

Educated To Exit

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How pedagogical neglect in urban secondary public schools shape not just who drops out, but how far the rest are able to go.

Executive Summary

The urban secondary public schools in Pakistan suffer from persistent supply-side constraints such as gaps in staffing, infrastructure, and the teaching method; conditions this brief will trace forward to ask about who drops out, and who stays. This brief focuses specifically on these supply-side, school-system conditions rather than demand-side challenges such as household poverty or family decision-making, though these also contribute to dropout and outcomes. Drawing on secondary data from ASER, PIDE research, and related academic sources, this analysis finds that these conditions push some students out of school entirely, with the dropout rate increasing sharply at the exact age secondary schooling starts. For those who remain, the same conditions resurface later on: they lag behind in competitiveness in tertiary admissions and also face a measurable earnings penalty in the labour market. Poverty and other social constraints matter too, but pedagogy remains as an often over-looked, yet significant, policy-actionable driver which the education sector can act upon. This brief recommends treating the classroom's quality itself, not just access, as a primary policy priority.

Introduction

In recent years, the quality of pedagogical environment in urban secondary public schools of Pakistan has emerged as a pressing educational challenge, with numerous factors that have led to its deterioration. There are supply-side conditions: teachers are often unavailable or overburdened, the classrooms lack basic instructional resources, the medium of instruction rarely matches what the policy prescribes, and teaching still relies heavily on rote memorization rather than interactive methods. Together, these conditions shape the everyday learning experience of secondary-level students in the urban public sector.

Secondary education is vital as it not only acts as the bridge between primary and tertiary education, but it also establishes foundational knowledge and analytical skills that allow both public and private school graduates to secure employment and achieve long-term life outcomes.¹ Yet in urban Pakistan, the dropout rates (nearly flat through primary and middle-school years at 3.9% and 3.7%) rise to 5.8% in 2022 among all children aged 14-16, the age band in which secondary schooling occurs.² This spike lines up almost exactly with the stage where public secondary schools are hit hardest by teacher shortages, resource gaps and rote-based instruction, which suggests that school quality is a part of the problem.

Poor pedagogical conditions do not only push students out of school, but they also limit what students who remain are able to achieve. For those students who stay, this environment still shapes their outcomes; it limits their competitiveness in tertiary education and, eventually, in the labour market. Addressing this problem requires treating the pedagogical environment, not just access, as the urgent policy priority.

¹ Zavlia School, "What is Secondary Education and Why It Matters for Students", April 17, 2026, <https://zaviaschool.edu.pk/secondary-education/>.

² Idara-e-Taleem-o-Agahi, Annual Status Of Education Report 2021-2022, Urban, ASER Pakistan, 2022, <https://aserpakistan.org/document/aser/2021/reports/Urban-2022.pdf>.

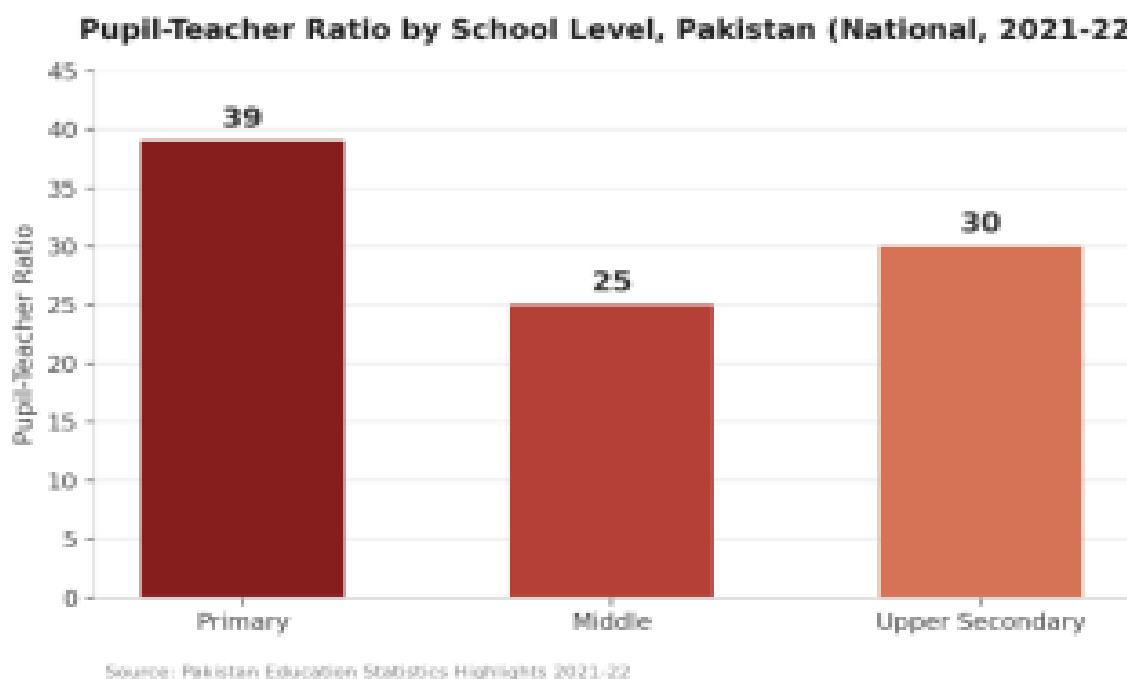
Methodology

This policy brief uses quantitative secondary data analysis. Due to time constraints, primary data collection such as surveys or interviews with secondary urban public-school students and teachers is impractical. Therefore, this analysis instead draws on existing national datasets and reports, which includes Annual Status of Education Report Pakistan (ASER), Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS) figures, and other relevant academic and policy research on secondary education in Pakistan.

However, there are a few limitations to keep in mind with this approach. Most of the available data isn't specific to urban secondary public schools; many sources instead cover rural areas, primary instead of secondary education, or contain data on a more general "public school" category. So, the figures are used as the closest approximation available rather than an exact fit in some sections of the brief. Also, some of the data is not current: for instance, the drop-out figures used are from 2022, and conditions may have slightly changed since, whether in a more negative or positive manner. Lastly, because this brief does not include first-hand interviews or surveys, it can trace the patterns between pedagogical conditions and dropout or outcome trends, but it cannot prove that these conditions alone are the sole cause. Social and economic constraints are important factors that are likely to contribute as well. To manage these few gaps, multiple sources are referred to for key claims where possible, and pedagogy is treated as one (sometimes overlooked) contributing factor among several, rather than the sole explanation for dropout.

An Under Resourced and Under Trained System

The quality of urban secondary public schools in Pakistan is well defined by the staffing, the infrastructure, and the teaching method applied. Nationally, the pupil-teacher ratio for upper secondary level stands at 30 as shown in the chart below.³



³ Pakistan Institute of Education, Pakistan Education Statistics Highlights Report, 2021-2022, <https://pie.gov.pk/SiteImage/Downloads/PES%20Highlights%202021-22%20New.pdf>.⁴ Robert Hunter, "Education In Pakistan", World Education News + Reviews, February 25, 2020, <https://wenr.wes.org/education-system-profiles/education-in-pakistan/>.

This shortage also includes teacher absenteeism or ‘ghost teachers’ who remain on the payroll but do not regularly attend school which reduces instructional time.⁴ There are also physical resourcing gaps at other levels of the public system: a case study of primary level public classrooms in Islamabad found that students would work without

proper desks and sit on broken chairs, with instruction that relied on basic whiteboard rather than the tools available in comparable private schools.⁵ Although this evidence is drawn from the primary level rather than secondary, it clearly points to a resourcing pattern within urban public education more broadly. Punjab’s Multan region also points to missing science and computer labs, and overcrowded classrooms which can sometimes be structurally unsafe in public secondary schools, though this data is not urban specific.⁶ This erosion also shows up in enrolment patterns: the share of urban children enrolled in government schools falls from 41.9% at ages 11-13 to 37.6% at ages 14-16 even as the private sector’s share holds steady. This indicates that families are not simply switching to private schools at this stage, but that the public system itself is losing students it once held.⁷

Teaching methods are largely teacher centred, usually including rote memorisation and exam focused “cramming” where students are expected to absorb content passively rather than engage with it. Teachers report that they receive little or no training in student-centred methods, even where curriculum reforms formally call for them.⁸ Examples of student-centred methods include project-based learning and peer teaching.

All of these shortcomings are not isolated but connect to form a pattern. Research on government school spending finds that public institutions spend roughly twice as much per student compared to private schools, yet do not achieve better learning outcomes. This suggests that the constraint is not just about the amount of funding, but how funding translates into teaching quality and classroom practice.⁹ The rest of this brief will build upon the foundation created by this gap between resources and outcomes.

Beyond Poverty: Pedagogy as a Driver of Dropout

The conditions described above do not stay abstract for the students living inside them. Consider staffing first: a pupil-teacher ratio of 30:1, worsened by “ghost teacher” absenteeism, means fewer opportunities for a struggling student to be noticed before they fall too far behind to recover. This is not a Pakistan-specific problem. A population-wide Norwegian study found that a 5 percentage point increase in teacher absence during lower-secondary school raised the probability of eventual dropout by 0.6 percentage points, and that this effect was driven almost entirely by low socioeconomic status students, with almost no effect for advantaged students.¹⁰ A similar pattern shows up within Pakistan itself: in rural schools, teacher absence was found to be much higher in girls’ schools than boys’ schools and was directly linked to lower enrolment and retention for girls.¹¹ This evidence is from rural primary schooling, not urban secondary, but it shows the same mechanism of uneven teacher absence undermining retention operating inside Pakistan’s own school system, backing up the Norway comparison with local evidence. Pakistani urban public-school students, who are usually drawn from lower-income households, fall into the group this mechanism harms the most.

⁵ Baneen Batool, “Differences in pedagogical approaches across public and private schools in Pakistan: Implications for single national curriculum”, MPhil thesis, Pakistan Institute of Development Economics, 2022, <https://file-thesis.pide.org.pk/pdf/mphil-public-policy-2020-baneen-batool--differences-in-pedagogical-approaches-across-public-and-private-schools-in-pakistan-implications-for-single-national-curriculum.pdf>.

⁶ The Urban Unit, Multan Division Regional Development Plan, Education Sector, 2023, <https://urbanunit.gov.pk/Download/publications/Files/18/2023/Education%20Sector.pdf>. ⁷ Idara-e-Taleem-o-Agahi, ASER, 2021-2022.

⁸ Baneen Batool, “Pedagogical Approaches”, 12.

⁹ Tahir Andrabi, Jishnu Das, Asim I. Khwaja, Tara Vishwanath, Tristan Zajonc, “Learning and Educational Achievements in Punjab Schools (LEAPS): Insights to Inform the Education Policy Debate,” Report, 2007, <https://www.leaps.hks.harvard.edu/research/schools#leaps-report>. ¹⁰ Borgen, Markussen & Raaum, “Socioeconomic differences in the long-term effects of teacher absence on student outcomes,” European Societies 26(3), 2023, <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC11262431/>.

Overcrowded and resource-poor classrooms with weak infrastructure lower attendance motivation on their own. In a local qualitative study of urban secondary public schools, 48% of dropout girls cited that a lack of basic facilities such as missing labs and inadequate classrooms, was the reason they left the school.¹²

The teaching method compounds both problems. Poor quality teaching, including teachers who followed rote memorization instruction since they had received no training to move beyond, was cited by 64% of urban dropouts as a reason for leaving. It was notably higher than the 48% cited in the rural sample from the same study.¹³ This suggests that the factor bites hardest in exactly the setting which this brief examines.

None of this happens in isolation from non-pedagogical pressures. The same research found that demand-side pressures such as poverty, early marriage, and the need to contribute to household income were cited just as often as independent reasons for dropout. In other words, pedagogy is a significant and policy-actionable driver, just not the only one. It is one which a policymaker can address directly as it is in the education sector's control.

For Those Who Stay Back: Their Preparedness Gap

For those students who leave, the informal sector wage penalty is steep and dropouts face a labour market where they have no credential to offer. But staying in school does not undo what secondary schooling failed to provide in the first place. The same rote, exam-focused instruction described in the initial finding leaves students technically “complete” but functionally underprepared. Cross-country panel data which includes Pakistan finds that test-score gaps between low- and high-income students at age 12 explain only 15% of the eventual gap in years of schooling completed, which is the smallest share of any of the five countries studied. In other words, something other than raw test performance is driving Pakistan's outcomes, and structural and preparedness barriers look like the more decisive factor over here.¹⁴

This preparedness gap has a specific, named mechanism in Pakistan. The English language functions as a “gatekeeper” into prestigious university departments and entrance exams, while public secondary schools instruct almost entirely in Urdu. A small qualitative study of students moving between these streams found that public/Urdu-medium students describe feeling structurally disadvantaged in English-medium exams and departments. They are perceived as having “no future” by their English-medium peers even when their abilities were comparable.¹⁵

¹¹ Ghuman & Lloyd, “Teacher absence as a factor in gender inequalities in access to primary schooling in rural Pakistan”, Poverty, Gender, and Youth Working Paper no. 1, Population Council, 2007, https://knowledgecommons.popcouncil.org/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1075&context=departments_bsr-pgy.

¹² Anam Shahid, “Understanding the Phenomenon of Female Students' Dropping Out of Secondary School: A Case Study of Public Schools in Rahim Yar Khan, Pakistan”, MPhil thesis, Lahore School of Economics, 2023, <https://repository.lahoreschool.edu.pk/xmlui/bitstream/handle/123456789/17471/Anam%20Shahid%20Thesis.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>.

¹³ Anam Shahid, MPhil thesis, 2023.

¹⁴ Das, Singh & Chang, “Test Scores and Educational Opportunities: Panel Evidence from Five Low and Middle-Income Countries”, *Journal of Public Economics* 206, Science Direct, 2022, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0047272721002061>.

¹⁵ Shamim & Rashid, “The English/Urdu-Medium Divide in Pakistan,” *Journal of Education and Educational Development* 6(1), 2019, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1216773.pdf>. (Small note: It is not a statistical finding but is cited to help visualize mechanism. It is a qualitative study of three students at one Karachi university)

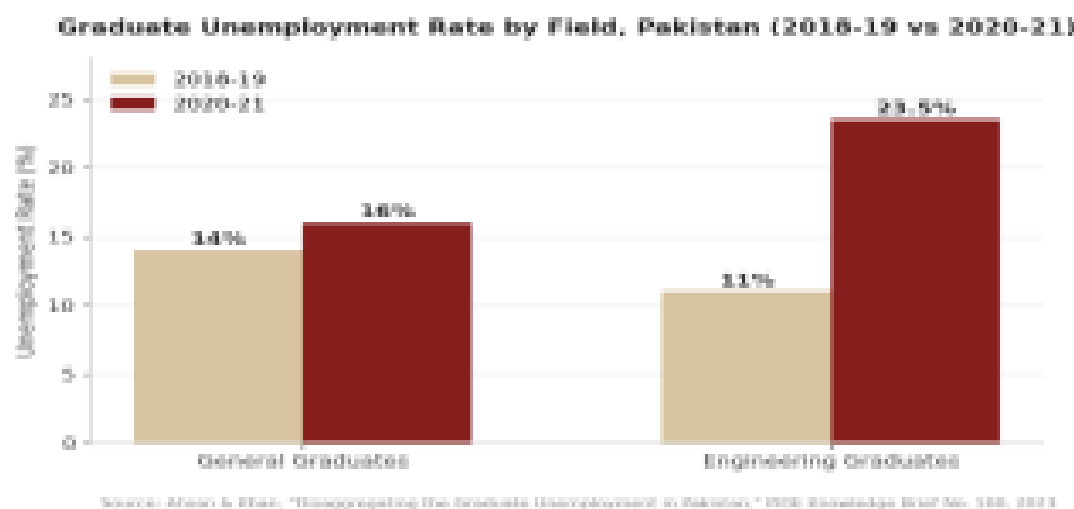
The wage market ultimately reflects this pattern at scale: individuals who graduated from secondary public schools faced a 12% earnings penalty in urban Pakistan compared to their private-sector peers with the same level of education.¹⁶

This is not a Pakistan-only pattern. Comparable research from Australia finds a similar sector gap in university entrance performance: even after accounting for students' previous achievements and socioeconomic background, students at independent schools still scored 6 points higher on tertiary entrance exams than students at government schools. This suggests that it is a structural problem but not only in Pakistan; weak secondary preparation just keeps piling up once students reach the tertiary transition.¹⁷

Pedagogy's Cost in the Labour Market

The preparedness gap does not close on its own once a student reaches the labour market. It simply resurfaces later, as employer dissatisfaction and weaker job outcomes. In a 2019 survey of over 200 Pakistani employers (they were collectively employing around 500,000 people across 25 industries), 78% of them reported that they were unsatisfied with the quality of fresh graduates. The most common complaints were regarding lack of skills such as communication, critical thinking, written ability, etc., which rote memorisation instruction does little to build.¹⁸

This dissatisfaction could be seen in aggregate numbers as well. National graduate unemployment rose sharply between 2018-19 and 2020-21, nearly three times the general unemployment rate, and the pattern further sharpens in technical fields such as engineering as seen in the chart below.¹⁹



¹⁶ Qureshi, "Wage Inequality and Rate of Returns to Private Sector's Education: A Case Study of Urban Pakistan", Pakistan Journal of Applied Economics, 2016, <https://www.aerc.edu.pk/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/WAGE-INEQUALITY-AND-RATE-OF-RETURNS-TO-PRIVATE-SECTOR%E2%80%99S-EDUCATION-A-Case-Study-of-Urban-Pakistan.pdf>. ¹⁷ Gary Marks, Julie McMillan, Kylie Hillman, "Tertiary Entrance Performance: The Role of Student Background and School Factors", ACER Research Repository, 27, 2001, https://research.acer.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1023&context=lsay_research. ¹⁸ Naqeebz Consulting, "Graduate Employability: Employers Perception Survey Report", Covered by Consultancy.asia, 2019, <https://www.consultancy.asia/news/2202/majority-of-employers-in-pakistan-dissatisfied-with-recent-graduates>. ¹⁹ Ahsan & Khan, "Disaggregating the Graduate Unemployment in Pakistan", Pakistan Institute Of Education Knowledge Brief No. 100, 3, 2023, <https://file.pide.org.pk/uploads/kb-100-disaggregating-the-graduate-unemployment-in-pakistan.pdf>.

Interestingly, the same data also shows that graduate unemployment is actually lower in urban areas (12%) than rural ones (22%), but this pattern does not contradict this brief's argument so much as narrow it. Urban labour markets simply generate more graduate-level jobs, enough to even absorb graduates that are underprepared with weaker skills. The employer dissatisfaction data shows this mismatch clearly, between what graduates can offer and what employers need, regardless of the raw unemployment rate.²⁰

This connects directly back to the initial finding of this brief: a system which trains its students to memorise for exams rather than apply knowledge produces graduates who look qualified on paper but are not equipped to match it. While academic gatekeepers stop at credentials, the employers don't. They notice the gap the moment it shows up on the job, and for public-school graduates, that gap leads straight back to the same rote instruction this brief opened with.

Recommendations

The following recommendations have been organised into short-term, medium-term, and long-term priorities for policymakers, corresponding to feasibility and implementation timeline rather than order of importance.

Short-Term (0-1 year)

Given that Punjab is currently doing a province-wide rollout of biometric and CCTV-based attendance monitoring across public schools, the provincial School Education Departments in Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Balochistan should adopt similar systems.²¹ They can enforce rules such as salary deductions for un-approved or unexplained absence of teachers. In an early finding, it had been noted that teacher absenteeism reduces effective instructional time, and evidence from an Asian Development Bank report confirms that biometric monitoring has already reduced teacher absenteeism in Punjab and Sindh.²² Pairing this with enforced consequences would have a much stronger impact.

The Provincial Textbook Boards and the curriculum authorities should require that at least 20% of classroom time in public secondary schools is given to project-based learning or group activities, instead of lectures involving rote-learning. There can be a pilot in one urban district per province. Earlier findings already link rote instruction to dropout, so testing it small first before a full rollout makes more sense than an unfunded, unmeasurable mandate everywhere at once.

Medium-Term (1-3 years)

The Provincial Education Departments should introduce in-service training that is mandatory for public secondary teachers regarding student-centred instruction. It can be delivered through existing teacher training institutes and completing them should be tied directly to salary increases.

The Higher Education Commission, with provincial Boards of Intermediate and Secondary Education should pilot a bridging English language program for public school students in their final two years of secondary schooling. This will be targeted at those who have to sit through competitive university exams later on. This way it will ease the English gatekeeping effect gradually instead of an abrupt shift away from Urdu as the main medium of instruction in these schools.

Long-Term (3-5+ years)

The Provincial governments should re-structure how the public secondary school budgets are spent. They should tie a defined share of per student funding to measurable teaching practices such as regular homework, feedback to students, and functioning school governance, instead of pouring most of it into salaries and infrastructure.

²⁰ Ahsan & Khan, "Disaggregating the Graduate Unemployment in Pakistan", 4, 2023.²¹ The Nation, "Punjab to Install CCTV, Biometric Attendance in All Govt Schools", July 20, 2026, <https://www.nation.com.pk/20-Jul-2026/punjab-install-cctv-biometric-attendance-govt-schools>. ²² The Dawn News, "Biometric Monitoring Reduces Teacher Absenteeism: ADB," Dawn, December 28, 2023, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1801228>.

The problem is not only whether a sufficient amount is spent, but how it is spent.

The Provincial Labour and Education Departments should set up a formal body between the employers and the education system so that the secondary curriculum is updated periodically based on the skill gaps the employers report. This will ensure that the system keeps adjusting as the labour market shifts.

Conclusion

The urban secondary public schools in Pakistan are not just short on resources; they are structured in ways that actively shape who continues their education there and who is left behind. This brief has shown that the same pedagogical conditions driving dropout at the secondary stage also follow the students who remain, resurfacing as weaker tertiary access, and finally as a gap in the labour market. To address this, more than just expanding access to schools is required. Classroom quality itself should be made a policy priority. Without this, Pakistan may risk continuing to educate a generation that is heading towards an exit instead of opportunities.

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