POLICY INSIGHT

From Fragmentation to System Coherence

Institutionalizing Evidence-Based Reform in Philippine Education and Innovation

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A Century of Warnings

The Philippine education system stands at an inflection point. For nearly a century—from the Monroe Survey of 1925 to the first EDCOM in 1991—diagnoses of systemic weakness in the education sector have remained remarkably consistent: deficient foundational learning, bureaucratic fragmentation, inequitable resource allocation, and a persistent misalignment between education and economic strategy. What has evolved is not the diagnosis itself, but the mounting urgency to address it.

The findings of the Second Congressional Commission on Education (EDCOM II) suggest that the crisis confronting Philippine education is structural, rather than episodic. Learning poverty is not an isolated failure of curriculum or teacher performance; it is the product of entrenched institutional weaknesses across governance, financing, accountability, and human capital development. Similarly, the mismatch between tertiary outputs and industry demand is not a narrow skills issue but a systemic coordination failure across agencies and sectors.

This moment demands institutional redesign, rather than incremental programmatic adjustments. The EDCOM Final Report, Turning Point: A Decade of Necessary Reform, alongside the National Education and Workforce Development Plan (2026–2035), provides a blueprint for such a

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redesign. Yet blueprints are not self-executing. The central challenge now is institutionalizing an evidence-based ecosystem capable of sustaining reform beyond political cycles.

From Policy Design to Policy Delivery: Closing the Implementation Gap

The Philippine case illustrates a broader tension in public policy: the persistent decoupling of formulation and execution. As implementation science repeatedly demonstrates, reform failure often stems from weak feedback loops, insufficient administrative capacity, and the absence of independent evaluative mechanisms.

In education, this gap has been particularly pronounced. Large-scale reforms such as the Mother-Tongue-Based Multilingual Education and the Senior High School curriculum were launched with strong policy intent but insufficient institutional readiness for implementation. A rudimentary monitoring and evaluation framework further hampered the rollout, ultimately stalling progress in student learning outcomes.

EDCOM II's approach—commissioning over one hundred research studies and integrating academic partners into the reform process—signals a shift toward institutionalized evidence use. However, sustaining this momentum requires more than commissioned research;it demands durable infrastructure, including independent assessment bodies separated from implementers, shared administrative datasets accessible to researchers and improved transparency from executive agencies, proactive participation of universities and scholars in the study and scrutiny of education policies, regulatory separation between standard-setting and service delivery, and institutionalized multi-agency planning and implementation mechanisms. Evidence must transition from an episodic input, into a permanent infrastructure that grounds policy and in the day-to-day realities faced by schools.

Reframing Reform: Three Structural Pillars of System Transformation

Rather than a series of discrete reform agendas, the required transformation must be addressed across three interdependent domains: foundational human capital, economic alignment, and governance architecture.

Pillar I: Repairing the Foundations of Human Capital

No downstream reform in tertiary education or workforce training can compensate for a collapse in foundational learning; education outcomes are path-dependent. Empirical evidence linking early childhood nutrition particularly for children aged zero to four, to cognitive development underscores that stunting is not merely a public health metric but a long-term productivity constraint. Persistently high rates of child malnutrition represent foregone human capital long before children enter Kindergarten.

Equally problematic is the normalization of "mass promotion" without mastery of foundational skills. A system that advances learners without core competence compounds deficits throughout the educational lifecycle, producing underprepared tertiary students and workforce skill mismatches. Breaking this cycle requires structural overhaul of assessment policy, robust remediation frameworks, and comprehensive teacher support. As we stated in the EDCOM II Year Two Report, urgent reform in the foundational years is the non-negotiable precondition for all subsequent progress.

Pillar II: Aligning Tertiary Education with Economic Strategy

The declining wage premium for college degrees and widespread employer dissatisfaction with graduate readiness signal a structural misalignment between tertiary education supply and economic demand. Resolving this mismatch requires moving beyond superficial curricular tweaks toward strategic convergence between Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA) and Commission on Higher Education (CHED). Furthermore, it necessitates the deep institutional integration of education providers into industry ecosystems.

The Enterprise-Based Education and Training (EBET) framework represents a critical structural mechanism for this alignment. However, for EBET to succeed, enterprise participation must be institutionalized through predictable incentives, streamlined regulatory processes, and the accelerated development of sector-specific training regulations. Industry linkage cannot remain dependent on intermittent goodwill; it must be permanently embedded within the governance architecture.

Beyond skills training, the Philippines faces a deeper structural challenge: chronic underinvestment in research and development (R&D). At approximately 0.3% of GDP, R&D expenditure lags significantly behind

regional comparators. Transitioning to a knowledge-based economy requires more than just expanding the pool of research scientists and engineers; it demands the spatial clustering of universities, technical and vocational education and training (TVET) institutions, laboratories, and firms within innovation ecosystems. Without this geographical concentration and institutional coordination, research commercialization and technology diffusion will remain stunted.

Strategic hubs in healthcare biotechnology, advanced manufacturing, and other high-value sectors represent more than mere economic initiatives; they are education reforms embedded within industrial policy.

Pillar III: Rewiring Governance for Coherence and Accountability

Fragmentation remains the most persistent structural constraint. While the trifocalization of education governance clarified individual mandates, it failed to institutionalize coordination. The result has been the entrenchment of policy silos, duplicative programs, and diluted accountability across DepEd, CHED, and TESDA.

The establishment of the Education and Workforce Development Group (EWDG) through Administrative Order No. 36 of 2025 presents a historic opportunity to transition from coordination-by-memorandum to coordination-by-design. For this mechanism to succeed, it must exercise direct authority over data integration, budget alignment, and cross-sector performance monitoring. Furthermore, the active participation of DepEd, CHED and TESDA must be legally and operationally institutionalized to ensure that accountability is no longer fragmented, but shared.

Financing architecture is equally critical. While increasing education spending toward 5% of GDP is a necessary benchmark, it remains insufficient without a fundamental reform of allocation formulas. Historical patterns demonstrate that uniform distribution perpetuates systemic inequality. Correcting these structural imbalances requires equity-weighted financing tied to disadvantage indices. Our experience with the Special Education Fund illustrates the current failure: it leaves 4th and 5th class municipalities without sufficient resources to finance critical Early Childhood and Care Development (ECCD) interventions. Only through targeted allocations can we ensure that resources flow to the communities with the greatest need.

Execution discipline must replace our prevalent compliance culture. Agencies should be held accountable for measurable learning and employment outcomes, rather than the mere completion of administrative outputs.

Conclusion: From Reform Cycles to Institutional Resilience

The Philippine education system has entered a decisive institutional window. Its structural weaknesses are meticulously documented, and the research base is more robust than at any point in the past century. The policy blueprint exists; the challenge that remains is the transition from diagnostic clarity to transformative execution.Breaking the cycle of episodic reform requires embedding evidence, accountability, and system coherence into the architecture of governance itself. This shift entails: protecting complementarity between public and private institutions rather than privileging sectoral dominance; aligning tertiary expansion with economic strategy rather than political geography; leveraging research capacity as a lever of education reform; and measuring success through learning outcomes rather than compliance metrics.

The next decade will determine whether the Philippines consolidates its reforms into a self-correcting ecosystem or reverts to reactive policy oscillation. The challenge is no longer diagnosis; it is one of disciplined, sustained execution.