

Balanced study load key to senior high success

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The DepEd, the business sector and students should begin looking for the right balance between academics and technical training to ensure the success of the K-12 program.



After the country's first batch of Grade 12 finishers receive their diplomas this month, the Department of Education (DepEd), private businesses, and students may have to sit down and discuss ways to find the right balance between academic load and technical training to ensure the long-term success of the senior high school (SHS) program.

Of the more than 1.2 million pioneer SHS graduates, at least 61 percent or 765,000 completed the academic track. With the recently legislated free tuition in all state universities as encouragement, most of them were expected to proceed to college.

Nearly 480,000 finished the technical-vocational-livelihood (TVL) track. About 2,100 completed the sports track, and more than 4,700 the arts and design track.

One TVL graduate, George Vincent Pagalilauan of Ramon Magsaysay High School in Quezon City, told the Inquirer he still plans to go to college for a criminology degree.

At the same time, the 18-year-old said he'd keep his job in the restaurant he had interned in to support his college studies and to prepare him in putting up his own eatery business.

Pagalilauan's decision to pursue higher education despite having taken a different track is not unusual. Most of the 77 graduates of Don Alejandro Roces Sr. High School—a model school for TVL training—also plan to go on to college.

Gina Basilides, Roces High's SHS adviser, said the school was not concerned about the students' decision, especially since the tech-voc program does not push graduates to immediately seek employment after high school.

Exit exam

To determine whether SHS graduates possessed the 21st century skills that the DepEd wanted them to imbibe, the department planned a basic education assessment (BEA), or exit, exam.

However, due to the failure in the bidding for the testing materials, the DepEd could not conduct the exit exam nationwide.

Education Undersecretary Lorna Dig-Dino said that apart from BEA, there were other indicators that would help government determine the success of the program, including the rates at which senior high graduates were being hired.

There are also ongoing studies on the issues and concerns regarding the implementation of the SHS program, according to Dino.

Officials, nevertheless, are already seeing one bright spot in the new enhanced basic education program—the high number of Grade 11 entrants.

Despite initial fears that many, if not majority, of Grade 10 students would not advance to the next level, the DepEd found that nearly all of around 1.5 million junior high finishers entered senior high in June 2016, when the SHS program began its full implementation.

Voucher program

The big number of enrollees was due in part to the DepEd's voucher program that funded students entering SHS in private schools.

In the pre-K-12 program, Grade 11 would have been the first year of college. In the past, only half of high school graduates went on to college, according to Education Undersecretary Tonisito Umali. The new figures show that more students stay in school longer.

"That by itself makes the implementation of the K-12 program a success," Umali said. "In terms of the ultimate objective of whether they landed a job, proceeded to college, or have set up a business, allow us to wait after graduation and we'll make a report."

Love Basillote, executive director of the advocacy group Philippine Business for Education, also said it was "too early to judge" the K-12 education reform program, which was a flagship project of the Aquino administration.

She said the country would have to wait until 2024 for the "first true batch" of graduates, referring to students who would have completed senior high school by then after entering kindergarten in 2011 when the new K-12-oriented basic education curriculum was introduced in the country.

Since the DepEd was already pouring in a lot of resources to ensure that children go to school and stay in school, the challenge that remains is improving the quality of their education, Basillote said.

"Are we really meeting our theoretical competencies? We need to assess that and pay attention to it over the next couple of years. It's not enough that the children are studying; what's important is that they should be learning," she said.

One thing the government could do to improve the K-12 program is to remove the TVL track from the DepEd, suggested Alberto Fenix, president of the Philippine Chamber of Commerce and Industry's Human Resource Development Foundation.

TVL track

Fenix is proposing that the DepEd turn over the teaching and training of students in the TVL track to the Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (Tesda), "to give them an honest-to-goodness techvoc training."

"The TVL track is somehow being left behind because the people at the DepEd don't really know much about it," Fenix said. "Why don't we instead give the budget [for TVL] to Tesda for them to implement it? Let them do a better job at implementing it than the DepEd, which doesn't know anything about tech-voc."

Besides, he added, students who finished the TVL track would still have to obtain from Tesda a national certification to validate the skills and competencies they had acquired and make sure these were up to standard. This, in turn, could boost their resumé.

Since a considerable number of TVL graduates would likely immediately look for a job after graduation, it would be more rational to focus their curriculum on training for work, rather than burdening it with too many academic subjects more relevant to students planning to go to college, Fenix said.

If TVL finishers later opt to continue on to college, there are bridging programs such as the alternative learning schemes that could help them qualify for college work, he added.

"These are the approaches we should look into. The whole point is, we have to give our young people the opportunity," Fenix said.

Umali said Fenix's proposal "needs further study."

He said, allowing Tesda to handle the TVL track could not be done legally without amending some laws, including the Governance of Basic Education Act of 2001, which mandates the DepEd to implement basic education that includes the SHS program.

“While the proposal sounds logical and has some wisdom to it, since Tesda is the government body mandated by law to cater to tech-voc education, under the law when we talk about basic education it is the DepEd that should be on top of it,” he said.

Umali added that they could not reduce the time allotted for academics in the TVL track in favor of skills training and work immersion.

“We want our children to be equipped with several competencies regardless of the track they take,” he said.

The activist youth group, Samahan ng Progresibong Kabataan (Spark), has raised another concern about SHS graduates—their lack of information about labor rights that could make them easy prey to exploitative employers.

Spark said the DepEd should beef up its curriculum to include employment policies, grievance procedures, state-sanctioned benefits and other political rights in the workplace so that SHS graduates will not be victimized by abusive employers “or worse, parasitic manpower agencies.”

The DepEd admits that there is no dedicated subject on labor rights and labor policies, and that labor-related laws are taken up only “in bits” with the students. But a subject dealing with labor rights in the curriculum was being considered, the agency added.