# Continuing injustice for noble profession

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The maxim that teaching is the most noble profession very much applies to Filipino public school teachers who, despite facing budget cuts impeding their work and being subjected to red tape and many barriers going up the career ladder, remain committed to their jobs.

Consider this: If it takes one to two years for a corporate employee to be promoted, it takes an average of 15 years for a teacher to progress from Teacher I to Teacher III rank, according to the Year 2 report of the Second Congressional Commission on Education (Edcom II). A student would have already completed the K-12 program, or from kindergarten through Grade 12, plus two years of college within the same time frame.

Once teachers get to the Teacher III rank, it takes from 11 to 20 years before they are promoted to Master Teacher I. By the time they get that promotion in a decade or two, their students would have long earned their university degrees, established careers, and even started families.

The process takes too long, per Edcom II, that some teachers have been forced to take on administrative roles in their schools which can be a dilemma for those who have a higher skills set. The message that the Edcom II report appears to be sending is this: If you want fulfilling professional growth, don’t be a public school teacher.

## Highest budgetary priority

This is ironic because Article XIV, Section 5 (5) of the Constitution is explicit that “The State shall assign the highest budgetary priority to education and ensure that teaching will attract and retain its rightful share of the best available talents through adequate remuneration and other means of job satisfaction and fulfillment.”

But this constitutional provision neither provides teachers assurance that their professional growth will be promoted, nor does it offer the education sector enough protection from the unkindest cuts that politicians who have the power of the purse wield.

This has become apparent in this year’s Department of Education (DepEd) budget. The agency proposed a P748.65 billion allocation but this was cut by about P12 billion to P737 billion. The items affected were the creation of new school personnel positions (P1 billion), the Basic Education Facilities Fund (P1.5 billion), and the implementation of the DepEd Computerization Program or DCP (P10 billion).

DCP absorbed most of the multibillion-peso cut that could have provided much-needed digital resources such as laptops, smart TVs, and satellite-based internet to help schools bridge the digital divide among students. The department said it was forced to cancel about P4 billion worth of DCP projects already in the early procurement stage. It also said that the lower budget for new personnel positions will exacerbate the teacher shortage.

## Learning crisis

These cuts come at a crucial time when the country faces a learning crisis marked by poor performance in international assessment rankings. They leave public schools without a budget for classrooms, textbooks, and computers, as well as the capacity to hire new teachers or promote existing ones.

Small surprise that many Filipino teachers have been leaving the country to work abroad, particularly in neighboring Southeast Asian countries that offer higher salaries and where their English proficiency is a plus.

Last year, the Teachers Dignity Coalition (TDC) raised concerns about a potential brain drain. It cited data from the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration that an average of 1,500 Filipino teachers have left the country each year over the past three years. The number was expected to be higher in 2024. TDC national chair Benjo Basas said this is alarming and the Philippines might eventually run out of teachers.

## Underpaid and overworked

Edcom II has recommended that the government institutionalize the Teacher Career Progression System to address the hurdles teachers face to advance in their profession. This includes creating more plantilla positions for Master Teacher roles and amending the quota system that limits the available positions in elementary and secondary schools.

This should send a strong signal to public school teachers, as Edcom II chief technical officer Krupskaya Añonuevo told a Senate hearing in October last year, that professional advancement and job satisfaction are possible in their chosen career.

Teachers play a crucial role in nation-building—they can change lives, inspire dreams, and push the potential of their students. Investing in quality education does not only entail looking after the welfare of students. It also calls for better work conditions for public school teachers who sometimes even find themselves making out-of-pocket expenses which the government has failed to provide.