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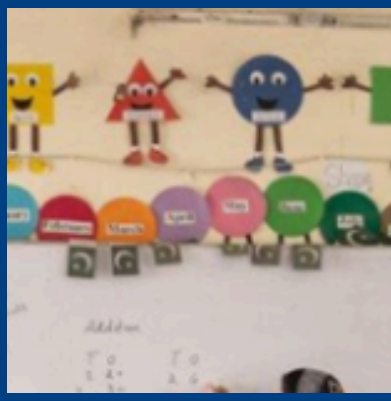
Mapping out the Consequences of Punjab's Digitised Teacher Transfer Policy

Evidence from the DARE Research Consortium

Policy Brief



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ABOUT
This policy brief was produced by the DARE Research Consortium. It summarises the findings from a full report (forthcoming) detailing research conducted as part of the DARE-RC portfolio, and was authored by the researchers of that report. This brief forms a part of a series to provide actionable evidence to policymakers in Pakistan to improve education.

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AT A GLANCE DARE RESEARCH CONSORTIUM · POLICY BRIEF SUMMARY

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

Dr Masooma Habib, Dr Farooq Naseer, Dr Yasira Waqar

Methodology

- **Quantitative:** system-wide transfer records covering every application and decision since 2019 (five years of administrative data, 2019–2024).
- **Qualitative:** key informant interviews, FGDs with district education officers, and interviews with head teachers and teachers in 16 schools across five districts.

Key Figures

332,000
teachers across 48,000 schools province-wide

90%
of schools saw at least one teacher move

52.7%
more female transfers than male, since the policy began

−10,250
net loss of teachers from rural schools

9–16 mo
average time to replace a teacher after transfer out

115,000+
transfers enabled since the policy's 2019 introduction

Findings

1
Stakeholders strongly prefer the new system
Teachers, head teachers, and officials overwhelmingly prefer e-Transfer, citing convenience and transparency as its key benefits.

2
Female teachers are key beneficiaries
Female transfers routinely outnumber male transfers by 52.7%, despite women being only 22% more of the workforce.

3
The system is deepening geographic inequity
e-Transfer is systematically draining teachers from the schools and districts that need them most.

4
Vacant posts remain unfilled for nearly a year
Transferred teachers' posts remain vacant for 9–16 months on average, with no systematic replacement mechanism.

5
Inter-district transfers widen disparities
Transfers from lower- to higher-literacy districts outnumber the reverse by more than two to one.

Policy Implications

- **A transfer system transparent to individual applicants but blind to system-level equity will, by design, produce unequal outcomes.**
- **The policy must move from a transfer platform to a workforce-management system linking incentives, recruitment and performance.**
- **The e-Transfer and Teacher Rationalisation policies need coordinated design to avoid generating friction and resistance.**
- **In the absence of structured policies, teacher labour markets sort qualified staff into better-resourced schools by default.**

Recommendations

SHORT-TERM · WITHIN 6 MONTHS
Protect continuity
- Restrict new transfer rounds to school holidays only.
- Create district-level substitute-teacher pools.
- Approve departures only once a replacement is confirmed.

MEDIUM-TERM · 6–18 MONTHS
Build equity incentives
- Reward rural and hard-to-staff service via pay and career incentives.
- Set equity guardrails on outflows from vulnerable schools.
- Revise scoring criteria to balance preference with staffing need.

LONG-TERM · 18 MONTHS+
Build a workforce system
- Link e-Transfer with performance, PD, and learning outcome data.
- Audit remaining discretion – seat-shifting, ad hoc rounds.

Key Messages

Punjab's e-Transfer Policy (2019) has replaced a system of patronage and discretionary transfers with an efficient, transparent, and 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% of schools have seen at least one teacher arrive/depart, increasing teacher mobility by 59%, while over 30% of the entire teaching workforce has completed transfers. Stakeholders, especially female teachers, strongly prefer the new system because it is transparent and merit-based.

While 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.

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.

Policymakers can address operational gaps through reforms such as restricting transfer timings to holidays and creating a substitute teacher pool, alongside career incentives for rural service and revised scoring criteria.





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 also 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).

332,000
TEACHERS

Across 48,000 schools and 12 million students province-wide

> ***One of the most consequential yet under-examined levers of education policy in Pakistan.***

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 out interesting cases of schools and teachers for in-depth semi-structured interviews. The qualitative strand includes interviews with 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 the study are summarised below.

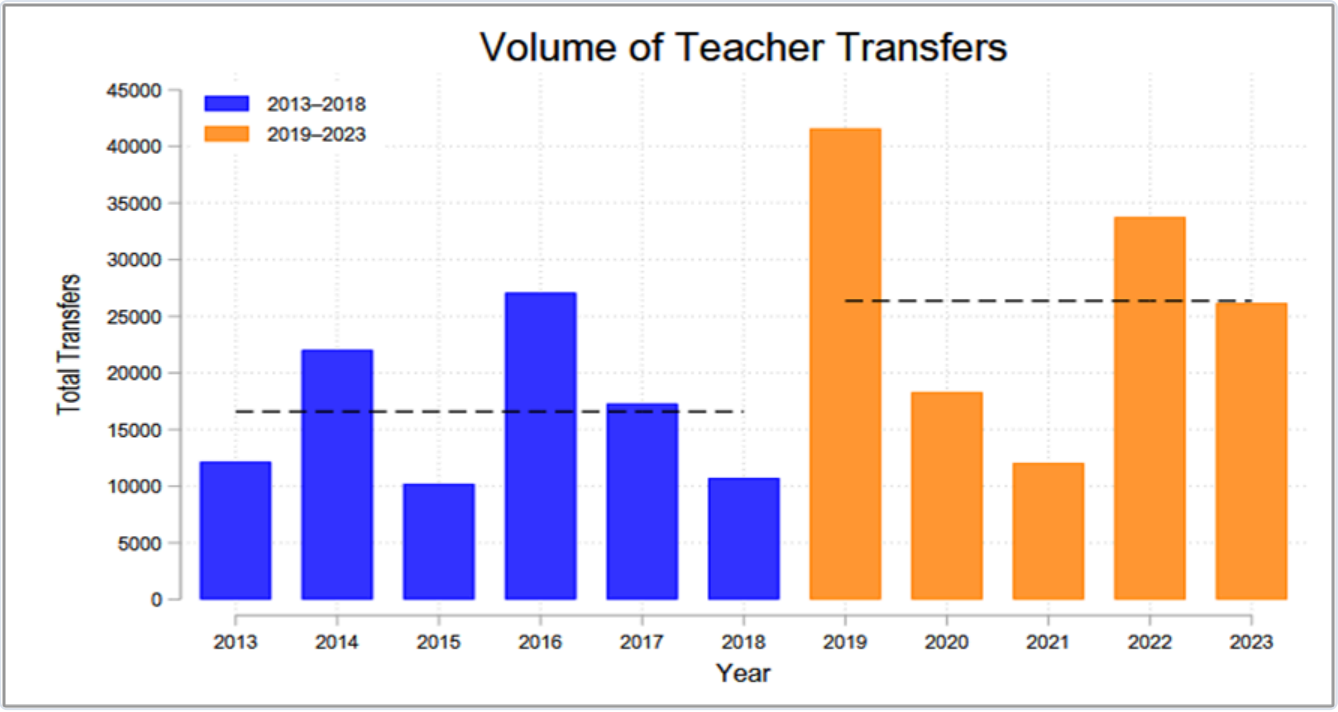

Figure 1

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 did not have those resources, and time. The e-Transfer policy has facilitated their transfers by applying on one touch."***
>
> **— FEMALE TEACHER, RURAL PUNJAB**

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 the number of female teachers, but after the policy was introduced, female transfers routinely outnumbered 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 Punjab explained:

> ***'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.'***
>
> — DISTRICT OFFICIAL, NORTHERN PUNJAB

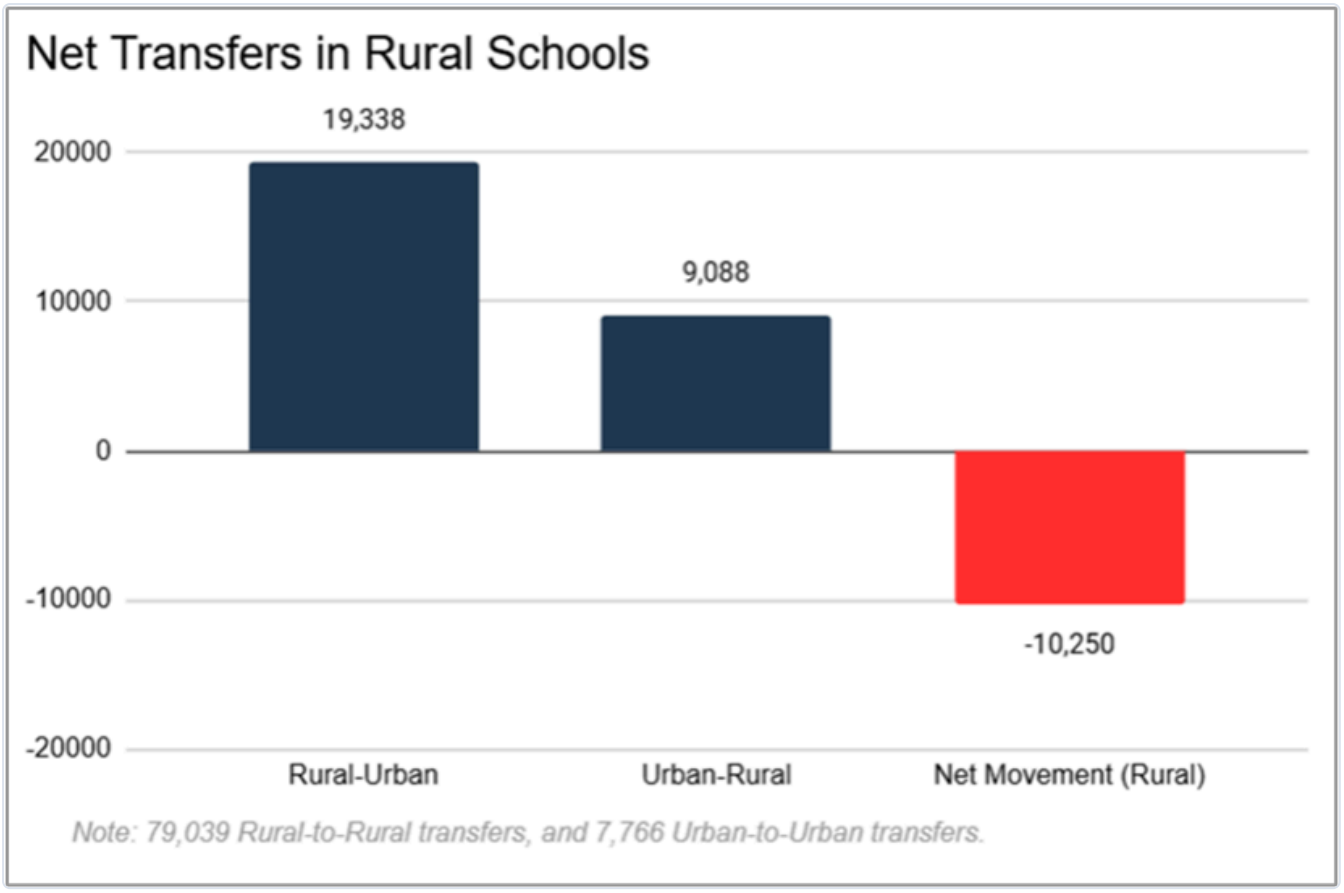

Figure 2

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.

[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.

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 will, by design, produce unequal outcomes.***

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 e-Transfer policy must move from a transfer platform to a workforce-management system.***

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. In practice, however, the interaction between them is likely to generate friction and resistance, undermining the trust and sense of agency that the e-Transfer system has carefully built.

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. 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 (Béteille, 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.
- **Substitute teacher pool:** Create and maintain district-level rosters of trained substitute teachers 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 – the single most direct intervention to prevent learning disruption.

Medium-Term (6–18 months)

- **Rural service incentives:** Introduce structured career incentives like salary enhancements and priority transfer rights for teachers who serve in rural or low-literacy districts.
- **Learning outcome monitoring:** Reinstate regular, low-stakes assessments to monitor the impact of transfer patterns on learning outcomes.
- **Equity guardrails:** Introduce caps or quotas on net teacher outflows from rural areas and stand-alone primary schools.
- **Scoring criteria reform:** Review scoring criteria to better balance individual preference with systemic staffing need.

Long-Term (18 months+)

- **System integration:** Integrate e-Transfer with teacher performance data and school-level learning outcomes to evolve into a strategic HR management system.
- **Transparency audit:** Close remaining discretionary loopholes like seat-shifting through 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 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-RC Programme: https://darerc.org/

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