

Education autonomy must for Sabah

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Kota Kinabalu: Autonomy in education is necessary for Sabah to access quality education as aspired in the Malaysia Agreement 1963 (MA63). Also a drastic increase in funds for schools and facilities, for both local children and undocumented or stateless ones.

Education autonomy would also enable the State to be actively involved in negotiating and framing the National Education Policy to realise the inclusion of the history of Sabah and its role in the formation of Malaysia in the school syllabus.

This was articulated in Sabah Action Body Advocating Rights (Sabar) and Kopitiam Council Podcast's second episode of "Voices to Action" on March 21.

Datuk Mohd Hanafiah bin Mohd Kassim, Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation and UMS Prof. Vincent Pang spoke to hosts Adi and Haffisz.

Sabar would present its recommendations to the State Government for further action. The Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation is in charge of education matters in Sabah.

According to Mohd Hanafiah, the state Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation is responsible for seven portfolios including education, but is manned by few staff allocated with the lowest budget. Hence, it struggles under these conditions.

Without the Federal Government's active assistance it would be difficult.

"With the amendment to the Constitution (recognising Sabah as one-third partner in the formation of Malaysia in 1963), we now can get involved in policy making decisions.

"Only half of our youth population have SPM and STEM graduates form less than 20 per cent of the student population. "The World Bank audit last year revealed that a significant number of our teachers are not qualified to teach the subjects they are teaching.

"We can't look at the teaching and education landscape in silo, some of the underlying issues brought to the surface relate to the financial capacity of Sabahans to afford quality education with fees continuously on the rise despite the State Government providing scholarships.

"Stateless and uneducated youth, especially in Sabah, have been a growing concern," said Hanafiah.

He said the latest 2022 amendments to the Federal Constitution to recognise MA63 strengthened the position of Sabah and Sarawak to intervene in federal planning for Sabah.

The Federal government can also delegate or devolve the education portfolio totally to Sabah and Sarawak.

He said it is best that the Federal and State authorities work together. On assets, in 2023, the Ministry identified 289 dilapidated schools in Sabah, 64 of which were deemed unsafe and slated for demolition.

Many rural schools also face shortage of learning materials, proper science labs, and libraries. Some schools lack essential sanitation facilities, further compromising student well-being and attendance rates.

Teacher shortage is another pressing issue. Due to traveling hardships, poor living conditions in remote villages and limited professional development opportunities, experienced teachers often request transfers to larger towns or cities.

This cycle results in an over-reliance on inexperienced teachers, reducing the consistency and quality of education in rural schools. Compounding this issue is the limited pool of qualified teachers willing to commit to long-term positions in remote communities.

As a result, students in these areas frequently experience disruptions in their education, with specific subjects often left without dedicated instructors for extended periods.

Prof. Vincent noted that Sabah is far from policy and decision makers in West Malaysia.

Geographical challenges also contribute to high teacher turnover, as educators often struggle to commute to remote schools.

Limited public transportation services in these areas increase students' reliance on basic methods of transport such as bicycles, boats or walking long distances. In some cases, students must travel for hours just to reach school, resulting in physical exhaustion that impacts their focus in class.

Furthermore, these long journeys expose children to potential risks such as adverse weather conditions, dangerous terrain and wild animal encounters, adding further stress to their educational journey.

For teachers, prolonged commuting can be tiring, reduces effective teaching hours and disrupts lesson planning, leading to lower learning outcomes. Without consistent teacher focus, students face fragmented learning experiences, impacting their ability to grasp core subjects effectively.

Prof. Vincent cited also a World Bank 2024 report that nearly 20 per cent of households in Sabah and Sarawak lack access to a secondary school within a 5km radius, compared to the national average of 4.7 per cent.

"Sabah's mountainous terrain and dispersed rural communities make accessing schools difficult.

"Limited access to devices such as tablets, laptops, or smartphones further widens the digital divide, reducing opportunities for self-paced learning and educational engagement.

"Addressing these issues requires significant investment in broadband expansion, the distribution of affordable digital devices and comprehensive digital literacy programmes to empower both students and teachers in navigating online learning resources."

He recalled the 2020 viral incident involving Veveonah Mosibin, who climbed and stayed on a tree to access internet for her studies.

It highlighted the sad state of digital infrastructure in remote parts of Sabah. "Poor road infrastructure further complicates school commutes, lowering attendance rates."

Additionally, language barriers limit learning engagement, as many rural students speak indigenous languages that differ from the language of instruction.

"In some areas, children arrive at school with limited or no exposure to Malay or English, the primary languages used in classrooms. "This language gap creates difficulties in understanding lesson content, following instructions, and participating in classroom activities.

Teachers in these regions often struggle to bridge this gap, as some of them may lack training in multilingual teaching strategies. Consequently, students face frustration, reduced confidence and disengagement from their studies.

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"Sabah Voices to Action - Shaping Sabah's Future Together" is a citizen-driven, non-partisan initiative running from March to June 2025, dedicated to amplifying Sabahans' voices, fostering meaningful discussions, and shaping policies on education, healthcare, public infrastructure, and good governance.

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Together, we can build a stronger, more inclusive Sabah!

