# Sara Duterte’s DepEd debacle

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So bad is the current state of Philippine education, lamented Vice President Sara Duterte recently before a gathering of Filipinos in Kuwait, that while in other countries children are “already learning about robotics and coding,” in our country “we are still in paper and pencil.”

Not only that: “At age three and four, they already know how to read,” she said, “while in our country, there are high school students who still do not know how to read.”

Objectively, it’s a blunt but accurate critique. No one would dispute the lows into which the country’s education system has sunk, as evidenced by the Philippines’ dismal ranking in the Program for International Student Assessment. In reading, mathematics, and science, Filipino schoolchildren ranked 76th out of 81 countries in the 2022 PISA results. In the new creative thinking assessment of the test, Filipino kids didn’t fare much better—placed in the bottom four out of 64, in company with the three other bottom-dweller countries of Albania, Uzbekistan, and Morocco per the results released last year.

So, yes, Philippine education is in dire straits. But that this criticism would come from VP Duterte is rich—she, having inflicted, after all, the greatest, most wanton damage in so brief a time on the long-suffering department tasked to handle education in this country.

## Biggest scandals

VP Duterte was Department of Education (DepEd) secretary for only over two years, from June 30, 2022 to July 19, 2024, and yet in that period, the department would be embroiled in some of the biggest scandals and anomalies to hit it in its history.

While at DepEd, VP Duterte frittered away the staggering sum of P612.5 million. These were confidential funds that she said were spent on intelligence operations such as the surveillance of campuses and payments for safehouses—functions that by no stretch of the imagination could be considered essential to advancing education and learning.

“Frittered” is the word, because when asked to account for where the funds went after huge sums—in cash—were withdrawn by her aides from banks and stuffed in duffel bags, VP Duterte’s office could offer no explanation. Instead, the second highest official of the land chose to stonewall and distract—presenting clearly spurious receipts (the “Mary Grace Piattos,” “Xiaome Ocho,” etc. list of alleged fund recipients), crying political persecution, throwing tantrums in the House hearings, and finally launching into her infamous livestream tirade where she threatened President Marcos with assassination.

## ‘Worst DepEd secretary ever’

Her most astounding expense was the P125 million disbursed in just 11 days. That profligate mindset extended to her management of DepEd: Officials testified that her office attempted to bribe them with envelopes of cash. And while the country’s schoolchildren sorely lacked textbooks and other learning resources, she spent P10 million on a personal book project. The “Isang Kaibigan” children’s book, touted as written by the VP herself and meant to be distributed to schoolkids, was blasted by observers as likely having plagiarized another book in story and visuals.

In the wake of VP Duterte’s exit from DepEd, she left behind a backlog of over 165,000 classrooms, a fund utilization rate of only 11 percent for textbook production, and a whopping P12.3 billion in questionable transactions flagged by the Commission on Audit.

In the words of ACT Teachers party list Rep. Antonio Tinio: “Vice President Duterte has the audacity to criticize the education system when she herself is the worst DepEd secretary ever.” He added, “She failed to deliver even a tiny fraction of what was expected of her during her tenure as Education Secretary.” Hence, “those who didn’t do their jobs have no right to complain.”

## Key reforms

That, too, is a blunt but accurate assessment. Now, hearing the VP perorate on what ails the education system, after all the aggravation, toxicity, and misconduct she had foisted on it with her singularly misguided tenure, sticks in the craw.

The Marcos administration has the opportunity to bounce back from this most recent setback to the education system by taking with utmost seriousness the findings and recommendations of the Second Congressional Commission on Education (Edcom II), which released the results of its comprehensive study in January last year.

Edcom II’s prognosis: Key reforms are needed to revamp the system in at least three areas: boost childhood and primary education as the foundational level of quality learning, improve the lot of teachers in terms of skills and workload, and ensure that Filipino schoolchildren are at par with the rest of their global counterparts by at least Grade 3.

Can this administration make a significant dent in that urgent generational project? Only if it has learned its lesson from the costly debacle of the last Education secretary—that the sector needs all the help it can get, and that includes crucially finding the right, most qualified people for it.