

## **'Building' money in education... again**

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Can the government work against the interests of other agencies under the same government, and even the same ministry? Apparently it can. In 1992, the Sindh Textbook Board rented out a ramshackle building to the [Sindh Education Foundation](#) (SEF), an autonomous body headed by former education minister and — a highly-respected, no-nonsense educationist — Professor Anita Ghulamali. Three years ago, the Sindh Textbook Board spent a whopping Rs300 million to renovate and spruce itself up most impressively, without parallel efforts towards textbook quality.

Then suddenly, just before the budget announcement, the secretary of the Education and Literacy Department of the Sindh government, Mr Wasim Ahmed Ursani, sent a notice to its tenants, the SEF, telling them to shift out immediately — without indicating where to or how to on such short notice. It was followed by Mr Ursani's verbal order on May 28 to vacate the building by May 31 — just two working days, which was not humanly possible.

It transpires that an Education Complex Scheme had been approved in the Annual Development Programme (ADP) and the already built SEF premises was identified as the new site which would be handed over to the executing agency, the Works and Services Department. It was all hush-hush, without the knowledge of the SEF. The funds for what must be a multibillion-rupee scheme have also already been released — although the amount was not revealed. The senior minister, Pir Mazharul Huq, who has maintained a plush, little-used office on the premises for years, could not have been unaware of what was going on.

The demand couldn't have come at a worse time. The SEF is in the midst of a couple of major projects. Under [commitment to the World Bank](#), it has to support 1,500 schools for quality education for some 200,000 children, and another 1,000 schools are to be opened for underprivileged children in Sindh by the end of this year.

That's going to require a lot of teachers and training. Summer vacation is the best time for training teachers and is routinely used because trainees are not burdened with classes at the same time. In other words, all of the SEF's work across Sindh would evaporate overnight if the Textbook Board's secretive and ill-conceived plans are bulldozed. The donor will not be pleased.

The SEF requires at least 20,000 square feet — which costs a minimum of Rs700,000 (at commercial rates) — to accommodate all its operations. One-fifth of that space alone is required to store educational and examination materials for 300,000 schoolchildren

every year. In any case, it would require at least six months and cost at least Rs50 million to relocate, the kind of money the SEF simply does not have.

On the one hand, there are constant groans about the lack of money for education. For 19 years, the SEF has been meeting maintenance costs by remaining strictly within budget. Yet an unknown amount of money was not only made available for a huge high-rise office, it has already been released — without even consulting the SEF (and presumably other departments too), to ascertain their convenience with respect to their ongoing work or what their actual needs would be in the planned new building.

The whole issue smacks of what the government is notorious for — [development money being swallowed up by construction projects](#), needed or not, well-planned or not, the fruits shared ingeniously between contractors and insiders. In this case, it is not even as if the Sindh Textbook Board could not have built a high-rise building elsewhere, if it is at all necessary. The Textbook Board has sites all over Karachi that could be made fit for better use.

But there is no need to demolish a completely finished office, just to put up another one on its grave. It would be an inexcusable squandering of taxpayers' money (including the debt they would continue paying for loans involved), and this is asking for trouble.

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