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# Ghost Schools in Pakistan: A Crisis of Education and Accountability

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## ABSTRACT:

Ghost schools in Pakistan represent a profound challenge to the country's education system, posing significant threats to educational equity, resource allocation, and overall national development. These non-functional institutions, which exist only on paper but fail to operate in reality, drain billions of rupees from the country's already constrained education budget. Meanwhile, millions of children—particularly in rural and marginalized communities—remain out of school, denied their fundamental right to education. The prevalence of ghost schools exacerbates existing disparities, perpetuating cycles of poverty and inequality, and further widens the urban-rural divide in educational access and quality. Although this issue is most prominently associated with Pakistan, ghost schools are a global phenomenon, prevalent in other countries struggling with weak governance, systemic corruption, and inadequate oversight mechanisms. Nations such as Nigeria, Afghanistan, and Kenya have also experienced similar challenges, reflecting a broader pattern of educational mismanagement in regions where accountability systems are either fragile or absent. This paper examines the scope, root causes, and impact of ghost schools, with a primary focus on Pakistan's unique challenges and circumstances. It highlights the deep systemic failures that allow ghost schools to persist, including corruption, political interference, and neglect of rural education. Furthermore, it evaluates the effectiveness of government-led and community-driven initiatives, such as biometric attendance systems, audits, GPS mapping, and public-private partnerships, in tackling this pervasive problem. Ultimately, this paper concludes by presenting actionable recommendations for structural reforms aimed at strengthening governance, enhancing community involvement, leveraging technology, and curbing corruption. By addressing these critical areas, Pakistan can ensure accountability in its education system, reclaim lost resources, and provide equitable access to education for all children, laying the groundwork for sustained national progress.

**KEYWORDS:** *Ghost Schools, Pakistan, Education Reform, Governance*

## INTRODUCTION

### Education in Crisis: The Global Phenomenon of Ghost Schools:

Education is widely recognized as the foundation for national development and prosperity. It equips individuals with the skills and knowledge needed to contribute to society and to improve their quality of life. However, in many countries, systemic

challenges such as corruption, weak governance, and poor resource management have stymied progress in the education sector. Among these challenges is the issue of ghost schools, institutions that exist only on paper but do not function in practice.

Ghost schools are non-operational entities that continue to receive government funding, including teacher salaries and operational budgets, despite being abandoned or entirely fictitious. While these

schools are most prominently documented in Pakistan, similar problems exist in other countries, revealing a broader pattern of educational mismanagement in regions with fragile governance systems.

In India, for instance, chronic teacher absenteeism in rural areas has paralleled the ghost school crisis in Pakistan. Funds allocated to schools often fail to translate into functional institutions, leaving communities underserved. Similarly, in Nigeria, ghost schools have been a significant concern, particularly in rural areas, where corruption and inadequate oversight allow public funds to be misallocated to non-existent schools or personnel (World Bank, 2020).

In Afghanistan, ghost schools have frequently been established on paper to attract international aid, while children in these communities remain without access to education. Reports from Kenya and Uganda also highlight similar trends, where payrolls are bloated with non-existent staff and institutions. Meanwhile, in Somalia, prolonged conflict and weak administrative systems have exacerbated the misuse of international education funding, resulting in ghost schools that provide no actual services to the public (Transparency International, 2015; UNICEF, 2018).

Despite these global examples, Pakistan's situation remains one of the most severe. The scale of the problem in Pakistan reflects deep systemic issues, including rampant corruption, lack of accountability, and political interference in educational administration.

### **The Extent of the Problem in Pakistan:**

The problem of ghost schools in Pakistan is not an isolated anomaly but a widespread systemic issue affecting all provinces and regions. These non-functional schools, which continue to receive government funding despite being abandoned or fictitious, represent a severe crisis that has hindered the country's education sector for decades. The scale of the issue varies across provinces, but the

cumulative impact is profound, depriving millions of children of their right to education and wasting billions of rupees annually in misallocated resources.

The province of Sindh is at the epicenter of the crisis. A 2022 survey conducted by the Sindh Education Department revealed that nearly 11,000 schools were either abandoned or completely non-functional. These ghost schools account for nearly 50% of all schools in some districts, such as Ghotki and Khairpur. Despite receiving funding for teacher salaries, infrastructure maintenance, and supplies, many of these schools are uninhabited, with neither teachers nor students present. The survey also uncovered cases where teachers assigned to these schools were drawing salaries while working other jobs or living in urban areas far from their assigned locations (Sindh Education Department, 2022).

In Balochistan, the situation is exacerbated by the province's rugged terrain and limited oversight mechanisms. The lack of infrastructure and governance in this geographically vast and sparsely populated region has allowed an estimated 2,000–3,000 ghost schools to exist. Many of these schools exist only in records, while on the ground, there are no functional facilities. Thousands of children in remote areas are left without access to education, perpetuating cycles of poverty and social inequality. The limited reach of government monitoring agencies in Balochistan makes it difficult to detect and address these irregularities, further entrenching the problem (UNICEF, 2021).

Even in Punjab, which is often regarded as the province with relatively better governance and infrastructure, the issue persists. An estimated 1,200–1,500 ghost schools operate in Punjab, particularly in underdeveloped regions such as southern Punjab. These areas are plagued by a lack of resources, teacher absenteeism, and political interference, which contribute to the prevalence of ghost schools. The Punjab government has made some progress in combating the issue through reforms such as biometric attendance systems, but

challenges remain, particularly in rural districts where oversight is weaker (MOFEPT, 2021).

In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), approximately 1,000 ghost schools have been identified. The provincial government has made strides in addressing the problem through community monitoring initiatives and technology-driven solutions, such as GPS mapping of schools. However, the lack of consistent follow-through and resistance from local stakeholders have limited the effectiveness of these measures (World Bank, 2022).

Even in smaller regions such as Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) and Gilgit-Baltistan, the problem is evident. Between 300 and 500 ghost schools are reported in these regions, highlighting the pervasive nature of this crisis. These schools are often located in remote mountainous areas, where governance and oversight are minimal, making it easier for corrupt officials to divert funds allocated for education to other purposes (Zafar, 2022).

The nationwide prevalence of ghost schools underscores the systemic nature of the problem. Weak governance, corruption, and political interference have allowed these institutions to persist unchecked across Pakistan. Each province faces unique challenges, but the underlying issues of poor oversight, inadequate accountability, and mismanagement are common across all regions. Addressing the problem requires coordinated efforts at both the federal and provincial levels, as well as collaboration with local communities and international partners to ensure that resources are directed toward functional and accessible schools.

### **Impact on Pakistan's Education System:**

The consequences of ghost schools in Pakistan are profound and multifaceted, affecting not only the country's education sector but also its broader socioeconomic development. One of the most direct and damaging impacts is the misallocation of resources. Billions of rupees from Pakistan's already constrained education budget are spent annually on

non-functional institutions, siphoning funds that could otherwise be used to build infrastructure, recruit and train qualified teachers, and enhance access to quality education in underserved areas. For instance, the Sindh Education Department's 2022 report revealed that a substantial portion of the province's education budget was being spent on schools that were either abandoned or fictitious, depriving functional schools of much-needed resources (Sindh Education Department, 2022).

This financial inefficiency is especially troubling given Pakistan's dire educational challenges. The country already faces one of the world's largest out-of-school populations, with 22.8 million children not attending school (UNICEF, 2021). The prevalence of ghost schools exacerbates this crisis by further reducing the availability of functional schools, particularly in rural areas where access to education is already limited. For children in these regions, ghost schools represent lost opportunities—opportunities to learn, grow, and escape the cycle of poverty. Without access to functioning schools, these children are more likely to remain trapped in poverty, perpetuating intergenerational inequities and limiting their ability to contribute to national development (World Bank, 2022).

The issue also has a profound impact on social equity, as it disproportionately affects rural and marginalized communities. Ghost schools are far more prevalent in rural areas, where governance and oversight are weakest. These regions often suffer from a lack of alternative educational institutions, meaning that when ghost schools fail to operate, children are left with no viable options for schooling. This deepens existing disparities in educational access and quality between urban and rural populations. Furthermore, the absence of functional schools in these areas forces families to make difficult decisions, such as sending their children to distant schools or foregoing education altogether, further entrenching inequalities.

In addition to its domestic consequences, the prevalence of ghost schools significantly

undermines Pakistan's credibility on the international stage. The inefficiencies and corruption associated with ghost schools damage the country's reputation among international donors and development partners. Donors are often reluctant to invest in Pakistan's education sector due to concerns about corruption and mismanagement. For example, the World Bank has repeatedly highlighted governance issues in Pakistan's education sector as a key obstacle to securing and effectively utilizing international funding (World Bank, 2022). This lack of trust not only reduces the inflow of financial assistance but also limits Pakistan's ability to implement large-scale educational reforms.

Finally, the existence of ghost schools erodes public trust in government institutions. When communities see public funds being wasted on schools that do not exist or operate, it creates a sense of disillusionment and frustration. This lack of trust discourages public engagement in education initiatives and fosters a broader perception of government inefficiency, further complicating efforts to reform the sector (Zafar, 2022).

Addressing the impact of ghost schools is essential for reversing these trends. Reclaiming misallocated resources, improving oversight, and ensuring that funds are directed toward functional schools can create immediate and lasting benefits for Pakistan's education system. In the long term, eliminating ghost schools is critical to building a more equitable and effective education system that serves all children and supports the country's economic and social progress.

### Root Causes of the Crisis:

The ghost school crisis in Pakistan is deeply embedded in systemic failures that have accumulated over decades. At its core, corruption is one of the most significant drivers of the problem. Funds intended for school construction, teacher salaries, and resources are frequently siphoned off by government officials, contractors, and influential figures. These actors exploit loopholes in the system,

creating non-existent or non-functional schools on paper to divert public money for personal gain. The lack of stringent checks and balances allows this misuse of resources to continue unabated, diverting funds away from the children and communities who need them most (Zafar, 2022).

Political interference also plays a significant role in perpetuating ghost schools. Many schools are established in locations chosen not for their viability or necessity, but as favors to political allies or to appease influential local figures. These schools often lack basic infrastructure, qualified teachers, or sufficient resources to operate, leading to their eventual abandonment. Furthermore, the political patronage system protects those who mismanage or exploit education funds from accountability. Politicians may shield corrupt officials and ghost employees, further undermining reform efforts and allowing the cycle of inefficiency and mismanagement to persist (Transparency International, 2015; World Bank, 2020).

Weak governance and poor oversight exacerbate the crisis. Pakistan's education departments lack robust monitoring mechanisms to track the functionality of schools or verify the attendance of teachers and students. Outdated record-keeping practices and an absence of real-time data allow ghost schools to remain undetected for years. In some cases, audits and inspections are either superficial or deliberately manipulated to conceal irregularities. This lack of accountability enables the problem to spread unchecked, particularly in rural and underserved regions where oversight is minimal (UNESCO, 2019).

Finally, systemic neglect has also contributed to the rise of ghost schools. Inadequate investment in infrastructure and education resources, combined with teacher absenteeism, creates conditions where schools gradually fall into disuse. Many rural communities are left without functioning schools because government attention and funding are disproportionately concentrated in urban areas. This neglect not only fuels the ghost school crisis but also

widens the gap in educational access and quality between urban and rural populations, perpetuating cycles of poverty and inequality (UNICEF, 2021; Zafar, 2022).

Addressing these root causes requires a multifaceted approach. Eliminating corruption, curbing political interference, and introducing effective monitoring systems will be critical to ensuring that public funds are directed toward functioning schools. Without addressing these underlying issues, ghost schools will continue to drain resources and deny millions of children their fundamental right to education.

### **Efforts to Combat Ghost Schools:**

Recognizing the urgency of the ghost school crisis, both the government and civil society in Pakistan have implemented various measures to mitigate the problem. These initiatives range from leveraging technology to improving community participation and conducting targeted audits. While progress has been made in certain areas, significant challenges remain in ensuring these efforts are effective and sustainable.

One of the most prominent reforms has been the introduction of biometric attendance systems in Sindh and Punjab. These systems verify the physical presence of teachers and staff through fingerprint or facial recognition, reducing the prevalence of ghost employees who draw salaries without performing their duties. The Sindh government, for instance, introduced biometric systems to track teacher attendance and uncovered thousands of ghost teachers in the process (Sindh Education Department, 2022). Punjab has also adopted similar systems, leading to greater accountability in teacher attendance. However, the success of these systems has been hindered by technical issues, such as unreliable internet connectivity in rural areas, and resistance from those benefiting from the status quo (MOFEPT, 2021).

Additionally, audits and inspections have been carried out in various provinces to identify and

address non-functional schools. For example, audits conducted in Sindh revealed discrepancies in school records, including schools listed as operational despite being abandoned or non-existent. While such audits have exposed inefficiencies, enforcement remains weak, as corrupt officials and powerful stakeholders often evade accountability. Without strict penalties and follow-through, the impact of these audits is limited (World Bank, 2022).

Community monitoring initiatives have also shown promise in improving accountability. Local communities are increasingly being involved in overseeing school operations, ensuring that teachers are present and resources are used appropriately. For instance, community-based school management committees (SMCs) have been implemented in some districts to enhance local oversight. These committees have empowered community members to report issues such as teacher absenteeism and inadequate infrastructure. However, the effectiveness of these initiatives is often hampered by limited resources, lack of training, and social hierarchies that discourage community members from challenging influential individuals involved in the mismanagement of schools (Transparency International, 2015).

Technological solutions have further strengthened efforts to combat ghost schools. Tools such as GPS mapping and digital databases have been deployed to track school locations and functionality. GPS mapping helps verify whether schools listed in government records actually exist at their stated locations, while digital databases provide real-time updates on school performance metrics, including student enrollment and teacher attendance. These technologies have played a critical role in identifying discrepancies between official records and ground realities (UNESCO, 2019). Despite their potential, these solutions face challenges in terms of scalability and consistent implementation, particularly in remote areas where digital infrastructure is lacking (UNICEF, 2021).

While these efforts have yielded some success, they remain insufficient due to systemic resistance, weak enforcement mechanisms, and a lack of sustained political will. Resistance from individuals benefiting from the existence of ghost schools, combined with bureaucratic inefficiencies, undermines the impact of reforms. Furthermore, reforms often lack continuity, as changes in government leadership result in shifting priorities and fragmented implementation.

To truly eliminate ghost schools, Pakistan must address these barriers by strengthening enforcement mechanisms, building institutional capacity, and fostering greater collaboration between government, civil society, and local communities. Without sustained commitment and coordinated efforts, the progress made thus far will be difficult to maintain, and millions of children will continue to be denied their right to education.

### **The Path Forward:**

Addressing the crisis of ghost schools in Pakistan demands bold, comprehensive reforms that tackle the systemic issues enabling their existence. Strengthening governance is crucial, and independent oversight bodies must be established to monitor school functionality, audit expenditures, and hold those accountable who misuse resources. These bodies should operate without political interference, ensuring impartiality in their enforcement of penalties and recovery of funds. However, corruption and resistance from powerful stakeholders pose significant challenges, underscoring the need for transparency and political will to back these reforms.

Empowering local communities offers another transformative solution. By involving parents, teachers, and community members in monitoring attendance, infrastructure, and resource allocation, the government can establish grassroots accountability mechanisms. Community-driven oversight works best when stakeholders are given training, resources, and reporting tools to identify

and address irregularities. However, building capacity in rural areas—where education and awareness are often limited—remains a challenge that must be addressed through public awareness campaigns and localized programs.

Technology can play a critical role in improving transparency. Biometric systems to track teacher attendance and GPS mapping of schools have already uncovered thousands of ghost schools and teachers in Pakistan. Expanding such systems nationwide can significantly reduce discrepancies in school records. However, poor infrastructure in remote areas, including lack of internet connectivity, and resistance from vested interests slow down progress. Targeted investments in digital infrastructure and training programs will be essential to making these reforms effective.

Finally, fostering public-private partnerships (PPPs) can help bridge gaps in management and resource allocation. Collaborating with NGOs and private sector organizations can bring innovation, accountability, and additional funding to the education sector. Initiatives like The Citizens Foundation have proven the value of such collaborations but scaling them requires clear legal frameworks and incentives for private partners. Ensuring these partnerships work in harmony with government goals will be key to their success.

The road to eliminating ghost schools is challenging, but it is essential for Pakistan's development. By addressing systemic issues, empowering communities, and leveraging technology, Pakistan can create an education system that fulfills its promise of equity, opportunity, and progress for every child.

### **CONCLUSION:**

Ghost schools are a global issue, but their prevalence in Pakistan represents a particularly severe crisis that strikes at the very foundation of the nation's development and prosperity. These non-functional institutions waste critical financial resources, deepen

existing inequalities, and perpetuate cycles of poverty and illiteracy, particularly in rural and marginalized areas. Beyond their economic and administrative implications, ghost schools erode public trust in governmental institutions, diminish the credibility of Pakistan's education system, and tarnish the nation's reputation on the global stage.

The consequences of failing to address this issue are far-reaching. Millions of children, already vulnerable and underserved, continue to be denied their fundamental right to education. This not only limits their individual potential but also hinders the collective progress of the nation, as an uneducated population is less equipped to contribute to economic growth, technological innovation, and social stability. Moreover, the persistence of ghost schools discourages international donors and development partners from investing in Pakistan's education sector, further constraining the country's ability to enact meaningful reforms.

Addressing this crisis is not merely an administrative necessity but a moral imperative that demands unwavering commitment from all stakeholders. Education is a cornerstone of sustainable development, and every child in Pakistan deserves access to a quality learning environment where they can acquire the skills and knowledge needed to build a brighter future. To achieve this, Pakistan must implement a multifaceted approach that combines robust governance reforms, technological solutions, and community involvement.

Strengthening oversight mechanisms, introducing real-time monitoring systems, and empowering local communities to hold school management accountable are vital steps in combating this issue. Additionally, sustained political will and a commitment to transparency are essential to dismantle the entrenched corruption and inefficiencies that have allowed ghost schools to thrive for decades. Expanding public-private partnerships and engaging with non-governmental organizations can also help mobilize resources and

expertise to address these challenges more effectively.

Ultimately, reclaiming lost resources and restoring functionality to Pakistan's education system will have far-reaching benefits, not only for the country's children but for the nation as a whole. A robust education system lays the groundwork for economic resilience, social cohesion, and long-term development. By tackling the ghost school crisis head-on, Pakistan has the opportunity to redefine its trajectory, close the gap between policy and implementation, and ensure that every child receives the education they deserve. The future of Pakistan depends on the decisions made today, and addressing the ghost school crisis is an investment in the prosperity and stability of generations to come.

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