



A Success Story Marred by Ghost Numbers: Afghanistan's inconsistent education statistics

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For years, the Afghan government and donors have cited the growing number of children going to school in Afghanistan as an important post-Taliban success, despite closer scrutiny showing that numbers may have been inflated. The issue came to a head when the newly appointed education minister in the National Unity Government, Asadullah Hanif Balkhi, said that, instead of 11.5 million children being in school, as his predecessor had claimed, there were, in reality, only a little over six million. Education officials scrambled to clarify, defend and adjust the numbers. AAN's Ali Yawar Adili has been investigating the figures and claims and trying to find out what the actual numbers might be. In the process, he has heard allegations not just of exaggeration, but manipulation, malpractice and mismanagement in the ministry (with input from Jelena Bjelica, Martine van Bijlert and Thomas Ruttig).

The re-discovery of ghost schools, and some inflated figures

Education Minister Asadullah Hanif Balkhi caused a public furore on 18 December 2016 when, in an [interview](#) with Tolo TV, he said that across the country only a little over six million pupils were actually in school. His count contradicted the ones provided by his predecessor under former president Hamed Karzai, Faruq Wardak, who had reported that up to 11.5 million pupils



– almost double Balkhi’s number – were attending school. Such high numbers of school attendance had not only served the Afghan government as a marker of post-Taleban success, but also donor governments as proof that their engagement in Afghanistan, though difficult, was still worthwhile. (1)

It was not the first time Balkhi had said the education numbers were inflated. Only a month after his appointment, on 27 May 2015, Balkhi testified before the Wolesi Jirga, that, in certain insecure areas, although there were no schools, money was still allocated (and spent), including for teachers’ salaries. He [said](#) he believed the ministry’s previous figure of 11.5 million pupils in school was inaccurate and that the figures had been inflated to safeguard donor funding. This caused quite a stir. The media had a field day and reported that the education minister had uncovered ‘ghost schools’ in restive [provinces](#) and that he had claimed his predecessor had falsified [data](#) on open schools. On 11 June 2015, the United States Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) John F Sopko expressed his concerns and sent a [letter](#) to the US Agency for International Development (USAID), saying that according to the media, the current ministers of education and higher education had said that:

... former ministry officials who served under President Hamid Karzai provided false data to the government and to international donors, claiming that far more schools around the country were active than was actually the case, in order to obtain more funding. The Ministers reported that there are no active schools in insecure parts of the country, and that former officials doctored statistics, embezzled money, and interfered with university entrance exams. These allegations suggest that US and other donors may have paid for schools that students do not attend and for the salaries of teachers who do not teach.

Warren Ryan, a spokesperson for SIGAR, [told](#) VICE News there was no way to tell how much of the 769 million US dollars provided by USAID had contributed to legitimate programs and how much may have gone to ghost schools.(2)

Former minister of education Faruq Wardak [defended](#) his figures. In a statement sent to the media on 20 June 2015, he called the remarks by Balkhi “empty, ridiculous and insulting,” saying that, “the statistics that I have given to the international community during [my] seven years [in office] were not my own mental product” and that there was a system through which the statistics were collected directly from school principals and sent to governors and then up to the deputy minister and minister. Wardak called the accusations “politically motivated” and, at the same time, alleged that donor countries wanted to use the pretexts of corruption and lack of accurate figures to not deliver on their commitments and to undermine former government officials. (3)

In a response to Wardak’s insistence on the 11.5 million figure, Balkhi in his December 2016 interview (where he launched the new figure of a little over six million) repeated that the figure Wardak cited was not supported by the ministry’s database. “There was one figure in the database,” he said, “and another [different] figure that was [reported](#) to the media”.



Afghanistan's education figures under Wardak

The figure of 11.5 million was first used by Minister Wardak and President Karzai when they spoke at an official event on National School Opening Day on 23 March 2014. Karzai, who for the last time as president symbolically rang the bell to start the new school year, said, "In 11 years, the number of children going to schools went up from less than one million to 11.5 million children" (see the transcript and video of his speech [here](#) and [here](#)). Wardak continued to trumpet the success in a June 2014 [interview](#) with al-Jazeera when he repeated the one to 11.5 million pupils over 11 years claim.

In 2009, when Wardak started in the education field and presented his five-year plan to the parliament, as candidate for the post as education minister, he put the total number of children going to school at seven million. He pledged to increase the number "to more than 10 million in the next five years." (See the full text and video of his statement [here](#) and [here](#)). In 2012, three years into his tenure as minister and after Afghanistan joined the Global Partnership for Education, he reported an increase of 1.3 million newly enrolled pupils. He put the total at 8.3 million, of which 39 per cent were girls (which would mean 3.2 million girls in school). At the same time, according to Wardak, there were 4.2 million school-aged children who did not have access to education "because of insecurity, the lack of availability of schools, and the distance between their homes and their schools." (see [here](#)) If Wardak's figures in 2012 were correct, the figure of 11.5 million children in school in 2014 would represent an increase of 3.2 million in only two years.

Apart from the fact that such a large and rapid increase seems fairly unlikely, it also did not match other official figures provided by the Ministry of Education. Its reports for [2013](#) and [2014](#), for example, actually showed a decrease, from 9.7 million children in school in 2013 to 9.2 million in 2014. The reason for the drop is not clear (particularly since both reports cited the exact same number of teachers (203,148, including 31 per cent women) and schools (16,534). Nor is it clear why these figures deviated from those presented by Wardak. Even more confusingly, in 2015 Wardak gave a – probably more realistic – figure of "more than eight million" children going to school in his foreword to the Afghanistan National Education for All Review, (see [here](#)) thus contradicting both his previous statements and his ministry's reports. This may merely indicate that, like many officials, Wardak does not read all documents and articles published in his name and simply signs them off, but it also illustrates the lack of consistency with regard to official Afghan statistics.

Like Wardak himself, some former and current officials in the ministry who were close to him defended the figure of 11.5 million. Kabir Haqmal, head of publications at the Ministry of Education, while seeking to reconcile the numbers that both ministers gave, told AAN on 3 January 2017 that "Faruq Wardak did not give incorrect figures when he said that 11.5 million children went to schools." Haqmal argued that:

There were around one million [children] studying in Pakistan and Iran and they were also part of the figures. We [also] had around one million to one million two hundred thousand studying in



informal classes conducted by, for example, UNICEF. Around five hundred thousand [children] were undergoing literacy courses. So he was not wrong.

He went on to try to reconcile this with the figures provided by the current minister, Hanif Balkhi, saying,

Regarding the figures given by the minister in his interview with Tolo, there was a slip of the tongue. He wanted to give an accurate figure. We calculated it for him. We said that around 9.2 million pupils were enrolled, but that 22 to 24 per cent [of them] were absent. When we deducted those who are absent, the figure was about 7.2 million, but during the interview, as a slip of the tongue, the minister said 6.2 million.

Amanullah Iman, Wardak's former ministerial spokesman took the same line on 6 February 2017 when talking to AAN. He argued that the "more than one million pupils" who were enrolled in Afghan schools in Pakistan and Iran must be counted "because we provide textbooks and other services to these schools." He also claimed that the 11.5 million figure had been correct, as it had been based on data from the ministry's Education Management Information System (EMIS). Iman who is still an aide to Wardak, echoed the former minister when he called Balkhi's [remarks](#) on the education figures "politically motivated and unrealistic."

Moreover, current deputy minister of education Sayyed Hamidullah Amini also contradicted the claim by both officials that Wardak's 11.5 million could be reached by adding the out-of-country students. On 26 December 2016 in the Wolesi Jirga, he [stated](#) that the total figure of 9.7 million had already "included students studying in our schools outside the country." One of Wardak's deputy ministers, Seddiq Patman, has also concurred with minister Balkhi in dismissing the figure of 11.5 million as incorrect. He was quoted in a media report as [saying](#) that he would "not confirm the statistics provided by the former leadership of the ministry [under Faruq Wardak]" and that he had at the time already relayed the message to the (former) president and the ministers that the statistics were "not accurate."

How many pupils in how many schools?

The confusion over what to count in the overall figures has, however, continued under the new minister. Mujib Mehrdad, the spokesman for the Ministry of Education, told AAN there were currently 9.2 million pupils (9,234,459 to be exact) in 17,482 schools (counting both government-run and private schools) and 1,006 schools are currently closed. 9.2 million pupils is also the figure that other education officials use, including some who spoke to AAN. Deputy minister Amini also cited it in his report to the Wolesi Jirga on 26 December 2016. (see [here](#)) However, according to spokesman Mehrdad, out of the 9.2 pupils, around 2 million (2,042,294 to be exact) – or more than 20 per cent – are permanently absent. According to the Ministry of Education's rules, an enrolled pupil cannot be removed from the database during the first three years of absence (counted consecutively). Mehrdad said that "some of these two million permanently absent have crossed the three-year limit and the ministry has started to omit them from the database." Even so, this system of counting and the errors it may feed into the system



had been flagged and questioned by Special Inspector General Sopko in his already quoted May 2015 [speech](#):

The student numbers are also less than they might appear to be. For one thing, they are not independently verified. For another, as SIGAR reported last year, the ministry counts absent students as ‘enrolled’ for up to three years, before dropping them from the rolls. That’s right: a student who has not attended school in nearly three years is still considered as ‘enrolled.’ That’s like saying a spouse who packed up and left three years ago is still committed to you.

Mehrdad said if the ministry was to deduct the permanently absent pupils, the total number of children actually attending school would probably be around 7.2 million. (Like Haqmal, Mehrdad also said current minister, Balkhi, had made a mistake when he claimed that only a little over six million pupils would be left if the permanently absent pupils were deducted, explaining that the minister did not have the figures with him when he was talking). However, even the current, somewhat reduced figure of 9.2 million children in school cited by ministry officials could still be inflated. A member of a fact-finding commission appointed by President Ghani in July 2015 agreed that “If the permanently absent students were to be included, the number would go up to 9.2 million pupils” and explained that even this figure included duplications; all pupils who were registered both for general education and literacy courses, the member said, would be counted twice.

How security issues may have affected the education numbers

During minister Wardak’s tenure as education minister, Afghanistan’s country-wide security situation deteriorated. At least up to 2012, Afghanistan was considered “very heavily affected” by attacks on schools, students and teachers (see this [2014 report](#)). (4) After a change in the Taliban’s policy towards education (see this 2011 AAN [report](#) on the *layha*), the number of Taliban attacks on education dropped, but did not go away all together. In 2016 UNAMA still documented 94 conflict-related incidents targeting or impacting education-related personnel, which was a 20 per cent decrease [compared](#) to 2015 (most of them perpetrated by insurgent groups). (5) The number of schools reported as closed by the Ministry of Education fell from 1,247 in September 2012 to 471 in March 2013 (see in this 2013 AAN [report](#): pp 1, 16) – although, as with the other figures, it cannot be ruled out that these were manipulated or affected by unreliable data collection.

The substantial drop in education-related attacks and closed schools was linked to reported, unofficial negotiations between the Taliban and the Ministry of Education which aimed at allowing schools to function in exchange for giving the Taliban influence over aspects of the curriculum and the employment of teaching staff (see this 2011 AAN [report](#) on the changing Taliban policy towards education). In contrast to the Taliban, the government did not admit that such an agreement was reached (see for instance the ministry’s response to the 2011 AAN [report](#)).

It is difficult to assess what the combined effect has been of, on one hand, the general steady



deterioration of the security situation in the country and, on the other hand, the agreement of the Taliban to allow education (under certain circumstances). A 2013 [AAN update](#) on the education deal found that the implementation of the deal had been patchy and that attacks on schools and teachers continued, albeit at a lesser rate. All in all, it seems unlikely that the greater leniency of the Taliban towards education, and their claimed cooperation, could have been to the extent that an additional several million children – including a large proportion of girls – could have been able to go to school (the increase claimed by former minister Wardak when in office). (6)

A fact-finding commission

Balkhi's contention when he came to office in 2015 that his predecessor had got his figures badly wrong and the number of Afghan children going to school were far fewer than claimed did trigger a response from the executive. On 1 July 2015 President Ghani [assigned](#) a ten member fact-finding commission to conduct a comprehensive investigation into allegations of corruption in the Ministry of Education (the contention was that someone was pocketing money going to ghost schools and teachers). The commission was made up of five MPs, one senator, two civil society activists and representatives of the Attorney General's office and the NDS. It started its work on 27 July 2015 and continued for four months. (7) The commission's report has never been published, but several members spoke to AAN about their investigation and their reports were gravely concerning. They pointed to considerable confusion with regard to the numbers of schools, teachers and pupils. They also cited a large number of unfinished projects and described a variety of malpractice within the Ministry of Education.

In part, the commission's findings showcased the genuine difficulty of establishing accurate figures in the face of different sources. For instance, AAN was told by a member of the commission that, according to their findings, up to 224 schools were closed in Kandahar province; meanwhile, the provincial education department had reported 150 schools closed, the ministry's department of planning 158 schools and the NDS in Kandahar 149. This epitomises the difficulty faced by any fact-finding mission, but also signals that the accuracy of all figures (including the commission's number of 224) need to be questioned.

Besides problems with data, the investigation also uncovered wastage, misuse of resources and a lack of oversight of school construction projects and textbook contracts. The commission reported that the construction of 1033 school buildings had remained incomplete, even though the final payments had been made. This was the case in both secure and insecure provinces. The commission also found seven contracts that had been signed with a private printing company, which – instead of printing the required textbooks – had printed textbooks of an old type that already existed in the stores within the Ministry of Education. As a result, hundreds of thousands of books were kept unused in storage, where they were spoiled. Similarly, in a separate case, Pashto language textbooks were printed twice and consequently rotted in storage. Another contract for 13.6 million textbooks was made with an Indian printing company which ended up producing low-quality books (many pages were left blank). The company promised to recompense the damages (it would either deduct 87,000 US dollars from the total cost or print 150,000 religious textbooks instead), but it is not clear if that compensation was



ever provided. (8)

Another major finding concerned malpractice within the ministry. According to a member of the commission, it was found that 340 people who worked as heads of different departments and sections also received top-up salaries as advisors to the minister. For instance, the heads of the procurement and the audit department received additional salaries, respectively as procurement and audit advisers. These additional salaries ranged from 100,000 to 890,000 Afghanis on a monthly basis (which, at the time, was between 2,000 and 17,800 US dollars). Similarly, the delegation found that scholarships had been awarded to temporary employees to study in European countries; according to the ministry's regulations, they were not eligible for such scholarships. Forty of these temporary employees, did not return to the country (reportedly including a girl who had been raped by an official in the ministry, and had been awarded a scholarship in return for her silence). Assets of the ministry had not been maintained properly or had gone missing. This included, in particular, 64 containers used as storage rooms, each costing 54,000 Afghanis, representing a total loss of 3,456,000 Afghanis (over 69,000 US dollars). When asked, officials said that senior staff, including a deputy minister, had taken the containers to their homes.

As an outcome of this investigation, a member told AAN, 33 dossiers documenting corruption were prepared. These dossiers named the former minister and 15 heads of provincial education departments as involved in malpractice, according to another member [quoted](#) by the press.

... but a final report kept away from the public

However, to the chagrin and frustration of the fact-finding commission, there has been no visible action taken with regard to the charges. One member complained that, "When the findings were presented to the president, he treated us coldly and said he would appoint a more technical team to look into the issues. But that never happened." The member also told AAN that the MPs who were part of the investigation team received threats from some of their colleagues in parliament. Another member described how, when the commission presented the preliminary findings to the president, he was in a hurry and set to travel somewhere. According to him, the president said he would meet the delegation again, but never did.

The commission's final report has not been made public and the president himself appears to be opposed to releasing the findings (see a media report on this [here](#)). USAID officials have been [quoted](#) as saying that President Ghani, while discussing the investigation's preliminary findings on 4 January 2016, outlined specific organisational and management reforms, "such as introducing a national electronic payment system and a national public corruption council to minimize fraud and corruption."

Previous investigations, by AAN and others

The controversy over the ministry's figures and the report of the fact-finding commission were not the first indications that there were problems at the Ministry of Education. For example, in



2013, long before Balkhi's testimony, AAN's researcher Obaid Ali visited Ghor province and found empty classrooms, ghost girls' schools and teachers' salaries siphoned off by warlords (see [here](#)). He visited a school in Ahangaran, 35 kilometres outside Ghor's capital of Chaghcheran (now renamed Feroz Koh), which was supposed to be teaching 767 students (494 boys and 273 girls) in grades 1 to 12, with 13 teachers working three shifts a day, each for three hours. During Obaid Ali's visit, he observed only five teachers and about 20 students showing up to class.

While the provincial director of the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) at the time estimated that more than 50 per cent of the schools in Ghor had been closed due to insecurity, Sebghatullah Akbari, the head of the provincial education department, insisted that only a few schools in the districts were "sometimes temporarily closed due to conflicts among illegal militias" (see [here](#)) – reflecting a tendency of education officials to either deny or underreport existing problems.

These problems appear to have persisted, also under minister Balkhi in the National Unity Government. In November 2016, SIGAR, in collaboration with an Afghan civil society organisation, inspected 25 schools that had been rehabilitated or reconstructed (most between 2004 and 2007) as part of 57 USAID-funded projects in Herat province. They visited the schools during normal operating hours. SIGAR [reported](#) that while, on average, school staff reported that 61 teachers had been assigned to each school, the site visits found on average, only 18 teachers on school grounds, roughly the equivalent of 38 per cent of those reportedly assigned. In six schools – ie in almost a quarter – less than 20 per cent of the assigned teachers were on-site during the observed shift.

The Independent Joint Anti-corruption Monitoring and Evaluation Committee (MEC), in its June 2015 Vulnerability to Corruption Assessment of Teacher Recruitment in the Ministry of Education, also raised the issue of teachers failing to show up to work or existing in name only, referring to them as ghost teachers. It said this had been "a problem in Afghanistan for years. For example, while many schools in the Shindand district of Herat remained unused, teachers were continuing to receive their salaries." (see [here](#))

A member of the 2015 fact-finding commission recounted similar cases. The commission had, for instance, found that in Bamyan province in 2013/14, 928 contracted teachers (or *ajir*, see a previous AAN's report on teachers [here](#)) were reported to have retired and received a lump sum of 100,000 Afghanis (around 2,000 USD) each. According to EMIS, however, in 2013 there were only 279 *ajir* teachers and in 2014, only 310 – none of whom had retired (meaning that the 928 'retired teachers' did not exist physically at all). The commission also found that as many as 2000 teachers in Herat existed only on paper. (9) According to the commission, ghost teachers were mainly found to be among the contracted teachers: "There were photos, signatures and payments for teachers who did not actually exist [as teachers]." MEC in its reporting had also found the temporary teachers particularly vulnerable to corruption. (10)

Conclusion



The right to education for “all citizens of Afghanistan” is enshrined in the constitution. (11) Since the fall of the Taleban, there has been tangible and important progress, but the tendency – both within the Afghan government and among international donors – to showcase the education sector as a major success story seems to have come at the expense of transparency and clarity, and to have resulted in exaggeration and room for corruption.

The ‘donor factor’ seems to have served as a double-edged sword. On the one hand, donor pressure can spur officials into action. But the fear that the discovery of scandals could lead to donors suspending funding can also discourage genuine probes. One of the members of the 2015 fact-finding commission was hesitant about disclosing the full extent of what they had found, saying: “There is stagnation in the education sector, and corruption everywhere. There are ghost structures. It is very obvious. It is our own internal issue that we need to resolve. But if we disclose some of these issues, donors and embassies may cut off their funding.”

The Ministry of Education has now made it clear that its previous numbers were inaccurate, but appears still to be struggling to clean up its databases. There needs to be greater clarity on which pupils are counted and which are not, and a greater effort to ensure that the new figures represent actual children going to school.

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(1) For instance USAID, in its response to a 2013 [SIGAR](#) request for a list of its most successful programs in Afghanistan, said that “In the education sector, there are clear indicators of progress. In 2002, only an estimated 900,000 boys, and virtually no girls, were in school. Now, there are 8 million students enrolled in school, more than a third of whom are girls.” USAID has disbursed approximately \$855 million for education programs in Afghanistan, as of 30 June 2016. (see [here](#)) Similarly, the World Bank in its November 2016 overview of Afghanistan said, “In 2001, no girls attended formal schools and boys’ enrolment was about 1 million. However, education is now one of Afghanistan’s success stories.”

(2) Reporting from the provinces shows there are different forms of ‘ghost schools’. Some do not exist at all, while others are simply non-functional. For instance in December 2014, Tolo News [quoted](#) tribal elders in Shahjoy district of Zabul province as saying that “only two schools are operational... but money is received for ten schools.” In other cases existing schools run below capacity, employing fewer teachers and teaching fewer students than officially claimed, as this 2013 [AAN research](#) from Ghor province found. Minister Balkhi in an [interview](#) in February 2016 defined ghost schools as “when a pupil does not go to school, [when] the tent is worn out and dilapidated, [when] the school does not have a building and the areas is insecure,



this is a ghost school.”

(3) Balkhi, an ethnic Tajik in his fifties from Balkh province and a member of Jamiat-e Islami, was introduced as a candidate for his post by the chief executive’s mainly Jamiati camp (see AAN’s previous report for background [here](#)). Balkhi was also one of the seven ministers who lost votes of confidences in parliament in November 2016 after they were accused of having spent less than 70 per cent of their ministries’ development budgets (see a previous AAN’s report [here](#)). Former minister Wardak is a member of Hezb-e Islami and a close ally of former president Hamed Karzai. He supported Ashraf Ghani during the 2014 presidential elections and currently serves as a presidential adviser.

(4) A [report](#) commissioned by UNESCO and written by CARE, published in 2010 (p 173-7), saw a steady rise in attacks, from 241 in 2006 and 242 in 2007 to 670 in 2008. The already quoted 2014 report found over 1,000 attacks on schools, universities, staff and students, for the following years from 2009 to 2012.

(5) Already in the 2009 version of their *layha* (rule book), the Taleban had deleted all provisions declaring the education system a target. Apparently it took some time to ensure that the new approach was widely implemented. The current, although lower figures of attacks on schools and teachers show that these attacks have not completely ceased.

(6) AAN has seen a translation of the Taleban education policy, a 75-article document published in 2012, called “The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan: Purposed Law for Education and Training.” It stipulates that education should be provided for all “children,” largely avoiding the terms boys and girls and keeping the exact policy on girls’ schools vague.

(7) The members of the commission included: five MPs (Abdul Khaliq Balakarzai, Abdul Qadir Qalatwal, Humaira Ayubi and Muhammad Wali Alizai, and Nader Khan Katawazi); one senator (Muhammad Hanif Hanifi); two civil society members (Attaullah Wisa and Muhammad Daud Salim); Muhammad Aref Nuri from the Attorney General’s Office and; a representative of NDS known as Agha Saheb. In addition to the fact-finding commission, according to this [SIGAR report](#), “By August, provincial teams from the Afghan government were assigned to collect more reliable figures for 6,000 schools across all 34 provinces, with field work conducted in September 2015.”

(8) On 7 April 2013 when then minister Wardak was summoned by the Meshrano Jirga to provide an explanation about the many errors in textbooks, he challenged the senators, saying if anyone found a single mistake in the textbooks, he would resign. On the same day, the media and social media shared many egregious spelling mistakes, which either altered the meaning or rendered the words meaningless altogether (see this [report](#) by Ariana television).

(9) Other (anecdotal) examples found by the commission included a teacher from Kandahar who had migrated to Quetta in 2005, but continued to receive his salary until his death in 2012. Another teacher in Kandahar was registered in two separate schools that were four hours



distant from each other (rendering daily commuting and teaching in both schools impossible). Also, a member of the border police was found who also received salary as a teacher, as was a teacher who had been killed in an attack long before.

(10) MEC also found temporary teachers particularly vulnerable to corruption. It wrote in its [report](#):

While applicants for fixed-term or permanent teaching positions must go through the competitive examination process, there are thousands of other teachers who are employed for nine months of the educational year and are compensated based on lecture hours. There is no transparent mechanism for hiring this latter category of teachers and they are not obliged to possess the same educational qualifications or pass the competitive exam. ... Respondents stated their belief that this hiring mechanism is particularly vulnerable to producing “ghost teachers,” as it is not subjected to the same recruitment procedures or safeguards.

(11) Article 43 of the constitution proclaims:

Education is the right of all citizens of Afghanistan, which shall be offered up to the B.A. level in the state educational institutes free of charge by the state. To expand balanced education as well as to provide mandatory intermediate education throughout Afghanistan, the state shall design and implement effective programs and prepare the ground for teaching mother tongues in areas where they are spoken.

Article 44:

The state shall devise and implement effective programs to create and foster balanced education for women, improve education of nomads as well as eliminate illiteracy in the country.