

# Problems with the Thai Public Education System



By Mark Richard Brown  
Revised December 17, 2017

**PREFACE:** This document represents a “grassroots” attempt to record some of the perceived problems associated with public education in Thailand. The intent is not to criticize or chastise any members of that system but simply to record the perceptions of foreign teachers working in Thailand. The goal is to provide useful guidance for anyone trying to provide better education to all Thai students. Possible solutions to these problems will be described in a separate document.

Currently the Thai government spends a high percentage of their annual budget on education yet the results are disappointing, especially when compared to the academic achievements of other ASEAN countries. According to [Wikipedia](#), “In comparison with the educational expenditures of other countries, (especially developing countries): China 13%, Indonesia 8.1%, Malaysia 20%, Mexico, 24.3%, Philippines 17%, United Kingdom and France 11%, the Thai GDP and national budget allocate considerable funds to education. By 2006 it represented 27% of the national budget.” (This number may actually be closer to 20%, however it’s still quite high.) The same article on Wikipedia says “In 2015, a [World Bank](#) study concluded that “...one-third of 15-year-old Thais are 'functionally illiterate', including almost half of those studying in rural schools.” Perhaps the most dramatic statement in this article is the following: “It is highly possible that Thailand's education system is harming student IQs. While the IQ of pre-school students is acceptable, IQ drops as primary schooling commences, suggesting a need for changes at schools. The IQ of students in rural areas is considerably lower, at just 89. This difference persists at university. While studies have found the IQ of Bangkok university students averages 115, the IQ of provincial university students is 5-8 points lower.”

**NOTE:** Most of the problems listed below are associated with TEFL although it seems likely that they’re present all areas of public education in Thailand. It should also be noted that many private schools, especially the International schools, don’t suffer from these problems or else have them to a lesser degree.

1. Students in most classes have a very wide range of abilities, with high-performing students sitting next to low-performing students. This makes it almost impossible to design curriculum or teach one group without short-changing the other. The bright students become bored and the slower students stop trying. One contributor estimates that total student participation is about 45%. He also said “There are students that are so advanced they belong two grades higher. They are not given the chance to be separated from their classmates for an English class.”
2. Related to #1, students are promoted from one grade to the next even when they clearly should be held back or directed to remedial programs. There’s a tradition in Thai culture that all students must advance to the next grade regardless of their performance. This means that low-performing students will be further mismatched with the curriculum in subsequent grades. This effect is compounded each year until some students in M6 have similar performance to students in P6 or even lower.
3. Cheating is endemic throughout all levels of public education. Students routinely cheat on all tests and exams. Unfortunately, this has become a cultural norm. Cheating contaminates performance assessments which are vital to improving curriculum and determining remediation. It diminishes the value of a diploma. It establishes a poor precedent for all future endeavors. As I pointed out in an article on ajarn.com, students don’t see any harm in cheating; instead they see it as “helping”.
4. Discipline is a constant issue in almost all classes. This problem seems to get worse as students progress through the system, until by the time they’re in high school they’re almost impossible to control. Students are often late for class. They talk freely with each other and move around the classroom as if they were at a social function. They use their cellphones or work on their homework from other classes. This is very discouraging to teachers and it’s clearly detrimental to the minority of students who are well-behaved.
5. Foreign teachers feel like they’re superficial and disconnected from the rest of their department. They often complain that they were hired merely for appearances and serve only as “window dressing”. They’re almost never solicited for input into curriculum. They’re often ignored by the other teachers. Some of the perceived separation between Thai and foreign teachers may be a result of shyness or even embarrassment on the part of the Thai teachers, but in an English department this is not a viable excuse.
6. Related to #5, the overall scores or grades that foreign teachers assign to their students are discounted or even ignored by Thai teachers to assign grades at the end of each semester. It’s common for the grades given by foreign teachers to account for only 10% of students’ final grades. This increases the perception on the part of foreign teachers

that their efforts are largely superficial. Thai teachers assign grades based on cultural expectations rather than performance.

7. The Thai education system is not a meritocracy, it's an oligarchy. Good teachers, even good Thai teachers, aren't evaluated and rewarded for their accomplishments or the accomplishments of their students. This is another factor which makes it very discouraging to work for a school in Thailand. Professional advancement in the Thai education system seems to be based on certificates or degrees regardless of the effectiveness of a teacher's ability to teach. The result is that Thai teachers work hard to get these degrees even to the point of cheating or short-cutting their way through the program just so they can get the piece of paper which they need to get a better salary.
8. The classrooms in many up-country schools are dirty and un-air-conditioned. The floors are filthy. The windows are broken. The desks and chairs are falling apart. Maintenance and janitorial services are inadequate. The classrooms are equipped with chalkboards instead of whiteboards. These unpleasant working conditions contribute to a sense of working in a menial job. The poor state of classroom facilities probably contributes to the general lack of respect on the part of the students. Considering how much money the Thai government spends on education you would think they could afford air conditioners in all classrooms, even in rural areas.
9. There's a ridiculous number of holidays and extra-curricular activities which result in fewer productive teaching days. These distractions include Buddhist holidays, sporting events, various competitive events, and all-day teacher meetings. A substantial amount of effort and apparently money is directed to these activities which, and although they may impart critical aspects of Thai culture, they do very little to advance core academic achievements while disrupting the continuity of the curriculum. Classes that meet in the first or last periods of the day are often cancelled due to competing activities.
10. Academic tests like ONET seemed to be used mainly as a way for schools to qualify for additional funding and have little impact on remediation for poor-performing students. Test questions are often completely mismatched to the average student's abilities which results in them being disappointed and further disengaged from their future education. Even worse, some of the English language test questions contain grammatical errors or examples which don't make sense to a native speaker. In addition to being a filter that determines which students can advance to college, performance tests should be used as a tool to identify students who should be enrolled in remedial programs.
11. There doesn't seem to be any standard curriculum. Foreign teachers aren't given any teaching materials and are allowed to select any text books they want and develop their own teaching materials without oversight. Even Thai teachers are given huge freedom

to do whatever they want in the classroom with little or no guidance from their department, let alone Thai educational organizations at the national level. While this lack of standardization may be considered a blessing in some cases it's evidence of a fractured and disorganized system as a whole.

12. Textbooks used for teaching English are written by English authors and targeted for English children. Books from Oxford Press are examples of this. The covers and first page of have been translated into Thai but there isn't a single word of Thai in the entire rest of the book. No attempt is made to translate English into Thai because that isn't necessary in England. Examples and vocabulary are obviously England-centric. Fruits, vegetables, and animals mentioned in these books don't occur naturally in Thailand. Idioms and nursery rhymes are England-centric.
13. Lessons are presented to students one time only instead of being repeated. Students are expected to learn without being given a chance to practice the material. Practice and repetition are absolutely necessary to learn any difficult subject like English or math. Difficult content won't be absorbed by all students at the same rate so it's essential to conduct assessment exercises followed by remedial activities until new concepts are mastered.

Here are some additional comments I received in response to a blog article I wrote or through email. I've made some minor edits.

1. Schools should put the students first. Not the teachers.
2. Most Thai teachers think the school is there for them, that they are the most important part of it. They're not!
3. Teach the students how to think, not just copy and follow the instructions.
4. School staff and above should listen to those with more experience, rather than saying "I've taught 'this', in this way for many years, you can't show me a better way".
5. If you're going to teach someone a subject, the teacher should have the basic knowledge of that subject. I.e. the ability to speak English, if that's what you teach. You don't see an art teacher who can't draw, or a P.E teacher who can't run.
6. Forget complex grammar until you have some ability to speak and understand the language.
7. Teach the students how to talk with constant practice, increase vocabulary, and lots of praise, not criticism.

Here are some more problems that I found by searching for “problems with Thai schools” on Google: