# It starts with reading

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The government has designated the “Tara, Basa! Tutoring Program” as a flagship program, a timely intervention that could help improve reading proficiency among elementary students.

Executive Order No. 76, which President Marcos signed last week, mandates the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) to work with the Department of Education (DepEd), the Commission on Higher Education, the National Youth Commission, state universities and colleges, local government units, and other relevant national government agencies and stakeholders in implementing the program. Initially launched by the DSWD in the National Capital Region in 2023, Tara, Basa! aims to hit two birds with one stone: help elementary learners with reading difficulties and offer short-term work for poor college students.

Under the program, qualified college students will be assigned to selected elementary schools to teach pupils to read and, in turn, they will receive financial aid based on the regional minimum wage rate in their areas. The government claimed that the program has already benefited more than 120,000 college students and elementary learners this year. If sustained and implemented properly, this could help address the learning crisis that has plagued the country’s education sector and saw Filipino students ranking low in math, reading, and science in the 2022 Programme for International Student Assessment.

## A reading culture

This learning crisis might as well be reflected in the decline in non-school book readership among Filipino children and even adults. The 2023 National Readership Survey (NRS) conducted by the Social Weather Stations and commissioned by the National Book Development Board revealed that adult readership was at 42 percent and children at 47 percent in 2023. This represented a sharp decline from another survey conducted in 2017 by the Philippine Statistical Research and Training Institute that showed a peak of 80 percent in adult readership and as high as 93 percent among children. The NRS cited access to books as the primary reason for the decline followed by limited awareness and distance of public libraries.

To elaborate on the factors cited by NRS, books have become so expensive that they are not accessible to the poor. Public libraries should be able to complement this gap but most do not have a quality inventory due to lack of budget and attention given by local governments. This is where the “Tara, Basa!” campaign can go beyond its mission by ensuring that books and other tools crucial to students’ learning are also accessible through schools and public libraries. It should also ideally lead to developing a reading culture in schools by making it an enjoyable exercise for students.

## Critical thinking

Thus, while it is notable that the DSWD is at the forefront of the “Tara, Basa!” campaign, the DepEd should take the bigger responsibility in addressing learning poverty. When nine out of 10 Filipino children, per the World Bank, cannot read and understand a simple age-appropriate text at age 10, it must be emphasized that an assessment of the education system is urgent and necessary. This includes teaching students critical thinking and practical skills in school rather than focusing on rote memorization.

The DepEd must also undo the disastrous impact of mass promotion, which while an unofficial policy, has been enabled by policies that according to critics allowed students to be promoted to the next grade level regardless of their academic performance. This includes the “no child left behind” policy that, as the Philippine Business for Education pointed out earlier, only meant students were “not truly learning, but merely progressing.”

## National mantra

Another study by government think tank Philippine Institute for Development Studies noted that even though education officials have denied that automatic promotion of students was an official policy, “the test results showing a huge proportion of students not having the required competence of the school level they are in is a piece of compelling evidence that this may not be the case.”

This unofficial policy has seen students being accepted to high school even if they have not acquired the learning skills, particularly reading, that corresponded to their education level. If not corrected, this could result in students going to college, graduating, and eventually joining the workforce without adequate skills, an outcome that will make the country less competitive on the global stage.

“Tara, Basa!” should be turned into a national mantra moving forward considering that reading is a very fundamental skill that is crucial to a person’s ability to comprehend, analyze, and be creative. Without this skill, students will face difficulties later in life. And the Philippines can only look at grim economic and development prospects ahead without a literate and empowered population.