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School zoning and the break from elitist mentality



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Education and Culture Minister Muhadjir Effendy expressed hope that schools would accommodate all school-age children in their respective zones. (JP/Muthi Kautsar)

Nearly two years ago, it took Abdul half an hour to reach his school in Depok, West Java, on a bicycle. He was so exhausted one day that sweat drenched his exam sheets. However, things improved when the government implemented a school zoning policy where schools must prioritize children living nearby. Abdul enrolled at a senior high school near his house that took him only 10 minutes by public transportation to reach.

The zoning system was intended to accommodate all children living near schools, regardless of their social and academic status. Education and Culture Minister Muhadjir Effendy expressed hope that schools would accommodate all school-age children in their respective zones.

Student admissions are carried out through three channels, namely the zoning channel (minimum quota of 90 percent), achievement channel (maximum quota of 5 percent) and transfer students (maximum quota of 5 percent). The main consideration of the new enrolment system is not academic achievement but the domicile of the students.

Since 2016, the education ministry has conducted intensive national consultative meetings with regional education offices to ensure they conduct further consultative meetings with the wider public in their respective regions.

However, student admission processes have caused heated controversy, as they are intimately related to the school zoning system, in which constraints and challenges vary in each region.

Parents in various areas have lodged complaints with schools and authorities, saying that their children with high academic achievement had failed to gain admission to "popular schools" because they had been "beaten" by other children with low academic qualifications that lived near the school.

While still strongly maintaining the policy, the minister has shown flexibility by accommodating the complaints by slightly increasing the quota of the achievement channel to 15 percent this year.

With the remaining gap in quality among provinces and regencies, and even among public schools in one regency or municipality, the challenges of school zoning are understandable.

However, the ministry has argued that school zoning will be referred to as a blueprint by the ministry to identify problems in education and pressure all stakeholders, particularly local governments, to pay attention to the improvement of all schools, not only popular and elite public schools.

This should include improving educational facilities and infrastructure, and improving the competency of all teachers, particularly in less popular schools. According to the ministry, 62.62 percent or Rp 208.38 trillion (US\$14.72 billion) of the total education budget of Rp 492.46 trillion has been shifted to the local governments.

Learning from other countries, school zoning has always been an ongoing process of perfection and improvement, taking into consideration various variables and conditions along with regular public debate.

In Malaysia, registered preschools are obliged to follow zoning regulations and must comply with regulations such as fire hazard assessment and health screening. Dense residential areas usually house many preschools.

In Singapore, the guaranteed equity with school zoning has long ceased to be an issue. The more pertinent issue has been traffic safety in school zones. Cars are required to slow down to 40 kilometers per hour during certain hours around school zones and motorists must signal more visibly with flashing lights.

In Australia, a primary school zone is an area from which the school recruits its core intake of students. Acceptance into a particular primary school is due to its capacity, and school principals during parental meetings can advise if they have available rooms for other candidate students.

In France, school zoning allowed the government to plan the construction of new schools in accordance with the demographic changes. It was designed to embrace social diversity as all students living in the area should enroll in their zoned schools.

Nevertheless, zones had gradually differentiated from each other. The zones defined by the education ministry were adjusted to the profile of students along with input from parents.

Canada has adopted mixed-schooling systems across different cities. Elementary students in Toronto are required to attend their local schools, while children in Edmonton and Vancouver have choices to a certain extent.

Public debate has always emerged between those who support school zoning and school choice, and the government is often forced to strike a balance between the two camps.

What can be learned is that policy adoption and public debate is justifiable before, during and after policy implementation, particularly in the education sector, where the interests of the wider public are crucially at stake.

However, several countries with sound education policies have clearly adopted school zoning with its variations.

The principle of fairness and equity is embedded in the school zoning system, as Indonesia needs to break from the mentality of elite and popular schools, which accommodates only the haves and the bright, and give more room to disadvantaged students to be able to benefit from quality public schools.

The ultimate success of every public school should be to ensure that all its students, regardless of their academic and social backgrounds, excel both intellectually and socially to reach their fullest potential as a human being.

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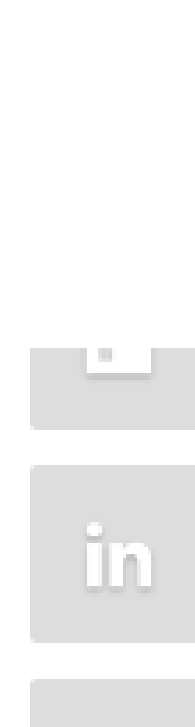
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