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DepEd and Coalitions for Change introduce

# BREAKTHROUGH SOLUTION TO REDUCE CONGESTION IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS



## OVERCROWDED CLASSROOMS, A PREVALENT PROBLEM FOR THE PHILIPPINES, HAVE A NEGATIVE IMPACT ON STUDENTS' LEARNING. ALMOST FOUR MILLION STUDENTS (ABOUT 18 PERCENT OF THE STUDENT POPULATION) ATTEND CONGESTED PUBLIC SCHOOLS.

In urban areas, some classes hold as many as 100 students – well beyond the Department of Education's (DepEd) prescribed 45 students per class. In those schools, students compete for space inside and outside the classroom.

In 2014, Coalitions for Change (CfC) began an effort to introduce institutional changes to improve the learning environment. In the first quarter of 2016, DepEd, with assistance from CfC, achieved a major breakthrough – DepEd developed an analytical system and procedures and issued guidelines to purchase a land parcel to establish a new school. Previous efforts at purchasing land for new schools had been ad hoc and arbitrary. By the end of 2016, DepEd successfully purchased seven parcels expected to accommodate about 28,000 students from congested schools. The purchase of these additional parcels represent the institutionalization of a reform, one of the principal goals of CfC. This story outlines the process and challenges of achieving this breakthrough reform.

### THE DEVELOPMENT CHALLENGE

School congestion is primarily an urban phenomenon. Many in DepEd recognize that the best solution is for DepEd to purchase land to establish new schools or expand existing ones. However, this solution to congestion had never been pursued for several reasons. One is DepEd's focus. Classroom shortage has been prevalent for so long that most of DepEd's attention and resources were focused on this problem. In fact, it was only when the budget for classrooms increased significantly under President Aquino in 2011 did the lack of land prominently surface. Another reason was the long-held belief by some in DepEd that school properties should not be purchased and rather donated by either the local government or private individuals and organizations. However, the likelihood of private land owners donating lands to DepEd has decreased with increasing land values, and the utilization of lands for

profitable ventures is now a more lucrative option for landowners. A third reason was the lack of a clear set of policies and procedures to govern the purchase of land, even as it is one of the options indicated in the school facilities manual.

To ease school congestion, DepEd principals and staff have developed and implemented a range of stop-gap solutions. These include: splitting classrooms into two using wall dividers; splitting the classes into morning, afternoon, and evening shifts; convincing students and parents to take distance-learning classes, or enroll in alternative learning schools that would not require daily class attendance. While there is currently no analysis on the impact of these options on student learning in the country, congestion adversely affects student learning and performance.<sup>1</sup>

In 2014, CfC began an effort to find a more permanent solution to school congestion. CfC met with a broad range of stakeholders to better understand the problem. These include meetings with DepEd staff, local government officials, civil society organizations, parents, teachers, and students.

At one pivotal meeting, a high-ranking DepEd official disclosed that a significant portion of DepEd's budget for school buildings and classrooms was not being utilized due to the lack of buildable space. Through succeeding consultations, CfC was able to pinpoint land shortage as the major and prevalent issue for congested schools in urban areas, especially in Metro Manila.

<sup>1</sup> Research on overcrowded schools in urban setting for developed countries indicate that congestion negatively affects student concentration as proximity (both with pupils and classrooms) invites more distractions. School congestion also limit the students' access to non-classroom facilities such as laboratories, gymnasiums, and media centers critical for learning.

*The Australian Embassy and The Asia Foundation, through its Coalitions for Change (CfC) flagship program, aims to effect policy reform by encouraging civil society, the private sector, academe, and government to work together and contribute to transformative change.*

*CfC works on development concerns that are consistent with the government's agenda: improving education outcomes, reducing vulnerabilities to disaster, ensuring peace and stability in Mindanao, promoting economic growth, and advocating for effective governance.*



# A POTENTIAL SOLUTION

## IDENTIFYING A POTENTIAL SOLUTION

With the lack of land verified as the major problem, the solution seemed simple and straightforward: DepEd could purchase land in areas where schools were congested. But the number of offices involved to make the land purchase made availing the solution more complex in reality. Follow up consultations on DepEd's land purchase surfaced that some believe it is the role of local governments to provide land to establish new schools. There was also an issue on budget — while there was a line item for classroom construction, there was no line item for land acquisition for new schools. Third, some within DepEd also argued that this solution carried considerable legal risks, which could lead

to cases filed against then DepEd Secretary Armin Luistro. These legal risks included the purchase of land that have questionable ownership or adverse claims. Lastly and as earlier mentioned, there was a lack of policy and procedures for purchasing land to guide DepEd staff, as such were done on an ad hoc basis. Added to this policy gap, there is a lack of clarity as to which DepEd office would be responsible for managing the land acquisition process.

## BUILDING THE COALITION

Fortunately, there were also strong supporters within DepEd including the Undersecretaries for Legal Affairs and Regional Affairs and the Planning Office of the land purchase solution. CfC had the

advantage of having developed an informal coalition within DepEd, with civil society, and in Congress to support DepEd's land purchase option to decongest public schools. CfC focused on briefing key people in Congress to understand the nature of the problem and garner support for the reform. The CfC team worked with several legislators including Representatives Oscar Rodriguez (3rd district of Pampanga), Yeng Guiao (1st district of Pampanga), Rufus Rodriguez (2nd district of Cagayan de Oro), Ronaldo Zamora (lone district of San Juan), Isidro Ungab (3rd district of Davao City), and Kaka Bag-ao (lone district of Dinagat Islands). The message communicated to these Congress allies was simple and two-fold: support the increase of allocation for land in the DepEd 2015 budget and make land purchase for schools a viable solu-

tion to address school congestion. CfC also met with then Finance Committee Chair Senator Francis Escudero at the Senate.

The hard work of DepEd, CfC, and partners paid off. The 2015 national budget included a special provision for DepEd to acquire land for new schools. The previous 2014 budget included a modest Php 65 million (AUD 1.9 million) for land-related issues, traditionally used to cover the costs of fees and title transfers of donated lands. The 2015 national budget gave DepEd Php 411 million (AUD 12.2 million), a remarkable 532 percent increase from 2014, with a specific earmark on the purchase of land for DepEd-identified congested schools.

## ESTABLISHING THE RULES

Now armed with the special budget provision, the next challenge was to develop and issue rules that would guide the DepEd staff and safeguard the process. Towards this end, CfC assisted DepEd in organizing a series of meetings and consultations with its Sites Titling Office, Office of the Undersecretary for Regional Operations, and School Division Office of Quezon City. This led to the crafting and DepEd's issuance of the Guidelines on the Acquisition of New School Sites in June 16, 2015.

To eliminate opportunities for discretionary decision-making by schools qualified to access the land purchase option, the rules outlined an objective and evidence-based process that primarily establishes a school's need for land. Two key criteria were established. The first is the number of students per classroom and the second is the ratio of the number of students per square meter of land to determine if there was buildable space. Only schools that had 1) over 56 students per classroom and 2) land area ratio of three square meters (sqm) per student would be eligible for land purchase.

To help move away from the dominant donation-dependent practice, the order also further defined what constitutes a negotiated sale or purchase on school site acquisition. The other modes of acquisition still include donation and expropriation, in accordance with Republic Act 8974, the law governing the Acquisition of Right-of-Way, Site, or Location for National Government Infrastructure Projects and for Other Purposes.

# 2 KEY

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# FROM CONCEPT TO IMPLEMENTATION

With the rules issued, the next step was to test the process and procedures. The Quezon City Schools Division Office (QC SDO) was selected to test the process of site acquisition, having the most congested schools in the country.

From March to August 2015, CfC assisted the QC SDO, visited potential school sites, compiled reports on the congestion situation of the public schools, and gathered documents required for the purchase. From an initial list of 12 properties, QC SDO was able to successfully acquire a 2,500 sqm property in Novaliches, Quezon City for Php 16.9 million (AUD 502,235) in January 2016.

The quarter hectare property is located near two highly congested public high schools: San Bartolome and Sta. Lucia High Schools. These schools have student-classroom ratios of 66 and 119 respectively, with a combined estimate of 7,181 students, clearly over capacity and in need of decongestion.

Based on DepEd estimates, the acquired school site can hold 60 new classrooms to accommodate 2,700 students. The acquisition of the Novaliches property will significantly reduce congestion in the two nearby schools of San Bartolome and Sta. Lucia High Schools.

In November 2016, the acquired school site was assigned a six-digit school identification (ID). This school ID is significant as the DepEd system now acknowledges the Novaliches property as a school and is included in the Department's database. With the School ID, the property is now eligible to receive programmed funds for school buildings, desks and chairs, and school personnel.

DepEd's Planning and Programming Division is currently preparing the school's development and improvement plan, and the corresponding budgetary requirements for it to be fully operational in 2018.



# TOWARDS » INSTITUTIONALIZATION

One of the goals of CfC is to introduce reforms that can be sustained and institutionalized. There are strong indications that CfC is making significant progress towards this goal. Armed with the experience of purchasing the first parcel and the clear procedural guidelines, DepEd and CfC conducted workshops

with the most congested School Divisions. This led to the successful acquisition of seven parcels that can accommodate over 20,000 new students from nearby crowded schools in 2016 (Table 1). What is worth highlighting is that DepEd did bulk of the work to acquire these properties, with CfC providing technical and legal advice.

Table 1. DepEd purchased properties for new schools in 2016

Schools Division Office	Property	Purchase Price (PhP millions)	Land Area (sqm)	Projected no. of Students
QUEZON CITY	Mary Lim	17	2,555	1,080
	G.B. Francisco	28	2,461	1,080
BULACAN	Sipat Elementary School	2	1,202	540
	Ramirez-Cruz High School	16	19,626	7,920
	Pinagkuertelan Elementary School	11	12,008	4,860
	Cay Pombo Elementary School	34	18,254	7,290
CAVITE	Jedrich Credit and Lending Services Corp.	21	12,896	5,220
TOTAL		129	69,002	27,990

# CONCLUSION

*“This land acquisition proof of concept provides DepEd with the policy, knowledge, and financial resources to expand existing schools or build new schools.”*

Over a two year period, DepEd and CfC, with the support of education stakeholders, conceptualized, tested, and successfully implemented a breakthrough solution to reduce school congestion in urban areas – the purchase of land to establish a new public school.

With nearly four million students nationwide and with more expected with the full implementation of senior high school under the K-12 program, the challenge for DepEd to provide adequate facilities is likely to intensify.

This land acquisition proof of concept achieved through CfC provides DepEd with the policy, knowledge, and financial resources to expand existing schools or build new schools, a modest contribution towards improving the learning

environment for elementary and high school students in urban areas.

Governance and development challenges are complex and often opaque with numerous issues that require attention. To deal with uncertainty and complexity, CfC is designed to encourage learning by doing through an iterative process, while maintaining a clear focus on transformative change.

In the case of the reform to help DepEd establish rules and procedures to successfully purchase land for new schools, CfC’s *modus operandi* appears to have worked. Instead of providing a ready made solution based on external analysis, CfC worked with various partners to identify a critical development problem that had been missed or ignored by most development partners, provided clear policy analysis and recommendations to key constituents, and established constructive relationships with a broad range of stakeholders in and out of government. Further, CfC encouraged these stakeholders to spend their valuable and limited political capital to introduce a sustainable high-impact policy reform that promises to improve the learning environment for millions of students in the country.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

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