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Primary Education System in Punjab: Issues, Reforms and Emerging Trends (2008–2018)

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ABSTRACT

Primary education is a foundation in human development and national progress. A host of reforms were introduced in Pakistan, particularly in Punjab, between 2008 and 2018 to improve access, quality and governance in primary education. The study examines the major issues, reforms and new trends in the primary education system of Punjab during the period reviewed. The study employs a historical and analytical approach and draws on government reports, educational statistics, policy documents and secondary literature. The results reveal that the improvements in literacy rates, enrollment levels, educational infrastructure and gender parity in Punjab through initiatives such as the Punjab Education Sector Reform Program (PESRP) were significant. Provincial authority in educational planning and management was further strengthened by the adoption of the Eighteenth Constitutional Amendment. Despite these achievements, challenges such as high dropout rates, inadequate teacher training, weak learning outcomes, regional disparities and insufficient educational spending continued to hamper the achievement of universal primary education. The study concludes that though Punjab has made significant progress, sustained reforms focusing on quality education, accountability and equitable access are essential for long-term educational development.

Keywords: Primary Education, Punjab, Educational Reforms, Literacy Rate, PESRP, Educational Governance, Enrollment Trends, Pakistan.

INTRODUCTION

Education is considered to be one of the most important tools for national development. It contributes to economic growth, social cohesion, political stability and human resource development. Primary education is the foundation of the educational system as it equips children with the basic literacy, numeracy and life skills required for further learning and active citizenship. Punjab is Pakistan's most populous province and the heart of its education system. The provincial government introduced several reforms between 2008 and 2018 to improve access to education, increase enrolment rates, reduce gender disparities and improve educational quality. The reforms were introduced to address long-standing issues such as low literacy, poor school infrastructure, lack of



Vol. 4 No. 3 (March) (2026)

teachers and poor learning achievements. This study investigates the development of primary education in Punjab between 2008 and 2018, highlighting key reforms, emerging trends, and major challenges that influence educational performance.

The period under review witnessed extensive reforms in Punjab's education sector. The provincial government significantly increased educational expenditures and introduced various programs aimed at improving access and quality. One of the most significant initiatives was the Punjab Education Sector Reform Program (PESRP). Supported by international development partners, PESRP focused on improving enrollment, enhancing educational governance, strengthening accountability, and expanding school infrastructure. During this time, there was a huge increase in government investment in education. Educational budgets increased significantly, enabling upgrading of school facilities, recruitment of teachers, provision of textbooks and educational monitoring systems. Administrative reforms also improved governance with the introduction of performance monitoring mechanisms and evidence-based decision-making processes. These measures helped to improve transparency and accountability in the education sector.

The Eighteenth Constitutional Amendment, implemented in 2010, marked a significant transformation in Pakistan's educational governance system. Through devolution, educational responsibilities were transferred from the federal government to provincial governments. Punjab got more powers in curriculum development, educational planning, resource allocation, school management, teacher recruitment, infrastructure development and quality assurance. This decentralization allowed provincial authorities to shape education policies according to local needs and priorities. The amendment enhanced the ownership of provinces on educational reforms and facilitated the implementation of program tailored to the educational needs of Punjab. However, there were still important concerns of issues of coordination, policy harmonization and institutional capacity. Educational indicators improved considerably during the period under study. Primary school enrollment increased steadily, reflecting growing public awareness of the importance of education and the effectiveness of government interventions. The literacy rate also improved. According to available statistics, there is a marked increase in the literacy rate of Punjab during the decade under review. The province has consistently performed better than most other regions of Pakistan in literacy and enrollment indicators. The gender parity in education also improved considerably. Female enrollment had increased, reflecting successful government efforts to encourage girls' participation in education. These changes contributed to reduce the educational access gender gap.

While improvements in enrollment and literacy rates were encouraging, educational quality remained a serious concern. Findings from the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2016 revealed significant deficiencies in student learning outcomes. A lot of students could not read Urdu texts for their age do simple math or speak English well. Grade 3 and Grade 5 students had trouble with basic reading and math. These findings show that just getting students into school is not enough to ensure they learn properly. The quality of education not access to it is a big problem in Punjab primary schools. The education system in Punjab faces a challenge in providing quality education. Students, in Punjab need to improve their reading, math and English skills.

Curriculum reform constituted another important dimension of educational development during the study period. The Punjab Curriculum and Textbook Board introduced revised curricula designed to align educational content with contemporary national and international standards. Scientific learning, Critical thinking, Problem-solving skills, Human rights education, Environmental awareness, Health and hygiene education,



Vol. 4 No. 3 (March) (2026)

Peace education, Disaster risk management, Gender awareness.

These reforms sought to modernize educational content and improve the relevance of primary education to contemporary societal needs. Despite notable achievements, several challenges continued to impede educational progress.

A significant proportion of students left school before completing primary education. Economic constraints, limited accessibility, and social factors contributed to student dropout. Although enrollment rates increased, many students failed to achieve expected learning standards. Weak reading, writing, and numeracy skills remained widespread. Many teachers lacked adequate professional development opportunities and modern pedagogical training. This negatively affected classroom instruction and student achievement. Educational opportunities varied significantly across districts. Rural and underdeveloped regions continued to face shortages of educational resources and qualified teachers. Although educational spending increased in absolute terms, the share of education within overall provincial expenditures declined during certain years, limiting the sustainability of reforms. Institutional inefficiencies, weak accountability mechanisms, and implementation gaps continued to affect educational performance. The reforms enacted from 2008 to 2018 significantly facilitated the growth of education in Punjab. The rise in enrollment, better literacy rates, upgraded infrastructure, and increased gender equality illustrate the beneficial effects of educational policies. Nevertheless, the ongoing issue of inadequate learning outcomes underscores a critical challenge within the education system. For long-term developmental objectives to be realized, educational expansion must be paired with enhancements in educational quality. Future reforms ought to focus on the development of teachers, the execution of curricula, the assessment of students, and the accountability of institutions. Policymaking grounded in evidence and the effective use of resources are vital for achieving sustainable improvements in education.

CONCLUSION

Between 2008 and 2018, Punjab witnessed considerable advancements in its primary education system. A combination of educational reforms, heightened public investment, modernization of administration, and constitutional devolution played a pivotal role in enhancing educational access and institutional performance. However, despite these accomplishments, issues concerning educational quality, teacher training, student retention, and learning outcomes persisted. The results suggest that although Punjab has made strides in broadening educational opportunities, the goal of delivering universal, equitable, and high-quality primary education remains unfulfilled. To attain sustainable educational development in Punjab, ongoing investment, effective governance, enhanced teacher training, and a greater emphasis on learning outcomes will be crucial.

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Vol. 4 No. 3 (March) (2026)

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