



Private sector has role to play in education (Pt 5)
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Private sector participation at preschool is already robust and there is not much more that can be done to increase that. However, the glaring deficiencies must be remedied.

One, these private preschools cater only to those who can afford them. No surprise there as they are profit-making ventures. Two, there is minimal regulatory oversight, it is strictly a case of buyer (or more correctly, parents) beware.

Private preschools catering to the poor and disadvantaged are non-existent except those few set up by religious and charitable entities, as well as public social agencies. The government could increase that number considerably by granting generous subsidies.

As we want to encourage our young to integrate early, these grants should only be given to those preschools whose enrollees reflect the general population. If the subsidies were generous enough, there would be plenty of takers. I envisage a chain of brand name preschools set up all over the country catering to the poor.

The government must regulate these private preschools more stringently to ensure their safety. Such issues as adequacy and safety of the physical facility, criminal background checks on the staff, and qualifications of the licensees must be clearly established before these preschools could be set up. The facilities should also be regularly inspected to ensure their compliance.

There has been a remarkable increase in private sector participation worldwide at the school level both in developing as well as developed countries.

In resource-challenged Benin, enrolment in private primary schools increased from three to 12 percent from 1990 to 2005, and eight to 25 percent for secondary schools, reflecting the vast potential for contributions from the private sector even in a poor country.

Private sector participation can take two forms: On its own, independent of the government except for regulatory compliance, or in partnership with the public sector (public-private partnership - PPP).

Both would require an official recognition of the fact that while education is a public good, the government is not the only entity that can provide it.

As schools are concerned with the nurturing of young minds - the future citizens - permits to operate a private school even one free of government funding should not be granted liberally as if one were dispensing licenses to sell ice cream. Even operators of ice cream parlors have to meet certain rules with respect to public health.

Private schools too, must be subjected to certain rules not only with respect to protecting its consumers (students) but also in serving legitimate national interests.

example of the first would be to require these schools to post performance bonds such that if they were to fail, the students would be compensated for their inconvenience and time loss.



Beyond that I do not think the government has any legitimate right to demand these schools follow the national curriculum or dictate the teachers they employ.

As for serving the national interest, these schools must assume their appropriate responsibility of preparing their students to be citizens of a plural Malaysia. Thus their students must be sufficiently fluent in our national language.

Specifically the school must teach Malay language every school day and at every level. To prevent such classes from being a sham, their students' aggregate performance must match those of government schools. If not, these schools would risk losing their license.

All the current private schools - international, independent Chinese, and private religious schools - meet these minimal standards, except perhaps some of the private pondok religious schools in Kedah and the East Coast. This is evident from the regular news reports of students succumbing to food poisoning or being burnt to death in dorm fires.

The greatest demand is for international schools, in part because they do not follow the national curriculum. This tells us something of what citizens feel about our national curriculum. These schools are still few in numbers and expensive.

If we liberalise the setting up of such schools and open up the admissions, many more would be set up. Then the wonders of the marketplace would take over: Their fees would come down because of the competition and more Malaysians could afford them.

As with anything else, we will never know how such a policy would actually turn out. Thus it would make sense to start out small, like giving out permits for about 20-25 such schools initially and then study the results for the first few years.

My hope is that the experiment would be so successful that there would unanimity to expand it. By this I mean that these schools would provide quality education, with their students flawlessly fluent in as well as proud of our national language, and have a faculty and student body representative of Malaysian society.

The poor would also be sufficiently represented, made possible through scholarships. In short, they would emulate the successful "private" non-profit American prep schools.

Of course many things could go wrong. There could be corruption in the awards of these permits. The schools would then be expensive, ineffective, and merely a repository for spoilt rich kids who would be illiterate in our national language and have no appreciation of our history. That would only generate a backlash.



Or these schools could be set up by extremist groups (secular and religious) bent on perpetuating their own brand of intolerance or on proselytising rather than educating. That too, would not be healthy. Should any of these were to happen, then the policy or its implementation would have to be reexamined and modified.

The other avenue for private sector participation would be through a variety of public-private partnership (PPP). The World Bank recently analysed the global experience with PPPs. At one extreme is the Netherlands



where the government is merely the provider of financing with the private sector the provider of services.

The best option for Malaysia

At the other end is Chile with its extensive use of vouchers. In between we have charter schools (America), direct subsidies (Quebec), or where private contractors are engaged to run public schools (America).

Nearly two thirds of Dutch pupils attend private schools, which can either be fully or partially funded publicly. This model obviously works for it receives wide support. Dutch students also consistently score at the top in various international comparisons like TIMMS.

If such a model were to be adopted locally, there would be the inevitable self-segregation based on class, ethnicity, or religious beliefs. That would not be healthy. There would also be the question of inequity of access based on geography, with the good schools in affluent areas and beyond the reach (physically as well as psychologically) of the poor.

The best for Malaysia would be to have PPP along the concept of charter schools. Charter schools are fully funded by the state but run by private (usually non-profit) entities. The state would pay the school the same amount what it would normally cost for a pupil to attend government school.

The main barrier to charter schools in America is that such permits are issued only by the local public school board. That immediately sets up a conflict of interest because for every charter school it approves, funds would be taken away from the board's budget. Further, to maintain their charter these schools have to satisfy the local school board, which views such schools as unwelcome competitors.

I suggest that Malaysia adopts the charter concept but with some adaptations. The first is that these charters should be given only to entities that meet the openly stated criteria put forth by MOE. These should address the financial and academic requirements, specifically the qualifications of senior academic officers like the headmaster.

He or she should have a degree from a recognised university and have specified years of relevant experience. I would also put as a requirement the governing board has significant representation from parents and teachers.

The student body of these schools must also reflect Malaysian society with respect to race and socio-economic class. To minimise inequity of access based on geography, these schools must also have sufficient hostel facilities to cater for those who live beyond commuting distance.

The admission policy too must be fair and transparent. Where there are more applicants than space, the school must have a fair method of selection (a lottery for example) to prevent favoritism or corruption.

This would also avoid these schools from skimming the top talents. There must be exceptions of course, to accommodate the siblings of present students and children of staff members.

As for the curriculum, the only requirement would be that these schools teach our national language for one period a day at all levels. Again as with private schools, the students of

these charter schools must collectively demonstrate competency in Malay comparable to those attending national schools.

If at any time these schools fail to maintain these standards, they would be given a specified time (three years, for example) to correct the deficiencies, or risk losing their charter.

In return such schools would get preferred government funding and credit for capital projects like new buildings and instituting new programmes, in addition to their per student grants.

Beyond those guidelines these schools would be free to carve their own path, including the freedom to choose the curriculum and language of instruction. I venture that if there were to be sufficient demand from a broad section of Malaysians for a charter school using Swahili, there will be one.

Again, as with the private school programme, I would start small, limiting such charter schools to about 15 or 20 each for primary and secondary levels per state. Study the development, and if successful expand it. I would also allow for the conversion of present schools into charter schools upon petition by a majority of the teachers and parents.

Malaysia should also be open to other models of PPP. One would be to have private entities (local or foreign) run a national school under a management contract. That would include recruiting the teachers to designing the curriculum, subject to the same conditions as charter schools.



The difference is that the contractor would not own the physical facility. The buildings and land would remain government-owned. Likewise, the government would select the students entering such schools.

My first candidate for such private management would be our residential schools. I would invite experienced operators locally and abroad to bid in running such schools. The contract would specify the goals, like the type of matriculation examinations the students would sit, as well as the costs.

Imagine the operators of Exeter running Malay College, or Taylor College with its excellent track record of preparing students for the GCE A level running Tunku Kurshiah College.

Another PPP would be the reverse, where private companies bid to build the entire school complete with desks, chairs and blackboards to the government's specifications and then lease it back to the government.

The government would run the school, just like any other government school. The P3 programme of Canada's Nova Scotia province is one such programme. Such a scheme would lighten the strain on the government's capital budget.

Truly the opportunities for meaningful private sector participation in education, either alone or in partnership with the government, are limitless, bounded only by our creative imaginations and self-imposed limitations.

There is a great pent-up demand for a school system other than what is being offered today by our national schools with its hide-bound culture and outmoded curriculum.

We see this in the backlog of applications to international schools, and more dramatically in the daily convoy of school buses carrying our young across the causeway in Johor.

It is time we address this desperate need with the help of the private sector.

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