

Students drop in general edn, rise in madrassahs

Shahin Akhter  26 October, 2025, 00:55

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The number of students at the schools and colleges from the secondary to tertiary levels of education in the country has dropped in the past few years.

On the contrary, the number of students at madrassahs from the secondary to tertiary levels increased in the same period, according to the Bangladesh Education Statistics 2024 released recently by the Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics.

Educationists said that a rise in poverty, high education cost, child labour, and growing Islamic philosophy-based politics were the key reasons for the trend.

As per the data, the number of students at the secondary schools (junior secondary school, secondary school and school section of school and college) in 2024 was 90,63,422, while it was 94,05,785 in 2023, it was 1,01,33,143 in 2022, it was 1,01,90,022 in 2021, and it was 1,02,52,126 in 2020.

In 2024, the number of students at colleges (school and college/intermediate college, degree (pass) college, degree (honours) college and master's college) was 49,26,266, while the number was 50,93,891 in 2023, it was 48,32,170 in 2022, it was 47,36,962 in 2021, and it was 46,35,121 in 2020.

In the case of the madrassahs from the secondary to tertiary levels, the number of students at dakhil (secondary level), alim (higher secondary level), fazil (honours level) and kamil (master's level) madrassahs was 27,96,191 in 2024, it was 27,58,504 in 2023, it was 27,62,277 in 2022, it was 26,57,252 in 2021 and it was 25,53,439 in 2020.

BRAC University professor emeritus Manzoor Ahmed said that the main reason for this situation was economic.

'Studying at schools and colleges is more expensive compared with that at madrassahs,' he said, adding that currently the rate of poverty in the country was increasing.

The World Bank in a report on October 7 said that poverty had worsened in Bangladesh as the rate climbed to 21.2 per cent in the 2024-25 financial year from 20.5 per cent in the FY 2023-24.

In August, local think-tank Power and Participation Research Centre calculated poverty at 27.93 per cent in May 2025 against 18.7 per cent in 2022.

Manzoor also said that not only the people living under the poverty line but also the people slightly above the line could not able to bear the educational expenses of their children.

So, some students were shifted to madrassahs where the educational expense was lower and some others started to do different work for earnings, he said.

According to the findings of ‘Education Watch Study 2023—School Education in Bangladesh: Post-Pandemic Resilience and Sustainability’, in the first six months of 2023, education expenses at the primary and secondary levels increased by 25 per cent and 51 per cent respectively, due mainly to having private tutors for students and the purchase of commercial guidebooks and notebooks.

The research, launched in March 2024 and conducted by the Campaign for Popular Education, a coalition of non-governmental organisations, also observed that the trend of choosing madrassahs might have been influenced by the pandemic-induced socio-economic impacts on families.

Professor Md Fazlur Rahman, a teacher at the Institute of Education and Research under Dhaka University, said that the tendency of rising enrolment at madrassahs had started since the Covid pandemic in 2020.

‘Due to the closure of the schools during the pandemic, a section of parents sent their children to madrassahs instead of keeping them at home as some madrassahs remained open during the period,’ he said.

Fazlur also said that an increase in poverty and political phenomenon were two other reasons for the rise in enrolment at madrassahs.

‘The same philosophy that the madrassahs work with has been active and increasing in politics in Bangladesh for quite some time,’ he said, adding that these political parties under their motivational programmes motivated parents in the rural areas to send their children to madrassahs.

Professor Manzoor also observed that the number of students in the country was decreasing slightly due to a decline in the population growth rate.

According to the 2024 BANBEIS report, the numbers of the general educational institutions and madrassahs are increasing and the number of teachers at all educational institutions but colleges are also increasing.

In colleges (school and college/intermediate college, degree (pass) college, degree (honours) college and master’s college), the number of teachers was 1,32,789 in 2024, it was 1,34,485 in 2023, it was 1,43,007 in 2022, and it was 1,37,225 in 2021.

The country’s school-age population (5–14 years) in recent years has varied between somewhat over 18 per cent and slightly over 20 per cent of the total demographic, as it was 18.56 per cent in 2023,

18.63 per cent in 2022, 18.82 per cent in 2021, and 19.7 per cent in 2020, according to the Bangladesh Sample Vital Statistics 2023.

The rate of population of 15 years to 24 years was 18.67 per cent in 2023, 19.05 per cent in 2022, 19.33 per cent in 2021, and 18.84 per cent in 2020.

The recent data on the country's quomi madrassahs are not available from the BANBEIS, the government agency responsible for the collection and dissemination of statistics related to education in Bangladesh.

According to a 2015 BANBEIS survey, there were 13,902 quomi madrassahs in the country, with 13,98,252 students studying in those madrassahs.