



BRIDGING EDUCATIONAL INEQUITIES IN REGION XII (SOCCSKSARGEN): A POLICY POSITION PAPER ON ACCESS, QUALITY, AND LEARNING OUTCOMES

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ABSTRACT

Education remains a critical instrument for social mobility and economic development in Region XII (SOCCSKSARGEN). Despite sustained government investment and the implementation of major educational reforms, significant challenges continue to affect learners, teachers, and schools across the region. Recent literacy data reveal improvements in educational attainment; however, disparities in access, infrastructure, teacher deployment, digital resources, and learning outcomes persist. This position paper examines major educational policy issues in Region XII and argues that existing policies require stronger localization, improved implementation mechanisms, and greater stakeholder participation. Drawing from recent statistics and policy documents, the paper proposes reforms aimed at strengthening educational equity, improving learning quality, and enhancing institutional accountability. Addressing these challenges is essential to achieving inclusive and sustainable educational development in the region.

KEYWORDS: *educational policy, SOCCSKSARGEN, Region XII, educational equity, learning outcomes, public education*

INTRODUCTION

Education has long been recognized as a cornerstone of national development. In the Philippines, educational reforms have focused on improving access, quality, and inclusivity through programs such as the K–12 curriculum and expanded learning recovery initiatives. However, educational realities vary significantly across regions. In Region XII, also known as SOCCSKSARGEN, policy implementation continues to encounter challenges associated with geography, poverty, resource allocation, and institutional capacity.

The region's population reached approximately 4.46 million in 2024, reflecting continued demographic growth and increasing demand for educational services. As enrollment expands, schools face mounting pressure to provide adequate classrooms, qualified teachers, learning materials, and technological resources. These concerns necessitate a careful examination of current educational policies and their effectiveness in addressing regional needs.

Educational Context of Region XII

Recent literacy data indicate encouraging progress in educational development. According to the 2024 Functional Literacy, Education, and Mass Media Survey (FLEMMS), the region's basic literacy rate increased from 79.9 percent in 2019 to 87.2 percent in 2024. Functional literacy likewise improved from 49.3 percent to 65.8 percent during the same period. Nevertheless, significant disparities remain among provinces. South Cotabato recorded the highest basic literacy rate at 93.7 percent, while Sarangani registered only 78.8 percent. Functional literacy rates showed similar inequalities across localities.

These figures suggest that while educational policies have contributed to improved literacy outcomes, gains have not been distributed equally across the region.

Policy Issue 1: Persistent Infrastructure Deficiencies

One of the most visible challenges facing Region XII is the inadequacy of educational infrastructure. Many public schools continue to experience classroom shortages, overcrowding, and insufficient facilities. Schools located in geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas often face greater difficulties in obtaining adequate resources.

Although national school-building programs have expanded educational infrastructure, population growth and increasing enrollment have outpaced construction efforts. Consequently, many schools continue to operate under conditions that limit effective teaching and learning.



Policy Issue 2: Teacher Deployment and Professional Support

Teacher quality remains among the strongest determinants of student achievement. However, Region XII continues to experience disparities in teacher deployment. Rural and remote schools frequently encounter staffing shortages, while urban centers attract a larger share of qualified educators.

Beyond deployment concerns, teachers often report heavy workloads, administrative responsibilities, and limited access to professional development opportunities. These challenges can negatively affect instructional quality and teacher retention. Policy interventions should therefore move beyond recruitment and address teacher welfare, mentorship, and continuous professional development.

Policy Issue 3: The Digital Divide

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed longstanding inequalities in access to technology. While digital learning has become increasingly important, many learners in rural communities still struggle with limited internet connectivity, inadequate devices, and insufficient digital literacy skills.

The persistence of the digital divide threatens to widen educational inequalities. Students who lack access to digital resources face disadvantages in research, communication, and independent learning. Policies promoting educational technology must therefore be accompanied by investments in infrastructure, connectivity, and training.

Policy Issue 4: Learning Outcomes and Functional Literacy

Recent national discussions on literacy have highlighted concerns regarding students' ability to comprehend, analyze, and apply information. While literacy rates have improved, functional literacy remains substantially lower than basic literacy, indicating challenges in reading comprehension and higher-order thinking skills. Nationally, only 70.8 percent of Filipinos aged 10 to 64 were classified as functionally literate in the 2024 FLEMMS.

The gap between basic and functional literacy suggests that educational policies should focus not only on access but also on learning quality. Schools must strengthen foundational literacy, critical thinking, and comprehension skills to prepare learners for higher education and employment.

Position Statement

This paper contends that educational policy in Region XII should prioritize equity, contextual responsiveness, and learning quality. While national reforms have generated measurable gains, implementation challenges continue to limit their effectiveness. Policymakers must recognize that educational needs vary across provinces, municipalities, and communities. A one-size-fits-all approach is unlikely to address the diverse realities of the region.

Policy Recommendations

1. Increase funding for classroom construction and school maintenance in underserved communities.
2. Implement stronger incentives and support systems for teachers assigned to geographically isolated schools.
3. Expand digital infrastructure and provide equitable access to educational technologies.
4. Strengthen reading, comprehension, and numeracy intervention programs at the elementary level.
5. Enhance monitoring and evaluation systems to ensure accountability in policy implementation.
6. Foster stronger partnerships among schools, local government units, parents, and community organizations.

Conclusion

Educational development in Region XII has shown notable progress in recent years. Nevertheless, persistent inequalities in infrastructure, teacher deployment, technological access, and learning outcomes continue to challenge the realization of quality education for all. Sustainable improvement requires policies that are evidence-based, context-sensitive, and responsive to local needs. By prioritizing equity and learning quality, Region XII can build a more resilient and inclusive educational system capable of supporting long-term regional development.

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