

End-of-Program Evaluation Study

Basic Education Sector Transformation (BEST) Program

DFAT Management Response

DFAT thanks the Quality Education Design – Aptissimi Development Innovations Inc. (QED-ADII) Partnership for its review and comprehensive evaluation of the Basic Education Sector Transformation (BEST) Program. The study identified key findings and lessons regarding the implementation of the BEST Program (2014 to 2019). It provides critical insights on implementing large-scale, reform-oriented education programs in lower middle-income countries, such as the Philippines. It also provides important considerations that will help inform current and subsequent pipeline aid program activities.

BEST supported the Philippines' most significant education reform in decades: the expansion of the basic education system through the 'K to 12 program' which added mandatory kindergarten and years 11 and 12 to the 10-year education system. Since the beginning of its implementation, the program was beleaguered with challenges, ranging from political to organisational to budget reduction, which inevitably impacted on BEST's ability to fully achieve its objectives. Despite this, BEST produced several significant and sustainable reforms in education governance which, as articulated in the program's theory of change, is the foundational outcome for improved learning outcomes and equitable access to quality education.

The study evaluated the results of BEST's program implementation, assessed the performance of the various program interventions, and consolidated lessons learned. The study consisted of two phases. The larger Phase 1 (March – May 2019) included 106 schools using an adjusted Context, Input, Process and Product (CIPP) Model. Phase 2 (March – May 2020) used a Case Study Approach to assess in depth the effects of program interventions in 12 schools before BEST interventions were introduced and at the end of program implementation.

BEST concluded in 2019 and DFAT has reflected on the implications and lessons learned presented by the evaluation study. DFAT fully agrees with the three implications that were directly addressed to DFAT. DFAT also positively recognises the lessons learned indicated in the study.

January 2021

The BEST End of Program Evaluation Study identified eight implications for consideration by DFAT and the Philippine Department of Education (DepEd). Three (3) implications – numbers 5, 7 and 8 – are addressed to DFAT.

Implication No 1: Give sufficient time for reforms or new practices to mature before assessing its outcomes [DepEd]

Implication No 2: Focus on responding to the barriers to the sustainability of the reforms [DepEd]

Implication No 3: In lieu of the “one-size fits all” approach to systemic reforms, a segmented or strategic approach to reforming systems may increase effectiveness [DepEd]

Implication No 4: Reinforce capacity of DepEd (Regional Offices (ROs)/Division Offices (DOs)/schools) and external stakeholders in Participatory Planning and Development [DepEd]

Implication No 5: Gender equality, disability and social inclusion (GEDSI)-related reforms must be backed by strong research, led by the Gender Focal Point System (GFPS) [DepEd and DFAT]

DFAT agrees. Efforts to improve any form of inclusion are complex and often challenging. It is important to understand the lived context, including barriers faced by different groups experiencing various forms of exclusion in order to respond to them effectively. Comprehensive studies on each of the target social groups can serve as an important baseline, and can better inform the approach to system-level policy reforms. This is an approach already being undertaken by DFAT in its Education Pathways to Peace Program in Mindanao.

Implication No 6: Strengthen both institutional and program/project results-based monitoring and evaluation [DepEd]

Implication No 7: Future reforms should propel school principals and teachers to success, and be mindful of not complicating their tasks and roles [DepEd and DFAT]

DFAT agrees. Any education programs should acknowledge the importance of considering the feasibility of large-scale reforms in the school setting and particularly the risk of disrupting teachers’ contact time with learners. There has already been a national policy that no training or additional activities may be scheduled for teachers during teaching hours. DFAT fully supports this approach and will follow this principle, especially in the implementation of in-service teacher quality-support activities through our Sustaining Education Reform Gains (SERG) project and Education Pathways to Peace Program in Mindanao.

Implication No 8: In implementing programs and projects, attention to the tenets and principles of program/project management is indispensable [DepEd and DFAT]

DFAT agrees. The absence of a direct contractual relationship between the BEST facilitating contractor and other implementing partners weakened the degree of integration among BEST program activities. This was an important lesson and has already informed other DFAT programs in the Philippines. The Education Pathways to Peace Program in Mindanao is implemented by a more tightly integrated consortium, and this management arrangement has supported greater convergence and coherence, with emphasis on programmatic rather than activity-based objectives.

The BEST End of Program Evaluation Study provided five lessons to be learned from the implementation of the BEST Program to better inform future investments. DFAT responses are below:

Change Management Strategies

1. **Resistance to reforms.** Program interventions that experienced challenges were those that required the highest behavioural investments from stakeholder-beneficiaries. This was strongly demonstrated in the use of the Learning Resource Portal, for which many teachers had to use personal resources to access materials from the Portal (that is, pay for their own internet connection) and the preparation of the Portfolio Assessment Tool for Teachers, for which many teachers had to spend extended hours of both official and personal time to complete the documentary requirements.

Change Management, a component included in the original design but eventually removed, could have helped manage the resistance more systematically. For instance, some schools through their initiatives levelled understanding among their teachers so that the use of the Classroom Observation Tools (COTs) and the preparation of the Portfolio Assessment Tool were mutually agreed among school stakeholders.

2. **Acceptance of reforms.** Program interventions that were considered of highest value by stakeholder-beneficiaries were those whose benefits were immediately visible in their work, or for which the potential was clearer and more tangible. For example, the benefits of implementing Learning Action Cells were demonstrated at school level; and the implementation of the Continuous Improvement approach was evident at the Regional Office and Division Office levels and the use of the Learner Information System by the schools.

Again, an effective Change Management component could have amplified positive experiences of implementers and thus boosted program gains.

DFAT agrees with the above two lessons. Change management is an integral principle in development partnerships and should have continued as the modus operandi throughout BEST's implementation. Despite the lack of a well-defined change management plan, BEST's flexible approach enabled considerable influence at the national level, allowing for long-term reforms to be embedded.

The positive impact of effective change management also takes years to manifest. For example, Australia provided support to DepEd to implement the Basic Education Sector Reform Agenda from as early as 2005. This represents nine years of work focused on implementation of a change management approach within DepEd, compared to the five years of BEST implementation.

Regular and independent reviews are also valuable to re-evaluate existing approaches and reorient the program in ways that would likely have improved the attainment of objectives and acceptance of reforms.

Program Management

3. **Unevenness in Program Management capacity.** Capacity development is more important than substitution. The unevenness of the leadership and management capacity among the different operating units (DepEd Bureaus and Services as well as the divisions under them) and at the different levels of governance in an agency significantly affects the overall performance of institutional and sector reform programs. Thus, investments in capacity building on program management for a large-scale program like the BEST Program may be recouped in higher attainment of outcomes. This capacity-building includes, among others: leadership in program management; resource planning, budgeting and scheduling; stakeholder engagement; as well as program communications.

Relative to Number 3, the Operating Units that were able to manage their working relationships with the Technical Experts generally were able to deliver good outputs and expressed high ownership of these outputs. In contrast, those that did not have good relationships with the Technical Experts felt that they were not able to influence the direction of the activities and thus had lower ownerships of the outputs they produced.

DFAT agrees. Capacity development (as opposed to capacity substitution) is critical to sustainability, and was an important feature of the BEST design. Despite this, the approach was not applied as consistently as envisioned across all program activities. Capacity development is being more systematically applied in our Sustaining Education Reform Gains (SERG) project and Education Pathways to Peace Program in Mindanao.

BEST's governance and management arrangements may have been adequate in design, but the evidence indicates that there were significant gaps in their application to provide strategic direction, including in capacity development.

Focus of Reform

4. **National vs. Regional.** The original designers of the BEST Program highlighted the deficiencies of pilot implementation of programs (i.e., implementing in only selected regions) and underscored the importance of shifting to national implementation scale at a fast pace. However, in doing so, there was little attention given to ensuring that the challenges encountered in going national do not become greater than the challenges of a modelling approach. The simultaneous 'downloading' of the

various program interventions was observed to be too rapid for the bureaucracy and participant stakeholders were left with little time to digest, adjust and iterate the interventions. Thus, the issues and pain points in implementation were magnified rather than worked through and ironed out prior to scale-up.

DFAT agrees. The nature of the national reforms BEST was supporting (e.g. the K to 12 program) resulted in a heavy focus on DepEd Central Office. The Independent Progress Review recommended a rebalancing to strengthen sub-national engagement; but this came late for school-level impact to fully manifest, with only a little over a year left for implementation. The intensification of Region, Division and school-level engagement in the program's final year was perhaps a bit rushed, and some schools felt overwhelmed with multiple activities. The appropriate balance and sequencing of national and sub-national engagement were considered in the design and implementation of subsequent programs, including the Sustaining Education Reform Gains (SERG) project.

Adaptive Programming

5. **The value of a flexible program design.** The Program designers and implementers took pains to explain that the BEST Program design differed from the traditional program implementation approach and instead opted for a flexible program management approach. The flexible design was enabled through the annual identification of activities to be supported by the Program, which was designed to increase the ownership of the process/product owners.

However, the pursuit of this flexible arrangement sometimes came at the cost of critical program management pillars such as the establishment of the program's baselines, identification of the program's critical paths (to identify critical prerequisites such as the administration of a globalised assessment tool prior to the implementation of the revised curriculum, or the issuance of the DepEd Order on the Philippine Professional Standards for Teachers (PPST) a few months after the issuance of the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) Memorandum Orders (CMOs) on Teacher Education), and adherence to the program's Results Framework. In a flexible program design, it might be beneficial to define what flexible arrangement meant and then set the parameters of what it entails.

DFAT agrees. BEST was deliberately designed to respond to the evolving policy priorities of the Philippine Government (through its collaborative annual planning process), while being guided by high-level programmatic goals (articulated in its theory of change). As the Independent Progress Review noted though, formal decision-making processes were not always strictly followed, particularly in 2016-17 period. This weakened strategic focus and limited progress on some critical program objectives.

The absence of comprehensive program baselines also undermined the program's ability to measure and attribute progress towards its intended outcomes. Baselines are now being implemented by the Education Pathways to Peace Program in Mindanao as an important aspect of its monitoring and evaluation framework.

However, the program's flexibility was also a strength. It enabled BEST to respond to DepEd's rapidly evolving needs in implementing the landmark K to 12 program. There is a productive tension between programmatic and flexible management approaches but one that must be carefully managed to realise sustainable change.