
Exploring Planning Criteria for School Establishment and Upgradation: A Case Study

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Abstract

This study is aimed to explore the planning criterion of schools' establishment and up-gradation in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. For the conduction of this research, qualitative case study design of research was adopted. All the administrative and managerial officials of elementary and secondary education department Khyber Pakhtunkhwa constituted the population of the study. For the collection of data, total of 15-respondents were purposively selected out of the research population and semi-structured interviews were conducted for the collection of data. The collected data was analyzed thematically. The findings of the study revealed that distance and accessibility, availability of feeder schools, adequate student enrollment, land availability, and sufficient infrastructure are the primary considerations for establishment and upgrading schools. From the findings of the study, it is concluded that there are proper planning criteria for the establishment and up-gradation of schools in elementary and secondary education department Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. From the findings of the study, it is recommended that planning criteria may be relaxed for areas where there is dire need of educational infrastructure.

Keywords: Planning & Development, Planning Criteria, Establishment of schools, Up-gradation of schools

1. Introduction

Education is a critical investment for human capital and sustainable socio-economic development. It plays an important role in the preservation, cultivation, and transmission of cultural heritage from one generation to the next. Education is the transformation of one's potential, enabling one to think and make informed choices and decisions (Fullan, 2016). School is a nucleus of the society and a functional unit of educational system. The development of educational system is linked with the establishment of schools, provision of facilities, enrollment of students and fulfillment of educational goals of a nation (Grew & Harrigan, 2026).

The establishment and up-gradation of school is based on the sustainable concept for which proper mechanism of planning is adopted across the world (Malik et al., 2022). The planning criterion of school establishment and up-gradation is regarded as the set of guidelines and standards used by educational authorities to determine the establishment of new schools and up-gradation of existing schools to a higher level (KPESE, 2025). These criteria are usually based on factors such as population size, student enrollment, distance between schools, availability of infrastructure, and community needs (Qadri & Ali, 2015).

Proper planning ensures equitable access to education, especially in rural and underserved areas, by reducing overcrowding and minimizing long travel distances for students (Torwali, 2020). In many education systems, including in Pakistan, the decision to establish or upgrade schools also considers the availability of trained teachers, classrooms, basic facilities, and projected student demand (Ahmed et al., 2019). Effective planning criteria help governments allocate resources efficiently and support the expansion of educational

opportunities, thereby improving overall educational access and quality (KPESE, 2025).

In Elementary and Secondary Education Department Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, specific planning criteria are used to decide the establishment of new schools and the up-gradation of existing schools to ensure equitable access and efficient use of educational resources (Asadullah et al., 2023). One of the major criteria is distance and accessibility. A new primary school is generally established only when there is no existing school within about 1.5 km, while middle and high schools are normally planned at least about 3 km away from the nearest school of the same level. Population and student availability are also considered; typically an area should have sufficient population of at least 100 households and potential enrollment of school going children before establishing a new school. The availability of out-of-school children, community demand, and feasibility of the site are also required indicators. For school up-gradation, the department considers indicators such as overcrowding in existing schools, increasing enrollment trends, distance from the next higher-level school, and availability of infrastructure and teachers. These planning criteria help the government expand educational facilities in underserved areas while avoiding unnecessary duplication of schools and ensuring efficient allocation of resources (KPESE, 2025).

This research addresses the significant gap in existing literature concerning the planning criteria of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's Elementary and Secondary Education Department. The primary objective is to identify deficiencies in the planning criteria related to the provision of physical facilities and school accessibility. By employing a qualitative case study approach, this study aims to offer insights and suggestions for improving the planning criteria to enhance the development of public elementary and secondary schools.

Objectives of the study

- 1) To explore the planning criteria for schools' establishment and up-gradation in Elementary and Secondary Education Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Research Questions

- Q-1: What are the planning criteria for schools' establishment and up-gradation in Elementary and Secondary Education Khyber Pakhtunkhwa?

Research Methodology

The methodology of the study employed a qualitative research approach using an instrumental case study design to explore the planning criteria for school establishment and up-gradation in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The study focused on professionals involved in planning and educational administration within the Elementary and Secondary Education Department. The population included all planning officers, M&E officers, directors, DEOS, DDEOS and ADEOS (P&D) of elementary and secondary education department Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. A sample of 15 respondents was taken through purposive sampling technique. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The collected data were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using qualitative data analysis techniques.

Results and Discussion

The approach of thematic analysis was adopted in which the gathered data was systematically converted into different codes. These codes were then converted into different concepts that were reflected from the codes. The explored concepts were then arranged for getting themes and sub-themes. The thematic analysis is presented through the following theme regarding the planning criteria used for the up-gradation of schools in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Distance and Accessibility

Most respondents emphasized that distance from the nearest school of the same level is an important planning

criterion to ensure accessibility for students. The participants reported that a primary school is generally upgraded to middle level when the nearest middle school is located about 3–5 kilometers away, while the distance requirement for high school establishment is about 5 kilometers. This ensures that students do not face long travel distances when progressing to higher levels of education. One respondent stated, *“In our planning process, distance is a critical factor. If a middle school is already available within three kilometers, the up-gradation of another school is usually not recommended.”* (Respondent 1)

Similarly, another participant explained, *“For high schools, we normally consider a distance of about five kilometers from the nearest high school so that students in remote areas can easily access secondary education.”* (Respondent 3)

Another respondent remarked, *“Accessibility is important because many students drop out when the nearest middle or high school is too far from their village.”* (Respondent 5)

Availability of Feeder Primary Schools

Another significant theme that emerged from the interviews was the presence of feeder primary schools that provide students for the upgraded institution. Respondents highlighted that the existence of nearby primary schools ensures a continuous flow of students into the middle school level. One participant noted, *“Before upgrading a primary school to middle level, we assess whether there are feeder primary schools in the surrounding area.”* (Respondent 2)

Another respondent shared, *“Feeder schools are important because they provide a stable student intake for the middle school.”* (Respondent 7)

Similarly, one officer commented, *“Without feeder schools, the sustainability of a middle school becomes difficult.”* (Respondent 9)

Student Enrollment Requirements

Enrollment strength was identified as another major factor for up-gradation decisions. Most respondents indicated that sufficient student enrollment at the terminal grade of the previous level is required before approving up-gradation.

One respondent explained, *“The number of students in Grade 5 plays a significant role in deciding whether a primary school should be upgraded to a middle school.”* (Respondent 4)

Another participant stated, *“Similarly, the number of students in Grade 8 is carefully reviewed before upgrading a middle school to high level.”* (Respondent 6)

A planning officer added, *“Up-gradation is only justified when the student strength indicates a sustainable transition to the next level.”* (Respondent 10)

Land Availability

Land availability was another critical theme that emerged from the interviews. Respondents highlighted that the availability of adequate land is necessary for expanding school infrastructure. According to the respondents, approximately 2 kanal land is required for attached middle schools, while around 4 kanal is needed for detached middle schools, whereas around 6 kanal land is generally required for high schools. One participant mentioned, *“Land availability is one of the first things we check before recommending up-gradation.”* (Respondent 8)

Another respondent commented, *“For middle schools, two kanal land is considered sufficient if the school is attached, but detached schools usually require more space.”* (Respondent 11)

Similarly, a participant stated, *“High schools require larger land areas because additional facilities such as laboratories and examination halls must be constructed.”* (Respondent 13)

Infrastructure and Educational Facilities

The final theme identified in the analysis was the availability of infrastructure and educational facilities. Respondents indicated that a school must have adequate classrooms, offices, and other essential facilities before it can be upgraded. For middle schools, the minimum structure generally includes three classrooms and one office, while high schools require additional facilities such as science laboratories, IT rooms, and examination halls.

One respondent stated, *“Infrastructure readiness is essential; without sufficient classrooms and offices, up-gradation cannot be justified.”* (Respondent 12)

Another respondent remarked, *“High schools must have facilities like science labs and IT rooms because secondary education requires more specialized learning environments.”* (Respondent 14)

Similarly, another participant observed, *“The planning department always reviews the physical facilities of the school before approving any up-gradation proposal.”* (Respondent 15)

Discussion

The findings of the present study highlight several important planning criteria for the up-gradation of schools in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, particularly distance and accessibility, feeder schools, student enrollment, land availability, and infrastructure facilities. These themes derived from the thematic analysis are consistent with existing literature on educational planning and school accessibility in developing countries. The respondents emphasized that the distance between schools is a critical factor in deciding school up-gradation. This finding aligns with previous research which indicates that greater home-to-school distance significantly increases the likelihood of student absenteeism and dropout, particularly in rural areas where transportation facilities are limited (Zeragaber et al., 2024). Similarly, studies on rural education systems suggest that school accessibility plays a crucial role in improving enrollment and retention rates because students are more likely to attend schools located within a reasonable walking distance (Li et al., 2025). Therefore, the planning guideline of maintaining a distance of 3–5 kilometers for middle schools and about 5 kilometers for high schools reflects international practices aimed at improving access to education.

Another important theme that emerged from the study was the role of feeder primary schools in determining the sustainability of middle and high schools. Respondents noted that the presence of feeder schools ensures a consistent supply of students to higher levels of education. This observation supports the argument in educational planning literature that school networks should be designed in a hierarchical structure where primary schools feed into middle schools and subsequently into high schools to maintain continuity in student progression. Such structured planning ensures efficient utilization of resources and supports long-term institutional sustainability.

The study also found that student enrollment strength, particularly at the terminal grades (Grade 5 and Grade 8), is a significant indicator for school up-gradation. This finding is consistent with earlier studies in Pakistan which highlight that enrollment levels and demographic demand are essential considerations in education planning and policy implementation (Naz et al., 2019).

Furthermore, land availability and physical infrastructure were identified as crucial requirements in the up-gradation process. Respondents emphasized that adequate land is necessary to accommodate additional classrooms and facilities required for higher levels of education. The requirement of 2–4 kanal land for middle schools and approximately 6 kanal for high schools, along with facilities such as science laboratories, IT rooms, and examination halls, reflects the increasing infrastructural demands of secondary education. Research on educational equity also indicates that improving school infrastructure and resources is essential for reducing disparities between urban and rural education systems and for enhancing students' learning opportunities (Abro & Wasi, 2024).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study explored the planning criteria used for the up-gradation of schools in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and revealed that several key factors guide the decision-making process of educational authorities. The thematic analysis highlighted that distance and accessibility, availability of feeder schools, adequate student enrollment, land availability, and sufficient infrastructure are the primary considerations for establishment and upgrading schools. These criteria ensure that educational facilities are established in areas where they are most needed and that schools remain sustainable in terms of student population and resources. So it is concluded that there exist proper educational planning for the establishment and up-gradation of schools in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa that not only improves access to schooling for students but also helps in the efficient utilization of government resources and infrastructure. Therefore, the application of well-defined planning standards is essential for strengthening the education system and promoting equitable educational opportunities across the province.

Recommendations

The Elementary and Secondary Education Department may relax the established planning criteria related to distance, enrollment, land availability, and infrastructure for the establishment and up-gradation of schools in areas where there is dire needs of schools.

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