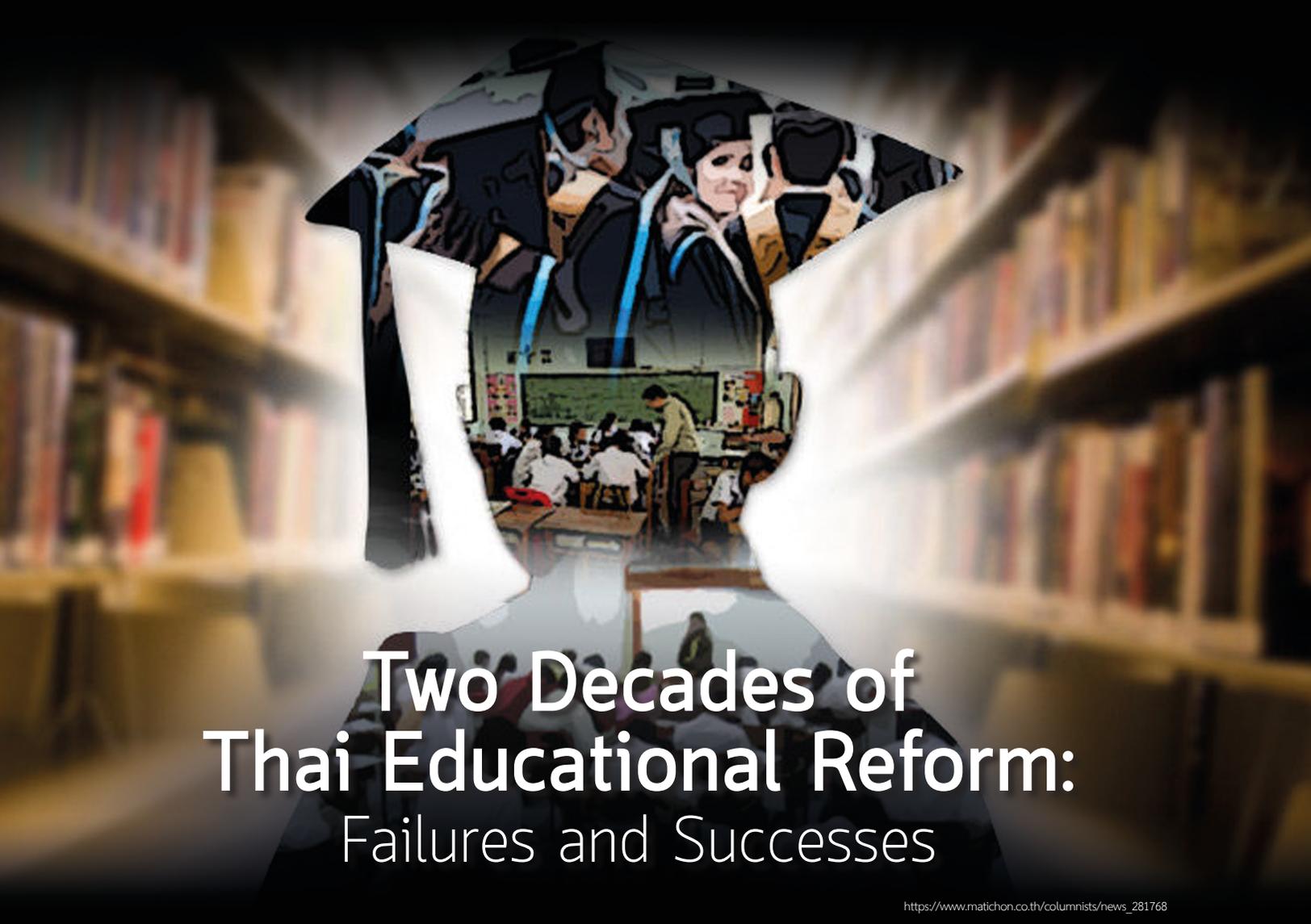


Two Decades of
Thai Educational
Reform: Failures
and Successes



Two Decades of Thai Educational Reform: Failures and Successes

https://www.matichon.co.th/columnists/news_281768

“If you let the people receive a bad education, and let them develop bad habits since childhood, and you punish them for all the crimes they commit based on what they had always learned, this simply shows how you have bred thieves in order to punish them later.”

Sir Thomas More from the Book of Greater Dreams (Utopia) (1516)

Over 500 years, in his immortal treatise (*Utopia*), Sir Thomas More hotly criticized British rule in many aspects, including education, and how that is linked to many manifestations in society, such as livelihoods, peace, tranquility, and moral and legal standards. That relationship is no different from what is occurring in the present day, namely, the status of education is reflected in the status of the host society.

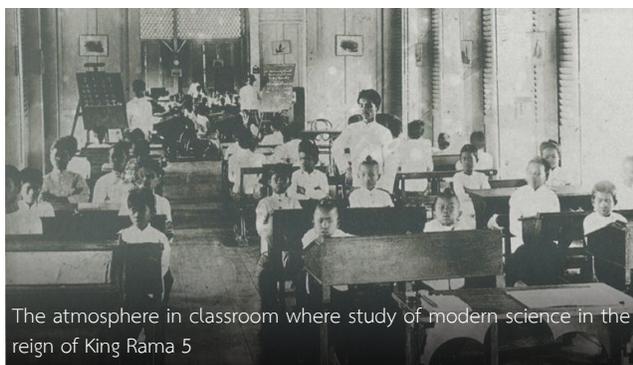
This special article in the latest report on the status of Thai health focuses on the issue of Thai formal education which is the cornerstone of health in every dimension. A sound education means that the person will know how to nourish and maintain good health of the body, mind and intellect throughout their life.

Efforts to improve the quality of Thai education have been going on for over a century. However, it is possible to identify at least four historical educational reform movements, which also coincided with critical changes in the administration of the country. The first reform occurred in the reign of King Rama V and coincided with Siam's independence. The next reform occurred as part of the Citizen's Petition in 1932, which called for development and increased coverage of quality education. The third reform occurred in the wake of massive student demonstrations in October 1973, in which there were calls for

changes in the structure of educational administration, teacher development, and curriculum reform. The most recent reform occurred alongside the economic crisis in 1997 which compelled Thai society to upgrade education to ensure Thailand's economic competitiveness in the 21st Century. This movement was part of the "People's" Constitution (1997) followed by the National Education Reform Act of 1999.

Since the passage of the Education Reform Act, up until 2019, the "reform" process has had two decades of implementation. Accomplishments have included increased access to quality education, decentralization of educational administration, and the active participation of all sectors in the development of education. These advancements are important. However, Thai society is still assessing the quality of education of the nation based on the quality of the graduates that it produces. Some students may feel that they are not moving forward, or are even sliding "backward" relative to other countries in the region that once lagged behind Thailand in education. The objective evidence for this comes from international standardized tests, such as Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) in science, mathematics and reading. In the 2015 round of PISA, Thai students not only scored lower than OECD countries, but also trailed behind Vietnam and Malaysia, despite the fact that Thailand spends as much as its peers on education, or even exceeds per capita or proportional expenditure compared to a number of developed countries.

In addition, each period of educational reform has led by a person considered to be a figurehead who was usually a revered thinker, scholar, or educational philosopher. Despite this public support and leadership, educational reform has not been as smooth and progressive as it should be.



The atmosphere in classroom where study of modern science in the reign of King Rama 5

https://www.silpa-mag.com/history/article_10847

Members of Thai society should help each other to ponder what are the main obstacles to significant reforms related to development of the potential of Thai youth and the future of the country's human resources that will lead Thai society to prevail in the midst of rapid change and globalization? Indeed, how can educational reform ultimately be effective?

4 Eras of Thai educational reform

The importance of education in Thai society is reflected through the lessons and specifications for people to receive a formal education, and that is a common theme in each era. This predilection can be traced to ancient texts as the "Jindamanee" which is theorized to have been authored by Phra Horathibodi during the reign of King Narai the Great. Those texts became the model that was studied in various eras, including the Jindamanee version of the King Borommakot edition; the H.R.H. Prince Paramanujitajinorasa edition, the H.R.H Krom Luang Wongsra Dhiraj Snid edition, and the Dr. Bradley's Edition.¹

When it came to the reign of King Rama V, there were six texts of Phraya Sri Sunthonwohan, and these formed the basis for the emergence of a formal curriculum and a system of teaching and learning. To a certain extent, changes in each period caused the educational system to be out of sync with the opportunities and needs of society. This disjunction led to the "reform" movements, which often meant a large adjustment, especially in terms of philosophy, structure, and system.

In modern Thai history, it appears that Thai society has implemented educational reform four times. Each time there were distinct factors leading to different reforms. The 1st reform era was born about 150 years ago in the reign of King Rama V (1853 - 1910). That time was a period of a strong Thai society which successfully stood up to the challenge of colonialism from the West. This spurred the ambition of Thailand to be at least as intelligent so as not to allow the Western nations from claiming that their imperialist motives were to 'educate the masses.' The reforms at that time involved a shift of the center of education from the temple (Buddhist monastery) to the government, or "Secularization." This led to the establishment of the Ministry of Instruction in 1892, which was responsible for education, religion, nursing, and museums. That can be considered a structural change

for the first time and also a setting of standards regarding education, course placement, and curriculum improvements, as stated in the Royal Code:

“Members of the Royal family, beginning from my children, and the lowest people can access the education equally regardless of nobility and peasantry. Education shall be the first priority and subsidized”

This proclamation was given at the Royal Council for civil servants on the occasion of the Royal proceedings to observe the Phra Tamnak Suankularb School in 1884. **This was the first articulation of a policy of education equality and education for everyone (i.e., universal education).** Clearly, the concept of education management in that era was influenced by the education system in England and, to some extent, in Japan. In addition, the establishment of a girls’ school by female members of the Royal family and missionaries in Bangkok and the districts **reflect efforts in the development of formal education for women, starting 150 years ago.**

The 2nd reform was initiated by the People’s Party in 1932, including some advocates who were foreign educators. That era coincided with a change of national administration from an absolute monarchy to a democracy. Thus, this 2nd reform can be said to be first to occur a democratic government. At that time, education was listed as one of the six principles of governing the country: *“[The State] Must provide full education to the people.”* The intent was to use education as an important tool in human development, and as a requirement of a healthy democracy in which the citizens must be able to read and write. They must have sufficient knowledge to exercise their constitutional rights and self-government through elected representatives who sit in the House of Representatives. At this time, the Primary Education Act, which was passed during the reign of King Rama VI, became effective throughout the country. The Act designated the Ministry of Interior to administer education outside of Bangkok, and this immediately increased access to education of people in provincial urban and rural areas. This also required an increase in teacher training to support expansion of education to provinces and districts.

“To improve the general educational qualifications of the populace requires a cadre of teachers of all types and classes until enough full coverage can be assured.”



(Government education policy announced on December 20, 1932. Chao Phraya Thammsakmontri was the Minister of Education).

The reforms included vocational education initiatives in agriculture, industry and commerce to create a career path for all members of society. In addition, there was expansion of higher education with the establishment of universities in regions to promote educational equality, and so that students would receive just as rich an education as those in Bangkok. **It can be said that the decentralization of education to areas outside Bangkok and the focus on vocational education are key contributions of this 2nd reform period.** However, it should be noted that the division of educational development burdens between the Ministries of Education and Interior which, despite the necessity of this in the context of that era, later became a source of inequality in Thai education, which widened over the years.

The 3rd reform took place as a consequence of the student-led uprising for democracy, which came to a climax in October 1973. The overthrow of the military government resulted in the installation of a caretaker administration led by an academic and jurist, Prof. Sanya Dharmasakti as the Prime Minister. An Educational Reform Committee was appointed to meet the demands, and was chaired by another academic, Dr. Sippanon Ketthat. The committee was charged with the task of reviewing the Thai education system and proposing educational reform plans.

The Education Reform Committee proposed the idea of *“Study for life and society,”* along with proposing 10 key points for reform: (1) Adjusting the education system to 6: 3: 3 (Primary 6 years, middle school 3 years and high school 3 years) and integrate education at all levels to be under the



Ministry of Education. Previously, non-Bangkok education was administered by the Ministry of Interior; (3) Decentralize educational management to local government; (4) Encourage the private sector to participate in educational management; (5) Amend the laws related to education; (6) Develop improved teacher training systems; (7) Reform the teaching and learning curriculum; (8) Expand the budget for education investment; (9) Expand educational opportunity; and (10) Develop other related systems which support the education system.

However, the proposal of the Reform Committee as a whole was not approved by the Cabinet at that time, and elements of the reform proposal were vehemently criticized as Communist. Despite the opposition, many of the points issued by the Reform Committee were, in fact, put into practice such as (in 1977) the improvement of the curriculum which aimed at training students to think and analyze more critically, and adjusting the system to the 6: 3: 3 which was particularly advantageous for school-age youth in remote areas in improving access.²

The 4th reform is the latest reform of education and refers to the period beginning in 1999, two years after the economic crisis. This reform was implemented under the 1999 Education Act, which was later amended twice, in 2002 and 2010. It was argued that the 1997 economic crisis made Thai society aware of the effects of globalization, and how Thailand needed to boost education of the new generation if it was to recover economically and compete with the rest of the world. The 1999 Act aimed at solving problems related to low high school enrollment, which had a huge downward impact on the enrollment rate for higher education. In addition, international standardized tests

continued to show that Thai students lagged behind in the STEM fields, especially science and mathematics. Both problems threatened to have a profound effect on maintaining the country's competitiveness and creating innovation in science and technology.

This reform was implemented through five successive governments, starting from the government of Thaksin Shinawatra, which had a relatively longer period than any subsequent government, but was abruptly cut short with the coup in 2006. All subsequent governments had durations of only one to three years and include the governments of Samak Sundaravej, Somchai Wongsawat, and Yingluck Shinawatra that ended with the clash between the "Yellow Shirts" and "Red Shirts." That was when there was another military coup (in 2014) and the installation of the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO). These political upheavals greatly affected the continuity of the 4th educational reform. Significantly, the Cabinet of the NCPO approved the National Education Act on October 24, 2018. The Act consists of 78 sections which are guided by the following principles: (1) The educational system supports diversity, and differences, and developing the individual from pre-school to life education; (2) Improving the quality of education on the part of the teacher requires the establishment of a fund for teacher production and development. That will help screen the right people to enter the process of development, and selection of suitable individuals. Curriculum and educational management will give priority to emphasizing the capacity to create good and talented people in society; (3) Give independence to the school; (4) Implement systems management that is focused on quality development, not inspection, and use assessment results to develop and drive quality development; (5) Provide a national education plan to be developed by the National Education Policy Committee.

This 4th era of educational reform has lasted for over 20 years and may be considered as the period that has had the greatest impact on educational development, so that the competitive potential of the country's human resources will be able to lead Thailand out of the "middle-income trap" into an era of prosperity and higher incomes, i.e., to actually achieve the vision of "Thailand 4.0."

The dimensions of failure in boosting of quality Thai education commensurate with the budget

Discourses about education in Thai society speak with the same mind, i.e., that education is important to national development. But then most discussions of the problem show dissatisfaction with the quality of education at almost every level, and that is the reason why education reform always calls for an upgrade of the quality of education including mechanisms for quality development. Thai formal education is at a critical stage that requires a paradigm shift, especially when comparing the quality of Thai students with their peers from other countries through international gauges such as PISA which is administered every three years, in which Thai students can be compared with students from 72 member countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Since 2000, there has not been much media interest in the exam results. In the latest PISA (2018) the exam emphasized scientific literacy by giving 60% of the questions to science, and 20% each to reading and mathematics. A total of 8,249 students participated from 273 Thai schools. Thai students ranked 52nd (out of 72 countries) on the science test with an average score of 426; on mathematics Thailand ranked 54th with an average score of 419. These scores were a slight improvement over 2015. For reading, Thailand ranked 57th with an average score of 393 which is lower

than its average score in 2015. By comparison, Vietnamese students ranked 8th in science, 22nd in mathematics, and 32nd in reading. Those scores represented an improvement over 2015 (Figure 1). In addition, the global test called Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study or TIMSS in the same year included 6,482 Thai students from 204 schools along with students from 39 countries. In math, Thai students ranked 27th and, for science, they ranked 26th.⁴

On the other hand, there has been the good news that Thai students have excelled in the Academic Olympics since 2010. Thais won an average of three gold medals in the field of physics per year. Thai contestants in the Mathematical Olympiad in 2017 ranked 7th in the world from (111 countries).⁵ However, in the aggregate, the science and math aptitude of Thai students is not keeping up with the rest of the world, and this can be attributed to the inequality of education. The annual Thai national standardized exam called Ordinary National Education Test (O-NET) classifies results by school type and geographic region, and the break-out clearly **reflects the differences in education quality by type and area. Students in the northeast and southern regions lag behind their peers in the north, central and Bangkok.** In addition, there are stark differences in scores for students by type of school, whether it is the schools under the Office of the Basic Education Commission (OBEC), private and public schools, and Bangkok schools. **There is a clear difference in the quality of education which is deeply rooted in the inequality of opportunity to access quality schools, in spite of the increase in the number of schools that pass the assessment criteria of the Ministry of Education each year.**⁶

The most regretful thing about Thai students' inferior performance on these standardized tests is that it reflects the shoddy implementation of education staff and administrators who are shirking their duty, with serious consequences for the Thai working-age population of tomorrow. Even though the Thai educational system is not training youth to become



Figure 1: PISA Scores of Thailand Compared to Other Countries of Asia and Southeast Asia



Source : OECD (2016) - PISA 2015 Results (Volume I): Excellence and Equity in Education. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264266490-en> OECD (2020) - PISA 2018 Results (Volume I): Excellence and Equity in Education. https://www.oecd.org/pisa/Combined_Executive_Summaries_PISA_2018.pdf

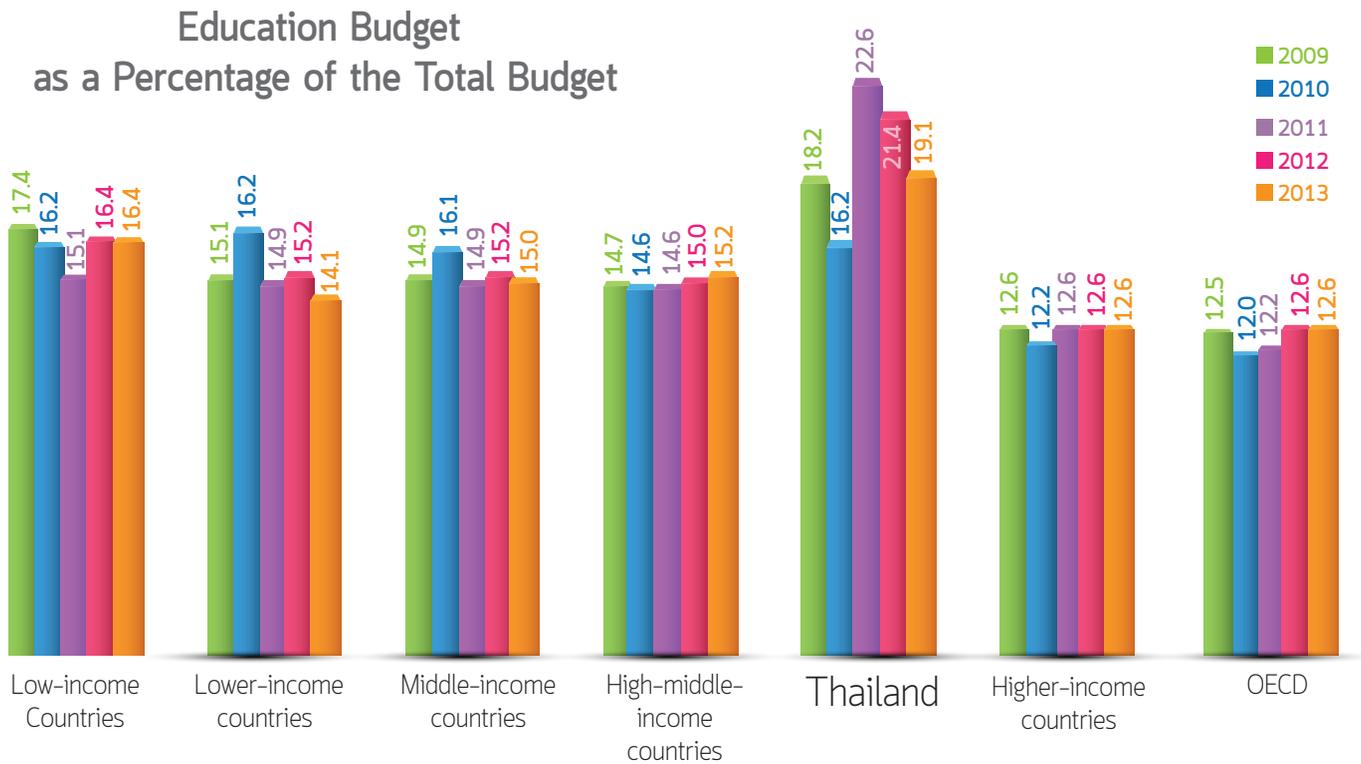
* PISA score in 2018 of Vietnam are unofficial, OECD is pending to review. <https://vietnamnews.vn/society/569454/vn-gets-high-scores-but-not-named-in-pisa-2018-ranking.html>

thieves (as sarcastically noted in More’s Utopia), but the malpractice of formal education in the past and at present is certainly behind Thailand’s falling behind its peer nations, and remaining stuck in the middle-income trap.

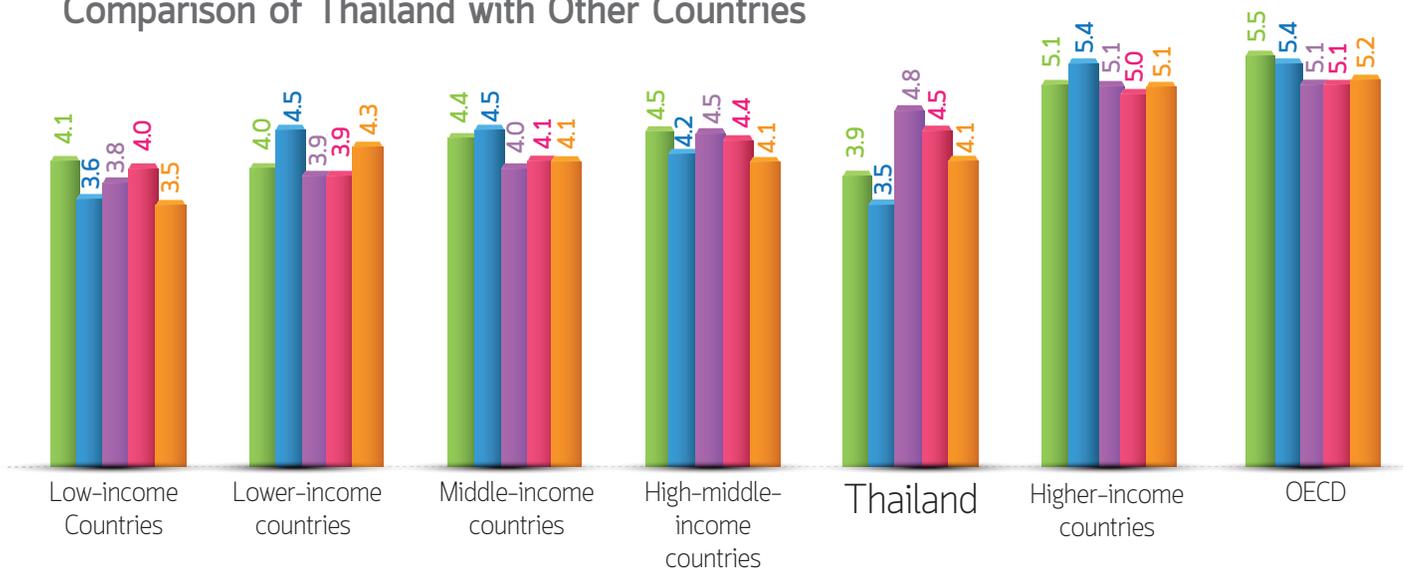
This is especially alarming given the amount of budget that Thailand has invested in education, which is higher per capita than some developed countries, or a higher proportion of the total budget that goes to education. Scholars who study educational development often look at the proportion of household resources to go to the education of the school-age children. This includes a valuation of the time students spend in school, in and outside the classroom in the form of supplementary learning. “Tutoring” and “weekend study” is becoming the norm for Thai students to make up for the deficiencies of the formal curriculum. Still, the central question is the following: What makes the quality of education in Thailand not as satisfactory as it should be?

Various academic studies that have analyzed the education system of Thailand identified weaknesses in many dimensions. From these studies, one can see the enormity of the problem, and realize that small changes may not lead to sustainable solutions. The level of reform has to be large enough in order to truly improve the quality of Thai students.

Figure 2 : Comparison of Education Budget of Thailand with Other Countries



Education Budget as a % of GDP: Comparison of Thailand with Other Countries



Source : World Development Indicators. <https://databank.worldbank.org/data/source/world-development-indicators>



<https://www.unicef.org/thailand/th/stories/> อดช่อว่างการดูแลเด็กปฐมวัยเพื่อเด็กไทยทุกคน

The curriculum content and strategy for learning in the Thai educational system is connected with most other issues behind the weakness in performance. There needs to be a modernization of courses to keep up with the changes in the world. The students, and especially teachers, may lack confidence in their ability to keep up with the latest content, given that online resources are at every student’s fingertips.

Despite the historical efforts to decentralize management of education to local government, the principal authorities are still located in the central departments and ministries. This means that the Ministry of Education can influence the appointment of the school administrators and teachers, including assessment mechanisms that are not favorably tied to the development of children’s learning (accountability), at the expense of assessment of teachers’ performance. This imposes a burden on both the school and the teacher. A study of the workload of teachers in 2015 found that from the beginning of the academic year through 200 days of classroom instruction, **teachers must spend time outside the classroom conducting activities unrelated to education, such as assessments, teacher evaluation, outside competitions, academic activities, in-service training, etc.** These non-teaching hours add up to 65 days, representing 32.5% of the school year. That has led to the movement to “Return the teachers

to the classroom” and returning the focus of the school to teaching, learning, and student development.

Structural problems arising from centralization of authority have a long history in Thailand. The attempts to expand the structure of the educational system in accordance with the expansion of society have created a bulky and unwieldy system. This is unnecessarily disruptive and makes the system overly complex. The large structure and centralized nature of the system is a major factor which inhibits any meaningful educational reform effort. Even though most thinkers about this issue agree with the necessity of decentralization of authority for education, the mechanisms by which to achieve that are not clear or agreed upon. If the end goal is to help students reach higher education, how can decentralization work when the university entrance exam process is centralized?

Nowadays, learning and knowledge seem to be separate entities and motivations. Ideally, students will identify their passion and be self-motivated learners, which eventually leads to a fulfilling career, with good income and stability. However, **there is a danger with excessive ‘vocationalism’ if it prevents the student to independently explore themselves and their intrinsic areas of interest.** The concern is that students will become overly focused on just earning the diploma (i.e., piece of paper) instead acquiring a true education, which Mounier and Tanchuang (2018), called the



“Diploma Disease.”⁸ Today, most youth study in order to get credentials that enable them to ascend to the next level in the educational system or land a job, while teachers merely “teach to the test” to get a high student passing rate.

Teaching and learning for scoring well in exams, especially competitive examinations to enter higher levels, inevitably lead to rote learning that focuses on the content that corresponds to the exam – instead of the curriculum for acquisition of true knowledge and self-motivated learning. The importance of the competitive exams opens up the market for supplemental education and tutoring that necessarily goes beyond or away from classroom, since the standard curriculum is a one-size fits all prescription from the central Ministry of Education. The focus on test-centered tutoring and extra-curricular teaching further stunts the educational opportunity for students. This can create a conflict of interest for teachers who also provide home-based tutoring outside class hours. In other words, there is a subtle incentive for those teachers to under-teach the classroom content in order to provide remedial instruction through lucrative private tutorials. The tutorial industry has expanded enormously from the home of the teacher, to full-fledged evening classrooms and buildings to accommodate the soaring demand for extra-curricular instruction. Some courses are in such demand that they have to be taught via online virtual classes. There are applications on social media platforms such as Facebook and LINE which are attempting to cash in on this tutorial industry.

The increasing requirement for outside-school tutoring further exacerbates the economic disparities

between the haves and have-nots in society. Those youth from higher-income families can afford the tutoring, do better on exams, and advance to higher education and professional careers, compared to those from lower-income backgrounds who do not have that option. This is increasing the cost of a quality education so much that today’s young married couples have to think very carefully whether to have children or not.

At the university level, one of the problems of the Thai education system is the production of graduates in fields for which there is no market demand (i.e., mismatched education). This reflects the rigidity and lack of flexibility in the educational system to more easily re-tool and adapt curricula to anticipate emerging needs in the labor market. This is leading to a variety of imbalances, such as qualification mismatch, field mismatch, skills mismatch,⁹ vertical mismatch, and horizontal mismatch.¹⁰ The result is unsatisfactory income, low job satisfaction, and inadequate production of graduates to fill gaps in the labor force. Generally, there is an oversupply of graduates in the social sciences and an insufficient number in STEM fields. This is impeding Thailand’s ability to transition from an economy with low value-added industries to production of innovation, thus making the vision of Thailand 4.0 more out of reach.

As for the vocational education, Thailand is not producing the number of graduates to meet domestic labor market needs. Thai society still undervalues a vocational degree compared to a college or university degree. Plus, vocational schools acquired the negative reputation of being a destination for delinquent students, or those without potential for higher education.

One of the problems in the debate about the problem of Thai education is the focus on the levels of the ministry, teachers, and students. In other words, **there is too little focus on parents and guardians of school-age youth. This is despite the fact that children spend more time at home with their parents than at school.** There is a Thai saying that the “*parents are a child’s first teachers.*” Yet society is ignoring the wisdom of this adage. Instead, increasingly parents see their role as simply the investor in the education of the child, and the teacher/school is responsible for the outcomes.

Parents and guardians are essentially washing their hands of their responsibility to help educate the next generation to be successful adults. They may have the view that, if a student fails, it is the failure of the teacher and formal education system, not the parents/guardians. This abdication of their role in educating their child is even more surprising when considering that today's generation of parents with school-age children have significantly higher education than their own parents had (i.e., they should value education more).

Indeed, there does not need to be more research or debate about the fact that there are glaring problems

with the Thai educational system. It cannot be denied that the problems are large and complex, and solving them will require reform at every level. There have to be changes in the structure and function at the ministerial level all the way down to the household and the role of the parents as the earliest educators of the child. It should not take international standardized testing to tell society that its youth are falling behind. Now is the moment for everyone in society to focus on this problem urgently and sincerely, since Thailand is running out of time in this crucial endeavor: The world will not wait for Thailand to catch up.



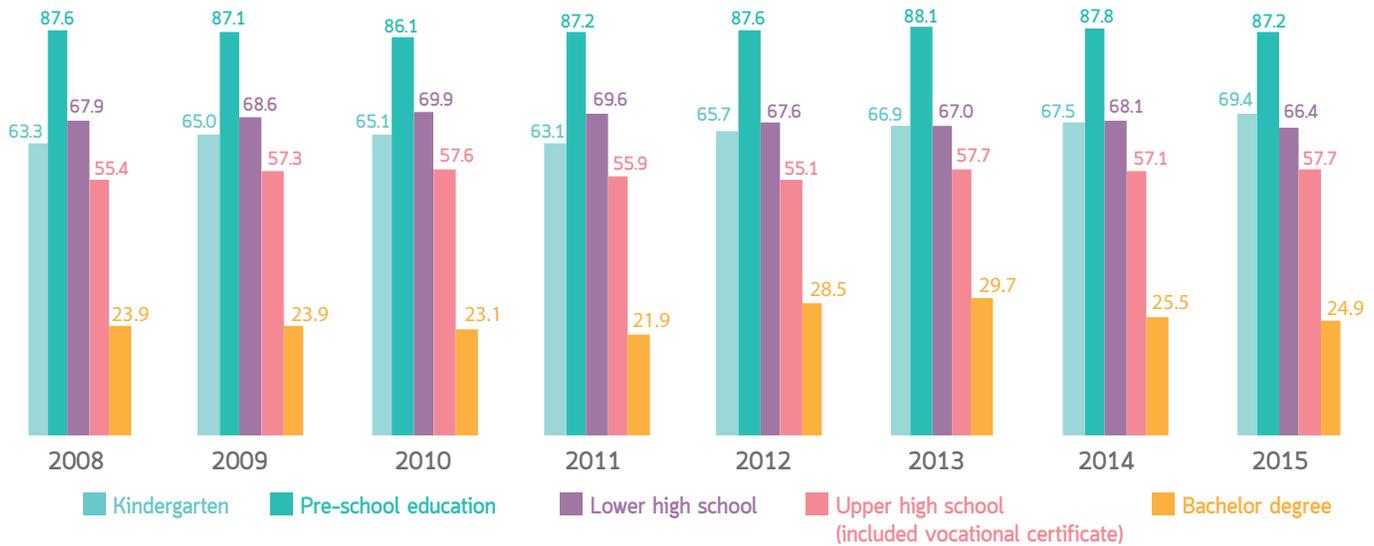
Inequality feeds into itself

In fact, the quality of education in Thailand is not all bad. There are talented educational personnel and educational institutions that are fully equipped to provide the needed training and support for the next generation. The problem is **that these resources are not evenly distributed around the country. This results in pockets and patterns of inequality in education which each era of reform has tried to fix**, but has not yet succeeded in any measurable way.

The net enrollment rate of Thailand at the primary level, which is the beginning of basic education, was at the approximate level of 87% from 2008 until 2015, and then edged up to 88% in 2017. The enrollment rate at

the lower (HS Grades 1-3) high school level has been approximately 67 - 68% from 2008 - 2017. Enrollment in upper (HS Grades 4-6) high school is about 55 - 57% throughout the same period. **This shows there has not been much progress in enrollment compared to the 12th National Economic and Social Development Plan which set the target for the enrollment rate of 90% for basic education. This also shows that a significant number of school-age youth are missing out on basic and compulsory education** which will surely affect the quality of human resources and the country's competitiveness in the near future.

Figure 3 : Net School Enrollment Rate of Thailand : 2008-15



Source : National Economic and Social Development Council (2015): Report of the Analysis of the Status of Poverty and Inequality in Thailand



<https://www.prachachat.net/columns/news-28932>

The problem of inequality becomes more apparent when classifying net enrollment rate in basic education by level of income of the population, by income decile. The first 10% group (i.e., decile) represents the lowest income level, up to the 10th decile, or the 10% with the highest income. For primary and secondary school (including vocational), the lower-income families have the highest student drop-out rate.

In kindergarten, the educational access gap of low-income and high-income people is not that wide despite the income disparities. The poorest 10% had a net enrollment rate of approximately 86-87%, while the richest 10% had an enrollment rate of about 91 - 92% for pre-school. However, that enrollment gap by income gets broader with each higher level of education. For example, at the lower high school level, the poorest 10% had an enrollment rate of approximately 63 - 64%, while the richest 10% had an enrollment rate of about 81%. At upper high school (including vocational certificate) the enrollment gap widens to 42-50% for the poorest compared to 72-78% for the richest. At the bachelor's degree level (including advanced vocational certificate) only 3 - 4% of youth from families with income at the lowest 10% can enroll in college/university compared to 58-63% of the richest 10%. When looking at the five bottom



income deciles (i.e., the poorest half of the country) only 48-51% are able to enroll in post-secondary education.

Decharat Sukkamnerd¹¹ reported the connection between educational inequality and inequality across generations in Thai society, based on information from the World Bank Global Database on Intergenerational Mobility.¹² **An analysis of the data suggests that two out of three Thais children in families in the lower half of the population by income will still be in the lower half as adults.** What is more, an estimated 36% will fall into the bottom quartile of households by income. Only one in three children of today will advance to the upper half of the population by income as adults. By contrast, of children born into the top quartile by income, only one in five will fall to the lower half income deciles as adults. Indeed, nearly half of those born into the top half of the population by income will progress to the top quartile as adults.

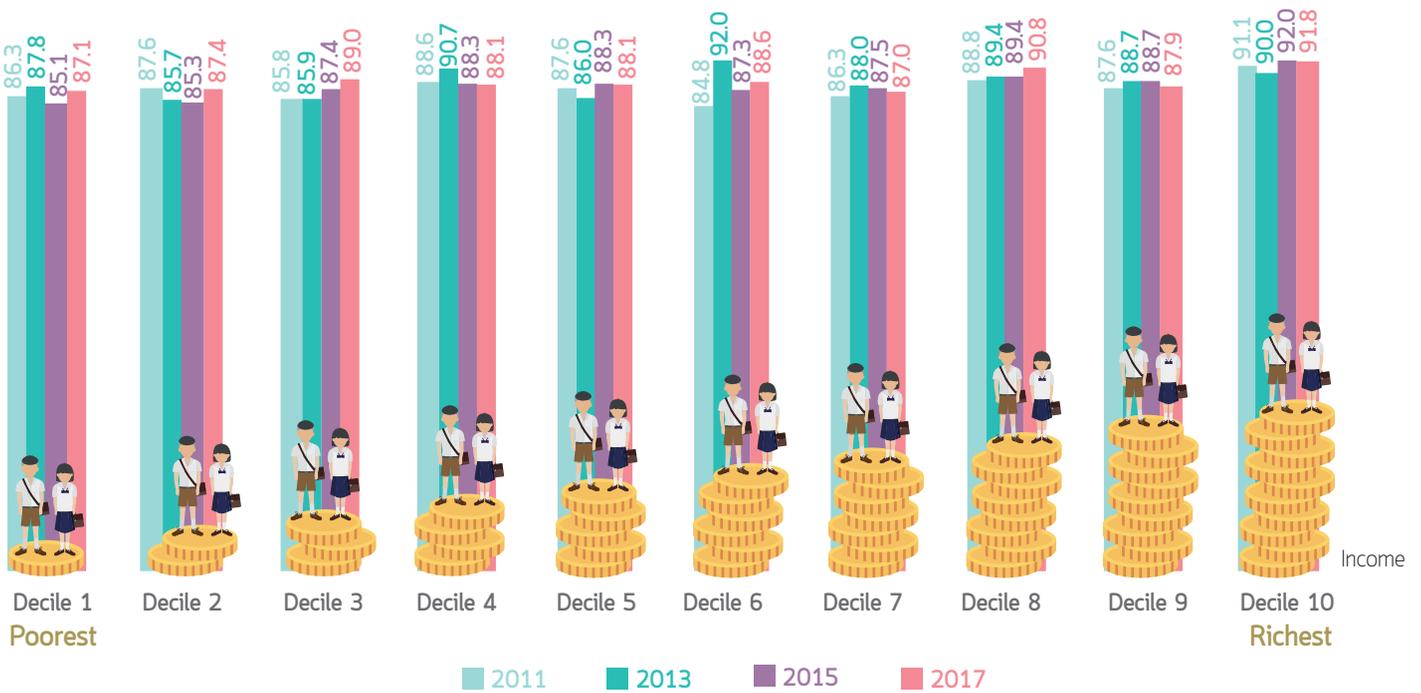
The World Bank calls this phenomenon “Intergenerational Privilege.” This means that privilege is inherited across generations. Largely, this is attributable to the fact that the higher income groups will have a better chance of getting a better education, access training courses, and have a wide variety of opportunities in life that will lead to better potential development than those with less income.

In the analysis of Thai educational inequality, Nonnarit Phisanlayabut (2016)¹³ studied the composition of inequality to identify predictors of education inequality.

He found that differences in educational institutions are important factors that explain differences the most, followed by availability and tuition fees. Many studies show that wealthier families are more than willing to invest in education of their child, even from the earliest ages. Parents seek the most prestigious school they can afford for their child, not only for the higher quality education, but also for the opportunity to make life-long friendships with children of other privileged families who are expected to help each other as adults. In Thai society, connections are often more important than raw merit in landing coveted job or opportunity.

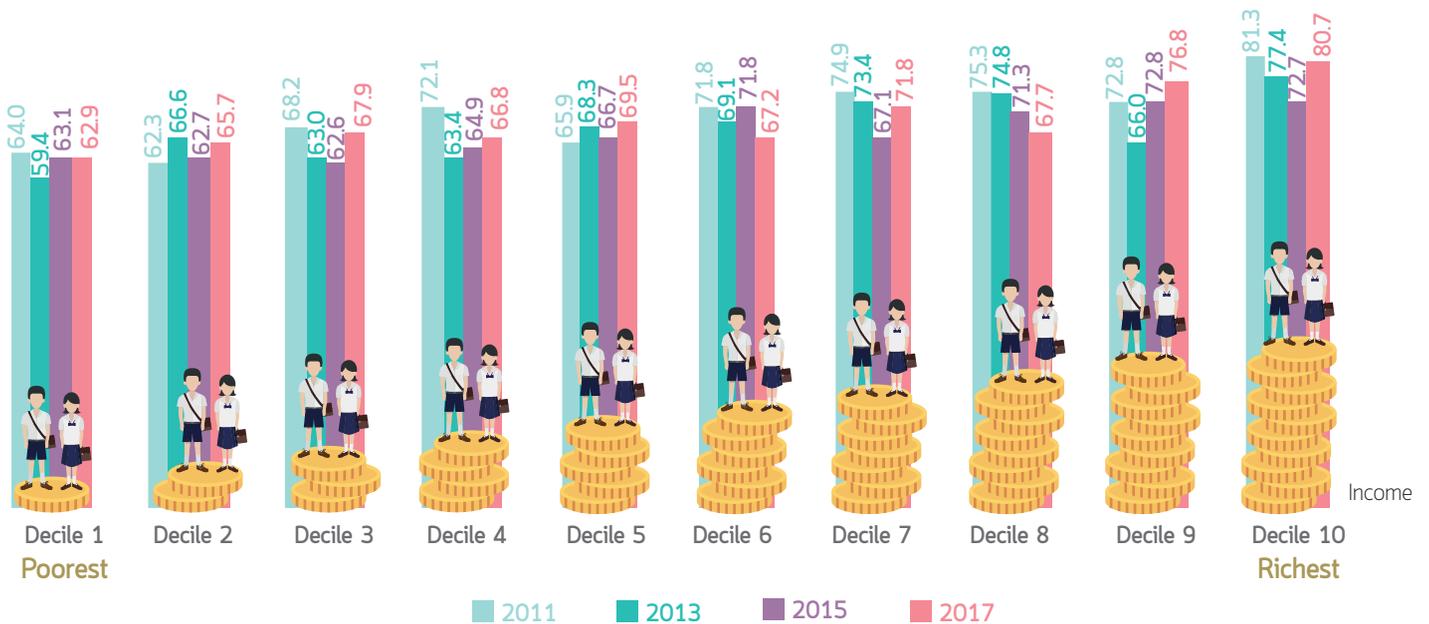
In 2019, there were 30,525 schools in Thailand. Half were small schools (less than 120 students) and most were in the countryside. Half of these smaller schools had 3.2 million students enrolled in K-12 grades. Because of their small size, they received proportionately less budget and resources. And while the government subsidizes much of the cost of compulsory education, these families in rural areas who send their child to a small school find themselves having to spend more each year for school-related expenses. Thus, as soon as these children complete their compulsory education, many do not continue with higher education since they have to help the family makes ends meet and/or could not afford the cost of going higher in the educational system. This is how the underprivileged generations cannot easily escape their disadvantaged status in society.

Figure 4 : Net School Enrollment Rate : Primary Education by Income Decile



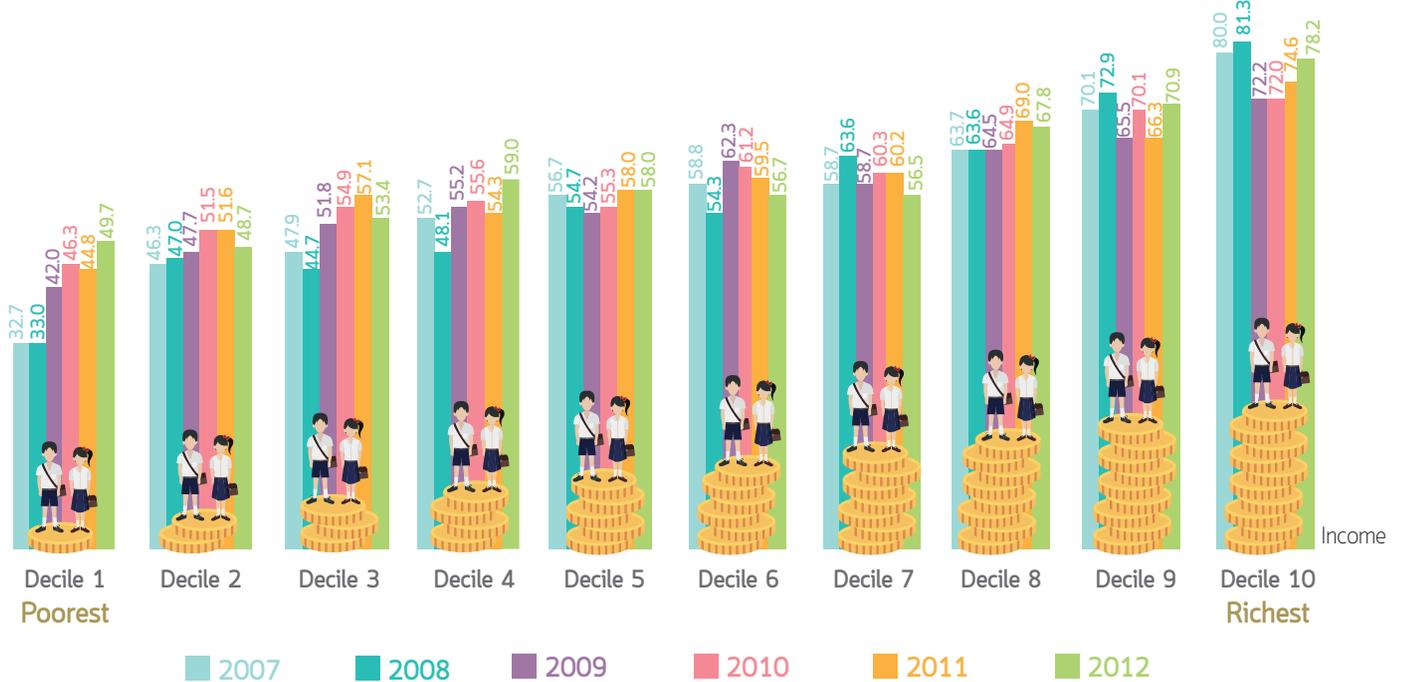
Source : National Economic and Social Development Council (2018) : Monitoring Report of Progress, Equality, and Reduction of Inequality in Thai Society in the First Year of the 12th Development Plan

Figure 5 : Net School Enrollment Rate : Lower Secondary Education by Income Decile



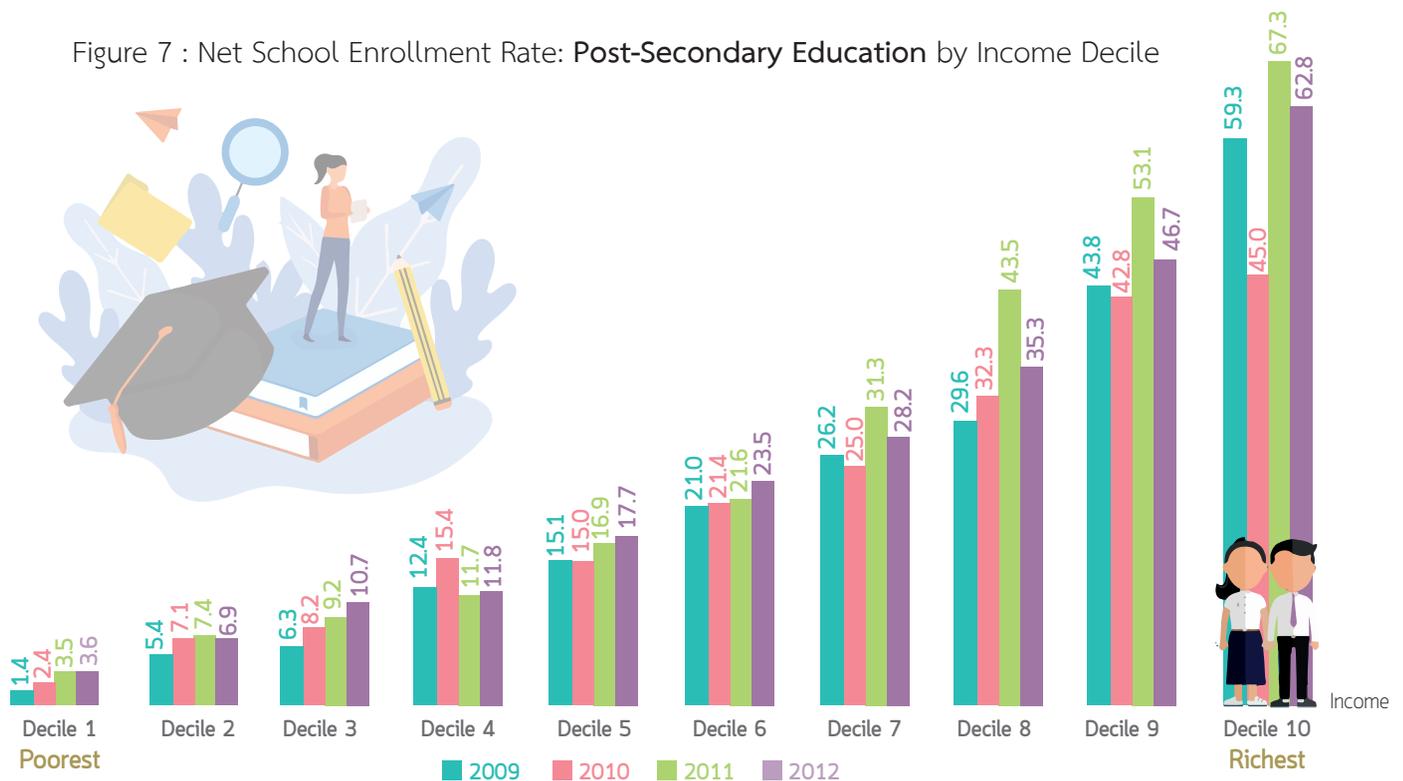
Source : National Economic and Social Development Council (2018) : Monitoring Report of Progress, Equality, and Reduction of Inequality in Thai Society in the First Year of the 12th Development Plan

Figure 6 : Net School Enrollment Rate : Upper Secondary Education by Income Decile



Sources : (1) National Economic and Social Development Council (2015) : Report of the Analysis of the Status of Poverty and Inequality in Thailand
 (2) National Economic and Social Development Council (2018) : Monitoring Report of Progress, Equality, and Reduction of Inequality in Thai Society in the First Year of the 12th Development Plan

Figure 7 : Net School Enrollment Rate: Post-Secondary Education by Income Decile



Source : (1) National Economic and Social Development Council (2015) : Report of the Analysis of the Status of Poverty and Inequality in Thailand
 Remark : Data on university enrollment by the National Economic and Social Development Council (2015) used data on expenditures to reflect income level

The lawn in front of another school



“The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence.”

“The lawn next to the house is usually greener.”

The PISA test results compare quality of students and education, and that can be connected to the competitive potential of each country in the future when these youth grow into adults. Many countries are being watched to see which has the best model of an education system that can consistently produce students who excel on standardized exams, e.g., in science, reading, and math.

Singapore and Finland are two countries which people are studying to see why their students consistently perform so well compared to their peers around the world. Clearly, performance is not just due to the core curriculum in their schools. There is also effective supervision and development of human resources for education. Students from both countries have outstanding scores in the Global Competitiveness Report of the World Economic Forum in the dimension of human capital, and in the Human Development Report of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). Educators want to know what are the components of the educational “engine” in those countries and how do they work.

Anyone who has thoroughly studied the systems of both countries will know that the educational atmosphere and environment are completely different. What the two countries do have in common is the relatively small size of the total population, or about five million. That might have important implications for the educational management of the country.

The priority on education of families with school-age children in Singapore is probably not that much different than middle-class parents in Thai society. But Singapore may have a significantly higher level of intensity in ensuring that the priority is actualized. In other words, parents of students in Singapore play a much stronger and closer supervisory role for their children’s schooling – acting almost like a boxer’s trainer in the corner of the ring. Singaporean parents know very well about the intensity of the competition in order to guarantee a safe future for their child(ren). **These “Tiger parents” adhere to the principle of “Kia Soo,” which is Hokkien language that literally means “my child can’t fail.”**¹⁴

In this dedication to excel, Singaporeans invest considerable money and time to have their child tutored, and this extracurricular education begins in the primary grades. While Thai parents (with means) also send their child to tutoring classes from a young age, one key difference is that many of these Tiger parents actually sit in the back of the tutor's classroom so that they know what is being taught and how to reinforce that learning at home. That also places tremendous pressure on the tutor to perform as well. In that way, unlike Thailand, parents and guardians in Singapore became part of the educational mechanism.¹⁵ Indeed, the focus on their child's education has become a second profession of Singaporean parents.

Elementary school children in Singapore must pass a Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE), to ensure they have acquired the requisite learning. That is the first external pressure that children must endure, since only a high PSLE score will enable them to enroll in one of the better high schools and, thus, increase their chances of getting into university level. Those with low PSLE scores are tracked into vocational school to pursue trade education, which is still a relatively well-accepted education. However, it is gaining enrollment at the university level which is considered a coveted mark of social prominence in Singapore.

The Australian Dateline Documentary "Inside Singapore's world-class education system"¹⁶ portrayed some of the techniques of teaching and quality of teachers, which the documentary suggested are the heart of success of education in Singapore. However, the program also interviewed a 12 year-old Singaporean student who ominously observed: "I wish I could have more time for sleep and recreation."

The picture of Finland's education system is entirely different from Singapore. Finland applies the idea of having the least amount of homework, and that children should have time to play with friends to improve their everyday life skills. Children should have the opportunity to enjoy life, based on the principle that playing with friends can lead to learning. The teacher's role is to try to encourage the children to bring what they observe from play or non-classroom experience to enhance the formal instruction at school.¹⁷

Children only start to have homework when they



<https://www.science.edu.sg/for-schools/resources/star-kits>

enter secondary school. Primary school children spend only 3-4 hours per day at school, and the whole week entails no more than 20 hours of classroom learning. The Finnish educational system requires the least amount of time in the classroom among countries around the world. That said, students from Finland had the highest academic achievement of OECD countries.¹⁸ Perhaps the most impressive thing is the fact that student performance in Finland by family income status has the smallest gap among countries. In other words, there is virtually no difference in academic performance between the more and less economically-privileged.

Finnish children start school at age 7 years, and do not have to take any standardized exams until the end of high school. Among the various attributes of the Finnish educational system, **the aspect that is hardest for other countries to replicate is the standardization of every school in the country. In Finland, there are no schools for the children from wealthy families. There is no school or classes for just the more advanced students. This reflects the socialist approach of Finland toward an egalitarian society in which there is as much equal opportunity as possible.** There is a very high social premium on equality, and that is reflected in the educational system (i.e., inclusive education).¹⁹ By contrast, most other countries use the elimination system to create a competitive environment in which students are pitted against each other, presumably based on the concept that competition will spur industriousness in education.

Singapore and Finland are examples of educational success but from exceedingly different approaches – indeed nearly the opposite approach. Both systems



are difficult to replicate, either because of a socio-cultural uniqueness (i.e., the “Tiger parent” in Singapore), or history of an egalitarian society (i.e., socialism in Finland). As noted, possibly the only similarity between Singapore and Finland is their relatively small population.

An example of a country with a large population that has achieved educational reform is China. China launched its latest educational reform in 1993, only six years before the latest educational reform in Thailand. A key person responsible for planning reform at that time was Li Lan Ching, a former Deputy Prime Minister, who was assigned to oversee education by President Li Peng, despite the fact that Li Lan Ching’s entire professional life up to then was focused on advancing the Chinese economy.

That first reform set a timeframe of ten years for the period 1993-2003. The state’s educational system was the largest in the world, having to serve a population of 1.3 billion. It had also been calcified in place for many decades. Li Lan Ching authored a book about his challenge titled “Education for 1.3 billion people: 10 years of education reform and development.”²⁰ In that book, Li Lan Ching describes the reform approach, first starting with a priority on science to help advance China’s economy. One of the first measures was to upgrade the status of teachers including increasing their number and capacity. The next measure was an increase in the education budget, and a push toward more cost-effective use of budget. China invited investors from the

private sector in China, Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan to support the educational reform mission. The next measures were to improve ethics in formal education, revise the curricula, revise the texts, and revise testing system/student evaluation. There was also the reform of vocational education which has its origin in the industrial school from 1866 to the time when China opened the country to the outside in 1978. This 10-year reform resulted in an increase of over 3 million vocational students each year to reach a cumulative total of 12 million graduates during the period. In addition, improvements were made to adult education, continuing education, and community education to reduce inequality and increase opportunity for as many as possible.

However, in the past two years, in Chinese academic circles, there has been a louder criticism of the university entrance exam system of China. People pointed to the harmful level of stress caused by such a rigorous exam and small odds of achieving a passing score. This stress begins at a young age as parents seek to get a head start on test-prep and try to get their children into more competitive primary and secondary schools. This system has resulted in inequality for educational advancement and opportunity, not unlike what has occurred in Thailand. Thus, a new approach to university admissions is being tried out in Shanghai and Zhejiang by changing both the subject of the exam and the time allowed to complete the exam.^{21, 22}

Table 1 : Global Competitiveness and Human Capital of Thailand Compared with Other Countries

Global Competitiveness		Report of Human Capital							
By the World Economic Forum: WEF		Quality of Education							
Rank	Human Capital		Overall	Ratio of Students to Teachers	Trained primary school teachers	Internet access 2010-18	PISA Score 2018		
	Health	Innovation					Primary	Secondary	Math
Singapore	1 st (85)	1 st (100)	19 th (79)	13 th (75)	15	99	551	549	569
Philippines	11 th (80)	27 th (93)	2 nd (86)	12 th (76)	13	NA	100	522	507
Malaysia	27 th (75)	66 th (81)	30 th (73)	30 th (55)	12	99	100	438	440
P.R. China	28 th (74)	40 th (88)	64 th (64)	28 th (65)	17	93	98	590	591
Thailand	40 th (68)	38 th (89)	73 rd (62)	50 th (44)	16	100	97	426	419
Vietnam	67 th (62)	71 st (81)	93 rd (57)	76 th (37)	20	100	543	505	496

Source : Global Competitiveness Report 2019, World Economic Forum²³
 Human Development Report 2019, UNDP²⁴ PISA 2018 Results, OECD²⁵

Some dimensions of success in Thai education reform



<https://www.unicef.org/thailand/th/stories/การศึกษาสำหรับศตวรรษที่21>

Even though the overall mood in the various media about the education system in Thailand seems more negative than optimistic, it is normal for an open society with individual freedoms to express thoughts and criticism out of a desire to improve things. Indeed, there are good features of Thai education, some that stem from the reform measures, while some are from the advocacy of other stakeholders outside the sphere of the Ministry of Education.

The Educational Innovation Area Act of 2019 is one of the successes in the effort to advance the Thai education system to keep pace with the dynamics and complexity of society during the era of globalization. Indeed, it is almost possible to consider the present as the post-globalization era. The concept of an educational innovation area is one of seven issues raised by the Independent Commission for Educational Reform. The idea is to create a space for experimentation and educational innovation in various forms by authorizing educational institutions to have the freedom to try out new approaches to learning, as long as they are consistent with the context and needs of the host community and can develop quality learners. There will be appropriate

support for this initiative from the central authorities, but only as a backstop.

The goal of the area of educational innovation is to boost learning of students through shaping attitudes, imbuing important skills, and transferring knowledge to reduce inequality of education, reduce drop-out, and stimulate cooperation and support from local government organizations, the private sector, and civil society for improving education. This initiative is being piloted in six locations of eight provinces, namely, in the northern region in Chiang Mai, in the central region in Kanchanaburi, in the eastern region in Rayong, in the northeastern region in Sisaket, in the southern region in Satun, and in the southern sub-region in Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat.^{26, 27}

In addition, the Equitable Education Fund has been established under the Equitable Education Fund Act, B.E. 2561 (2018) with the goal of ensuring that people throughout Thailand have the right to access basic education, and extend financial aid to disadvantaged children and youth to ensure they can complete compulsory education. This is a student-centered fund and is not related to compensation for teachers. The fund has an initial capital of one billion baht and will also

receive an annuity from the proceeds of the government lottery.

In addition to these developments, the Independent Commission for Educational Reform proposed that 5% of the national budget be allocated for education each year for the next five years. Normally, the education budget is approximately 25 billion baht per year, and this proposal would increase that amount significantly. However, the proposal did not pass the National Legislative Assembly (NLA) and, thus, the 5% figure will have to be considered on a year-to-year basis and remain a matter of debate in parliament.²⁸ That said, the 2020 national budget allocates 1,939 million baht for the Equitable Education Fund, which reflects the seriousness of legislators to genuinely address the problem of educational inequality once and for all.²⁹ **The establishment of the fund received attention of UNESCO which pledged to support the effort as part of its mission to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals in education.**³⁰

There are intensified efforts to promote the development of vocational education to address current and future labor shortages, especially as industry in Thailand is expected to upgrade from lower-skilled labor to more medium-skilled labor which requires vocational-level training. That way,

production will add higher value. This new emphasis is causing various sectors to take a closer look at the problems of vocational education, and why that branch of education is looked down upon by society. Also, the image of vocational students as rowdy delinquents also needs to be addressed. Importantly, however, it is the quality of the vocational school coursework that needs to be upgraded and tailored to the emerging needs of the industrial sector.

Accordingly, a new initiative was launched called the **“Creative People” Project** which began operations in 2005, and selects outstanding vocational students from all over the country to be “ambassadors” in conducting public information dissemination. These model students are first selected at the provincial level, and then at the regional level. Associated activities include exhibitions, displays of inventions, and personality development, to help reverse the image of the vocational student as unproductive and disruptive. Then, in 2015, a new project was launched called the **“Show your vocation”** which included a documentary film contest to motivate youth with a mechanical aptitude to be a creative thinker and innovator. The films helped to disseminate the good work being produced by vocational students, and were shared through various media and channels. This also helped



<https://www.chiangmainews.co.th/page/archives/863124>



to instill pride among vocational students everywhere. **There is also a link with the Office of the Basic Education Commission (OBEC) so that high school students studying the general curriculum have the opportunity to try vocational courses** which might be closer to their innate skills and interests.

In order to ensure that vocational schools are producing graduates which meet the needs of industry, there is formal **cooperation between schools and worksites, including joint curriculum development, as well arranging internships in worksites so that students see how their learning is applied in real life.** Some of these collaborations include a program with Toyota Motor (Thailand), Pruksa Real Estate Public Company Limited, and many other large private companies. There is also **the “Sattahip Model” which is a tripartite collaboration between vocational educational institutions, professional organizations, and worksites.** That way, vocational students are almost guaranteed an attractive and enjoyable job once they graduate. The Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC) is investing in ten target industries and the new S-curve industry, and this is also being shared with vocational education institutions to ensure the curriculum keeps pace with the new trends and technology in industry. In addition, in 2018, Thailand launched **“Vocational Premium”** in collaboration with educational institutions from other countries to allow students to be exposed to worksites and methods in real locations, real factories,

and real equipment. So far, there are six vocational fields which are participating in this exchange program: Rail transport, mechatronics and robotics technician, air transport, industrial robotics, logistics and ‘Smart Farmer.’

The Panya Breeding Project is another example of collaborative educational reform between the private sector, civil society and vocational schools, sponsored by Kasikorn Bank and the Thailand Science Research and Innovation (formerly Thailand Research Fund or TRF). This project includes applied research to develop the teaching and learning guidelines of participating instructors and students by using a Research-based Learning (RBL) model. This approach relies on three important tools: Posing questions to learners or have the learners ask the questions (asking as teaching); inviting learners to express their views (reflective thinking as learning); and assigning students to write academic works and express their ideas and feelings while working (writing is thinking). Students work in groups to identify their problem of interest, then design the method of finding the answer by conducting applied research. This approach is project-based learning which is student-centered, and is a strategy for 21st Century Skills development. The Panya Breeding Project was implemented 2013 until May 2019, with 135 participating schools, 842 classrooms, 4,579 teachers, and 24,612 students.

In the past several decades, **schools for alternative education have been established around Thailand. These schools have flexibility in courses, learning,**



and student assessment. The emphasis is on the development of learning and practical skills from both classroom and outside-the-classroom experience. The approach is to encourage students to practice on their own and keep questioning, as opposed to traditional rote learning, lecture, and competition with other students. That said, the teaching must cover the core elements of the curriculum issued by the Ministry of Education. Importantly, the alternative education experience must be enjoyable for the student. This program has received attention and support from parents and guardians. Currently there are alternative education schools mentioned in many places such as Thawsoi School, Siam Sam Tri School, Baanrak Kindergarten, Roong-Aroon School, Plearn Pattana School, Darunsikkhalai School, Panyotai School, etc.³¹ A comparative study has looked at O-NET exam scores of students who studied at alternative schools and mainstream school students. In 2010, the comparison found that the average ONET exam score of students in alternative education schools was higher than their counterparts in the mainstream.³²

In addition, efforts to nurture students in STEM fields will be important in driving innovation in science and technology, and create a higher value-added industry for Thailand. At least **two schools are focusing almost exclusively on mathematics and science: Mahidol Wittayanusorn and Kamnoetvidya Science Academy.** Indeed, Mahidol Wittayanusorn School has been given

‘public organization’ status, and started operations in 1991 with cooperation between Mahidol University and the Department of General Education. That institution is regarded as the first science school in Thailand and accepts 240 new students per year at the high school level. The three grades in 2019 had 720 students, and 22,231 were on a waiting list for admission. Mahidol Wittayanusorn is considered a competitive school at a very high level.

Kamnoetvidya Science Academy was originally named the Rayong Science Academy, and that school focuses on teaching and learning in math and science, also at the high school level. The school has received an endowment by the PTT Group Public Company Limited with initial value of over five billion baht. The school is situated on an area of over 900 rai in Wang Chan District of Rayong Province, and started operating in 2015. The school admits 72 students per year, and has 216 students in three grade levels. There were only an average of 18 students in each classroom in the academic year 2017. There are 7,000 people on a waiting list for admission.

It can be seen that there are a number of impressive developments in the sphere of Thai education, both due to the reform movement directly, but also from advocacy by other sectors, including civil society and the private sector. These efforts are helping Thailand to try to help the next generation of young adults to keep pace with the rapid changes in society and the economy.

Summary of two decades of Thai education reform

“Quality education is like the orchid, which only produces a flower slowly,
But the flower’s bloom is mesmerizing and worth the wait.

Quality teaching molds the individual.

The result can be a sight to behold.”

ML Pin Malakul, one of Thailand’s pre-eminent educators, wrote this poem to explain that a complete education takes time and requires patience. Even though ML Pin might not have been referring directly to educational reform, the reform process certainly does take time and patience, as the poem explains.

Paitoon Sinlarat (2015)³³ wrote on the topic of “**Bottom-up educational reform**” to offer a new perspective on educational development. In the past, when referring to educational reform, people tended to think at the level of changes to the constitution, and passing laws and legislation. That approach led to restructuring of educational administration at the

ministerial level. In other words, this process was just a rearrangement of the power centers and budgeting. Even though new units were set up at the central level to try to modernize the Thai education system, the nature and familiarity in traditional methods bred an indifference to these attempted reforms. In other words, structural change at the top can only achieve so much. Instead, true educational reform must come from the bottom up. This view requires a paradigm shift to embrace the view that change must come at the level of the student and the educator. That shift is going to require teachers to acquire a new set of skills that are suited to 21st Century Learning.



Picture of the school in border province

Bhubate Samutthak

Dr. Vicharn Panich (2012), in his scholarly analysis “The way to create learning for students in the 21st century” proposed that, if the teacher is unable to change the instructional method, it will be difficult for them to lead their students to learning in various environments. Those environments are quickly changing in the age of information and fluctuating technology (i.e., ‘disruptive technology’). Teachers need to be encouraged to try new methods, such as inquiry-based learning, which is learning first by careful observation, then asking questions to formulate a project to implement as a means of finding answers, and learning from the implementation of those projects. The teacher’s role is as an advisor and mentor to help with the student’s search for information through various modern media, and summarizing the lessons learned. This is a student-centered approach which is vastly different from textbook learning or lectures, as was the tradition in the past. In addition, student evaluation is evolving toward measuring the way of thinking rather than testing the student’s memory of facts.

By reforming education from the bottom up, one begins to see the way forward more clearly. Civil society has been advocating these new approaches, such as the Teach for Thailand Project³⁴ that aims to create a new generation of teachers to reduce inequality in education. The Rakluke Group Foundation³⁵ has disseminated manuals on how to build Executive Function (EF) as part of routine teaching in the school. The Kru Kor Sorn Network³⁶ was established to help teachers learn new skills in order to be better teachers. An increasing number of parents have started to home-school their child(ren). Homeschooling can be done by individual families or groups of families, i.e., “Flock Learning” as a social enterprise.³⁷

Thai society in the 21st century environment is large in number, diverse, and complex. This complexity and dynamic evolution is too challenging for the traditional educational administration to control or manage effectively. Instead, the Ministry of Education will have to work more closely with other sectors, civil society, the private sector, and the public itself. **Thailand must prevail in meeting these challenges**



if it hopes to keep pace with the rest of the world. The educational reform movement has often used the term “decentralization” to mean decentralization of authority and budget to local government. However, in the new paradigm, “decentralization” means tapping into the knowledge and expertise from all sectors in order to help advance education of the next generation of adults.

In this process of educational reform, one must not narrowly focus on formal education as a means to a career and advanced technology. Instead, we must remind ourselves of the true purpose of education as being the foundation for a happy and productive life. Students, teachers, and educational administrators should be aware of how this is progressing with a range and depth of information that has never been as accessible as it is today. Alas, there are new problems and types of suffering that come with the information age, and which may be more intense than before. Thus, it can be harder to find peace and happiness in one’s life when connected to everything and everyone else in the world. This is an issue that educational reform still needs to give priority to. In other words, how to ensure that the Thai education system promotes a lifelong healthful happiness in every learner.

