

GMA's 'Education for All': A Mere Rhetoric

In her various policy pronouncements, President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo repeatedly promoted her 'education for all' program. A look at the proposed budget for 2005 drafted by the Department of Budget and Management (DBM), however, shows that this program is nothing but an empty rhetoric.

President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo (GMA) promised a lot to develop the country's educational system, but the government's subsidy can hardly be called an improvement compared to the previous years.

For 2005, the DBM proposed to give the Department of Education (DepEd) P111.04billion. This accounts for 11.68 percent of the P951-billion national budget for 2005.

The education budget is a pittance, however, if one were to analyze Macapagal-Arroyo's promises on education.

Scholar for every poor family

In the past, Macapagal Arroyo has repeatedly vowed to adopt one scholar from every poor family.

According to the Wallace Report, a study by the business community released last June, there are 1.7 million children aged 7 to 12 who are not in school because of poverty. To send these children to school for just one year, the government needs PhP13.6 million to PhP17billion. The computation is based on estimates by the Alliance of Concerned Teachers (ACT) that one year of schooling amounts to P8,000 to P10,000.

Macapagal-Arroyo said that based on the records of the Philippine Health Insurance Corp. (PhilHealth), there are about seven million poor PhilHealth cardholders. Sending seven million poor children to school will cost P56billion to P70billion. This already accounts for more than half of the education budget.

Her Student Assistance Fund for Education for a Strong Republic (Safe 4 SR) aims to provide easy-to-pay loans for third and fourth year college students. This, the President said, would enable students to graduate.

The Wallace report revealed that the drop out rate in college is 73 percent. In the proposed budget for 2005, the government will allot P92.8million for 58,085 students in tertiary and vocational levels. Based on the data from the Commission on Higher Education, the beneficiaries comprise only 1.82 percent of the total college population of 3.2 million.

SUC budget

Meanwhile, the proposed budget for state universities and colleges (SUCs) is only PhP16.85billion. The amount is even lower than the budget allotted for SUCs in 2003 which is P17.07billion.

Ironically, the state's premier university will suffer the biggest budget reduction. The University of the Philippines-System's budget will be cut by almost P67million. From this year's P4.52 billion, UP may only get P4.45 billion next year.

The subsidy of 30 more SUCs will decrease. The Mindanao State University will get P14.74million less than its current budget. Around P8.44million could be slashed from Romblon State College's subsidy.

The Polytechnic University of the Philippines, which has 11 branches and 60,000 students, may have to do with P545.34million next year, a decrease by around PhP2.6 million compared to this year.

Part of cost-cutting measures is the merging state colleges. This year, the government subsidizes 111 SUCs. The proposed subsidy be reduced to only 85 SUCs under the proposed budget for 2005.

In Nueva Vizcaya, for instance, two state colleges will receive no subsidy. This is because the two colleges – the Nueva Vizcaya State Institute of Technology and Nueva Viscaya State Polytechnic College will merge to become the Nueva Vizcaya State University.

Addressing the classroom shortage

The Macapagal-Arroyo administration is set to allot P3.2billion for the construction of 8,000 classrooms (based on official estimates that P1 billion can construct 2,500 classrooms). This will reportedly reduce the classroom shortage by 20.31 percent. It may be recalled that DepEd records show a shortage of 39,383 classrooms this school year.

Reducing the shortage in classrooms will not automatically reduce the class size to the ideal 25, however. Today, the actual class size in public schools is 60 to 110. This pales in comparison to Thailand (18), Malaysia (19), China (24), Taiwan (14) and Indonesia (22).

Facilities

Ms. Macapagal also pledged to improve school facilities and provide computers to all schools.

The DepEd said 20 percent of classrooms have no proper ventilation, 27 percent have no lighting, 55 percent do not have electricity and 25 percent have no ceilings.

However, the DBM proposed to allot only P2.42billion for DepEd's capital outlay.

Teachers

The Macapagal-Arroyo government will allocate P1.11billion for 10,000 additional teaching and related positions. This will reportedly reduce the shortage of teachers by 30 percent.

However, based on the current figures, the budget could only address 20.32 percent of the shortage of teachers given that the DepEd said it lacks 49, 212 teachers for the current school year.

Ms. Macapagal-Arroyo also said she wants to resolve teachers' problems. As to how, she has never made any clear statement so far.

The proposed 2005 budget is silent on any increase in the teachers' salary.

A teacher's salary is only P9,939, a little higher than the minimum wage in Metro Manila. Again, this is not enough for the basic needs of the teachers and their families. In Metro Manila, the family living wage – the amount needed to fulfill the needs of a family of six – in February 2004 was pegged at P594 daily or P17,820 monthly.

Because of low pay, teachers are forced to borrow money. The average loan of every teacher is P50,109, according to reports. The combined loans of teachers to the Government Service Insurance System (GSIS) have already reached P15billion.

Real priorities

Meanwhile, debt servicing will eat up PhP301.69billion or 31.72 percent of the national budget. The amount is 272 percent higher than the education budget.

Moreover, the proposed allocation for Department of Interior and Local Government (DILG) and Department of National Defense (DND) is higher than this year's. The combined allotment for the two departments may amount to P90billion next year, much higher than the proposed budget for SUCs.

Indeed, the youth can see through the deception of Macapagal-Arroyo's rhetoric. Based on the proposed education budget, the promise of "education for all" is nothing but an empty rhetoric.