

## Dr. Armand V. Fabella: educator, economist

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An economist and an educator, Armand Fabella never gave up expressing his passionate belief in the necessity of improving the quality of basic education in the Philippines. The country's entire education system, he believed, could only be as strong or as weak as its foundation.

The day before he passed away he dictated a last "lecture" to his son Vincent, President of Jose Rizal College, outlining his vision. I believe it deserves to be quoted here as an illustration of the practicality of his planning and because I can think of no better tribute to him than the spreading of his ideas.

He said:

"There are only three things to fix in education and everything else follows.

The most important thing is to put in a 12-year basic education system. By this I mean education prior to college. There's just no way around this.

I know this won't be possible to complete by 2010, so what is important is to ensure the seeds are planted so that efforts to build a 12-year program continue after 2010. Perhaps one year can already be put in before 2010.

Adding one year to college is not the answer. Whatever structure we select should be aligned with international standards, which are now readily defined.

There are three challenges regarding implementation.

The first will be debates on prioritization. Because of limited budget, critics will say the 12-year system would come after teachers have been properly trained or given improved compensation.

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That's the wrong priority. Increases in salaries will have little to do with improving performance.

The second argument is: expanded preschool education is the equivalent of the extra years. This is a misconception. Preschool cannot be considered part of the 12 years, since it is socialization, not formative.

Critics are right that we cannot just implement the 12 years by doing more of the same. The additional years should focus on the critical, those needed by students to succeed. And there are three: English, mathematics, and science.

Professional organizations are putting too much emphasis on professional subjects at the expense of general education.

The textbook calls the shots (dictates instruction). You cannot rely on teachers completely to ensure a stable quality of graduates.

The third important thing to fix is the current structure where we basically have two masters: the PRC (Professional Regulation Commission) and CHED (Commission on Higher Education). Schools cannot have two masters. CHED should be the only one schools answer to. You want to avoid having the PRC intervene where it has no authority, such as teacher salaries.

Avoid a structure where the subordinate has to answer to two bosses.

In the end, there are four things to focus on: a 12-year basic education cycle, general education, textbooks, and a single master for education. Of these, general education should be the first (priority) since it would require no legislation, and simply an understanding with CHED."

Armand zeroed in on the greatest resource of our country, our human resource, and the need for parents and the educational system to develop that resource. Being the Secretary of Education he knew the weaknesses of the system—children not in school, no schools in 20 percent of barangáys, no textbooks for the students, and the inconsistent quality of teaching. In simple economic terms, the supply of goods and services hardly met the minimum demand for such in the education system. Because of this lack of resources, he believed that the system should focus on subjects with the lowest achievement

levels—namely, science, mathematics, and English. He believed that by strengthening the curriculum with concentration on these subjects, students would be better equipped to compete for jobs. He believed that English should be the language of instruction starting from the elementary level. He argued that if students could comprehend, write, and speak good English, they would be more competitive.

Armand believed that the educational system should be a partnership between the public and private schools. He took a bold step in deregulating tuition fees thereby giving parents and the schools the opportunity to determine the quality of education they desired for their children. Before that controls had been instituted regulating tuition increases and mandating that 70 percent go to teacher salary increases and only 30 percent to administration and school improvements. At the same time he instituted the National College Entrance Examination to measure the quality of instruction and preparedness of students.

It was unfortunate that just when he began to institute educational reforms, the Department of Education, Culture and Sports was dismantled to create two departments with two bosses. Disagreeing with this move, Armand resigned as Secretary of Education.

It was not only in the field of education that Armand made his presence felt. Having held high government positions at the early stages of his career, he developed a keen insight into how the government developed and formulated policies—the difficult processes involved, including the necessity of having to go through independent branches of government and implementation having to go through the bureaucracy.

While Armand was Assistant Executive Secretary and Director General of the Program Implementation Agency, I informed him that one of the projects assigned to me at SGV was the development of the Dole pineapple project in Southern Mindanao, but considering that it was a big project it was necessary to inform government about the obstacles along the way and to get the necessary higher level approvals. In November of 1962 the project was inaugurated. The ceremonies included the planting of pineapple tops that had just arrived from Hawaii. President Macapagal was invited to do the honors but he could not come so he was represented by Armand as Assistant Executive Secretary for Economic Matters. With a sterling silver trowel Armand planted the first pineapple top. Today the project has expanded to about 20,000 hectares, which is probably the largest pineapple plantation in the world.

Anyway, about a year and a half later, the President of Dole, Herbert Cornuelle who initiated the Dole project, became President of United Fruit, a



major banana fruit company that had plantations in Central and South America and marketed their produce in the US, Europe, and Japan, Mr. Cornuelle once again engaged SGV to develop a banana project that would export to Japan. Once again we had to go to Armand's office for policy approvals so that we would not need to go through the usual maze of government regulations and offices that were not equipped to handle major project development.

This time, however, as we were exploring several sites in Davao, Senator Almendras and Senator Lorenzo Tañada, Sr. passed a resolution to investigate the activities of agricultural projects initiated by foreign investors. Poor Armand had to bear the brunt of the questioning. Johnny Ponce Enrile and I stood ready to help him but we were never called. Anyway I think Mrs. Fabella still keeps the clipping of a huge photograph published in the newspapers of Johnny, Armand, and me labeled "the three monkeys"—see no evil, speak no evil, hear no evil. The project was not approved then but years later, during the time of President Marcos, the project was revived and bananas became one of our major exports.

This knowledge, this experiential capital, was used by different administrations with regard to changes in the constitution, new international and regional agreements, and new challenges brought about by increasing population. One of his greatest achievements, and one that he was most proud of, was the creation of administrative regions—initially set at fourteen. This created regional offices of functional departments that focused on their own assessment of resources, plans, and project preparation and implementation. These regions exist to this day.

His work in reorganization included the creation of standard staff and service units for each department. To the usual units (personnel, legal, administration, and accounting) he added a Planning and Statistical Service unit for all departments believing that the expertise and training of economists and other professionals should be made useful for sectoral and/or geographic planning. Many economists owe their placement to Armand.

While I was in government, I had many occasions to turn to Armand for reorganization matters—especially those brought about by the 1973 constitution and its subsequent amendments creating a semi-parliamentary structure of government in some ways similar to that of France (which incidentally was Armand's birthplace). He was so good at this that he prepared Presidential Decree No. 1 on government reorganization, the basic Administrative Code, decrees creating new departments like the Department of Tourism and Environment, and amendments to existing laws such as those on banking reforms (e.g., the so-called DOSRI rule), executive orders, organization charts,

department orders regarding transitions and reassignments, and others. I called his office “Komisyon ng Pabago-bago”.

After I left Government and set up a consulting office, I involved Armand in a number of engagements. One such engagement was for the ADB as a consultant for the rebuilding of the Central Bank of Laos and its banking system. He stayed in Vientiane for about 18 months. I also had many occasions to use his expertise in projects involving our own government reorganization. Unfortunately some of our recommendations, based on studies we were paid to do, that were designed to cut staff costs, were ignored. But we did try.

Armand, with his jokes and his witty repartee, will be missed—by his colleagues, including myself, who continued to meet occasionally for lunch to exchange views and to solve the problems of our country and the world after our stints in government service were over; by groups and organizations who continued to make use of his knowledge and expertise; and by those who share his passion for education and the youth of our country.