

Bangladesh kids spend least time in schools among Saarc states

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With a staggering 137-day official holiday besides temporary closure due to natural calamities, Bangladesh schoolchildren get minimum time a year for academic activities among the Saarc nations.

Educational institutions, especially the government primary and high schools, officially remain open for only 228 days every year to cover class activities, examinations and other programmes.

Students of these schools get per week less than 30 hours to interact with teachers, much lower than that of India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Nepal, Bhutan and Afghanistan, sources in the education ministry say.

Even Pakistani students, who are the second lowest, get 35 hours every week, the sources add.

"The future of the nation is dark because school students lack adequate academic knowledge. Children's time is not being utilised

properly. Education has become a commodity where investment gets maximum priority," renowned academician Prof Dr Zillur Rahman Siddique told The Daily Star.

"Students have to depend on private tuition because schools have failed to provide proper education. For this reason students from poor families, especially in rural areas, are being deprived of education," said the former vice-chancellor of Jahangirnagar University.

Educationists suggest a drastic cut and adjustment of long annual leave like the 30-day Eid-ul-Fitr holiday, 18-day summer vacation, 17-day Eid-ul-Azha and winter vacation, which are in addition to the 52-day weekly holidays a year.

Every year natural disasters like floods and cyclones often impose unplanned holidays. Last year students of 39 districts were deprived of classes from August to October for two consecutive floods.

Moreover, students of 30 south and southeast districts could not attend their classes from November 15 to February due to devastating cyclone Sidr.

Around 5,000 educational institutions were destroyed completely and 15,000 more damaged partially due to two floods and Sidr last year.

Students had to wait for long as authorities concerned failed to repair the damaged schools and colleges quickly.

The issues of expanding 'school schedule' and introducing 'disaster-friendly' academic calendar have been raised from academics, students and authorities concerned.

Academics suggest that the caretaker government curtail "unnecessary" leave and introduce July-June academic session instead of the old January-December one as August-September is the probable time for floods.

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Allegations are rife that many teachers give private tuition in batches even in the school after the classes. Taking the opportunity of long leave, teachers also give more attention to private tuition rather than imparting education in the classrooms, guardians and students allege.

They also allege teachers, especially of English and Mathematics, often absent themselves from school because they are too busy in doing private tuition. A report of World Bank says 16 percent teachers are found to be absent during the working days.

As the practice continues, students from solvent families who can afford tutors do well in the examinations, while students from poor families often cannot achieve good results.

Education Watch Report-2006, a survey conducted by Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE), also points finger at the tendency for depending on private tuition.

According to the report, 88 percent students of government schools and 78 percent students of non-government schools in urban areas have private coaching or tutors. Parents spend Tk 16,894 on an average annually on a child's private education.

Teachers in the capital say they give 40 to 45 minutes for each class before recess and take important subjects like English and Math then. After interval, especially during afternoon shift, they take

30-35-minute class.

The total leave of a year includes 52 days for weekly holiday, 30 days for Eid-ul-Fitr, 18 days for summer vacation, 17 days for Eid-ul-Azha, winter vacation, Victory Day and the Christmas, one day each for Bangla new year, English new year, Muharram, Saraswati Puja, Maghi Purnima, International Mother Language Day, Shiv Ratri, Eid-e-Miladunnabi, Easter Sunday, Independence Day, May Day, Shab-e-Meraj, Shab-e-Qadr, Janmastami, Durga Puja, Laxmi Puja, and Kali Puja.

In addition to these, the headmasters are entitled to close the schools, if need be, for five days throughout the year.

Least time

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August-October is the most important period for students of conventional calendar as they have to sit for second term examinations or take preparations for final exams usually held in November.

"Students will be more benefited if they are given more time to spend with their teachers. For this reason, we have to keep schools open for more days and unnecessary leave should go. Besides, time has come to reschedule our academic session considering the floods," said renowned educationist Prof Scrajul Islam Choudhury.

Education ministry top officials said suggestions from experts have been asked as to how school timing can be expanded and classroom activities made more attractive for the children.

"We've asked all the deputy commissioners to hold meetings with the headmasters, teachers, members of managing committees, guardians and students for taking their views on how to increase school timing," Nazrul Islam Khan, joint secretary of the education ministry, said.

He also said the ministry has a plan to give scheduled vacation for students based on regional atmospheres and demands so that studies are not hampered.

Students have to depend on private tuition to achieve good results in the examinations because they don't get sufficient education from schools.