

Cost of education

The issue of fees in Nepal's private schools has been intensely contested



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The issue of private schools' fee structure resurfaced again last year as private school operators in the country sought to increase fees significantly. The student wings of political parties protested the move that resulted in the formation of a technical committee, based at the Department of Education, in April, to explore scientific measures to fix fees in private schools. The committee assessed the existing policies on fee structure and submitted a draft to the Ministry of Education proposing categories for private schools to charge fees. Yet, the measures proposed are not specific, precise or clear to address the issue substantially. Thus, it is difficult to assume that they will help solve the problem.

In fact, the issue of fees in Nepal's private schools has been intensely contested. In one such instance, the Supreme Court issued a verdict banning private schools from increasing fees for three years in 2012. Hence, this is a continuing problem arising from various reasons partly related to inadequacies in the existing policies and regulations and their poor enforcement. The ambiguous role of the state in private education also adds to the difficulty. Given this context, a genuine collaboration between the stakeholders in education—government, private school operators, student wings of political parties, parents, among others—could be the way ahead.

Policy and practice

Amidst growing debate over private education, the government amended the education regulations in 2003 AD to determine and regulate fees in private schools. According to the policy, School Classification and Fees Monitoring Committee located in District Education Office would classify private schools registered under company act into A, B, C, and D categories based on the facilities they provide. Specifically, schools are classified on the bases of physical facilities, management of teachers, responsibility and transparency, operation procedure, educational achievements and other achievements. Consequently, the monthly tuition, annual, and admission fees should be fixed based on the category the schools belong to. However, this policy leaves out many other bases for determining fees.

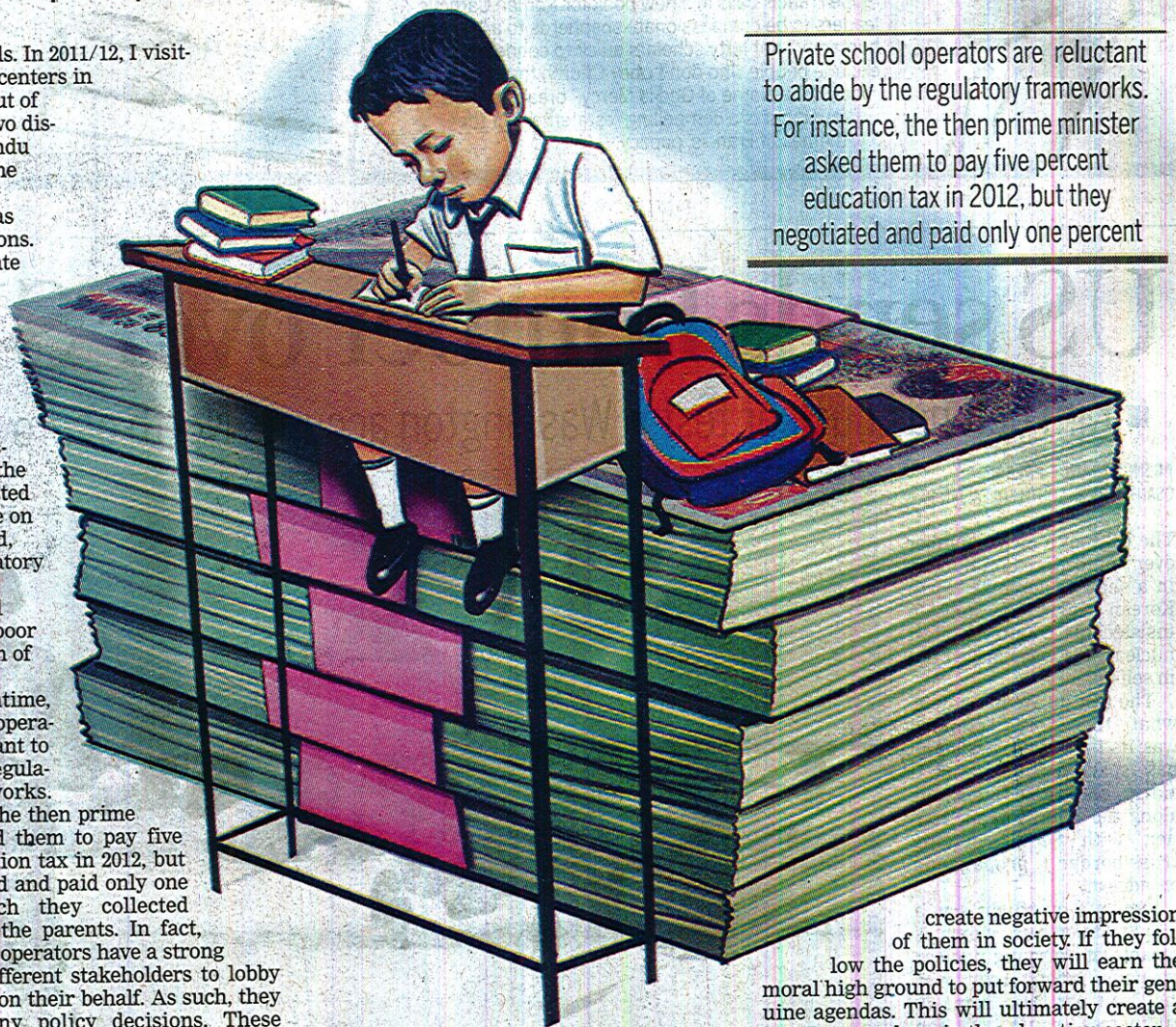
The existing policy provisions for fees are hardly monitored, regulated and enforced.

in private schools. In 2011/12, I visited major urban centers in nine districts, out of which only in two districts—Kathmandu and Lalitpur—the private schools were classified as per the regulations. Thus, how private schools should determine fees remains unknown when the very basis for that is not executed in many of the districts. None of the schools had posted its fee structure on the notice board, which is mandatory as per the regulations. All these indicate poor implementation of policies.

In the meantime, private school operators are reluctant to abide by the regulatory frameworks. For instance, the then prime minister asked them to pay five percent education tax in 2012, but they negotiated and paid only one percent, which they collected directly from the parents. In fact, private school operators have a strong nexus with different stakeholders to lobby and negotiate on their behalf. As such, they influence many policy decisions. These stakeholders' presence in Parliament is also significant at the moment.

The role of the state in private education also looks a bit conflicting in the broader national context. Through policy amendments, private schools are permitted to operate as companies since 2003 AD, which was an interesting turning point in the history of private education. In a sense, this policy arrangement allows private schools to do business legally. So restricting high fees in private schools and blaming them for commercialising education is a bit contradictory. However, the policies intend to regulate fees in private schools. This shows an ambiguous perspective of the state towards this sector.

The policy formulations for education are mostly influenced by power dynamics among stakeholders. However, the state often seems to resolve issues temporarily by amending the policies without thinking of its implications in practice. Hence, many of



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create negative impression of them in society. If they follow the policies, they will earn the moral high ground to put forward their genuine agendas. This will ultimately create a better atmosphere in the education sector.

Similarly, new policies need to be introduced as there are inadequacies in old ones. For instance, there are a lot of variations—as explored by the technical committee—in how much should be charged for the meals provided to students in private schools, and there are many other such categories for charging fees left unaddressed. These loopholes need to be bridged as early as possible to avert untoward consequences in the days ahead.

Finally, the state should be clear about private education in terms of the extent to which private schools should be regulated. In the name of regulation, it is impossible to have complete control over them, while they can hardly be left unregulated. So, the most appropriate way ahead is to strike a balance between the two extremes.

the policies are only for the sake of policy; they have little to show for when it comes to practice. Provisions of education regulations are hardly implemented. This compels us to think about the limits of such policies in making any difference in reality. Policies need to have far-reaching implications to avert future complications.

Way forward

To overcome these persisting hurdles in the sector, the existing policies should be strongly enforced. Specifically, private schools should be categorised as per the regulations to allow them to charge fees based on the facilities they provide.

The other urgent need is that private school operators should genuinely cooperate with and abide by government regulations. In the past, they have been hesitant to comply with the existing regulatory frameworks. Such acts of school operators are likely to