In 1925, Yale professor George Counts observed key problems in Philippine basic education that, sadly, resonate with the issues plaguing the Philippine education system. Half of the school-aged children in the 1920s were outside the reach of schools. Pupil performance was generally low in subjects that relied on English although achievement in math and science was at par with the average performance of American school children. The functional literacy of children in schools left much to be desired, constraining learning in later grades.

More than 80 years after Counts published his observations, basically the same issues remain. Drop out rates, for instance, continue to be high, threatening to leave many more children out of school given the country’s high population growth rate. Currently, about 28 to 34 percent of the population do not reach or complete Grade 6. In the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), the poorest region in terms of human development, only 3 out of 10 children who enter Grade 1 move on to Grade 6 while only 1 out of the 10 will be able to reach fourth year high school. Performance in several subjects has also remained pathetically low. Seen against the achievement of Filipino pupils in science and mathematics in the 1920s, pupil performance in these subjects has deteriorated remarkably. As to the language issue, it remains unresolved in the minds of policymakers despite numerous scientific studies supporting the use of a child’s mother tongue in the first few years of schooling and the Department of

PIDS Policy Notes are observations/analyses written by PIDS researchers on certain policy issues. The treatise is holistic in approach and aims to provide useful inputs for decisionmaking.

This Note was condensed from Chapter 2 of the Philippine Human Development Report 2008/2009 by Claudette S. Malana with comments from Dr. Cynthia Bautista and Jennifer P.T. Liguton. The views expressed are those of the original authors of the PHDR’s Chapter 2 and do not necessarily reflect those of PIDS or any of the study’s sponsors.
Education’s recent evidence-based policy that support multilingual education.

This is not to say though that there have been no attempts to improve Philippine education. On the contrary, there have been significant reform interventions at the level of policy and programs since Counts joined the Monroe Survey in the 1920s, many of them progressive in their philosophy and approaches. In the last 20 years alone, several important broad frameworks for education reform have been instituted—Education for All: the Philippine Plan of Action 1990–1999; the 1991 Congressional Commission on Education (EDCOM); the 2000 Presidential Commission on Education Reform (PCER); the 2000 Education for All (EFA) Assessment; the ADB-WB initiated and funded Philippine Education Sector Study (PESS); the 2006 National Action Plan for Education for All 2015 (EFA 2015); and the 2006 Basic Education Sector Reform Agenda (BESRA).

Why have these frameworks and the programs they ushered not succeeded in transforming the country’s education landscape? Why are the analyses of the dismal state of Philippine education tiresome in their repetition year after year? What have constrained the Department of Education (DepEd) from translating the successful results of structural reforms and programmatic changes into large-scale, integrated, and sustained outcomes?

This Policy Note, which condenses the analysis and recommendations in Chapter 2 of the 2008/2009 Philippine Human Development Report (PHDR), provides insight into this seeming paradox by focusing on one of the reform measures discussed in the chapter—the decentralization of basic education.

Decentralization through site management or school-based management (SBM) is a major global education reform thrust which started in the 1980s. In the Philippines, the impetus for its implementation came with the legislation of Republic Act (RA) 9155 or the 2001 Governance of Basic Education Act, a landmark law that transferred, at least in theory, the governance of basic education to schools. Within the law’s legal framework, DepEd instituted SBM to make those closest to the delivery of services more accountable for the results of their operations.
As practiced in the Philippines, SBM is more than a mechanism for decentralized education governance. By giving schools the autonomy to decide on administrative and substantive matters, it has also encouraged the exploration of various strategies to improve learning. Moreover, SBM has provided a framework for the integrated management of diverse inputs both for achieving equitable access to quality education and instituting changes in the approaches to learning and pedagogy.

DepEd’s initial move toward decentralization was through the implementation of externally funded projects like the Basic Education Assistance for Mindanao (BEAM), the Third Elementary Education Project (TEEP), the Secondary Education Development and Improvement Project (SEDIP), and Strengthening the Implementation of Basic Education in Selected Regions in the Visayas (STRIVE). Two of these successful projects are described in Box 1.

While Project BEAM and TEEP differed in many aspects such as their type and source of funding; underlying philosophies of learning; historical evolution and operationalization of the SBM approach within each project; and the politics of their SBM implementation, it cannot be denied that both projects have resulted in significant outcomes. In terms of student achievement, for example, the student assessment tests based on the basic education curriculum competencies for BEAM known as RAMSE or Regional Assessment in Mathematics, Science, and English reveal that the average scores of the learners increased significantly from 2004 to 2006, particularly for items reflecting higher-order thinking skills. Similarly for TEEP, the universally administered National Achievement Test (NAT) results show that from SY 2002/2003 to SY 2006/2007, a higher proportion of TEEP-SBM schools crossed the 75 percent NAT mean percentage score, DepEd’s desired minimum competency level, and the 60 percent “near mastery” level compared to other clusters of divisions that are as poor or less poor than the TEEP divisions.

Beyond good student performance, both Project BEAM and TEEP are replete with stories disclosing their respective successes in changing classroom and management cultures. The 2008 BEAM Evaluation noted, for instance, that the BEAM-trained teachers tended to better understand “big ideas” and appreciate that classrooms should be more child-friendly, participative, and stimulating. They also saw their role to be more of encouraging creativity, inquisitiveness, and group activities rather than of simply being lecturers. TEEP contributions to the...
Box 1. Project BEAM and TEEP

**BEAM**
The Basic Education Assistance for Mindanao (BEAM) project started in January 2002 and ended in November 2009. A US$25.66 million DepEd project funded by the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAid), Project BEAM sought to improve the access to and quality of basic education in Southern and Central Mindanao, specifically in Regions XI, XII, and ARMM in light of Mindanao’s broad-based poverty in education and peace and order problem. Consisting of four components—human resource development; materials development; access; and project management, monitoring and evaluation, Project BEAM built on the gains from earlier projects assisted by the Australian government, specifically the Philippines-Australia Science and Mathematics Education Project (PASMEP), which covered the whole Philippines but with primary focus on Regions II, VII, and X, and the Project on Basic Education (PROBE), with a specific focus on Regions II, VII, IX, X, and XIII (Caraga).

Project BEAM’s underlying philosophy of learning asserts that higher-order thinking skills are likely to develop in flexible and cooperative learning classroom environments rather than in environments characterized by a one-way transmission of knowledge to passive learners. This is why BEAM invested substantially in capacity building at all levels—teacher educators, teachers, school heads, division and regional personnel—toward learner-centered management and teaching.

Corollary to this, Project BEAM facilitated the formulation of School Improvement Plans (SIPs) that are oriented to a student-centered, activity-based approach to teaching and learning in the divisions within its scope. The use of these plans in school management constituted the operation of SBM in the BEAM project.

**TEEP**
The Third Elementary Education Project (TEEP), on the other hand, started in 1998, with financing from a government loan agreement with the World Bank and the Japan Bank for International Cooperation (JBIC). It ended in June 2006. Conceptualized in the context of the education crisis of 1990—e.g., lack of physical facilities and learning materials, poor teacher quality, inequities of access, and inadequate financing, among others—the project consisted of three major components: civil works, education and development, and financial administration.

TEEP did not begin with a well-articulated learning and training philosophy. Its conceptualization was enlightened more by empirical research on the determinants of desirable student outcomes and the discursive thrust toward decentralization worldwide than by a coherent philosophy of education. This is why TEEP allocated most of its resources for the procurement of inputs such as classrooms and textbooks. The subsequent flow of resources to education and training beginning in the early 2000s happened later in the project’s life, when SBM came to the awareness of TEEP.

Given the late evolution of SBM and learning-oriented interventions in TEEP, its training was not as methodical and systematic as that of Project BEAM. Unlike the latter’s reliance on a constructivist learning philosophy, TEEP training was more pragmatist in its orientation. It developed from concrete demands that ranged from the need to supervise classroom construction and procure goods to the more substantive improvement of learning outcomes. Because TEEP proceeded without a full-blown and integrated capacity building plan, its training processes and procedures ended up to be largely school-based and, in effect, quite flexible.
management culture are just as significant, particularly in finance management.

Both Project BEAM and TEEP have ended but their positive outcomes contributed to the incorporation of SBM into DepEd’s BESRA and its critical role as its linchpin. Nevertheless, the scaling up of SBM to other divisions has not moved fast enough. An examination of some of the constraints to widespread implementation provides a glimpse into some of the factors that have prevented education reforms in the past from truly transforming education on the ground.

Constraints to education reform

A number of factors have stood in the way of enhancing DepEd’s capacity to shift paradigms, and transform and scale up successful reform initiatives like the SBM. Many of these are institutional in nature. A major factor singled out in the education chapter of the PHDR is DepEd’s almost entire dependence on foreign-assisted projects that have reform activities built into pilot project components.

The last 20 years have witnessed, for example, the syndrome of “projectization.” DepEd seemed to have moved from one foreign-assisted program to another, with donor agencies taking the lead in initiating, nurturing, monitoring, and seeing the reform-oriented projects through to their completion. Furthermore, since reform initiatives were mostly undertaken on a pilot project basis, moving from one externally funded project to another has reduced the institution’s energy to move a notch higher, to scaling up the implementation of the reform.

This situation is compounded by the fact that most of the donor-initiated reform projects, while administered within DepEd itself, lie outside the main line of operations of the education bureaucracy. As a consequence, the reform projects remain peripheral to the operation of DepEd throughout their implementation. This has thus prevented the Department from orchestrating, directing, and worse, owning the reform process. It has also kept DepEd from developing an institutionalized system of processing and reviewing the project outcomes and their implications for reform throughout the public school system.

There is nothing wrong with treating reform interventions as projects within DepEd, with the Department leaders setting clear targets for the completion of different components of the process and the organic staff seconded to ensure that the reform-oriented goals are achieved. “Projectization” becomes problematic—and this is what the chapter on education in the PHDR criticizes—when scaling up or sustaining reforms is not done without external prodding or when the actors involved in the project no longer sustain the implementation of the reforms after the project ends.

It is important to note, however, that not all the factors constraining education reform are
within DepEd’s control. For one, there are procedural mismatches in the national budget cycle which stymie the release of funds in critical stages of project implementation. The political meddling of national and local officials also affects the course of reform implementation.

But perhaps one of the major factors that hinder education reform has been the constant change in the leadership of DepEd. In eight years since 2000, there has been a succession of six secretaries of education. The critical role of the education secretary cannot be overemphasized. After all, the secretary possesses the power to push the bureaucracy to prioritize the implementation of a reform agenda. He/she can also break the impasse either in policy revision or in the implementation of existing policy. The rapid turnover of the education leadership in previous years has thus resulted in breaks in the momentum of decentralization as embodied in the SBM reform.

A strong leadership alone, however, is not sufficient. It must also be accompanied by a strong second layer of career executives who will be able to sustain the reform agenda when the people at the helm changes with each new administration. Likewise, a second layer of career executives will not be able to hasten the pace of reform without good leaders at the regional, division, and school levels. One of the key lessons from Project BEAM and TEEP is that leadership at all levels matter, but mostly at the levels closest to the ground.

Apart from these institutional factors, there are also other constraints such as the traditional norms that guide everyday life in the bureaucracy. These include prevailing behaviors, practices, and mindsets. As in other government agencies, resistance to institutional change seems to outbalance the push for reform within the DepEd bureaucracy. This is unfortunate since both Project BEAM and TEEP have shown that bureaucratic cultures can change without a change of actors.

**Hope for the future: the Basic Education Sector Reform Agenda (BESRA)**

Given the above discussion, is there hope for the transformation of the Philippines’ basic education system?

The task may be gargantuan but the prospects are bright. Building on the gains of previous projects like BEAM and TEEP, the BESRA that DepEd launched in 2006 holds much promise for the future of Filipino children. It is a comprehensive and sector-wide reform.
package that aims to change the entire sector and not just target sites for pilot implementation. Its general objectives are anchored on the targets of the EFA global program for universal access and success of children in basic education schooling. A major premise of BESRA is the importance of school-based management for attaining the targets for the entire sector.

Because it approaches reform from a broad and multicomponent perspective, BESRA provides a significant deviation from the previous pilot project approach. It also differs from previous practice in that it hopes to involve various sectors at different levels of the education bureaucracy not only in the implementation stage but also and more importantly in the key planning aspects of the reform activity. This hopes to ensure that BESRA will not be a project run independently of the mainstream DepEd offices.

Another important development is the extent to which DepEd has engaged the larger public, apart from the various sectors within the education bureaucracy, in its advocacy of the BESRA. This advocacy now includes the donor community which seems to have forged a tacit agreement to fund programs within the BESRA framework. Interestingly, the local and national stakeholders in education seem to have also bought into the BESRA framework.

In summary, the more extensive involvement of the DepEd bureaucracy, the wide consensus building, and the increased levels of accountability being exacted from DepEd are features of the BESRA that, hopefully, would give it the needed impetus to transform the education on the ground.

Making BESRA move forward: recommendations

Despite the positive features of BESRA, however, there remain a good number of skeptics, both within and outside DepEd, who believe that the institution does not have the means to carry out reforms other than through disjointed externally initiated projects. Moreover, these cynics and skeptics feel that the positive developments associated with BESRA remain tenuous because efforts could easily revert to the old practices when the implementation becomes difficult and/or when the highest levels of leadership do not push for these changes in practice. Indeed, the challenge for DepEd is how to revise and strengthen its various institutional processes to enable it to carry out its own reform agenda. The much-needed tasks are many, among which are the following:

Assess and manage risks. DepEd should take more deliberate steps toward assessing and anticipating the risks at the different levels of DepEd’s operations. These include risks at the community and school levels, keeping in mind the wide diversity in the economic and socio-political conditions surrounding the over 50,000 schools in the country.
Anticipating the risks at the different levels of DepEd’s operations. These include risks at the community and school levels, keeping in mind the wide diversity in the economic and socio-political conditions surrounding the over 50,000 schools in the country. There are also important risks related to the middle and higher levels of the DepEd bureaucracy. Decentralization, by definition, will mean shifting resources and decisionmaking closer to the ground, which would have implications for the functions of the DepEd’s central bureaus, regional offices, and division offices. Anticipating these risks and learning from the experiences of TEEP and Project BEAM should contribute toward fine-tuning the implementation aspects of BESRA.

Strengthen TWGs and multisectoral decisions. The creation of technical working groups (TWGs) which are responsible for the attainment of BESRA’s key reform thrusts (KRTs) is a positive step toward gaining more widespread ownership of the outcomes of the reforms as it involves a process of representation and consensus building. The effectiveness of the TWGs, however, is highly dependent on whether their composition remains truly representative, and on the extent to which the representations truly strive to forge consensus within their respective constituencies.

Expand advocacy and social marketing of BESRA. Getting the entire DepEd bureaucracy to become more aware of BESRA and commit to it in the shortest possible time is urgent. Beyond DepEd, the commitment of more sectors to BESRA would not only provide DepEd with a stronger network of support but also create a larger community that can demand accountabilities from DepEd. Thus, in the shorter term, advocacy and social marketing will provide DepEd with the resources to augment its limited coffers. In the longer term, this wide social network will be DepEd’s watchdog that will keep it on its toes, so to speak.

Prioritize capacity building. The key features of reform directed at decentralization involve empowering and capacitating sectors of the DepEd bureaucracy who have traditionally been left to fend for themselves and make do with what little they have. For decentralization to work, DepEd needs personnel, especially teachers, who can be effective despite the limited resources at their command.
effective despite the limited resources at their command. Thus, DepEd ought to prioritize efforts to build capacities among its staff, and focus on capacity building that is self-sustaining in the long term.

Continue developing efficient systems of procurement, financial management, human resources, and formula-based allocation of MOOE. The 28 April 2008 joint World Bank and AusAid Report on the implementation of BESRA noted improvements in the system of procurement of goods. It cited, for instance, that DepEd’s decision to unbundle procurement of manuscripts from printing contributed to a lower price of textbooks. Efforts to further push for this kind of improvements must therefore continue. So should improvements in the areas of, among others, financial management, human resource information system, and management information system.

Prioritize efficient and cost-effective interventions. Given the volatility of the fiscal situation that surrounds DepEd’s operations, it is not likely that the material resources available will improve dramatically in the future. DepEd’s dependency on donor organizations is understandable as it pushes for major reforms, but there are long-term consequences to such dependence. Thus, DepEd should push for reform activities that do not require additional infusion of external funds, or that involve more cost-effective use of existing funds at all levels of the bureaucracy.

Define new metrics of success. At some point, when the consequences of BESRA become more concrete, DepEd will need to develop more appropriate metrics for assessing its progress. Clearly, some of the standard metrics such as participation rate, cohort survival rate, and drop out rate, and all those defined in the EFA 2015 need to be preserved. In some of the more important goals of BESRA, however, particularly goals related to school-based management, teacher quality, and the attainment of curriculum standards, DepEd will need to develop better assessment tools and systems.

Redefine the role of DepEd central offices. In line with the preceding suggestions, there is a need to redefine the role of the DepEd Central Office, including its various bureaus. The present institutional culture of DepEd is such that no one down the line moves unless there is an explicit instruction or memo from the higher offices. This top-down management process is antithetical to the core values of decentralization in BESRA, and will need to be reconfigured. For the schools to be truly empowered, the central office needs to take on different functions other than prescribing practices. It should thus take on roles that are more similar to orchestrating different units and ensuring that they move toward the same goal, even as they may move through various routes.
In BESRA lies the hope of widespread institutional reform that would finally lead to changes in the Philippines’ education landscape. Hence, it is important that BESRA's multicomponent, multilevel, and multidisciplinary agenda gets the necessary focused and sustained implementation across political administrations.

Some of the more important goals of BESRA, however, particularly goals related to school-based management, teacher quality, and the attainment of curriculum standards, DepEd will need to develop better assessment tools and systems. Some metrics will also need to be reconsidered. For example, if some schools successfully develop learning modules that involve indigenous learning resources, textbooks may then become unnecessary. Thus, the metric of one textbook per student may no longer be appropriate and the most important metric would be one that relates to student learning.

Concluding remarks

Since the 1920s, various reformist interventions that have sought to change the face of the country’s education seem to have failed. The tireless repetition of issues in most analyses of Philippine education problems and the seeming inability of the education bureaucracy to implement well-articulated, discursive, and comprehensive reform frameworks have made skeptics out of many educators, educationists, and the public at large.

Indeed, the challenges have been daunting for reformists who have aimed to change either institutional structures and processes or classroom and out-of-classroom learning. But there could be certain interventions that are built on previous recommendations for institutional reforms in DepEd which have not only improved student achievement remarkably, but have also begun to change the institutional culture in pockets of the DepEd bureaucracy without changing its staffing. The formulation of BESRA’s components is one that is built on such interventions.

In BESRA therefore lies the hope of widespread institutional reform that would finally lead to changes in the Philippines’ education landscape. Hence, it is important that BESRA's multicomponent, multilevel, and multidisciplinary agenda gets the necessary focused and sustained implementation across political administrations.