

Promising investment for education

Last year, the Education and Culture Ministry issued a new regulation on student enrollment at state schools, stating that admission procedures must prioritize students that reside close to the school. For many regions and provinces, this year will become the first time they adopt this admissions system for high schools.

The regulation aims to prevent discrimination in access to good quality education and to fulfill the rights of students who live within a school's zone to be admitted to state schools. It is a breakthrough in the long-standing student admissions system that has determined student enrollment based primarily on merit, on their academic results, leading to a bias for students of well-to-do families in towns and big cities.

Now, schools must learn to accept the heterogeneity of their student body in terms of academic and socioeconomic backgrounds.



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In issuing the new regulation, the government implicitly admitted that the former student admission system for state schools was prone to discrimination. International or national schools often had special facilities and privileges, such as air-conditioned classrooms, libraries, laboratories and better-quality teaching and learning processes. Although the labels have mostly disappeared, their status as elite schools remains.

Scholars have argued that academic standards, though seemingly neutral, were indeed filled with cultural values and specific skills biased in favor of well-off families. As several studies have found, to be strong, a nation needs the creativity, skills and ed-

ucation of all people.

The new policy should lead to a system that could be transformative when implemented correctly, wisely and with close supervision, since it is expected to accelerate improvements in teaching quality, and equitable and equal education for all across the country. Two positive consequences can at least be brought forward.

Firstly, by accepting students based on their homes' relative proximity to the schools rather than their academic credentials, the special status of "elite schools" should fade sooner rather than later.

Having students with diverse abilities would force all schools to rethink their education paradigm and reformulate their visions, missions and strategies. This should lead governments, parents and teachers to be much more responsible in providing good quality education to all children at all schools.

The new system better ensures the constitutional right to educa-

tion for all Indonesian children. An education system that prioritizes the responsibility, equality and equity of local schools rather than academic "elitism" has been successfully implemented in other countries, such as Finland.

Secondly, the new system will encourage key players to shift the paradigm on evaluating education results from focusing on the product to focusing on the process. While the national examinations and classroom tests might still be the most effective and relevant means of managing the quality of education across the nation, this system of quality assurance may fade once school-based quality development programs are established. Nationwide periodic assessment programs could incrementally replace the national examination system to gather valid data on students' test results and schools' performances. This data could then be used to inform national education policies.

Local governments and schools can periodically administer evalu-

ation and assessments to measure what has run well and what needs intervention and improvement, such as through staff development programs, developing good libraries and laboratories and providing internet access. Critical to this assessment is the need to conduct a comparative study on schools with similar demographics.

Similar approaches have been undertaken in some countries, such as Australia, where the National Assessment Program helps governments, education authorities, schools and communities determine whether young Australians are meeting important educational outcomes regardless of their geographical locations.

Let's welcome the new regulation, though not without caution. In many parts of Indonesia, state schools might be located near a city. The quota for students at these schools might already be satisfied by children that live nearby. Consequently, the minority of children residing in remote areas that are far from the schools

might be denied admission.

Local governments should therefore ensure that they have comprehensive demographic information on students, as well as strategies to guarantee seats for all students.

The Ombudsman should take a proactive role in overseeing the local authorities' implementation and management of the school zone system to prevent discrimination, mismanagement and manipulation. Enforced correctly, schools with low-quality teaching will be able to meet the quality benchmark of national education. Indonesia can then boast of being a strong country where every person, regardless of their place of residence, can enjoy better education for a rewarding life.

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