

## 2.6

# Bribes for enrolment in desired schools in Vietnam

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**VIETNAM**

**49%**

**of people see the education system as corrupt or highly corrupt.**

Source: Transparency International's 'Global Corruption Barometer 2013'.

Over the past few decades Vietnam's predominately public education system<sup>2</sup> has produced impressive improvements in basic literacy and enrolment rates.<sup>3</sup> In more recent years, however, the increasing demand for high-quality education, along with a perceived shortcoming in the standard of public schools, has resulted in an explosion of competition for admission to 'desired schools'. As a result, corruption in enrolment for desired schools – particularly primary and junior secondary schools – has become rampant in Vietnam, threatening the affordability and accessibility of public education. In a recent online poll of almost 20,000 respondents conducted by Dan Tri Online Newspaper, for example, 62 per cent of

parents admitted having used personal relationships or money to register their children in desired schools.<sup>4</sup>

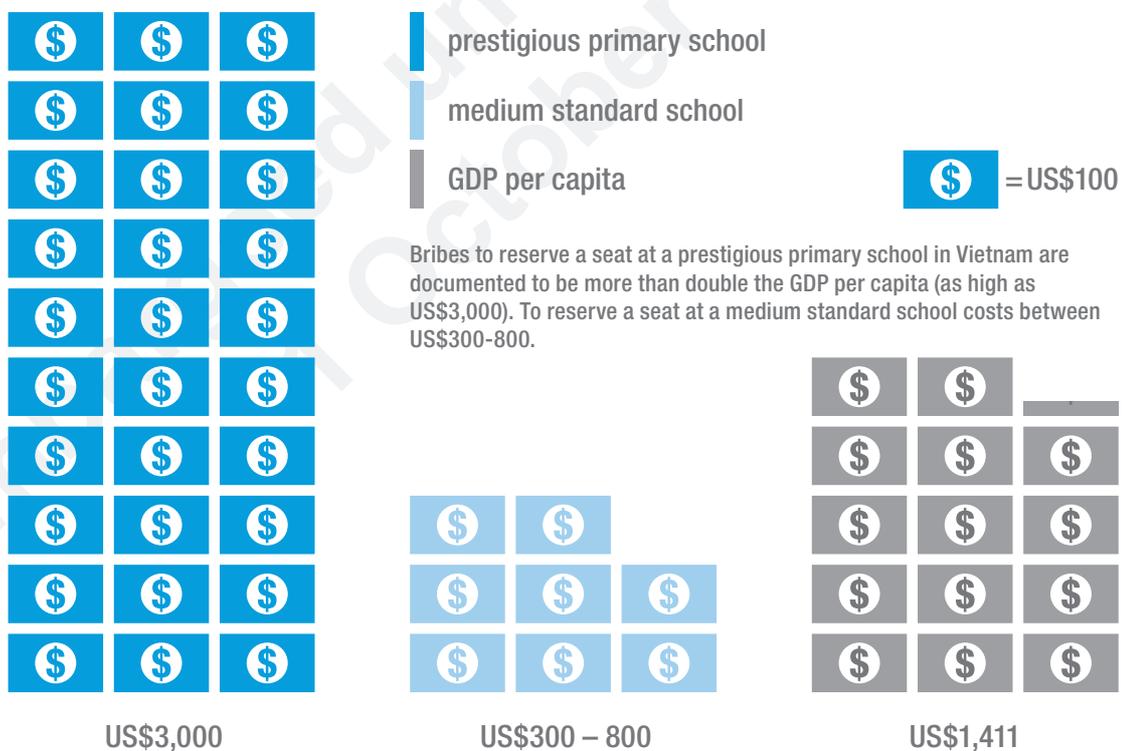
Under the existing regulations, schools are required to prioritise admissions on the basis of the *geographic eligibility* of applicants, meaning that priority must be given to students who are officially registered as living in the area.<sup>5</sup> In one study of three major urban cities, over 31 per cent of students attending desired schools had ineligible residence status, with close to 40 per cent of parents noting the quality of the school and its reputation as a 'desired'<sup>6</sup> school as reasons for sending their children to schools outside their residence eligibility.<sup>7</sup> Although reports have described desired schools as those with better teachers and material foundations and a friendly education environment,<sup>8</sup> the exact definition of what constitutes a *desired school* remains unclear, with the terms *honour*, *star* or *prestigious schools* also being commonly used. There exists no official classification, with education forums on the internet filled with hundreds of parents who 'share experiences about how to choose schools and teachers'.<sup>9</sup>

## Key features and aspects of the practice

Corruption in school admissions is widespread in early childhood education, with costs for bribes documented to be as high as US\$3,000 to reserve a seat at a prestigious primary school and between US\$300 and US\$800 for a medium-standard school.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, money itself is often not enough, with almost 30 per cent of parents seeking assistance in enrolling their children in desired schools in areas outside their residence eligibility,<sup>11</sup> resulting in the development of informal systems involving third-party brokers to facilitate the practice.<sup>12</sup> Although existing studies have focused primarily on urban areas (namely Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City and Da Nang), there has been some suggestion that corruption in school admissions occurs less commonly in rural areas. In a recent study conducted by Towards Transparency, based on interviews with over 50 school leaders, teachers, parents, school administrators and researchers across Hanoi, teachers from schools in outer Hanoi reported that corruption in school admissions rarely occurred, while those in inner city schools described corruption as commonly taking place.<sup>13</sup>

## Strong demand for the practice

In order to arrive at a better understanding of the causes, it is important first to recognise that corruption in school admissions is widely accepted: 67 per cent of parents consider it normal for families to incur costs to obtain their children's admissions to good schools, including schools in which children are already of eligible residence.<sup>14</sup> One parent reported that the fee



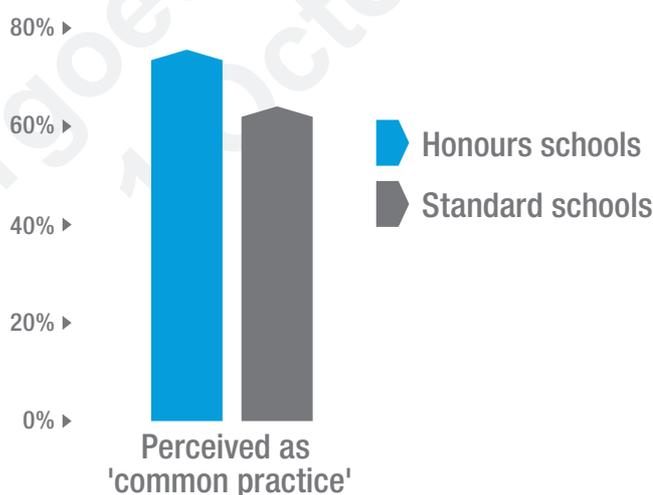
**Figure 2.3** The cost of a seat in Vietnam: Bribes for school admission in 2011

Sources: World Bank DataBank, WDI and GDF Database, Vietnam, 'GDP per capita, current US\$', 2011.

of US\$1,000 for entrance into a top primary school was both 'reasonable' and 'acceptable',<sup>15</sup> as '[w]anting a quality education for your children is normal' and '[a]ll parents want their children to study at a prestigious school.'<sup>16</sup> As a result, parents readily and willingly pay bribes in exchange for their children's enrolment in desired schools.

The importance placed on attending a desired school is confirmed by Towards Transparency's Youth Integrity Survey, which surveyed over 1,500 youth and adults from 12 provinces across Vietnam. When presented with four scenarios, young people and adults alike were most willing to undertake corrupt practices in order to get into a good school (or company) – more than twice the amount of respondents who were willing to compromise their integrity in order to pass an exam or apply for a document.<sup>17</sup> The findings attribute the readiness of youth and adults to participate in corruption in school admission to the fact that getting into a good school is seen to be 'more financially important' and having a 'greater impact' on their future.

Another key driver behind such demand is the lack of trust in the public education system in Vietnam, which is demonstrated not only by the high rate of acceptance of the practice but also by the widespread expectation that official school fees need to be supplemented by the payment of 'voluntary contributions' for school buildings, learning equipment and supplies<sup>18</sup> and extra classes.<sup>19</sup> In the recently published Vietnam Provincial Governance and Public Administration Performance Index,<sup>20</sup> it was found that, on average, over 61 per cent of respondents agree that parents have to pay bribes to teachers or school administrators, and more than 43 per cent of respondents agree that teachers favoured students who attended extra classes in performance evaluations (in the municipality of Da Nang, over 80 per cent of respondents agreed with both these statements).<sup>21</sup> The prevalence of bribes in schools and the wide recognition that students are effectively coerced to take extra classes (or risk being discriminated against in student evaluations) demonstrate that there is a widespread sentiment amongst parents that 'the public school system is unable to effectively provide for students' needs'.<sup>22</sup>



**Figure 2.4** Paying bribes in Vietnam. How common is it to pay for admission to good schools?

**Source:** Based on a survey of parents of children attending honour versus standard schools. 'Assessment of corruption behaviour in the Education Sector in Vietnam'. (Hanoi: UNDP and GIV, 2010), p. 38.

This is further fuelled by strong public pressure, as parents who do not partake in the practice fear discrimination against their children. A study by UNDP and the Government Inspectorate of Vietnam suggests that ‘once parents are engaged in the practice they are very willing to encourage other parents to do likewise’, meaning that, the more parents who ‘participate, the stronger the trend becomes, which in turns creates more pressure for parents who do not comply with the expectations’<sup>23</sup>, resulting in ‘a vicious circle that will be difficult to break’.<sup>24</sup> The pressure for families to participate in corrupt practices throughout the education system seems to be confirmed by the high incidence of people who agree that students who don’t participate in extra classes are discriminated against in performance evaluations,<sup>25</sup> and by various media reports, such as one of a woman who organised for her child (who attended a standard school) to take extra classes from a prestigious teacher because she feared the child would lag behind other students.<sup>26</sup>

### Increasing inequality in access to education

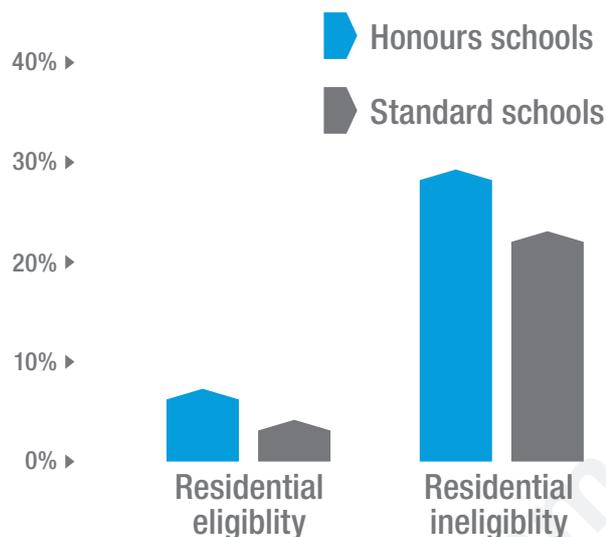
One of the most significant impacts of corruption in school admissions is that it decreases equality in access to education. In addition to the cost of the bribes, ranging from several hundred to several thousand dollars, the ‘voluntary contributions’ for school construction, equipment and so forth (see below) are generally expected to be higher among students in desired schools and students of ineligible residence.<sup>27</sup>

Given the substantial and continuing costs associated with corruption in school admissions, it is not surprising that it has led to rising social inequalities, as ‘poorer children are driven out of a school, even if they have residence eligibility, or are discriminated against because they can’t afford [to pay the bribes].’<sup>28</sup> Over 20 per cent of parents of children in desired schools state that ‘admission is too costly,’ while more than 50 per cent stress about school admissions.<sup>29</sup> These concerns are not limited just to families of geographic ineligibility, as 7.4 per cent of parents with residential eligibility require and seek assistance (including paying bribes) to register their children in desired schools and 4.3 per cent of parents with residential eligibility need support to register their children in standard schools.<sup>30</sup> Paying bribes for admission into desired schools is generally recognised as a practice that only well-to-do families can afford to do, thus disadvantaging children from poor families.<sup>31</sup>

Furthermore, corruption in school admissions is self-perpetuating, in that the payment of bribes only undermines public trust in the education system and increases public pressure to participate in bribery, further fuelling the problem. The practice also perpetuates a lifelong cycle of unhealthy attitudes. This finding was confirmed by the 2011 Youth Integrity Survey, which found that, although 92 to 94 per cent of youth recognise that acting with integrity includes ‘never accepting or giving a bribe’, 38 per cent were nonetheless willing to engage in corrupt practices so as to get into a good school or company<sup>32</sup>, suggesting that the widespread nature of acts such as paying bribes for enrolment in desired school causes corruption to ‘become social norms rather than exceptions’.<sup>33</sup>

### Administrative measures alone are insufficient

To reduce the payment of bribes for enrolment in desired schools, in 2006 the Ministry of Education and Training (MoET) sought to establish strict enrolment procedures for secondary school students, including the establishment of enrolment councils to ensure oversight.<sup>34</sup> In their annual enrolment instructions, a range of provincial and municipal departments of education and training (DoETs) also attempted to curb corruption in school admissions with a number of administrative measures. The Hanoi DoET, for example, issued an official letter



**Figure 2.5** Assistance with admission. What percentage of parents seek assistance to register their children in desired schools?

**Source:** Assistance needed to attain entrance into schools (honour versus standard schools). (UNDP and GIV, 2010) p. 34.

in 2010 requiring kindergartens to make public the number of children to be enrolled for each age group as well as the time of enrolment, and reaffirming that students from the eligible residential area had to be prioritised.<sup>35</sup> Even so, corruption in school admissions remains widespread. Given that the very purpose of such bribes is to circumvent existing administrative measures to guide the enrolment of students, it is questionable whether the promulgation of additional administrative regulations alone will result in a substantive control of the practice. Consequently, the ability of such administrative decisions by themselves to curb corruption is limited, as they are likely only to 'result in modest and short-term effects'.<sup>36</sup>

### Improving public awareness and restoring trust

With corruption in school admissions receiving the cooperation and consent of a majority of parents, teachers and school administrators, there is, first, a need to place a stronger emphasis on broader social measures, which raise awareness of the negative impacts of the practice. The media, particularly television and radio, can play a more active role in highlighting the wider long-term ramifications of corruption in school admissions, outside the personal and immediate gains for families. Articles published on the topic need to acknowledge it publicly as a form of corruption.

In addition, as both the victims of and the key drivers behind the practice, parents need to be mobilised to help end the practice. With 80 per cent of mothers taking a decision-making role in the selection of schools, and studies showing that mothers are 3.5 per cent more likely to pay bribes for enrolment in desired classes and 11.2 per cent more likely to agree with the practice,<sup>37</sup> the Women's Union<sup>38</sup> has been specifically identified as being well positioned to play an important role in collaboration with other key actors, such as MoET and the GIV, to produce an awareness-raising campaign.<sup>39</sup>

Moreover, there is an urgent need to restore the trust that parents have in the education system, in order to reduce the willingness of parents to participate in corrupt practices. This cannot be done without addressing the other forms of corruption that plague the education sector, particularly the unauthorised collection of additional fees and extra classes. One successful approach adopted by Nguyen Thai Binh School in Ho Chi Minh City has been to implement a system of 'institutional autonomy and accountability' with the support of the local DoET. The school has limited the collection of additional fees to a regular monthly tuition and infrastructure fee,<sup>40</sup> which is openly publicised through written documents sent to parents and an open commitment that there will be no collection of unexpected or extra fees. As a result of their increased financial autonomy, the school has also been able to use its budgets more effectively, with significant improvements to the school's infrastructure, an increase in teacher and staff salaries by an average of 20 per cent and the replacement of extra classes with vocational and extracurricular activities at no additional cost for students and families.<sup>41</sup> Such improvements, particularly the control of extra classes, have been credited with restoring the confidence and trust of parents.<sup>42</sup>

The recommendations outlined here are only an initial step in the overall solution, which will ultimately need to be supported by continuing implementation and strengthened oversight and monitoring not only by the government (MoET and DoETs) but also by the involvement of families and parents through mechanisms such as citizen assessments. In addition, there needs to be an increase in efforts to rectify the incentives for teachers to contribute to corrupt practices, notably continuing reform of teachers' salaries and the establishment of teacher associations to help improve their working conditions.<sup>43</sup> Nonetheless, eliminating public acceptance and readiness to pay bribes for enrolment in desired schools is imperative, to ensure that there exists broad public support for future actions against corruption in school admissions.

## Notes

1. Stephanie Chow and Dao Thi Nga both work for Towards Transparency, the official national contact of Transparency International in Vietnam, as Research and Publications Officer and Deputy Executive Director, respectively.
2. Public schools comprise 99 per cent of lower secondary schools and 99.4 per cent of primary schools; for more information, see UNDP and Government Inspectorate of Vietnam (GIV), *Assessment of Corruption Behaviour in the Education Sector in Vietnam* (Hanoi: GIV, 2010), p.18.
3. Adult literacy rates jumped from 84 per cent in 1979 to 93 per cent in 2009 and net primary school enrolments rates rose from 90.2 per cent in 1978 to 98 per cent in 2010. For more information, see the World Bank's 'Vietnam Country Data' at <http://data.worldbank.org/country/vietnam> (accessed 4 January 2013).
4. This was an online survey conducted by Dan Tri Online Newspaper from 12 May to 8 June 2011; see <http://dantri.com.vn/c25/s25-487926/62-doc-gia-chay-truong-lop-cho-con-Ty-le-dang-de-Bo-GD-DT-luu-tam.htm> (accessed 4 January 2013).
5. Since primary and junior secondary schools are under the authority of the local provincial/municipal people's committees and the departments of education and training, the relevant regulations among schools differ; see, for example, Regulation no. 4555/SGD&ĐT-QLT for schools in Hanoi.
6. In this report, the term 'honour school' is used in place of 'desired school'.
7. From Hanoi, Da Nang and Ho Chi Minh City, 23.5 per cent and 15.8 per cent of parents, respectively, selected the quality of the school and the fact that it was an honour school; for more details, see UNDP and GIV (2010), pp. 32–33.

8. *Vietnamnet* (Vietnam), 'Hanoi Parents Anxious to Send Kids to Prestigious Schools', 11 May 2011.
9. *Vietnamnet* (Vietnam), 'Race for "Star Schools" Getting Fiercer in Hanoi', 19 June 2011.
10. *Vietnamnet* (Vietnam), (11 May 2011).
11. UNDP and GIV (2010), p. 34.
12. See, for example, Nguyen Hung, 'The Race to Find a "Good School"', *dtinews.vn* (Vietnam), 27 April 2011.
13. Towards Transparency, *Forms and Effects of Corruption on the Education Sector in Vietnam* (Hanoi: Towards Transparency, 2011), p. 18.
14. UNDP and GIV (2010), p. 39.
15. *Vietnamnet* (19 June 2011).
16. Nguyen Hung (27 April 2011).
17. Towards Transparency, *Youth Integrity in Vietnam: Piloting Transparency International's Youth Integrity Survey* (Berlin: TI, 2011), p. 32.
18. Despite the fact that equipment, construction, etc. are subsidised by the school, most parents report paying such fees, such 'voluntary contributions', as they do not have full knowledge or understanding of government rules and regulations regarding which payments are legal and which are not. Towards Transparency, *Forms and Effects of Corruption on the Education Sector in Vietnam* (Hanoi: Towards Transparency, 2011), p. 22.
19. Extra classes are classes held by regular schoolteachers (or outside tutors) that can take place either at school or elsewhere, often used to supplement the official income of teachers. Although such classes are 'voluntary', students report being discriminated against for not attending such classes, by being given worse marks and by not being taught substantial content in their regular classes. For more information, see Towards Transparency (2011), *Forms and Effects*, pp. 19–22.
20. The index, by UNDP, CECODES and the Viet Nam Fatherland Front, surveys 5,568 citizens from 30 provinces across Vietnam.
21. See 'Vietnam Provincial Governance and Public Administration Performance Index 2010', 'Dimension 4: Control of Corruption', p. 42, [www.papi.vn](http://www.papi.vn) (accessed 4 January 2013).
22. *Vietnamnet* (19 June 2011).
23. UNDP and GIV (2010), p. 56.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
25. See PAPI findings above, in which 43 per cent of respondents agreed that teachers favoured students who attended extra classes in performance evaluations.
26. *Vietnamnet* (19 June 2011).
27. Notably, for students of ineligible residence, the amount of these voluntary payments range from 1.5 to 2 times the amount paid by students of eligible residence. For more information, see UNDP and GIV (2010), p. 37.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 54.
29. UNDP and GIV (2010), p. 38.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 34.
31. Towards Transparency (2011), *Forms and Effects*, p. 33.
32. Towards Transparency (2011), *Youth Integrity*, p. 32.
33. UNDP and GIV (2010), p. 34.
34. Decision no.12/2006/QD-BGDDT.
35. Regulation no. 4555/SGD&ĐT-QLT.
36. UNDP and GIV (2010), p. 60.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 67.
38. The Vietnam Women's Union is a mass organisation founded in 1930 with the mandate to work for the equality and advancement of women, along with protecting the legitimate legal rights and interests of women. It is estimated to have over 14 million members across a range of communes and districts. See <http://hoilhpn.org.vn/newsdetail.asp?CatId=2&NewsId=5&lang=VN> (accessed 4 January 2013).
39. UNDP and GIV (2010), p. 62.

40. The tuition fee is VND <sup>đ</sup>110,000 (US\$5.50) and the infrastructure fee VND <sup>đ</sup>45,000 (US\$2.25) per student per month. The tuition fee is regularised for semi-public schools by the Ho Chi Minh City PPC's decision no. 336/2004/QD-UB, dated 30 December 2004. These fees supplement the state budget allocation. This decision builds on previous initiatives, such as decision no 49/2000/QD-UB-VX, dated 10 August 2000. See <http://hcm.edu.vn/ThongBao/2011/7/HDNH1112.htm> (accessed 4 January 2013) for more information.
41. Ho Chi Minh City's Department of Education and Training: Nguyen Thai Binh Upper Secondary School, 'Report on the Implementation of Institutional Autonomy and Accountability Mechanisms', 9 November 2011.
42. Ibid.
43. For further information, refer to Towards Transparency (2011), *Forms and Effects*, pp. 34–8.

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