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The Madrasa Myth

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And how private schooling can save Pakistan's next generation.

On May 3, the *New York Times* published a lengthy description of Pakistan's education system. The article, like so many before it, rehearsed a well-known narrative in which government schools are failing while madrasas are multiplying, providing a modicum of education for Pakistan's poorest children.

Arif Ali/AFP/Getty Images

Knowledge is power: The reality of Pakistan's private schools is far from the hysterical image of madrasas.

"The concentration of madrasas here in southern Punjab has become an urgent concern in the face of Pakistan's expanding insurgency," veteran Times reporter Sabrina Tavernise wrote. "The schools offer almost no instruction beyond the memorizing of the Koran, creating a widening pool of young minds that are sympathetic to militancy."

The story coincided with a debate in the U.S. House Foreign Affairs Committee over a new aid package for Pakistan. The proposed legislation, among other initiatives, focuses upon eliminating madrasas with ties to terrorism and reforming the public school system, riven with teacher absenteeism and out-of-date pedagogy. Numerous charitable organizations and NGOs have also embraced this dual focus.

Unfortunately, this well-intentioned approach risks failure. First, contrary to the public hysteria about madrasas serving as "weapons of mass instruction," in 2005, just 1.3 percent of children in Pakistan's four main provinces attended madrasas. Most students attend public schools (nearly 65 percent), and the remainder attend nonreligious private schools (34 percent). Nor are madrasas the last resort of the poor. In fact, the socioeconomic profiles of madrasa and public school students are quite similar -- except that madrasas have more rich students than public schools. Of the extremely small number of households enrolling at least one child full time in a madrasa, 75 percent use other types of schools to educate their other children.

Despite the tremendous importance of improving Pakistan's public schools and madrasas, moreover, attempts to influence their structure and output have been largely ineffective. Pakistan itself is struggling to reform its public education system, debating the federal-local divide, voucher schemes, and merit pay.

Rather than focusing on madrasas and public schools, the donor community should take note of a striking change in the Pakistani educational landscape: the emergence of mainstream and affordable private schools.

Indeed, nonreligious private schools now enroll one third of Pakistani students, according to the 2005 education census. This sector is dramatically expanding. In 1983, there were roughly the same number of madrasas and private schools

in the country -- 2,563 madrasas and 2,770 private schools. By 2005, there were five times as many private schools. Moreover, the growth in private schools has increased since the 9/11 terrorist attacks, while madrasa growth has stayed relatively flat.

Data collected by the authors as a part of the largest-ever longitudinal study of education in Pakistan find that private schools are cost-effective and affordable. They keep costs low because they are "mom and pop"-managed, for-profit, independent schools, unsubsidized by the government and responsive to local demands for education.

Although education standards all over Pakistan are poor, private schools outperform government schools at all income levels. In three districts of rural Punjab where the project team tested more than 25,000 primary-grade students, private school children outperformed those attending government schools by a large margin. Moreover, data show that the same students learn more when they switch from public to private schools and learn less when they leave private schools for public schools.

Incredibly, this higher quality comes at a lower cost. Most private schools in Pakistan charge a monthly fee of less than a single day's wage for an unskilled worker. And it costs less than half as much to educate a child in a private school as it does in a public school. For these reasons, private schools are expanding from urban and suburban areas into Pakistan's countryside.
Why are these schools able to deliver affordable value? Private schools take advantage of an important untapped supply of labor by relying upon moderately educated young women from local neighborhoods who are willing to work for low pay. In fact, private schools are one of the largest sources of regular, salaried employment for Pakistan's women. Private schools also boast lower teacher absenteeism than public schools, which minimizes wastage and increases time spent learning. They also use their compensation structures effectively to reward better teachers and punish those who don't perform well.

Moreover, these private schools tend not to be affiliated with religious groups or movements. Private schools generally use a curriculum that is similar to that of government schools, but with a greater emphasis on teaching English. The vast majority of these private schools are coeducational at the primary level, compared with government schools, which are mainly single-sex.

Where the donor community can do most good is in developing and expanding Pakistan's most dynamic education sector. Small-scale studies are already showing that innovative programs, aided by NGOs and the private sector, can make dramatic gains. A study we conducted showed that disseminating better information about school performance led to dramatic improvements in both public and private schools. With more transparency and information available, private school fees dropped, test scores at private and public schools climbed, and public school enrollment increased.

Pakistani parents, like parents everywhere, are pragmatic about education. Although aid donors may want to help reform Pakistan's religious and public schools, genuine reform will emerge from local debates and initiatives, some of which are already underway. The risk is that future monies allocated to such purposes could be wasted or, at best, spent inefficiently. An aid program based on bold, persistent experimentation will help foster a true public-private partnership model that takes advantage of this low-cost private sector and improves the public sector in turn.

Unfortunately, the importance of the dynamic private education sector is overshadowed by unsupported claims about madrasas and their role in terrorism. Given that Pakistan's population is ever more dominated by youths and given the urgent need to produce a skilled labor force to drive Pakistan's future, the stakes for education reform could not be higher.

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