

School Certification Assessment Process: Implications to Quality Assurance in the Basic Education System

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Abstract: The school certification assessment process plays a crucial role in ensuring the quality of education provided by educational institutions. However, this process is not without its challenges. This study explores some of the key challenges faced during school certification assessments and discusses some implications for quality assurance in a developing country. A survey research design using quantitative and qualitative methods was conducted with 40 junior high school faculty, staff, and administrators from four selected Education Service Contracting (ESC)-participating schools in San Pablo City, Laguna, Philippines. An e-survey questionnaire was used online through Google Forms. Findings revealed that the recertification process presents significant challenges for ESC-participating schools, and some did not achieve the certified status because they did not meet the Department of Education (DepEd) minimum standards and Private Education Assistance Committee (PEAC) certification requirements. In addition, there is a lack of government support and incentives for the schools. The study recommended specific ways to address the issues encountered. By addressing these challenges, we can enhance the effectiveness and credibility of the certification process, ultimately leading to improved educational outcomes.

Keywords: Basic Education, Certification, Quality Assurance, Recertification Practices.

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INTRODUCTION

In today's rapidly evolving world, education plays a pivotal role in shaping the future of individuals and societies. To ensure the delivery of quality education, school certification plays a crucial role. School certification is a comprehensive evaluation process conducted by educational authorities to assess and accredit educational institutions. It involves a systematic review of various aspects of a school's performance, including curriculum design, teaching methodologies, infrastructure, faculty qualifications, student outcomes, and overall institutional effectiveness (Kumar et al., 2020). The primary objective of the school certification assessment process is to ensure the provision of quality education. By setting stringent standards and benchmarks, certification serves as a mechanism to hold schools accountable for delivering high-quality education. It promotes continuous improvement and encourages schools to meet and exceed the established standards.

The Private Education Assistance Committee (PEAC) implements most of the program in the Philippines, including the certification and recertification of qualifying private high schools, while the Department of Education (DepEd) establishes the policies. Parental and public reassurance that the school is committed to providing a safe and enriching learning environment while remaining effective and efficient is facilitated by certification and recertification. In addition, certifiers who recommend additional school improvement measures validate the school's quality (Aguilos, 2015). PEAC certifying bodies regularly check the participating schools' quality control. Higher education institutions are reviewing their goals, objectives,

academic methods, target students, and scholars because of quality assurance, quality assessment, and world rankings becoming increasingly competitive and prevalent worldwide (Aburizaizah, 2022). Meemar (2018) demonstrated that the Ministry of Education (MOE) sets a number of criteria for the educational system and is in charge of providing general oversight and administration of all educational activities, as noted by Aburizaizah (2022). Additionally, quality assurance makes ensuring that school assessments are conducted in accordance with the specified standards and guidelines, which enhances student performance. The same quality standards and indicators are used for both internal and external school evaluations. They inform all parties involved of this. This ultimately encourages countrywide planning, education, and policy advancements (Atanda & Olaifa, 2022). Quality control should be a part of everyday job since it sets standards and expectations and benefits pupils. It helps with nation-building, the fast-evolving educational landscape, workforce requirements, ASEAN integration in 2015, compliance with laws, directives, and issuances, the unabated growth of private schools, certainty of ESC slot distribution, and the most reliable route to survival (Aguilos, 2015).

Public and private schools play complementary roles in the educational system, which the Philippine government acknowledges. Complementarity is exemplified by state-funded public schools and private educational institutions collaborating to provide educational services (Tabora, 2014). Both public and private schools would ideally treat each other as equals, sharing resources and capabilities on mutually agreed-upon terms to achieve

the shared goal of promoting education as a fundamental human right and providing the best education possible in the Philippines. To fulfill these complementary roles, the government has established public-private partnership education programs that require quality assurance certification and recertification. One of these is the Education Service Contracting (ESC) program.

The Department of Education's (DepEd) ESC program is one of the world's largest public-private partnership initiatives in the Philippine education (Saguin, 2019). ESC began as a pilot program in 1982 and was later expanded and enacted into law in 1989 as Philippine Republic Act (RA) 6728, or the Government Assistance to Students and Teachers in Private Education (GASTPE). With the passage of Republic Act 8545 in 1988, GASTPE changed to broaden its scope. Aside from ESC, GASTPE also includes Teachers' Salary Subsidy (TSS), an in-service (INSET) fund for teachers from private high schools, Tuition Fee Supplement (TFS), and research. A Senior High School Voucher Program (SHS VP) was also introduced as a core component of GASTPE in 2013 through RA 10533, also known as the Enhanced Basic Education Act (Saguin, 2019). The program improves school quality, decreases congestion in public high schools, assures the financial sustainability of private secondary schools, manages overall public secondary education expenditures, and encourages households to invest in education (Ferrer, 2019).

Furthermore, the ESC program promotes the efficiency of the mixed public-private national education system choice, which may lead to greater individual well-being by empowering and enabling students/parents, and

diversity of providers, which may lead to greater competition, which, if managed well, may lead to efficiency improvements. Every high school student grantee in the National Capital Region (NCR) receives PhP 13,000 per year, while those in Highly Urbanized Cities (HUCs) outside of the NCR receive PhP 11,000 each, and those in other locations receive PhP 9,000 each. The scope of the program has steadily expanded. The ESC subsidies totaled PhP 9.33 billion. Currently, the ESC government program is only available to junior high school students (Private Education Assistance Committee, 2022). However, the House Committee on Basic Education and Culture has formed a Technical Working Group (TWG) to draft legislation expanding government assistance to include preschool and elementary students in private schools (Begas, 2022).

The primary ESC implementing agency is the Private Education Assistance Committee (PEAC). The Fund for Assistance to Private Education (FAPE), a permanent trust fund established in 1968 to finance private education assistance programs, is administered by PEAC. DepEd provides annual funding and oversees the ESC by establishing general policies and specific guidelines. A yearly renewed memorandum of understanding governs the relationship between DepEd and PEAC. All program costs are covered by DepEd, including an administrative service fee for PEAC's program management. The Secretary of Education chairs the PEAC and includes members of the National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA) and representatives from private school and university associations. While DepEd sets the policies, PEAC carries out the bulk of program implementation, including

certification and recertification of eligible private high schools, determination of slots per school, and collating and forwarding billing statements of schools to DepEd. Participating schools must provide an academically rigorous junior high school (JHS) education to ESC student grantees in an environment of values, trust, and loyalty (Private Education Assistance Committee, 2020).

Certification and recertification are two of the most valuable programs in the ESC, as they ensure that participating schools meet the minimum standards, follow the rules, and meet the criteria established by the DepEd for junior high schools (Private Education Assistance Committee, 2019). It serves as a mechanism for increased public accountability, reassuring parents, and the general public that the school is committed to providing a safe and enriching learning environment while remaining efficient and effective, and the certifiers who recommend additional school improvement measures validate the school's quality (Aguilos, 2015). PEAC certifiers continuously validate the quality assurance of the ESC-participating schools. Quality assurance, quality assessment, and world rankings have become competitively and increasingly a global concern and a worldwide pursuit among higher education institutions leading them to review their aims, objectives, academic practices, target students, and scholars (Aburizaizah, 2022). As cited by Aburizaizah (2022), Meemar (2018) illustrated that the Ministry of Education (MOE) sets several standards for the educational system and is responsible for providing overall supervision and administration of all educational processes. Furthermore, quality assurance ensures that the process and

practice of school assessments adhere to the established standards and procedures, resulting in improved student performance. External and internal evaluations of schools use the same quality standards and indicators. They communicate all these to stakeholders. That eventually encourages state and national planning, training, and policy developments in the country (Atanda & Olaifa, 2022). Quality assurance raises standards and expectations, results in positive outcomes for students, and should be a part of daily work. It contributes to nation-building, a rapidly changing educational landscape, workforce demands, ASEAN integration 2015, compliance with laws, directives, and issuances, the unabated proliferation of private schools, assurance of ESC slot allocation, and the surest path to survival (Aguilos, 2015).

ESC-participating schools undergo recertification despite ongoing difficulties and pressures. An ESC school can assess its strengths and areas for improvement as a learning environment using the 2018 Certification Assessment Instrument (CAI). Through its various area committees, the school rates itself using the CAI standards outlined in several areas. The CAI self-ratings require participation from all parties involved.

Due to various factors and challenges, some ESC-participating private high schools that applied for recertification did not attain the certified status following recertification. These factors include a lack of funding, unsupportive top management, inexperienced middle management, a lack of stakeholder ownership, government directives such as taxation, restrictions on tuition increases, rapid teacher turnover, teacher quality, and

student profiles such as low academic achievement, disruptive behavior, lack of interest, media influence, a lack of parental involvement in school initiatives, and potential conflicts of interest between some LGUs and school advocacy (Aguilos, 2015).

These schools who were not awarded the certified status have not reached the required minimum standards set by the DepEd and PEAC certifiers. According to Ferrer (Private Education Assistance Committee, 2022), 1,376 schools underwent e-recertification (remote mode of recertification as a result of the current COVID-19 global pandemic) in 2020-2021. Of these schools, 638 (46.36%) were awarded Certified Status, 355 (25.08%) Substantial Compliance Status, 220 (15.99%) Partial Compliance Status, and 163 (11.85%) Other Status.

Junior high schools that failed recertification must prepare for a recertification revisit within one school year. Schools that fail the recertification revisit twice are terminated from the ESC program and may only graduate their remaining ESC grantees (Private Education Assistance Committee, 2022).

With this pressing concern, and the gap in knowledge about dealing with this issue, this study aimed to examine the challenges faced by educational institutions during school certification assessment. Specifically, the study (i) determined the profile of the ESC-participating schools in San Pablo City, Philippines in terms of school type, curriculum level, school size, year of establishment, ESC certification status, and type of certification activity; and (ii) analyzed the issues encountered by the ESC-participating schools in the recertification process.

METHODS

Research Design

This study used a survey research design with a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods to determine the profile of the ESC-participating schools, and the challenges they encountered during the e-recertification.

Research Participants

The study involved the participation of 40 respondents from four selected ESC-participating schools in San Pablo City, Laguna, Philippines. The population consisted of 24 junior high school faculty members, four administrators/school heads/owners, three JHS department heads, three coordinators/facilitators, two librarians, one finance officer/treasurer, two guidance counselors/coordinators, and 1 registrar.

The convenience sampling technique was used to determine the samples derived from the population. The respondents from the four ESC-participating schools were chosen since they have direct knowledge and understanding of the e-recertification process of the PEAC.

Instrumentation

For the first objective, the profile of the ESC schools in terms of their school information, which includes the school type, curriculum level, school size, year of establishment, ESC certification status, and types of certification activity, was determined using an e-survey questionnaire.

For the second objective, the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) Analysis allows an in-depth discussion, providing a greater understanding of the challenges encountered by the ESC schools, problems, causes, and effects. Strengths and opportunities allow the researcher to make a generalization on how ESC-participating schools will be able to

sustain or improve their ESC rating and compliance. On the other hand, weaknesses and threats were determined to prevent problems that may arise before or during the certification process. The SWOT Analysis was used to determine the management and supervising practices of administrators in realizing compliance with the set standards of CAI.

Ethical Considerations

Human respondents were used in this study's data collection techniques. Accordingly, the researcher adhered to principles of research ethics like:

- Prior to the actual data collection, a consent form explaining the purpose of the study, how the data will be used, and how it would be stored after the study was distributed to all potential respondents.
- Respondents are allowed to accept or reject the invitation at their discretion.
- The respondents' anonymity was kept a secret.
- The responders were informed of the study's findings.

Data Analysis

Data gathered were analyzed using descriptive statistics. The profiles of respondents and ESC-participating school information were analyzed using graphical presentation. For the second objective, textual presentation through SWOT was used to analyze the challenges encountered by the ESC schools in the e-recertification process.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Profile of the ESC-participating schools

Figure 1 displays the types of ESC member schools. Among the respondents, twenty-seven (27) are from a non-stock non-sectarian school (67.5%), twelve (12) are from a foundation school (30%), and one (1) is

from a stock non-sectarian school (2.5%).

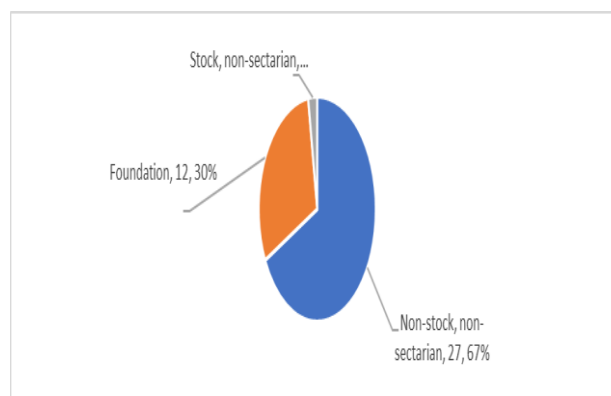


Figure 1. School type

According to the Securities and Exchange Commission (2023), under the Revised Corporation Code of the Philippines (RCCP), SEC Memorandum Circular No. 8, series of 2006, a foundation is a non-stock, non-profit corporation established to extend grants or endowments to support its goals and raise funds to accomplish charitable, religious, educational, athletic, cultural, literary, scientific, social welfare, or other similar objectives.

As defined by the Securities and Exchange Commission (2023), a non-stock corporation, under Section 3 of the RCCP, is any corporation not organized as a stock corporation. A stock corporation has capital stock held by shareholders, and dividends are distributed to them regularly. A non-stock corporation, on the other hand, has no part of its income distributed as dividends to its members, trustees, or officers, according to Section 86 of the RCCP (Securities and Exchange Commission, 2023). However, any profit derived from its activities must be, if necessary or appropriate, put toward promoting the purpose/s for which the

corporation was formed (Securities and Exchange Commission, 2023).

A non-sectarian school does not adhere to any particular religious belief or tradition (Kennedy, 2019). A sectarian corporation, on the other hand, adheres to the rules of a specific group or sect (Vocabulary.com, 2023). The Latin term secta means "a way or a road." It also means "a following, school of thought, or religious group" (Vocabulary.com, 2023).

Figure 2 shows the curriculum levels offered by the schools. All schools provide preschool, elementary, junior, and senior high school education (100%). None of the schools offer college or vocational education (0%).

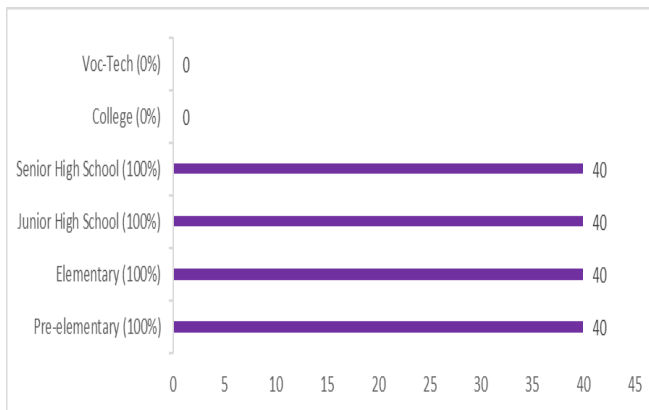


Figure 2. Curriculum level offered

These schools are ESC-participating private schools that have undergone recertification by the Private Education Assistance Committee (PEAC) for Education Service Contracting (ESC) by the Department of Education for the GASTPE Program during the COVID-19 pandemic years 2020 and 2021. Private schools with junior high school level that are recognized by the DepEd and pass the "within standards" rating by PEAC is accepted into the ESC program (DepEd Order No. 20, 2017).

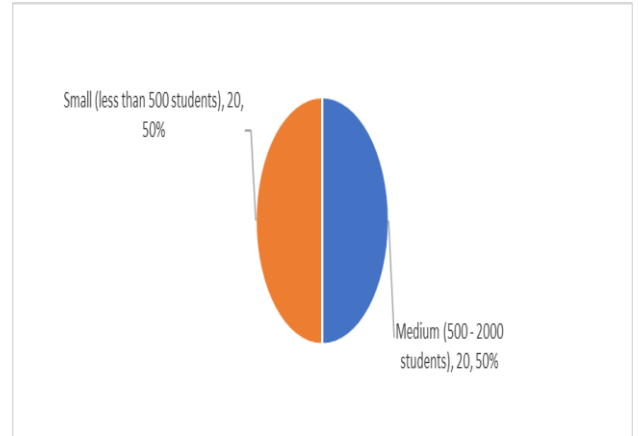


Figure 3. School size

According to the Private Education Assistance Committee (2020), schools are classified as small if they have fewer than 500 students, medium if they have 500-2000 students, and big if they have more than 2000 students. None among the four ESC schools in San Pablo City that participated in the study is classified as a big school.

Figure 4 shows the year each school was founded, ranging between 1998 and 2013. 12 respondents are from 1998 (30%), 1 from 2001 (2%), 19 from 2003 (48%), and 8 from 2013 (20%). This shows that all selected ESC schools have been in operation for 10 or more years.

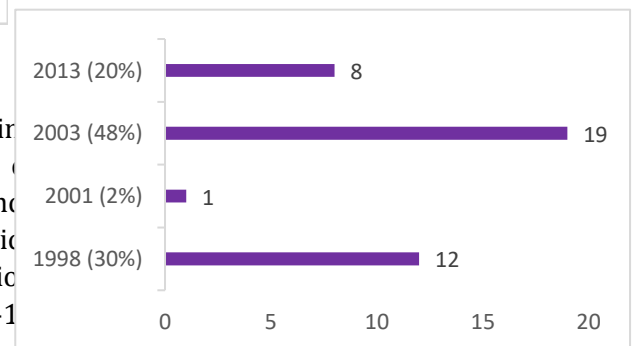


Figure 4. Year of establishment

Figure 5 displays the ESC certification status of each school. In response to the query of whether or not their school is ESC certified, all respondents said "yes," implying each

Respondent is from an ESC-participating school (100%).

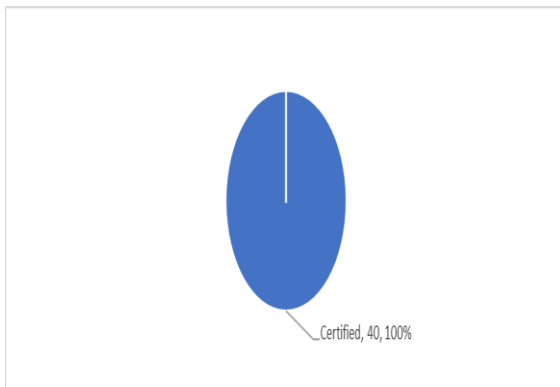


Figure 5. ESC certification status

A certified ESC school is one that has complied with all DepEd standards, adheres to applicable DepEd policies, and meets the requirements of the self-study procedure prescribed by the PEAC National Secretariat ESC Certification Unit. These schools attained a final certification rating of 3 or 4 (Private Education Assistance Committee, 2018 CAI).

Figure 6 shows the type of certification activity that happened throughout the years 2020 and 2021. Based on the chart's data, all the schools underwent e-recertification during these years. It means that they obtained a passing rating of at least 2.0 during their last certification visit before the year 2020.

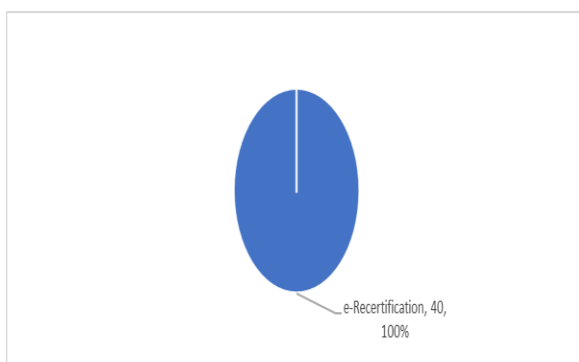


Figure 6. Type of certification activity

According to Terre (2020), PEAC presents an alternative recertification protocol for the years 2020 and 2021 through its Certification Unit. Assessment of institutional quality and school

compliance with DepEd and K-12 standards is carried out within community quarantine parameters using digital platforms and a hybrid of technology applications. All certification and recertification activities by the PEAC were done remotely due to COVID-19 restrictions.

Challenges encountered by the ESC-participating schools in the e-recertification process

The Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) Analysis examines both internal and external factors—what is going on inside and outside the ESC-participating schools (Table 1). This allows for an in-depth discussion, providing a greater understanding of the challenges encountered by the ESC schools, problems, causes, and effects. The SWOT analysis is based on the responses to the open-ended questions in the e-survey instrument. The SWOT analysis seeks to answer the question: “What challenges do ESC-participating schools face during the recertification process?”

Included in the strengths are the best practices or initiatives implemented by the ESC-participating schools in accordance with the DepEd minimum standards for e-recertification. Weaknesses are the challenges encountered by the ESC-participating schools during the e-recertification process. Opportunities are chances for something positive to happen that arise from situations outside of the ESC-participating schools. Threats include external factors that negatively affect the recertification of ESC-participating schools.

There are several challenges that the ESC-participating schools faced during the e-recertification process. Out of 40 respondents, 16 found difficulty in preparing and gathering too many ECEs (e.g., collecting students' outputs and creating video presentations). One of the reasons is that they struggled with modern technology, or a lack thereof, during the e-

recertification implementation. As a result, teachers had to adapt teaching techniques. However, this required them to face time constraints in learning the necessary teaching tools. In response to the pandemic, teachers needed an immediate shift toward online education, which can be challenging due to a lack of time and preparation (Grady, 2022). One respondent stated that using technology was a challenge and that, as a SHS teacher, he had to adjust his teaching style to handle JHS students. Three respondents also stated that having missing or lacking ECEs was a challenge during the e-recertification process. One respondent also stated that submission of evidence was challenging on some areas including budget and finances.

According to three respondents, developing curriculum maps aligned with the PVMGO was difficult during the e-recertification process. One of the respondents stated that since there is only one teacher per subject, it is a challenge to make all the mathematics curriculum maps in just a short time. This statement supports the findings of Shilling (2013) in her study, which reveal the challenges teachers encountered in curriculum mappings, such as teacher buy-in, resistance to change, training for mapping, and inconsistent support and leadership. The participants suggested providing training in mapping on an ongoing basis to address the needs of the existing and newly hired faculty. qualified personnel for academic support services.

Table 1. SWOT analysis

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advanced preparation and proper documentation of ECEs • Continuous training of employees • Effective Learning Management System (LMS) • Open communication with stakeholders • Proper implementation of DepEd guidelines • Shared responsibilities of stakeholders on the implementation based on DepEd's standards 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preparation and gathering of too many ECEs • Development of curriculum maps aligned with the PVMGO within a limited time • COVID-19 pandemic-related challenges (e.g., limited resources and budget, restricted movement, and enrollment decrease) • Responding to difficult questions from PEAC certifiers • Lack of qualified personnel for academic support services
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Potential increase of Teachers' Salary Subsidy (TSS) • Programs and free trainings by PEAC for teachers and school administrators • Encouragement to other non-ESC schools to undergo ESC certification • Long-term action plan to retain or improve ESC certification • Gateway to research opportunities related to ESC certification 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of government support • Enrollment decrease due to student transfers to public schools

CONCLUSIONS

This study explores some of the key challenges faced during school recertification assessments using SWOT analysis. While it is true that the ESC-participating schools displayed strengths during the recertification process, such as advanced preparation and proper documentation of ECEs, continuous trainings of employees, availability of effective learning management systems (LMS), open communication with stakeholders, alignment of curriculum maps to the school's PVMGO, availability of effective LMS, proper implementation of DepEd guidelines, shared responsibilities of stakeholders on the implementation based on DepEd's standards, there are challenges that the schools have to face, such as preparation and gathering of too many ECEs, development of curriculum maps aligned with the PVMGO within a limited time, accomplishing too many tasks due to a lack of qualified personnel especially for academic support services, addressing COVID-19 pandemic-related challenges such as limited resources and budget, restricted movements, and decrease in enrollment. In addition, the ESC-participating schools considered some questions by the certifiers difficult to answer. Participating ESC schools hope for opportunities such as increased ESC and TSS subsidies, programs and free trainings by PEAC for faculty, staff, and instructional leaders, long-term action plans, encouragement for non-ESC schools to participate, and a research gateway. However, there are clear threats, such as a lack of government support and a decrease in enrollment due to student transfers to public schools.

The following recommendations are made to achieve quality assurance and ensure the recertification of ESC-participating schools:

The government should protect the rights and welfare of the private

schools and their school community members through the Private Education Assistance Committee by considering the following: provision of sufficient fund allocation for the ESC relative to the fund allocation for the public high school students and provision of fund for High school textbooks. Furthermore, the DepEd, through PEAC, must investigate and act quickly on the urgent petition of private school teachers: for the National Government to sufficiently increase the Teachers' Salary Subsidy (the TSS as provided for under Section 14, Republic Act No. 8545 or the E-GASTPE Law) under our National Government's General Appropriations Act. While it is understandable to reward public school teachers, the government should not overlook the needs of private school teachers. Licensed teachers, whether from a public or private school system, serve a public function by educating Filipino youth through schools. All licensed teachers share the same noble duty and role in educating the youth of the Philippines (Estrellado, 2020). Private school teachers must receive benefits relative to the benefits provided to public school teachers, such as free in-service (INSET) training and seminars. Furthermore, the government should consider providing subsidies for the K-6 students and TSS for qualified K-6 and SHS teachers.

There are strategies that ESC-participating schools can use to maintain their certification status. They must follow the policies and guidelines of the E-GASTPE Program. Their quality assurance activities should be ongoing and never stop after initial certification. It is necessary to have close coordination with stakeholders such as regulators, certification bodies, employees, management, suppliers, and other relevant interested parties. To maintain certification, they are encouraged to continue holding management review meetings. The current study suggests that private school teaching and non-teaching personnel be involved in the

certification and recertification process and review their PVMGOs to ensure they meet the DepEd minimum standards. Furthermore, ESC schools should systematically collect examples of compliance evidence as tangible proof of adherence to DepEd standards.

Non-ESC private schools should apply for certification to fulfill the public-private complementarity, ensure quality educational service, and allow the students to avail of the government subsidy. It will also increase students' access to quality education. They must attend seminars featuring DepEd assistance for private schools to get the proper orientation and understand the procedure well. It will help them if they refer to the 2018 CAI for guidance.

Identifying training needs and organizing training programs about the management system of the junior high school department is a requirement. Employees who have previously undergone training may also require refresher training. All the stakeholders in the education sector should proactively collaborate for a comprehensive review and assessment of the annual operational plan and the creation of a plan of action for a standards-based school improvement plan. The school heads should provide constant and adequate feedback to the teachers on their instructional task performance to ensure periodic review and determine specific training needs of teachers for the further partnership of the communities in teachers' capacity development and improvement in the teaching-learning process in secondary schools. Documentation of compliance evidence must be established and maintained by the School Quality Assurance team. Documented information can be dynamic, especially if the organization implements new processes that necessitate control, such as documentation and the generation of evidence demonstrating conformity. Given the challenges these schools faced during the certification process, they

have to start developing an action plan to give proper attention and preparation for the upcoming certification process, especially in the following areas in the CAI: School Budget and Finance, Physical Plant, and Instructional Support Facilities, and Academic Support and Student Services. Provision of ECEs like School Catalog/Prospectus, Intervention Program for Students with Learning Difficulties, Annual Interview of Principal, Clinical Supervision Plan, Testing Program, Certificate of Water Potability Results, Provisions for Administrators' Upgrading, Budget Performance Reports, and AOP Evaluation Results, is in order.

Institutions should begin cultivating a sustainable and compatible culture that supports new learning modalities while encouraging faculty, instructional leaders, and administrators to continually advance their expertise through continuous professional development and continued use of the applicable technology for achieved proficiency. Significant emphasis should be placed on the need for a paradigm shift so that junior high school learners can be effective in the new learning environments.

Lastly, the study suggests that it be further improved by future research through building upon the findings, addressing limitations, constructing the same research in a new context, or in any way that can help expand the knowledge brought upon by the study.

While the school certification assessment process is essential for ensuring quality education, it faces several challenges that need to be addressed. Collaborative efforts among education stakeholders, policymakers, and even international organizations are crucial in developing globally recognized standards and promoting a holistic approach to evaluating educational institutions. By overcoming these challenges, we can foster continuous

improvement in the education sector, ultimately benefiting students and society.

The school certification assessment process serves as a vital mechanism for ensuring the provision of quality education. By evaluating various aspects of educational institutions, it promotes accountability, facilitates continuous improvement, and enhances public trust. Through its comprehensive evaluation of academic performance, infrastructure, teaching quality, curriculum design, and student support services, certification contributes to the development of well-rounded individuals and prepares them for success in their personal and professional lives. As we navigate the ever-changing educational landscape, the school certification assessment process remains an indispensable tool in shaping the future of education.

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