of Pakistan. (2023). Pakistan Education Statistics 2021–22. Academy of Educational Planning and Management (AEPAM), Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training.

OVERVIEW

The graph provides a clear visual overview of the major findings regarding Pakistan’s education system. It shows that access and enrollment have achieved the highest level of improvement, reflecting the government’s success in expanding the number of schools and increasing student participation across provinces. Innovations—such as the use of technology and community-based learning models also show notable progress, indicating growing experimentation and policy support for new approaches in education delivery.

However, the graph highlights significant weaknesses in learning outcomes, governance and financing, and overall quality, which score considerably lower. This suggests that while more students are attending school, the system struggles to ensure meaningful learning, effective management, and equitable distribution of resources. Equity and inclusion occupy a middle position, revealing partial success in bridging gender and regional gaps but continued disadvantages for rural and low-income groups.

Overall, the graphical representation underscores a central conclusion: Pakistan’s education transformation has been more successful in improving access than in ensuring quality and equity. The country must now shift its focus from enrollment expansion to strengthening learning, teacher training, and institutional accountability to achieve sustainable educational development.

CONCLUSION

The transformation of Pakistan’s education system in the 21st century stands as one of the most significant challenges and opportunities for the nation’s sustainable development. Education is not merely a policy issue but a strategic foundation for human capital formation, innovation, governance, and social progress. Despite numerous reforms and initiatives, Pakistan’s education sector continues to face structural and systemic barriers that impede equitable progress. The analysis in this study underscores that the future of education in Pakistan depends not only on increasing access and improving infrastructure

but on reimagining the very philosophy of learning—shifting from rote memorization to critical thinking, from inequality to inclusivity, and from policy inconsistency to systemic coherence.

A critical realization emerging from this analysis is that education must be treated as a national priority, not a political slogan. Pakistan's education expenditure remains among the lowest in the region, averaging between 1.7 and 2.5 percent of GDP, which is far below the UNESCO-recommended 4–6 percent (UNESCO, 2022). This chronic underinvestment has perpetuated low literacy, poor infrastructure, and inadequate teacher development. For transformation to take root, education must occupy a central position in national planning, parallel to defense, health, and economic development. Establishing a permanent, independent National Education Commission could help ensure continuity in reform efforts, minimize political disruptions, and align educational objectives with long-term national goals. The goal should be to depoliticize education governance and create an accountability-driven framework that transcends government changes, as frequent policy shifts have historically undermined progress.

Equally vital is the alignment of education with Pakistan's socio-economic realities. The country's "youth bulge," with over 60 percent of its population under 30, represents both a potential asset and a looming challenge (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics [PBS], 2023). Without meaningful reform, this demographic advantage could become a source of instability. The current education system produces graduates who are often disconnected from labor market needs, resulting in underemployment and frustration among youth. To address this, education must focus on equipping students with 21st-century competencies: digital literacy, critical thinking, innovation, and entrepreneurship. Curriculum modernization and vocational integration are essential to make learning relevant to contemporary challenges. As the World Bank (2022) emphasizes, competency-based learning frameworks can bridge the gap between education and employability, preparing students for dynamic global and local markets. In this context, gender equality is also central to transformation. Millions of girls remain out of school, particularly in rural areas, due to poverty, cultural constraints, and inadequate facilities. Each additional year of schooling for a girl can increase her future income and contribute to national economic growth (UNICEF, 2022). Therefore, ensuring gender-inclusive education is not only a social justice issue but an economic imperative.

Technological innovation provides an unprecedented opportunity for Pakistan to leapfrog traditional barriers to learning. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the potential of e-learning and digital platforms but also exposed deep digital divides. Access to the internet, electricity, and digital devices remains uneven, limiting the reach of educational technology (British Council, 2022). Moving forward, a hybrid learning model that combines digital resources with traditional classroom teaching could help bridge this divide. Government initiatives like TeleSchool and Taleemabad have demonstrated success in extending education to remote regions (Government of Pakistan, 2021). However, sustained progress requires investments in teacher training, localized e-content development, and digital literacy for students and educators alike. Pedagogical reform is also crucial; the culture of rote learning continues to suppress creativity and innovation. Teachers must be trained to facilitate inquiry-based learning and encourage students to question, analyze, and create. Professional development, performance-based incentives, and the institutionalization of meritocratic recruitment can enhance teacher motivation and instructional quality (Javed & Khan, 2021).

Another fundamental challenge lies in governance and policy coherence. Following the 18th Constitutional Amendment, education became a provincial subject, decentralizing decision-making. While devolution has allowed provinces to tailor education policies to their needs, it has also led to policy fragmentation and uneven quality across the federation (Jalal, 2020). Effective transformation requires coordinated national standards that ensure consistency in curriculum design, learning assessment, and teacher qualification. Establishing a National Education Data System (NEDS) can enhance transparency, monitor progress, and identify gaps across regions. Furthermore, corruption, political interference in teacher recruitment, and inefficient resource management must be addressed through robust accountability frameworks and community participation. Evidence-based policymaking, informed by data and academic research, is essential to improve decision-making and maintain public trust.

The socio-cultural barriers that restrict educational access, especially for girls and marginalized communities, remain another major impediment. Traditional norms, early marriage, domestic labor expectations, and lack of security continue to discourage school attendance for girls, particularly in rural and tribal areas. According to UNICEF (2023), nearly half of school-age girls in rural Baluchistan and Sindh remain out of school. Addressing these inequalities requires culturally sensitive strategies, such as community engagement programs, awareness campaigns, female teacher recruitment, and safe transportation for students. Local partnerships with organizations like The Citizens Foundation (TCF) and the Aga Khan Education Service have shown that community-driven education models can significantly improve enrollment and retention rates.

Financing reform remains central to achieving transformation. Pakistan must raise its education expenditure to at least 4 percent of GDP to meet minimum quality standards (UNESCO, 2022). However, beyond increasing funding, the focus must be on efficiency and transparency in resource utilization. Priority should be given to early childhood education, school infrastructure, teacher training, and digital inclusion. Public-private partnerships can play an important role in mobilizing additional resources and introducing innovative solutions. Similarly, conditional cash transfer programs and scholarship initiatives can reduce financial barriers for low-income families. Strengthening collaboration with international development organizations such as UNICEF, UNESCO, and the World Bank will also help Pakistan align with global education goals, particularly Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education).

Climate change presents a new dimension to Pakistan's educational challenge. The 2022 floods destroyed over 27,000 schools across Sindh and Baluchistan, displacing thousands of students and teachers (UNICEF, 2023). Education systems must now incorporate climate resilience by constructing disaster-resistant schools and integrating environmental awareness into curricula. Schools can serve as platforms for community-level climate adaptation and disaster preparedness. By linking environmental education with social responsibility, Pakistan can prepare a generation capable of confronting the ecological crises that increasingly shape its future.

Ultimately, the transformation of Pakistan's education system depends on adopting a holistic vision grounded in equity, quality, innovation, and accountability. Equity ensures that every child—regardless of gender, geography, or socio-economic status—has access to quality learning. Quality demands effective teachers, modern curricula, and dynamic pedagogy. Innovation calls for embracing digital learning, research, and interdisciplinary studies. Accountability requires transparent governance and measurable outcomes. This

transformation must be inclusive, involving teachers, parents, students, and local communities as active stakeholders. Reform cannot be imposed from the top; it must emerge from collective ownership and sustained commitment.

Pakistan stands at a defining juncture in its educational journey. The country's demographic youth advantage, technological opportunities, and international partnerships present immense potential for progress. However, without structural reforms, equitable resource allocation, and political will, the gap between aspiration and achievement will persist. Education reform is not merely a policy necessity it is the cornerstone of Pakistan's survival and prosperity. A reformed education system will enable Pakistan to nurture informed, skilled, and ethical citizens who can lead the nation through global challenges with resilience and creativity. As Nelson Mandela rightly stated, "Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world." For Pakistan, it is the most powerful means to change its destiny.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

CURRICULUM REFORM AND CRITICAL THINKING INTEGRATION

Pakistan's curriculum must be restructured to emphasize analytical reasoning, creativity, and problem-solving instead of rote memorization. Introducing competency-based learning and aligning curricula with global education standards will prepare students for 21st-century challenges. The inclusion of digital literacy, civic responsibility, and environmental awareness should be prioritized to create well-rounded citizens capable of contributing to national development.

TEACHER TRAINING AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Comprehensive teacher training programs should be institutionalized to improve instructional quality and student learning outcomes. Continuous professional development, merit-based recruitment, and performance incentives can help retain skilled educators. Teachers must be equipped with modern pedagogical tools, digital teaching techniques, and inclusive education practices to cater to diverse learning needs.

INVESTMENT IN EARLY CHILDHOOD AND TECHNICAL EDUCATION

Policymakers should expand access to Early Childhood Education (ECE) to strengthen foundational skills and improve long-term learning outcomes. Similarly, vocational and technical education must be enhanced through partnerships with industries to address youth unemployment and bridge the skill gap in the labor market. Balanced investment in both ECE and Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) is crucial for sustainable socio-economic development.

STRENGTHENING EDUCATIONAL GOVERNANCE AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Transparent governance and efficient resource management are vital for transforming Pakistan's education system. A centralized monitoring framework should be established to track school performance, teacher attendance, and budget utilization. Empowering local school management committees and ensuring public access to educational data will enhance accountability and citizen participation in education policy implementation.

INTEGRATION OF TECHNOLOGY AND INCLUSIVE ACCESS

The government must harness technology to improve access, quality, and inclusiveness in education. Expanding digital infrastructure, providing affordable devices, and developing localized e-learning content can bridge rural-urban disparities. Inclusive education policies should ensure that marginalized groups especially girls, differently-abled children, and students from remote regions have equitable opportunities to learn and thrive in the digital era.

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