

Examining Philippine-US Cooperation Amid the Covid-19 Pandemic: Setting a Broader Agenda for Educating Filipino Children and Youth

By **Ma. Glenda Lopez Wui, PhD.**

The United States' introduction of the public school system is considered one of its most important legacies in the Philippines. Private schools were also established alongside public schools during the American colonial period. From a handful at the start of American colonization in 1898, elementary and high schools have grown to around 60,900 in 2021, catering to the basic education needs of about 26 million Filipino students according to official figures from the Philippines Department of Education.

Dr. Ma. Glenda Lopez Wui, Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Ateneo de Manila University explains that “[t]he US Government has been providing support to the Philippines to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on Filipino students,” including providing nearly \$3 million in funds and equipment to support education delivery.

As in other countries, the Philippines was forced to shut down schools due to the Covid-19 pandemic. However, The Philippines is the last country in the world to re-open schools. The Philippines Department of Education allowed the limited re-opening of 120 elementary and high schools in areas with low Covid-19 cases on November 15, 2021, after almost 20 months of being closed. Nonetheless, the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) has been advocating for re-opening more schools because of the adverse consequences of prolonged school closures on students' learning and overall well-being. UNICEF has outlined various recommendations to ensure the safe re-opening of schools including adequate personal protective equipment, facilities for hygiene, regular cleaning, proper ventilation, staggered schedules, and information sharing.

In addition to the above recommendations, the COVID-19 vaccination of teachers, school staff, and eligible students should be fast-tracked. Support from vaccine-manufacturing countries, like the United States, is crucial in that regard. The experiences of many countries show that COVID-19 outbreaks have been prevented in schools with high vaccination rates and where health protocols, such as masking, frequent hand washing, and physical distancing are observed.

As schools have not fully re-opened, support for millions of children and youth whose learning occurs at home should be ensured. Maximizing the use of information technology in education is a critical objective. However, many Filipino students lack access to information technology. A national survey, conducted by the research group Social Weather Stations in November 2020 among 5- to 20-year-old Filipino students, found that 40 percent did not have any devices for distance learning. Students disconnected from school are the most at-risk of dropping out from their studies and could join the growing number of Filipino out-of-school-youth (OSY), a metric tracking 16- to 24-year-old individuals. In 2017, there were an estimated 3.53 million Filipino OSYs.

The US Government has been providing support to the Philippines to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on Filipino students. In June 2020, through the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the US government provided \$2.5 million to assist the Philippines Department of Education (DepEd) in implementing the Basic Education Learning Continuity Plan which was designed to ensure education delivery during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Plan aims to accomplish four objectives: 1) provide teachers with learning materials and instructional strategies that can be used in both school and home learning contexts; 2) assist DepEd in the development of user-friendly assessment tools for teachers to evaluate and support student literacy; 3) support

the design of learning activities that parents can implement at home; and, 4) establish partnerships with the private sector and local media companies to assist children with their learning during the school closure.

In July 2021, USAID turned over \$240,000-worth of distance learning equipment to the DepEd's Alternative Learning System (ALS) e-Skwela Learning Centers catering to out-of-school youth. Equipment donated included desktop units, printers, projectors, wireless routers, and other materials for ALS partners implementing distance learning programs in various parts of the Philippines.

As the aforementioned US initiatives are critical, the Philippine government must implement monitoring and assessment mechanisms to ensure objectives are met. While the Philippine government attends to school re-opening and continued online learning for most Filipino children and youth, it also needs to address deep-seated problems besetting its education system. Consistently low performance of Filipino students on international benchmark tests highlights the problematic state of Philippine education. In the 2019 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), Filipino grade 4 students scored the lowest out of 58 countries on math and science assessments.

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During a recent multi-sectoral assembly, the Philippine Business for Education (PBE) presented an Agenda for Education Reform aimed at producing legislative measures to address problems ailing the Philippine education system. Following are action points of the agenda:

1. Implementation of the Philippine Plan of Action for Nutrition to address the problem of malnutrition and stunting among children. It is estimated that one in three Filipino children under five years old is stunted.
2. Allot at least 20 percent of the government budget to education. The Philippines budgetary allocation for education was 13.5 percent in 2020, while the nation's peers, Thailand, Vietnam and Malaysia, averaged more than 20 percent on education spending.
3. Establish an Autonomous Assessment Agency that will regularly assess elementary and high school students' reading, writing, numeracy, and 21st-century skills. DepEd will use the assessment results to plan its interventions.
4. Institute a National Teacher Education Scholarship Bill to attract the best and brightest students to become teachers. They will study on scholarships at leading Philippine teaching institutes and be required to teach after graduation.
5. Strengthen the mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) law. Under the law, which recognizes 19 languages, grades 1 to 3 students are taught in their mother tongues to learn better. After which, students will transition to Filipino (Tagalog) and English as the medium of instruction. To strengthen MTB-MLE implementation, teachers should be better trained on MTB-MLE and provided with high-quality teaching materials written in the students' mother tongue.

PBE hopes to gain significant headway regarding the above-discussed action plans through its continuing dialogue with concerned government agencies. Regarding the first action point, the United States could provide support to the feeding programs of Philippine schools. Meanwhile, the Philippines could tap into its relationship with the United States to generate additional resources to better address the ill effects of the pandemic on its education system. US assistance in enhancing students' access to and teachers' competence in online learning is critical even beyond the pandemic given the need for the Philippines to develop its capability in those areas.

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