Education in Bangladesh
Rethinking the Narrative

CONTEXT

Bangladesh enters 2026 at an education crossroads. A new government has taken office after 17 February 2026, with ambitious pledges to transform the country's schools — raising the education budget to 5% of GDP, introducing mid-day meals, distributing tablets to teachers, and building multimedia classrooms nationwide. The pledges signal political intent. But intent alone cannot address what the evidence increasingly shows: that the gains Bangladesh achieved in the 2000s — rising enrolment, closing gender gaps, and expanding access — have plateaued, and in several critical areas, gone into reverse.

For more than a decade, Bangladesh's education system has been sustained by narratives shaped during the Millennium Development Goals era. Those narratives now require fundamental rethinking as Bangladesh prepares for the Fourth Industrial Revolution. The demographic window that once powered the country's economic rise is narrowing. The labour force that will drive the next phase of development sits in classrooms today, and what those classrooms actually deliver has become an urgent national question.

KEY MESSAGES

First, enrolment gains are masking a deepening access crisis. While primary enrolment is nearly universal, secondary participation remains far from universal and has begun to stagnate. The transition from primary to secondary education has weakened in recent years: the share of students moving from Grade 5 to Grade 6 fell sharply from 96.5% in 2019 to about 75% in 2022, before only partially recovering. At the same time, boys' enrolment has declined more rapidly than girls', widening the gender gap in secondary education. Recent data also show a sharp drop in boys' primary net enrolment by seven percentage points in a single year in 2024, the steepest recorded single-year decline. Rising child labour is reported to have increased from 6.8% in 2019 to around 9.2% in 2025. This suggests that economic pressures are increasingly pulling boys out of school. These patterns indicate that access gains at the primary level are not translating into sustained educational participation.

Second, learning outcomes were declining before COVID-19 and have not recovered. Official narratives emphasise that learning levels remained stable during the COVID-19 disruption. However, national assessment data show that learning performance had already been declining well before the pandemic. Mean scores in Bangla and mathematics remain below their **2013 levels despite a decade of major education investments**. Only about **30% of Grade 5 students achieve minimum competency in mathematics**, indicating that the majority complete primary education without mastering basic numeracy. The system, therefore, produces students who formally complete school but lack foundational skills. This learning crisis is increasingly visible in the labour market, where unemployment among tertiary graduates (**around 13.5%**) is significantly higher than among workers with only primary education.

Third, the governance architecture generates data but changes nothing. Bangladesh has built one of the most comprehensive education data architectures in South Asia, including the Annual Primary School Census and the National Student Assessment. Yet the National Student Assessment — created explicitly to improve classroom practice — carries a mandate that has been copied word-for-word, unchanged, into official reports since 2015, with no mechanism connecting its findings to teaching decisions, resource allocation, or school policy. Governance constraints further weaken implementation: as of recent administrative assessments, **over a quarter of district-level education posts and more than half of resource centre instructor posts remained vacant**. Development spending on the programmes most directly linked to teaching quality — teacher training, professional development, ICT in education — goes consistently unspent, while infrastructure budgets are executed in full.

Fourth, **education is free to enter but expensive to sustain in.** While the government provides free textbooks, stipends, and tuition-free schooling in public institutions, households now finance **more than half of total education expenditure**. Private tutoring and guidebooks—largely driven by the examination system—have become widespread. Surveys indicate that **over 90% of students rely on commercial guidebooks**, and about **three-quarters receive private tutoring**. As a result, the removal of formal tuition fees addresses only a small portion of education costs. In practice, education in Bangladesh is free to enter but expensive to sustain, which is reinforcing inequality and encouraging a gradual shift toward private schooling.

Fifth, infrastructure expansion has not consistently translated into improved learning conditions. Bangladesh has achieved near-universal access to electricity and drinking water in schools and has significantly expanded digital infrastructure. However, these resources are often underutilised. Surveys indicate that **actual pedagogical use of ICT in classrooms is as low as about 1.5% in primary schools and roughly 11% in secondary schools**, largely due to limited teacher training and weak integration into teaching practices. Trained teacher rates at the secondary level are lower today than in 2012. At the same time, equity gaps remain: **less than half of primary schools are accessible for students with disabilities**, and gender-sensitive sanitation facilities remain uneven across institutions.

Finally, public investment in education remains far below international benchmarks. Bangladesh currently allocates **around 1.7% of GDP to education,** which is significantly below the UNESCO-recommended global benchmark of 4–6%. Despite repeated commitments across successive Five-Year Plans to increase education spending, both budget allocation and actual expenditure have declined as a share of GDP in recent years. Structural fiscal constraints further limit reform capacity: the country's **tax-to-GDP ratio remains below 7%**, one of the lowest in the region, leaving little fiscal space to expand education investment.

INCUMBENT GOVERNMENT'S ELECTION PLEDGES UNDER THE COUNTER-NARRATIVES

The new government's election pledges, taken as a whole, show a meaningful degree of alignment with the structural challenges identified above. On access, commitments to prevent dropouts in remote areas, extend universal pre-primary education, and reduce geographic and social inequalities directly address the reversal in enrolment trends and the weakening transition from primary to secondary education.

On learning quality, several pledges—including technical education for all, reforms in madrasa education, the inclusion of sports and cultural learning, greater emphasis on creativity and analytical thinking, and the recruitment of talented teachers—reflect growing recognition that the system's central weakness lies in its limited ability to develop meaningful capabilities.

On cost and equity, commitments to provide free school uniforms, introduce a mid-day meal programme, and improve sanitation facilities acknowledge—at least partially—that public education is not currently free in practice. The proposal to introduce a digital student identity (Edu-ID) addresses aspects of the governance gap, although a tracking mechanism alone is unlikely to bridge the disconnect between administrative data and classroom realities.

Infrastructure-related pledges—including multimedia classrooms, free Wi-Fi provision, and a dedicated education television channel—seek to address technology gaps, but they risk repeating earlier patterns of hardware investment without corresponding pedagogical reform. The pledge with the greatest potential structural impact is the commitment to allocate **5% of GDP to education**, which, if implemented, would represent a significant shift in the country's fiscal priorities.

Finally, several proposals advanced by other political parties also merit consideration. These include participation in internationally recognised learning assessments such as **PISA-D**, and embedding **inclusive education** as a mandatory component of teacher training, supported by district-level resource centres to ensure that no child is excluded from education on the basis of disability.

ASSESSING THE FISCAL AND OPERATIONAL FEASIBILITY OF KEY PLEDGES

Five of the most consequential pledges have been assessed against international evidence and Bangladesh's fiscal and institutional realities.

The commitment to **allocate 5% of GDP to education** is the most ambitious and the most difficult to deliver. Bangladesh currently spends about **1.38% of GDP in actual terms**, meaning the pledge would require a nearly fourfold increase within a few years. Reaching the target by 2031 would require annual increases of roughly **0.6 percentage points of GDP**, a pace without precedent in the country's fiscal history. This challenge is compounded by structural constraints: Bangladesh's **tax-to-GDP ratio stands at just 6.8%**, among the lowest globally, while **revenue shortfalls exceeded Tk. 1 lakh crore in FY2025**. At the same time, the **development budget execution rate has fallen to 49%**, which reflects limited implementation capacity. Delivering this pledge would therefore require not only political commitment but also significant improvements in domestic revenue mobilisation, procurement systems, and programme management within the education sector.

The proposed **mid-day meal programme** has strong evidence of impact on retention and nutrition when implemented well. An estimated BDT 82.88 billion per year would be required to establish it as a structural budget commitment rather than a development project. Experience from countries such as India, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Indonesia, and the Philippines suggests that successful implementation depends on strong institutional arrangements, including multi-level governance and community oversight. The main risks—budget shortfalls, procurement irregularities, and food safety failures—highlight that the programme requires robust administrative systems alongside sustained financing.

Improving **school sanitation facilities** to meet minimum service standards across government primary and secondary schools is estimated to cost around **Tk. 4,875 crore**. However, the primary issue is not the absence of infrastructure but inadequate gender segregation and compliance. Currently, only **24.5% of toilet units in public primary schools are designated for girls**. This indicates that expansion focused on compliance and gender separation will generate more equity impact than large-scale construction alone.

Providing **free school uniforms** would cost approximately **Tk. 3,278 crore annually**. Evidence from India and Sri Lanka suggests that such programmes can reduce out-of-pocket costs for low-income households and support retention in public schools. Introducing income-based targeting could improve fiscal sustainability while strengthening the redistributive impact.

Multimedia classrooms, free Wi-Fi, and the 'One Teacher, One Tab' initiative together represent the largest technology investment in the pledges. Establishing at least one multimedia classroom in every primary and secondary school is estimated at Tk. 6,950 crore; teacher tablets would require Tk. 750–1,130 crore across both levels; basic Wi-Fi installation is estimated at Tk. 33 crore for government schools alone. International evidence — from India, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Indonesia, and the Philippines — reveals that hardware distribution without investment in teacher training and digital pedagogy results in low utilisation and wasted expenditure. Bangladesh already has high connectivity coverage. The gap is not infrastructure — it is how infrastructure is used. Any technology pledge that is not paired with a credible teacher development programme should be treated as a risk, not a solution.

REFRAMING THE EDUCATION AGENDA: THE WAY FORWARD

Translating the political commitments of the incumbent government into sustained change in Bangladesh's education system will require a coherent reform agenda structured around **five priorities**.

Revisiting the vision for education

The starting point is a fundamental redefinition of what education is for. Bangladesh's current system is largely oriented around certification, examination performance, and content recall. What is needed instead is **a vision grounded in whole-child development**. This will develop interpersonal capacities, e.g., empathy, ethics, and emotional intelligence, and equip every child with the cognitive

foundations required for lifelong learning and employable skills for an evolving labour market. This is not a marginal adjustment. It represents a shift in the purpose of education itself, and everything downstream—curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, teacher training, and governance—must align with that purpose.

Making the education system future-ready

A future-ready education system must rest on **two pillars**. The first is **cognitive learning**—literacy, numeracy, civic understanding, and critical thinking that provide the foundation for lifelong learning. The second is **social and emotional learning (SEL)**—self-awareness, discipline, curiosity, empathy, ethical reasoning, and collaborative problem-solving. As technological change expands opportunities for self-directed learning, labour markets increasingly reward soft skills rather than formal certificates. An education system that cannot develop both pillars will continue to produce graduates who are over-certified and under-prepared.

It is worth noting that Bangladesh has attempted such reforms before. Life skills education was introduced into the secondary curriculum in 2004–05; creative questioning was introduced in 2012 to discourage rote learning; and the 2021–22 National Curriculum Framework embedded SEL and critical thinking before being abandoned in 2025. These initiatives faltered not because the vision was flawed, but because teachers were insufficiently prepared, school environments were not adapted to support new pedagogy, teacher–student ratios in many primary schools remain as high as **1:80**, and political incentives rarely outlive the decade-long commitment required for meaningful education reform.

Consolidating past achievements

Reform must build on what already works and sustain past achievements. Bangladesh has achieved **near-universal primary enrolment**, sustained gender parity, and large-scale public programmes, e.g., free textbook distribution that reaches more than 40 million students annually and stipend programmes that benefit over **16 million children**. The Female Secondary Stipend Programme successfully reversed the gender gap in secondary education, and most schools now have electricity and drinking water.

These are substantial achievements. The challenge is not to replace them but to deliver them with greater **quality, consistency, and accountability**. Pre-primary education is a particular priority: the **two-year pre-primary pilot launched in more than 3,000 schools in 2023** provides a foundation that should be strengthened rather than discontinued.

Pursuing a staggered approach to election pledges

Delivering all pledges simultaneously is neither fiscally nor institutionally feasible. The government should classify education commitments into **three tracks**:
- actions that can begin immediately without major institutional expansion;
- actions that should be embedded within the next cycle of sector programmes, e.g., **PEDP and SEDP**;
- and actions that require deeper design through the proposed **Education Reform Commission** and should be incorporated into the **Ninth Five-Year Plan**.

Some pledges also require more precise articulation before implementation. For example, the commitment to prevent dropouts in remote areas must be precisely defined, costed, and mapped against existing interventions. For each pledge, fiscal implications must be estimated, and financing sources identified before commitments are made to communities and institutions. There is a definite need to show a strong commitment to overcome the 'elite capture' barrier in earmarking incremental resources for education.

Rethinking governance for accountability and effectiveness

The governance challenge in Bangladesh's education system struggles with a lack of **incentives, accountability, and meaningful decentralisation**. Teacher or institutional performance is rarely linked to meaningful incentives, e.g., reward or recognition. National Student Assessment results are

not connected to operational decisions. Fragmented oversight across multiple ministries—covering primary education, secondary education, child labour, and disability—creates policy incoherence. School Management Committees (SMCs) have had no dedicated training budget since **2011**. More frustratingly, the parliamentary oversight has been limited over the years.

Development goals in Bangladesh's education system are often set by government agencies without considering the education ecosystem as a whole. Fragmented oversight across ministries, such as the Ministry of Education (MoE) and the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education (MoPME), complicates policy delivery. Studies show that head teachers significantly influence outcomes but often lack decision-making power and resources. The current system is centralized, limiting schools' authority in areas like teacher recruitment, budgeting, and curriculum decisions. There are calls for cautious decentralisation, with examples from countries like Malaysia, Sri Lanka, and Vietnam suggesting that school-level autonomy can enhance responsiveness and efficiency. However, weak accountability and unclear roles can hinder equity if decentralisation is not handled carefully. In a decentralized approach, the central authority would maintain standards, funding, and oversight while local authorities manage schools effectively. Schools could gain more autonomy in resource mobilisation and teacher incentives, focusing on accountability for learning outcomes.

The current accountability structure is administration-driven and output-based, leading to insufficient outcome-based results. There's a need to shift toward outcome-based accountability with stronger school-level monitoring. Depoliticizing SMCs is essential. Independent citizen-led monitoring has been largely ineffective, and parliamentary oversight is lacking. The accountability framework must include a wider range of stakeholders, such as the private sector, local civil society organizations (CSOs), and media, to act as pressure groups. For instance, the private sector should advocate for the importance of education alongside physical infrastructure.

CONCLUSION

The 'day of reckoning' for Bangladesh is knocking at the door, ready to unveil the consequences of neglecting education! The 'democratic window of opportunity' is elapsing while the 'future of jobs' is fast-moving. The education system in Bangladesh needs a 'transformative change' - moving forward from the 'old narratives' to become 'future-ready'. For that, education truly needs to be a 'political' agenda. The tenure of the Interim Government may be termed as a "lost opportunity'' to bring transformational changes in the education system. Education was 'allegedly' considered in the reform area list, but did not have a 'commission'. Three separate ministry-initiated committees were formed that submitted three reports with no significant steps towards reforming education as per the need. It is encouraging to see that the newly elected government has emphasised education-related electoral pledges, indicating their initial sincerity.

The counter-narratives and recommendations presented here are shared with a view to contributing to the formulation of next steps for preparing the next education budget, education sector development programmes, and articulating the terms of reference for the proposed 'Education Reform Commission'. Implementation progress of the electoral pledges of the incumbent government will also be followed up through the 'Bangladesh Reform Tracker' created by the Citizen's Platform.