Pakistan Policy Note 9

Halil Dundar and Huma Waheed

Expanding Access to Quality Education

Although Pakistan has made some progress in improving access to education over the past decade, it still faces major challenges in providing access to quality education at all levels. It has the world’s second highest out-of-school population (7 million)—two-thirds of them girls (though enrollment rates vary appreciably between and within provinces). National surveys of student learning suggest that achievement is also very low—a sizable share of school leavers do not achieve even minimum mastery of mathematics, reading, and language, as defined by the government. The main contributing factors include poor teacher quality and accountability, inadequate and inefficient funding, and weak management and governance. Since the 18th Amendment was passed in 2010, the management and financing of education has been decentralized to the provinces, but national standards need to be set and their achievements monitored to address disparities in access to quality education between provinces. The federal government should play this role and coordinate and facilitate the provision of “education for all.”

Pakistan ranks 113 of 120 countries in the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization’s Education for All Education Development Index. It has the world’s second highest out-of-school population (7 million), two-thirds of them girls (UNESCO 2012). It has generally performed worse than other countries in South Asia and other developing countries (at its level of per capita income; Figure 1). Based on current trends, the United Nations Development Programme reports that the country is unlikely to meet the Millennium Development Goal of universal primary education by 2015.

Primary and Secondary Education

Education service delivery up to grade 12 has primarily been the concern of provincial and area governments. They are responsible for policy formulation, sector financing, and implementation through their education departments. The 18th Amendment, passed in 2010, formalized this responsibility. When the amendment was approved, Article 25-A—which guarantees the right to free and compulsory education for all children ages 5–16 years—was also added. Article 25-A requires further legislation by the provincial assemblies to enforce free and compulsory education; the process is under way.

Role of the Private Sector

As in other South Asian countries, Pakistan’s private sector is emerging as an alternative to public schools, even for poor households. Today, nearly a third of primary and secondary students in Pakistan attend private schools: 31 percent of boys and 33 percent of girls ages 6–10 years and 26 percent of boys and 30 percent of girls ages 11–15 years (Figure 2). Over 2004/2005–2010/11, the overall share of children ages 6–10 and 11–15 enrolled in private schools increased 7 and 6 percentage points, respectively. In net terms, virtually all the gain in school participation in
the country during the period, especially at the primary level, was a result of increased private school participation.

This increased enrollment was triggered by low public financing and poor public service delivery. In responding to the widespread demand for greater access to and better education, a sizeable and rapidly expanding low-cost private schooling system now serves as a viable alternative to the government school system for even low-income and rural households.

The private sector holds real potential for increasing access to quality education. To further increase access, the governments of all four provinces have set up “education foundations,” which channel public financing for low-cost private provision. Evidence from Sindh and Punjab confirms that the growth of such a dynamic school system is reaching more and more low-income and rural households. It also suggests that student achievement in private schools tends to be much higher than in government schools—and that the higher achievement is obtained far more cost effectively than in government schools, possibly arising from a combination of private schools’ lower labor costs and market stimulation.

Government Reform Programs

To address the major issues in education, all four provinces have embarked on sector reform programs.
that aim to increase equitable access to quality education. Education reform initiatives address issues ranging from merit-based teacher recruitment and mobilization and financing of school management committees to the provision of basic facilities and free textbooks to schools. Punjab initiated the reform process nearly a decade ago and is the most advanced in implementing its reforms (Box 1). Balochistan, which lags behind the most, is still developing its sector reform program.

Policy Challenges and Issues

Despite recent achievements in improving access to education, Pakistan’s education sector performs poorly compared with other South Asian countries. This undermines its efforts in economic growth and poverty alleviation.

Low enrollment and major disparities in access

Although Pakistan has made some progress in expanding enrollment since 2000, access to education remains low at all levels. Major shortfalls persist in school participation. In 2010, the estimated 7 million children still not in primary school accounted for about 10 percent of all out-of-school children worldwide. Primary, middle, and matric net enrollment rates in 2010/11 were 66 percent, 35 percent, and 23 percent, or close to those of low-income countries in Sub-Saharan Africa (Figure 3). There are also large inter- and intraprovincial variations—for instance, district primary net enrollment rates ranged from 14 percent to 90 percent.

Pakistan’s completion rate for primary education is among the lowest in the world. Less than half the country’s population has completed at least primary education, making Pakistan unlikely to meet the education Millennium Development Goal by 2015.

Education participation is inequitable, even at the primary level. Girls, disadvantaged children from poor families, rural children, and children from some social groups have very low enrollment rates. The child’s age and the household’s socioeconomic status and location (urban or rural) appear to matter greatly for participation. The chances of participation at primary and middle levels increase with age, suggesting late entry into school. Children from poor households appear to suffer a large participation disadvantage at all levels: only 43 percent of children ages 6–10 years belonging to the poorest wealth quintiles are enrolled. The participation disadvantage rises sharply for rural households at middle

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**Box 1: Punjab Education Sector Reform Program**

In 2003, Punjab launched its Education Sector Reform Program to improve access, quality, and governance in education. Key reforms include:

- **External monitoring system.** This relies on independent collection of data on school performance (such as teacher presence) and ensures that policy makers have reliable data to make informed, transparent, and needs-based decisions.
- **New teacher recruitment and placement policy.** This was introduced to hire new teachers on merit, with preference to local candidates and women. All teacher recruitment is now transparent and has had a major impact on ensuring that teachers with the right qualifications are hired. This has, in turn, helped reduce chronic teacher absenteeism. The government is working on a teacher certification and licensing mechanism to ensure that teachers gain the required competencies.
- **New textbook policy.** The development, printing, and distribution of textbooks are now managed through an open competitive process.
- **Public-private partnership program.** This was established to provide public funding to low-cost private schools. Under this program, the Punjab Education Foundation was restructured as an autonomous but publicly funded institution to support low-cost private schools. In 2012, more than a million students benefited from the program.
- **Measurement of student learning outcomes.** Under this reform, an independent Punjab Examination Commission was established to carry out universal examinations for grades 5 and 8. The program also has tight links with content and quality of teaching and is a strong tool for holding teachers accountable for performance.

According to Pakistan Social and Living Standards Measurement Surveys, the primary net enrollment rate increased from 45 percent in 2001/02 to 62 percent in 2006/07 (for girls, from 43 percent to 59 percent; for rural girls, from 38 percent to 55 percent). These gains were helped by improved sector governance, including the establishment of independent bodies and stronger monitoring systems.
Pakistan net enrollment rates, 2010/11

![Figure](Pakistan net enrollment rates, 2010/11)


and high education levels: only 36 percent of rural children ages 11–15 years are enrolled in grades 6–10, compared with 56 percent of urban children. Although some provinces, notably Punjab, have made progress in reducing the gender gap, female participation in primary and secondary education remains low. At 61 percent, female participation at the primary level lags 10 percentage points behind male participation.

### Poor learning outcomes

*International comparisons of student achievement are unavailable because Pakistan has not taken part in any international assessments.* However, national surveys of student learning outcomes suggest low achievement. A large proportion of school leavers do not achieve minimum mastery of mathematics, reading, and language (as defined by the national government). The ASER1 2011 assessment found that, although arithmetic competence was somewhat better in rural Pakistan than in rural India, it was very low in absolute terms (ASER-Pakistan 2011). For instance, only 37 percent of grade 5 students in rural Pakistan could divide a three-digit number by a single-digit number. By grade 8, only 72 percent could perform simple division. Unlike in rural India, however, recognition of two-digit numbers in rural Pakistan was widespread by grade 3.

*Figure 3 scored 30 percent on English tests, 29 percent on Urdu tests, and 38 percent on math tests.* Four years later, students in grade 3 in the same villages scored similarly or slightly lower, at 31 percent, 27 percent, and 34 percent in the same tests (Andrabi and others 2007). Data from universal testing exercises in Punjab in 2010 and 2011 suggest that the child’s gender (a general disadvantage for boys), urban or rural status (a disadvantage for rural children), and district affect the mean test scores for government school students in grades 5 and 8.

The above low enrollment and poor learning outcomes have three main contributing factors, now discussed.

### Poor teacher quality and accountability

*Teachers are consistently found to be the most important factor in student learning* (Hanushek and Rivkin 2010; Rivkin, Hanushek, and Kain 2005; Nye, Konstantopoulos, and Hedges 2004; Rockoff 2004; Park and Hannum 2001; Sanders and Rivers 1996). While the quality of education is affected by many factors (teachers, facilities, textbooks, and so forth), improving teaching is probably the most effective way to raise school quality. In Pakistan, both teacher effectiveness and accountability are weak. Key issues include:

- **Poor quality of teachers.** Teachers across the country have low content knowledge and weak pedagogical skills. A recent survey showed that only 36 percent of primary school teachers in Punjab could explain two-digit addition, suggesting that they are not
competent to teach the curriculum (World Bank 2013). This is generally attributable to the country’s weak recruitment policies and practices. Two of the larger provinces—Punjab and Sindh—have introduced merit-based teacher recruitment, which could dramatically improve teacher quality at entry (Box 2). Policies and practices in teacher deployment are also a serious concern.

- **Weak teacher accountability.** Measured by high absence rates and minimal effort, this is the main cause of poor learning outcomes even when teachers are sufficiently qualified. A recent survey of primary schools in rural Punjab found that 11 percent of the teachers were absent on any given day. Most nonattendance was unexplained, and illness accounted for most explained absences (World Bank 2013). In most parts of the country, policy dictates that teachers can be dismissed for misconduct, child abuse, absenteeism, and poor performance, while teacher absenteeism can theoretically result in penalties such as salary deductions—but there is no evidence that these strictures are enforced.

- **Few incentives for teacher performance.** Government school teacher salaries are determined principally by teacher grade and tenure, along with allowances and benefits that relate to the characteristics of the location and school where the teacher works. Importantly, government school teacher salaries are not linked to the levels of teacher absence, teacher subject knowledge, and student achievement.

- **Discrepancies in teacher placement.** The placement of teachers shows wide variations: some schools have fewer than five students per teacher, and others more than 100. Some schools are thus understaffed, and others have more teachers than they need. Political interference in teacher placement and transfers is the main contributor to the imbalance. Particularly in rural schools, teachers may be appointed to vacant positions, but they are known to use political pressure to transfer their posts within a few months, leaving remote schools understaffed or sometimes without a teacher altogether. Government policies dictating student–teacher ratios and teaching loads exist, but enforcement is weak and made harder by external influences.

### Inadequate and inefficient financing of public education

**Although Pakistan is increasing its attention to education, financing has not followed suit.** The country has one of the lowest rates of public expenditure on education as a share of GDP (1.9 percent; Figure 4). Adequate financing is a major challenge for the provinces and the country as a whole. More than 90 percent of the education sector’s recurrent expenditure is related to remuneration. This leaves a very limited budget for spending on critical non-salary inputs, such as teaching and learning materials, repair and maintenance of school infrastructure, and teacher professional development. The quality of public education suffers as a result.

The education funding mechanism does not induce behavioral changes through incentive structures and accountability mechanisms. These could ensure that school inputs are used more efficiently and lead to gains in learning. Establishing a link between financing and outcomes is essential for this.

### Weak management and governance

**The country’s capacity to plan, manage, and monitor the education sector is weak.** The
management and financing of primary and secondary education are the responsibility of provincial governments, which are below par in their capacity to gather and report on key performance indicators on time to effectively manage and monitor implementation of education reforms. The key issues in policy making, management, and monitoring capacity include:

- **Inadequate institutional capacity for primary and secondary education delivery, hampering the implementation of a consistent and effective education policy.** Local capacity to deliver education services is especially minimal at district and village levels.

- **Weak monitoring and evaluation systems at all levels of government to guide reforms.** Data, not always easily accessible, are rarely used either by the system to improve education decision making or by parents to demand school accountability. Student assessment systems are inadequate for providing systematic and reliable information on student learning outcomes.

- **Deficiency in coordination and support at the federal level for achieving national education goals.** Provincial governments are responsible for delivering primary and secondary education, including policy making, management, financing, planning, and monitoring. However, in principle, the federal government has a pivotal role to play in promoting national cohesion of the education system, whether through setting universal teacher standards or in curricula development. Yet the federal Ministry of Education and Training, established in 2012 following the 18th Amendment, is not involved in either activity.

**Recommendations for Reform Priorities**

Making learning outcomes an explicit goal of education policy. Although Pakistan has made some progress in improving access to education, it faces major challenges in providing access to quality education at all levels. How can it address the twin challenges of access and
quality, given competing demands on a very limited national budget? Whereas continuing efforts are needed to increase participation and make education more inclusive, policy should highlight the importance of improved learning outcomes for all. In fact, learning outcomes need to be the central goal of any education policy—an “umbrella priority” under which the other priorities fall. Five are identified below.

**Improve teacher effectiveness and accountability**

Developing and implementing policies that focus on teacher performance and management should be the cornerstone of an education system that is effective and efficient in providing quality education to all children. Punjab and Sindh have already launched reforms to improve teacher quality and accountability, focusing on recruitment and management policies. These policies should be implemented throughout the country and entail four steps.

**First,** clear standards need to be set for recruitment, deployment, transfers, and postings, with strong safeguards against decisions not based on merit. Allocation of teaching posts to schools should be based solely on student–teacher ratio norms and minimum staffing criteria (for instance, a minimum of two teachers per school to ensure a functional school).

**Second,** preservice and in-service training needs to operate on three levels: raise teacher subject knowledge, equip teachers with up-to-date approaches to teaching, and help teachers adopt effective pedagogical methods to enhance student learning.

**Third,** programs to provide intensive support to teachers in low-performance schools need to be designed. These programs should regularly provide on-site support to teachers to address the challenges they face in their particular environments (a multigrade classroom, for instance). A good example is the Punjab program to provide onsite advisory support to teachers through a network of field-based district teacher educators and teacher educators based in high schools or government elementary teacher education colleges. Managed by the Directorate of Staff Development under the Punjab School Education Department, this field-based support system serves as a new and promising conduit for providing regular, customized teacher support and improving teaching performance.

**Fourth,** teachers need to know that if they acquire new skills and perform well, they will be rewarded—and vice versa. To improve teacher performance, incentives that link teacher pay to performance need to be built into the system. A good example is the Improver’s Program of the Punjab Education Sector Reform Program. Launching strong accountability mechanisms (such as penalties for absenteeism) is also important.

**Improve governance, efficiency, and quality, using financing as a tool**

School finance systems must provide the necessary resources so that all students, regardless of background, can learn. All provinces and areas need mechanisms that ensure adequate resources for all schools. The mechanisms should be aimed at meeting the minimum requirements for creating and maintaining acceptable learning conditions. Minimum funding standards for schools should be developed and implemented—and be objective, criteria-based, and linked closely with the needs of schools (most specifically, the number of students in the schools). Other factors could include needs relating to school levels, school buildings, availability of basic amenities, and so on.

**More funding is required to improve resource-use efficiency and learning outcomes.** Pakistan could consider financing tools that have shown promise in other countries, such as changes in the incentives structure for both teachers and schools. Four promising approaches stand out. First, accountability systems (such as performance-related pay and promotion) based on student learning achievements could help modify teacher behavior and stimulate more effort in the classroom. Second, modifying school funding formulas has the potential to create incentives for quality improvement. Block grants that do not demand accountability from
Schools could be replaced by grants that carry a range of incentives for efficiency and equity. (Box 3 presents the case of Armenia, where this move has been effective.) Third, financial powers need to be decentralized closer to the school level. School financing is currently managed at the tehsil level, with several hundred schools (in the larger provinces) under the purview of the drawing and disbursing officer. Fourth, greater use of public–private partnerships—Punjab and Sindh already have them—could also increase resources for education and maximize efficiency, as long as efficiency and equity incentives are built into the agreements.

Leverage the contribution of the private sector

In the face of capacity and resource constraints, leveraging the contribution of the private sector is key to meeting the challenges of improved access and quality. Since the private sector has already demonstrated that it can offer access at lower cost and with similar or better outcomes than the public sector, countries will gain by helping it expand, easing barriers to entry, and carefully designing PPPs. Innovative and cost-effective programs in Sindh and Punjab could be scaled up (Box 4).

Box 3 Ensuring adequacy with per capita funding, Armenia

Armenia has undertaken a series of major (but incremental) education finance reforms—including decentralization and the use of per capita funding—to respond to demographic and political changes. After the Soviet Union dissolved in the early 1990s, Armenia’s education expenditures and enrollment declined but its number of teachers rose. The inefficiency in spending was the result of previous school funding methods, based on a simple adjustment of historic levels—bargaining, and discretionary decisions.

To increase efficiency, Armenia shifted the responsibility for managing education resources to administrators at the subnational level through decentralization and to schools through school-based management reforms. A per capita formula made funding more transparent. Resources are now allocated per student and adjusted for rural location, level of schooling, and special needs.

These structural reforms, piloted in 1999 and implemented throughout the country by 2007, have improved the efficiency of education finance tremendously, increasing class size to appropriate levels and making surplus teachers redundant.

Box 4 The promise of public–private partnerships for improving education quality

Several public–private partnerships introduced in Pakistan have generated cost-effective gains in participation and achievement.

Introduced in 2005, the Foundation-Assisted School program administered by the Punjab Education Foundation provides conditional cash subsidies to low-cost private schools to open up private schooling opportunities for children from low-income households and to raise the level of learning. Per student cash subsidies are provided monthly, with essentially no conditions on how they are to be used. The amount is purposely set low (half the estimated per student cost in the public school system) to ensure that only low-cost private schools self-select into the program. In return for the subsidy, the school must maintain a minimum student pass rate in the Quality Assurance Test (QAT). The QAT is a curriculum-based, multisubject test designed by subject specialists and administered by independent testing agencies.

Program schools are also eligible for group bonuses for teachers who achieve high QAT pass rates and for competitive bonuses for schools that rank highest in the QAT. Schools that do not achieve a minimum pass rate twice in succession are dropped from the program.

As of June 2010, the Foundation-Assisted School program had proceeded through six phases of expansion and supported about 800,000 students in 1,800 schools in 29 of the 36 districts in Punjab. Rigorous evaluation (Barrera-Osorio and Raju 2010, 2011) found that within two years, the program generated major gains in enrollment and school inputs (roughly 40 percent) and student achievement (0.3–0.5 standard deviation).

The Punjab Education Foundation runs a sister program, the New School Program, which supports the opening of new schools in underserved communities. The program provides per student subsidies to new private schools in underserved areas, conditional on a school’s achievement on standardized, competency-based tests. The program (early 2013) covers more than 20,000 students in 230 schools in 16 districts.

A similar program, Promoting Private Schooling in Rural Sindh, is run by the Sindh government. It, too, attempts to leverage the private sector to deliver schooling to underserved rural communities. Program schools get grants for construction and other support, as well as per student subsidies conditional on maintaining minimum student achievement. A rigorous evaluation found that the program produced substantial gains in participation and achievement (Barrera-Osorio and others 2011).
Improve sector coordination and support

The federal government has an important role to play in promoting cohesion of the education system nationwide, whether by setting universal teacher standards or by playing a role in curriculum development. Coordination among provinces—a key function of the Ministry of Education and Training—needs to be strengthened. The ministry should play a key role in improving communication between the provinces/areas to facilitate knowledge exchange for improving Pakistan’s education indicators.

Enhance learning-assessment systems

Enhanced learning-assessment systems are necessary to monitor progress in learning outcomes and in improvements in schooling quality over time. These comprehensive assessments need to cover students in both public and private schools. Yet Pakistan’s student assessment systems, which are at the provincial level, are weak and do not provide regular information about student performance. Pakistan needs to strengthen these systems to emphasize classroom testing. It also needs to include large assessments.

Notes

Given the differences in challenges, opportunities, and priorities by level of education, this note focuses on primary and secondary education.

1. This is a composite index that provides an assessment of a country’s education system on four Education for All goals: universal primary education, adult literacy, quality, and gender.

2. All statistics in this paragraph and the next one are staff estimates based on various rounds of the Pakistan Social and Living Standards Measurement Surveys.

3. The net enrollment rate figures are based on the officially recognized age of children for each education level.


5. World Bank staff estimates using student test score data from the Punjab Examination Commission.

References


Park, Albert, and Emily Hannum. 2001. “Do Teachers Affect Learning in Developing Countries? Evidence from Matched Student-Teacher Data from China.” Paper presented at the Social Science Research Council Conference “Rethinking Social Science Research