

POLICY BRIEF

Mapping out the Consequences of Punjab's Digitised Teacher Transfer Policy

Evidence from the DARE-RC portfolio

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Key Messages

- **Punjab's e-Transfer Policy (2019) has replaced a system of patronage and discretionary transfers and eliminated the influence of local administrative gatekeepers.** It has introduced an efficient and transparent, points-based system of teacher transfers, giving hundreds of thousands of teachers fair and accessible careers.
- **The e-Transfer system has been readily adopted:** 90% schools have seen at least one teacher arrive/depart, increasing teacher mobility by 59%, while over 30% of the entire teaching workforce have completed transfers. Stakeholders, especially female teachers, strongly prefer the new system because it is transparent and merit-based, and does not require them to navigate travel, bribery, and informal networks.
- **Whilst welcomed, the e-Transfer system is also deepening structural inequality;** transfers caused a net loss of 10,250 teachers from rural schools and their posts remained vacant for 9-16 months on average. This flight to better-resourced, high literacy districts is draining teachers from schools that need them most.
- **The e-Transfer policy needs to be considered alongside the Teacher Rationalisation Policy 2025:** e-Transfer handles voluntary movement while rationalisation corrects the imbalances caused by this by moving teachers from overstaffed to understaffed schools. However, friction can arise if some teachers use the e-Transfer system to move to a school voluntarily, but others already in the school are moved out involuntarily through a compulsory rationalisation order.
- **The e-Transfer policy needs to transition from a 'transfer platform' to a 'workforce-management system'** that combines teacher incentive structures, recruitment pipelines, performance systems, and learning outcome targets. This is necessary to ensure that the efficient transfer system also maintains equity.
- **Policymakers can address operational gaps through reforms such as restricting transfer timings to holidays and creating a substitute teacher pool.** They may introduce career incentives for rural service, caps/quotas for teacher outflows, and change scoring criteria for transfers to better balance individual preference with systemic need. They can also undertake systemic reforms, like integrating teacher and school performance data within the e-Transfer system.

Introduction

Managing teacher postings across a school system the size of Punjab - 332,000 teachers, 48,000 schools, and 12 million students - is one of the most consequential yet under-examined levers of education policy in Pakistan. Where a teacher is posted determines not just their career trajectory, but the quality of schooling available to children in some of Pakistan's most disadvantaged communities (Zafar et al., 2025). In the past, Punjab's teacher transfer system was opaque, discretionary, and vulnerable to corruption. Local administrative "gatekeepers" controlled transfer files, enabling widespread rent-seeking: teachers with political connections or resources secured postings in desirable urban schools, while teachers with fewer resources had limited chances of transferring to their preferred posts (Bari et al., 2013).

In 2019, Punjab introduced the e-Transfer policy whereby an objective, points-based mechanism replaced opaque, discretionary transfers with a rule-bound, voluntary process designed to ensure school continuity. The policy was operationalised through an algorithm-based web-enabled platform that automated the transfer policy rules. Teachers can browse vacancies all across the province, read the scoring criteria, and apply for transfers online. The system has since processed over 288,000 applications and enabled more than 115,000 actual transfers. This policy brief draws on the first rigorous evaluation of the e-Transfer system, combining five years of administrative data (2019–2024) with qualitative research across five districts, to assess what works, what does not, and what needs to change.

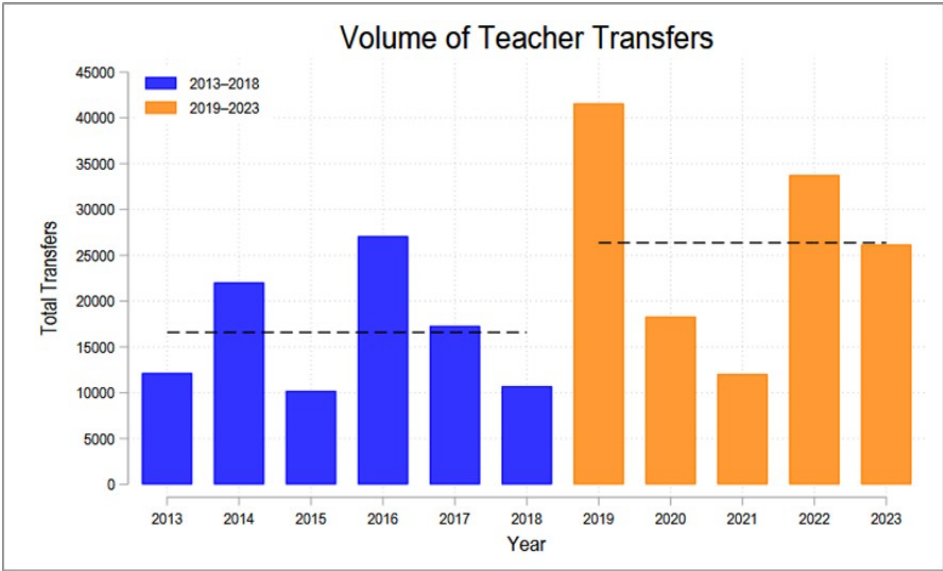
Study Methodology

The study uses a mixed-methods design. The quantitative strand examines system-wide transfer records covering every application submitted and every transfer decision made since 2019. The analysis of the administrative data is then used to draw interesting cases of schools and teachers for in-depth semi-structured interviews. The qualitative strand includes interviews of key informants who designed and operated the e-Transfer system, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with district education officers (AEOs, DDEOs/DEOs), as well as interviews with head teachers and teachers in 16 schools across five districts.

Key Findings

The take-up of the e-Transfer system has been phenomenal, with 90% of Punjab's 48,560 public schools seeing at least one teacher arrive or depart under the new framework, increasing teacher mobility by 59% (Figure 1). Across 22 rounds, the e-transfer platform generated 288,492 applications, of which 115,424 resulted in completed transfers (over 30% of the entire teaching workforce). Key insights from our work are summarised below.

Figure 1
Volume of teacher transfers (2013-2023)



1. Stakeholders strongly prefer the new system

Teachers, head teachers, and district officials overwhelmingly prefer e-Transfer to the old system, citing convenience and transparency as the policy’s key benefits. As stated by a female rural primary school teacher in central Punjab:

“Before the online system, it was tough - paper files, using approach, favours and wrong sort of means. The poorer teachers didn’t have those resources, and time. The e-Transfer policy has facilitated their transfers by applying on one touch.”

Since the scoring criteria and applicant lists are visible to all, and the outcome is determined algorithmically and not through personal connections or paying bribes, respondents said almost all transfers are now transparent and merit-based.¹

2. Female teachers are key beneficiaries

Before 2019, the number of male teachers transferred per year consistently exceeded female teachers, but after the policy was introduced, female transfers routinely outnumber male transfers by 52.7%, despite women outnumbering men in the teaching workforce by only 22%. Female teachers, particularly in rural areas, cited the convenience of applying from home/school without having to physically visit the district office, spend money on travel and bribes, or navigate informal networks as transformative.

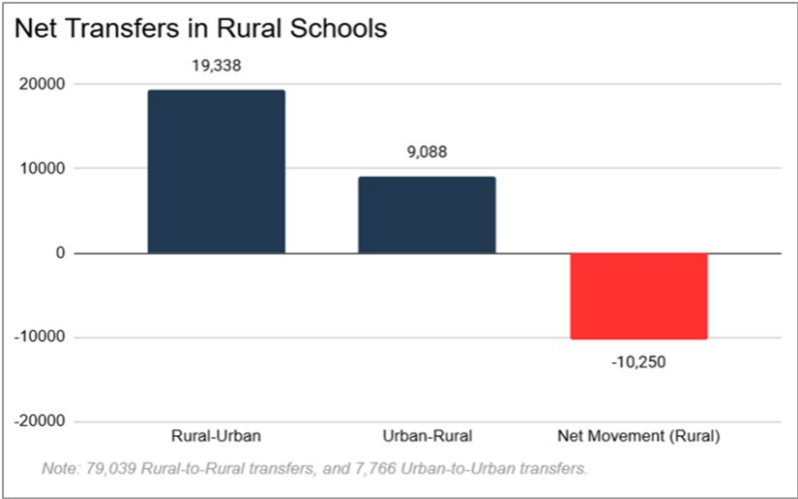
3. The system is deepening geographic and structural inequity

The most urgent finding is that the e-Transfer system is systematically draining teachers from the schools and districts that need them the most. A male district official in northern

¹ Among residual discretionary practices, respondents flagged "seat shifting", opening rounds for administrative purposes, arbitrary rejection at the final document-verification stage, and the use of administrative postings to manoeuvre teachers before rounds open.

Punjab explained that: “The teacher is satisfied. The drawback is, obviously, to the department... (as it) does not have any immediate hiring option – those schools suffer, and the children suffer.”

Figure 2
Transfer of teachers across rural and urban schools



Transfers resulted in a net loss of 10,250 teachers from rural schools (Figure 2). Stand-alone primary schools have been hit hardest: 29,683 teachers transferred out while only 6,810 transferred in.

Inter-district transfers reflect the same problem of flight to better-resourced high literacy districts. Over the five-year period, transfers from lower- to higher-literacy districts outnumbered the transfers in the opposite direction by more than two to one (4,187 vs. 1,873). Over 38% of all inter-district transfers widened existing disparities.

4. Vacant posts remain unfilled for nearly a year

Transferred teachers’ posts remain vacant for 9–16 months on average (Table 1). Without any systematic mechanism to provide replacement or temporary staff, head teachers resort to informal hiring of local substitutes, funded from discretionary school budgets or personal contributions.

Table 1
Average time (in months) taken to replace a teacher after transfer out

School Level	Female School	Male School
Primary	13	16
Middle	13	15
Higher Secondary	9	11
High	10	12

Special education schools face the same problem, with particular impact on rural students with disabilities who lose access to trained teachers for extended periods.

Policy Implications

The e-Transfer policy is a genuine governance success: it eliminated a corrupt patronage system and gave hundreds of thousands of teachers, especially female teachers, fair and accessible careers. The policy has achieved its original goal of a teacher transfer system that is efficient, transparent, and fair at the individual level. That achievement should not be understated. **But the data reveal a policy in need of the next stage of reform.**

A transfer system that is transparent to individual applicants but blind to system-level equity in teacher allocation will, by design, produce unequal outcomes. Punjab's schools are not interchangeable: rural primary schools serve children from underprivileged areas, face greater resource constraints, and have fewer options when teachers leave. When experienced teachers systematically move away from these schools and replacements are not found for a year, the resulting disruption in schooling falls on the students who can least afford it.

The study's findings need to be considered alongside other policy interventions such as Punjab's concurrent Teacher Rationalisation Policy 2025—a mandatory relocation scheme that moves teachers from overstaffed schools to understaffed ones. In principle, the two policies are complementary: e-Transfer handles voluntary movement, while rationalisation corrects the imbalances that the voluntary movement either creates or fails to address. In practice, however, the interaction between them is likely to generate friction and resistance. While some teachers are able to use the e-Transfer system to secure a preferred posting perhaps after years of waiting and strategic planning, other senior teachers already in the same school may be moved out involuntarily through a compulsory rationalisation order. This undermines the trust and the sense of agency that the e-Transfer system has carefully built. The government should therefore address the need for rationalisation not just through a separate coercive policy, but treat it as a sign that the voluntary system's incentive architecture needs reform.

The data also point to a structural gap: **the e-Transfer policy must move from a transfer platform to a workforce-management system** that connects teacher incentive structures, recruitment pipelines, performance systems, and learning outcome targets. Until these links are made, the efficiency of the transfer engine will work against equity. In the absence of structured policies, teacher labour markets often sort more qualified teachers into schools with better amenities, leaving disadvantaged students with a disproportionate share of inexperienced staff (Bétéille, 2015; Siddiqui & Shaukat, 2021).

Recommendations

The following recommendations are grouped by time horizon. Short-term actions (within 6 months) address operational gaps; medium-term reforms (6–18 months) restructure incentives and policy design; long-term investments (18 months+) build the systems needed for sustained, equitable workforce management.

Short-Term (within 6 months)

- **Transfer timing:** Restrict the opening of new transfer rounds only during school holidays, since transfer rounds that open during the academic year force students to lose their teacher mid-term, often leaving schools understaffed for months.
- **Substitute teacher pool:** Create and maintain district-level rosters of trained substitute teachers, drawing on teacher intern schemes, retired teachers, and public-private partnerships, to ensure same-term replacement when transfers are approved.
- **Replacement guarantee:** No teacher should be permitted to leave their post until a verified replacement has been confirmed and signed off. This is the single most direct intervention to prevent learning disruption. Teacher replacement guarantee after teachers transfer out should be implemented especially in stand-alone primary schools, often the only educational option for young children in remote communities, that are now operating with critically thin staffing.

Medium-Term (6–18 months)

- **Rural service incentives:** Introduce structured career incentives like salary enhancements, priority transfer rights, and professional development opportunities for teachers who serve in rural areas, stand-alone primary schools, or low-literacy districts for defined periods.
- **Learning outcome monitoring:** Reinstate regular, low-stakes student learning assessments under existing systems to allow the School Education Department to monitor the impact of transfer patterns on learning outcomes and adjust policy accordingly.
- **Equity guardrails:** Embed equity metrics into transfer policy design. Introduce caps or quotas on net teacher outflows from rural areas and stand-alone primary schools to prevent a worsening of resource allocation. A system that lets every teacher move to their preferred school will, over time, concentrate experienced staff in better-resourced locations considered more desirable by teachers.
- **Scoring criteria reform:** The existing scoring criteria for transfer eligibility should be reviewed to better balance individual preference (distance, seniority) with systemic need (school staffing ratios, student-teacher ratios in rural areas).

Long-Term (18 months+)

- **System integration:** Integrate e-Transfer with teacher performance data, professional development records, and school-level learning outcomes to evolve the platform from a transfer engine into a strategic human resource management system.
- **Transparency audit:** Close remaining discretionary loopholes like seat-shifting, and opening rounds arbitrarily through implementing system-level audits and transparency reporting.

Overall, resolving the tension between fairness to individual teachers and equity for students requires moving from an automation tool to a more strategic workforce management system.

Conclusion

While Punjab's e-Transfer policy has significantly improved a key administrative process, its focus on individual fairness over systemic equity has inadvertently left rural, isolated,

and low-literacy schools understaffed. The next phase of reform must maintain the transparency while introducing teacher replacement guarantees, learning outcome tracking, equity safeguards, and stronger links to overall workforce management.

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- Full Report: Forthcoming
- More information about the DARE Programme: <https://darerc.org/>

Acknowledgement: The DARE-RC project is funded with UK International Development from the UK government. Its implementation is led by Oxford Policy Management in partnership with its consortium partners.

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