

Making the 'dream-school' grade

Now that a Srinakharinwirot University (SWU) research paper has revealed problems in the One District, One Dream School Project, it may be time for the Education Ministry to decide if it should continue the scheme or scrap it.

The project, brainchild of deposed prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra, is an experimental exercise to explore various educational models tailored to meet the needs of local communities under the ongoing education reforms.

The research team, funded by the Office of the Permanent Secretary for Education, conducted the research last year on 16 "dream schools". A report was submitted to the ministry in October. SWU vice president for academic affairs Napaporn Havanon, who headed the team, said the study did not aim only to point out the drawbacks, but many participating schools were not ready in terms of personnel and funding. She recognised the scheme's advantages, that it encouraged community participation in schooling and thus created a learning process that responded to the community's needs while also allowing students to attend developed schools without having to travel to a provincial centre. The weaknesses are mentioned in the report's conclusion, intended to show executives what needs improvement.

Napaporn emphasised the key to the scheme running smoothly was community participation to create a mutual ideal, not one created for them by the ministry. She urged the ministry to develop a clear strategy and accept that each dream school would have a different means of achieving the goal.

Since the project kicked off in April 2003, the selected 921 schools have been trying to improve in many aspects, using both the scheme's block grant of Bt3 million per school and funds raised from outside. Aiming for the same standard and using similar methods, schools with less funding and resources opted to follow the example of nearby schools, consult networking schools and take advantage of available training. The better-off schools cooperated with higher institutions in setting curricula and improving teaching skills.

The path to becoming a "dream school" seemed to be in accordance with what the government had set for the schools rather than being a "shared dream from the foundation level", the report said. Despite that, the schools were proud to be chosen and readily set out on

the path decided for them. With Bt3 million for each school, they set out to become dream schools that actually cost Bt10 million each. Many primary schools, mostly poor ones at tambon level, suffered financial hardship while trying to acquire the required equipment, such as satellite systems, computers and software, projectors and laboratory equipment.

Some schools decided to borrow computers or buy materials on credit. With poor financial planning, some ended up in debt. Overall money owed by schools in the scheme totals Bt132 million, or Bt2 million per school. Some schools simply charged their students more. Napaporn's team found that some district-level schools had charged an additional Bt2,500 per term to pay for electricity, Internet connection, telephone bills and satellite rental, while some primary schools had charged Bt300 to Bt500 extra. Some village-level primary schools were asked to try stretching to Mathayom 3 level in order to "extend educational opportunity", a request they were not happy about but which they felt obligated to comply with. These schools found it hard to raise funds from already poor villagers while their teachers were still insufficiently experienced and technologically unqualified. Some schools could not acquire a satellite system; others managed but found their other facilities could not support the hi-tech extension. Schools also struggled to pass the Education Ministry's evaluation in order to call themselves "dream schools". They had little chance to set their own goals or express what a dream school for them would be like. Of 921 participating schools, 700 passed the evaluation.

The pressure to be a local representative mounted, and to fail was unacceptable. Thus many schools devoted money, time and effort to passing the evaluation. On the one hand, this brought everyone together. School executives tried hard to make their schools "dream schools" by adjusting their administration to bring in other parties, including local administrators, alumni, religious leaders and even private companies, to advise, raise funds and share knowledge. But on the other hand the desire to pass the evaluation and meet the standard set by the authorities may have corrupted the idea of school communities improving themselves as appropriate and at their own pace.

The "dream-school" label was seen as giving parents more confidence about sending their children to the schools, which would provide the schools with more money to continuously improve, the report said. The researchers also found that while the goal of making students computer literate had been achieved in some schools, it was a pity that students often just lumped together online information into reports, no different from the previous rote practice of teachers spouting information and students jotting it down in a notebook. The new method still does not teach students to analyse knowledge and select useful information.

Meanwhile, Somwang Pitayanuwat, director of the Office for National Education Standards and Quality Assessment (Onesqa) cited his agency's report that 58 per cent of the schools were up to standard but the scheme should be continued at a more gradual pace by starting with the most capable schools first. The Education Ministry could gather tax-free donations and distribute the money to schools upcountry, Somwang said, which would be better than having school directors seeking funds themselves and ending up in debt.

"The scheme should go on, but with changes. It should not focus on getting a school the required amount of laboratory space or prettifying the school environment: it should be done in capable schools and then expanded gradually, so the "dream schools" are the dream schools of local communities too," Somwang added.

Chularat Saengpassa
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