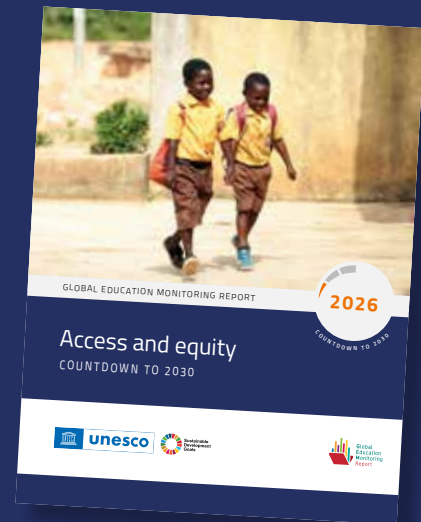


2026 GEM Report: Access and equity

COUNTDOWN TO 2030

Cover photo: UNESCO GEM Report / Rooftop



As the 2030 deadline approaches and multilateralism is under strain, there is a need to use data and narratives to understand the diverse pathways countries have taken towards SDG 4. This edition of the *Global Education Monitoring Report* is the first in the three-part *Countdown to 2030 series*, designed to take stock of education progress in access and equity (2026), quality and learning (2027) and relevance (2028/9). Together, these three editions will assess how education systems open doors, nurture knowledge and prepare learners for a world full of uncertainties – and thus help frame the debate on the post-2030 education agenda.

THE COUNTDOWN TO 2030 SERIES

The 2026 *Global Education Monitoring Report* is the first of a three-part series, entitled *Countdown to 2030*, which aims to take stock of progress and help frame the international community's debate about the education agenda beyond 2030. The series blends discussion of data and policies, involving two steps. First, monitoring data are analysed to identify countries that have improved faster than their peers over a long period of time according to some measure of education development. Second, drivers of strong country performance are described, including both a broad range of explanatory factors, as they emerge from country case studies and a more focused range of policies that research has credited with having made a difference.

The three editions split the international education agenda into three broad topics:

- This first report (2026) focuses on **access and equity**, data for which are abundant and also relatively unambiguous in demonstrating whether countries have progressed.

- The second report (2027) will focus on **quality and learning**, data for which are not only scarce but also harder to interpret.
- The third report (2028/9) will focus on **relevance** in education, in particular the extent to which education systems prepare students to be agents in addressing global challenges. This will be the part of the agenda with the least amount of hard data to support an assessment of whether countries have progressed.

The *Countdown to 2030* series is designed as an integrated trilogy. It recognizes that access, learning and relevance are pillars of a single educational vision. Equity serves as a connective tissue across the trilogy: how to ensure not only that all have an education opportunity but also that the capabilities that they develop and the opportunities they get to develop them are distributed fairly, so that education can be a force for equalizing opportunities rather than reproducing inequalities. Presenting these as three distinct reports is a response to the diverse nature of the global educational data that underpin each of these themes. Each topic demands a different approach to monitoring.

Collectively, the series aims to provide a foundation for international dialogue on where countries stand, how fast they have progressed, what drives differences in performance, and what priorities education systems must address going forward.

THE 2026 GEM REPORT ON ACCESS AND EQUITY

The report uses five SDG indicators to track progress in access and equity, covering pre-primary participation, out-of-school rates, completion rates, tertiary enrolment, and parity among groups. While gender data are relatively strong, measuring equity by wealth, location, disability or ethnicity remains hampered by limited and inconsistent survey data. Countries that have progressed faster or slower than their peers are identified. For example, in the case of the completion rate, the annual growth rate over 10-year-periods was calculated for all countries. Countries were placed into five equal-sized groups depending on their starting point. Countries with at least one period of average annual growth in the top or bottom 25% of their group were classified as having experienced progress or stagnation.. This step produced an initial pool of countries, from which a representative sample (in terms of SDG region, income level and population size) has been selected for case studies (Figure 1).

To understand what drives progress, the report draws on trend data since 2000, 35 country case studies, and a broad research

review. It identifies three sets of levers: factors internal to education systems, such as policy design; factors that are affected by and affect education, such as economic growth and urbanization; and external factors like geography, history and politics, including conflict.

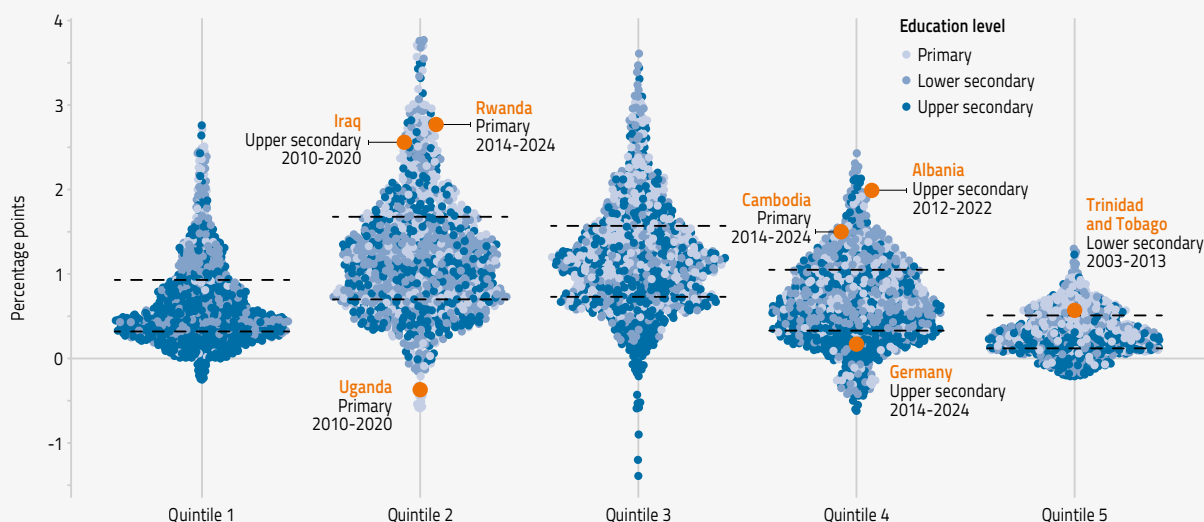
Each of the four main chapters follows a common structure. First, there is a review of the trends of the focus indicators, which identifies core issues that deserve more attention for monitoring a future education agenda. Second, country case studies are presented in alphabetical order for each of the five focus indicators. Third, an education policy analysis follows, which includes inputs from three externally commissioned reviews with the GEM Report team’s own analysis.

In the chapter on equity, the policies analysed in depth are those related to the use of public financing to channel resources to disadvantaged subnational governments, schools and students (or their households) to equalize education opportunities. Country profiles of all national education systems have been developed for the PEER website and an index has been developed that assesses the extent to which countries intentionally reallocate resources for improving education outcomes. The analysis also features how countries’ policies in this field have changed over the past 25 years. This forms part of a reshaping of the PEER website, which will be exploring how selected law and policy indicators have evolved since 2000, starting with inclusion.

FIGURE 1:

Distribution of average annual growth rates of SDG global indicator 4.1.2

Average annual growth rate (in percentage points) over rolling 10-year periods for the completion rate (primary, lower secondary and upper secondary), grouped by the starting value of each period, 2000–24



Notes: Lighter-coloured points represent periods with interpolated data. The starting value quintiles cover the following ranges: quintile 1 (0%–20%), quintile 2 (20%–42%), quintile 3 (42%–66%), quintile 4 (66%–84%) and quintile 5 (84%–95%). The two dashed lines for each quintile represent the 25th and 75th percentiles of growth rates. For each selected country, the most recent period identified as progress or stagnation is highlighted in the figure.

Source: GEM Report team analysis based on the VIEW database.

KEY FINDINGS

Countries will not achieve access for all by 2030, but this does not mean that the global education agenda has failed.

- The three major global education agendas – universal access to primary education declared in 1990; universal completion of primary education in 2000; and universal completion of secondary education in 2015 – increased levels of ambition faster than education system expansion, undermining the credibility of these agendas.
- Behind the numbers of those out of school is a more encouraging story of surging enrolment. With 1.4 billion students enrolled in school in 2024, enrolment had increased by 327 million, or 30%, in primary and secondary education since 2000. It also increased by 45% in pre-primary and by 161% in post-secondary education.
- Countries have also transformed their policy approach to education equity and inclusion. Governments support disadvantaged regions and groups, and have leveraged investments in technology, transport, energy and health to expand education access.

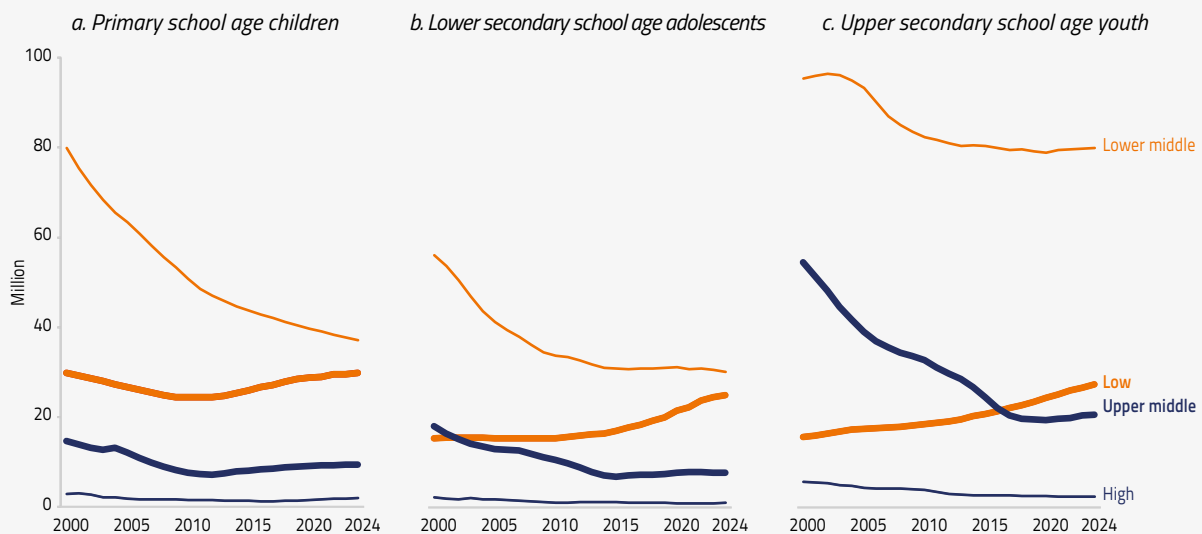
Since 2015, progress in reducing out-of-school rates has slowed across all regions.

- After falling by 33% between 2000 and 2015, the out-of-school population has risen for a seventh year in a row, up 3% since 2015 and reaching 273 million in 2024. This means that one in six children, adolescents and youth worldwide are excluded from education (Figure 2).
- This population is undercounted by at least 13 million if supplementary information from humanitarian sources is used to correct data gaps in the 10 countries most affected by conflict.
- Progress is possible. Some countries have reduced out-of-school rates by at least 80% since 2000, such as Madagascar and Togo among children, Morocco and Viet Nam among adolescents, and Georgia and Türkiye among youth.

FIGURE 2:

The out-of-school population has increased since 2015

Out-of-school population, by age group and country income group, 2000–24



Source: GEM Report and UIS estimates.

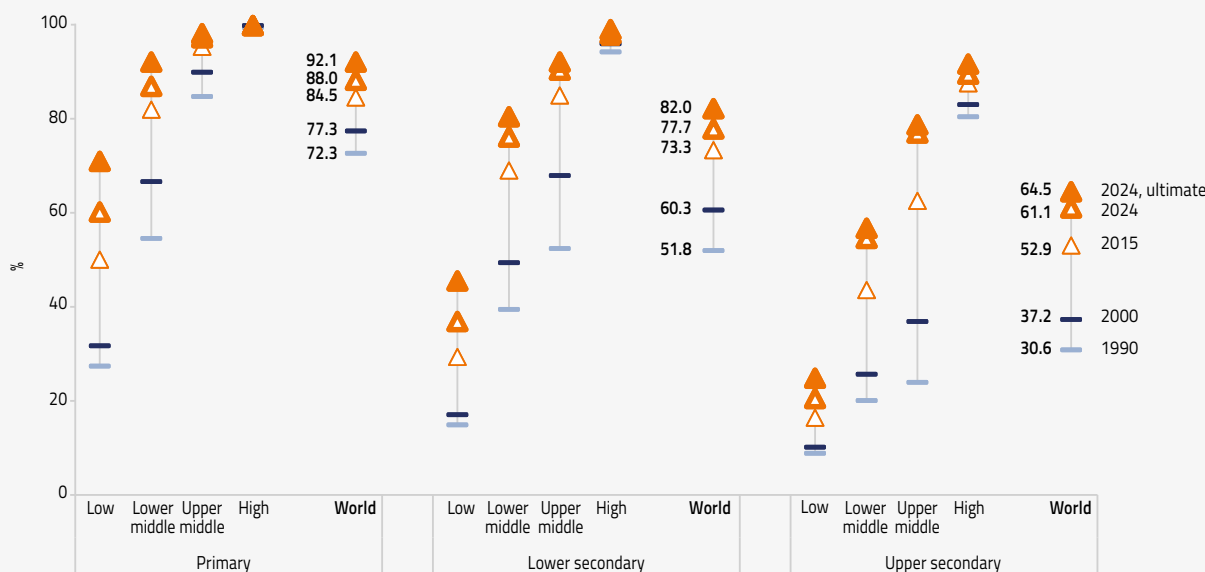
At the current rates, we may never get everyone through to the end of secondary school.

- More children are completing their education even if the out-of-school rate has stagnated. Since 2000, the completion rate has increased from 77% to 88% in primary, from 60% to 78% in lower secondary, and from 37% to 61% in upper secondary. The pace of increase has been, for instance, one percentage point per year in upper secondary education since 2000 (Figure 3).
- At current rates of expansion, the world would achieve 95% upper secondary completion by 2105.
- High rates of children repeating grades have fallen since 2000 by 62% in primary and by 38% in lower secondary education, which explains why out-of-school rates can stagnate, while completion rates improve.
- Many children still enrol in school late and repeat grades in low- and lower-middle-income countries, meaning that many complete each cycle with several years of delay. The gap between ‘timely’ (within three to five years of official graduation age) and ‘ultimate’ (even later) completion in lower secondary education is four percentage points globally but nine percentage points in low-income countries, a gap that has been growing since 2005.

FIGURE 3:

Although upper secondary completion rates have doubled in a generation, more than one in three youth do not graduate from secondary school

Completion rate, by education level and country income group, 1990, 2000, 2015 and 2024 (timely and ultimate)



Source: GEM Report team estimate based on the VIEW completion rate model.

The way to define progress needs to be improved.

- While the 2030 Agenda acknowledged that governments should set their own national targets based on their circumstances, little was done in this way, with education a notable exception. Since 2022, 80% of countries have communicated national targets for eight indicators to be achieved by 2030, with progress monitored annually by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics and the GEM Report.
- Progress is best understood when comparing countries that started from similar points. For example between 2000 and 2024, Mexico cut out-of-school rates over 20 percentage points more than El Salvador; Sierra Leone increased primary completion rates 22 points more than Liberia; and Iraq increased its secondary completion rate 10 points more than Algeria.
- Monitoring progress in equity is not served well by the parity index, the global indicator, which says more about the progress of the indicator being disaggregated rather than the state of inequality. Conclusions can be drawn but trends need to be analysed in context.

Some measurement tools need to be adjusted to be more informative.

- In pre-primary education, the global indicator, which says that 75% of 5-year-olds are in education, overestimates how many children attended preschool before primary because 27% of those children were already in primary school. This report estimates that only 60% of primary school students had at least one year of pre-primary education.
- In primary and secondary education, one in three countries do not report disparity by urban–rural location and one in two countries do not report disparity by wealth. In most cases, this reflects the fact that education ministries do not appreciate survey data enough to use them or that countries are reluctant to reveal disparity even if they have the data.
- In post-secondary education, the gross enrolment ratio overstates progress because many do not ultimately graduate. The tertiary attainment rate of 25- to 34-year-olds consistently represents only some 60% of the gross enrolment ratio 10 years earlier. The attainment rate of 25- to 29-year-olds should become the basis of monitoring and that of 30- to 34-year-olds a measure of late completion.

There are no simple explanations of long-term progress in access and equity.

- Factors outside of education policy can often explain long-term educational expansion, such as rising women’s labour force participation, the prospect of migration, and the peace and stability dividend in countries recovering from conflict.
- Experimental evaluations have provided important policy insights, for instance on the importance of health and nutrition interventions for education. But there is also a tendency to pay too much attention to results of these short-term impact studies, which try to suggest ‘what works’ and yet are silent on the robust institutions that matter for policy implementation to sustain educational expansion.
- No single solution will work. Policy reviews in this report highlight the importance of coherent, context-specific and balanced policy packages that develop institutions, encourage demand, and strengthen the supply of education.

There have been major policy efforts to improve access.

- Since 2000, the share of countries with inclusive education laws has risen from 1% to 24%, while those calling in their laws for children with disabilities to be taught in inclusive education settings has increased from 17% to 29%. The proportion of countries that have adopted a definition of inclusive education has grown from 68% in 2020 to 84% in 2025; of those, the share whose definition extends beyond disability has increased from 51% to 69%.
- Between 1998 and 2023, among 158 countries, the share of those with 12 years of compulsory education has increased from 8% to 26%; among 130 countries, the average duration of free education increased from 10 years to 10.8 years.

There is a shift towards policies that redistribute resources to improve equity in education.

- Financing is an important policy area for achieving equitable outcomes in education. The share of countries deploying four financing mechanisms and using their potential to benefit disadvantaged populations in primary and secondary education – transfers to subnational governments, to schools, and to students and households – has increased by 4 to 6 times in the past 25 years. School meal programmes, which started from a higher baseline, have doubled.
- A new index measuring the intended coverage and volume of equity-oriented policies shows, however, that fewer than 1 in 10 countries have a sufficiently strong equity focus.
- In pre-primary education, 54% of countries transfer resources to institutions serving disadvantaged children, 26% transfer resources to families through the education ministry and 55% transfer resources to families through some other ministry.
- In post-secondary education, 1 in 3 countries charge no tuition in public universities, almost 1 in 2 countries subsidize student housing, 4 in 10 support transport, and just under 3 in 10 subsidize textbooks.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the SDGs were designed to be universal, interdependent and focused on leaving no one behind. This approach has helped create a common lens with which to view the world's education challenges. It has highlighted the role of education in influencing other development outcomes and has brought equity to the centre of policy discussions.

As the world is coming closer to the 2030 deadline, and as the multilateral approach to solving global challenges at the heart of the SDGs is being sorely tested, the *Global Education Monitoring Report* is putting forward its *Countdown to 2030* series to evaluate the success of SDG 4 on education and the lessons to be drawn. It has split the scope of SDG 4 into three parts: access and equity, quality and learning, and relevance in education. It asks three questions. First, among countries that started from similar levels, which ones have improved much faster than others in these broad domains? Second, among a select group of countries singled out for their improvement or their stagnation, what are the key reasons that help explain the observed trends and how do these explanations compare to those that research has identified as having played a key role? Third, what are the implications of the statistical, country case study and policy analyses for a future international education agenda?

This first report in the series addresses these questions as they pertain to access and equity in education. In the case of access, it is clear that the goal of universal secondary completion was wildly unrealistic, considering that not even universal primary completion will have been achieved by 2030. In the case of equity, the targets of eliminating gender disparities and ensuring equal access to all levels of education were similarly too ambitious. But this report argues that it would be wrong to judge the success of the agenda solely on the basis of whether

the world came closer to achieving these symbolic targets. The question is instead whether countries have tried to address bottlenecks using tools that were relevant for their level of educational development and their context: setting targets, monitoring them, and using the information to adopt and adjust the right policy mix. There is evidence that this has been happening.

The following recommendations focus on a selected set of issues related to monitoring progress and designing policies to improve access and equity in education that may not be receiving sufficient attention in global and national policy dialogue processes.

HOW SHOULD MONITORING BE IMPROVED?

a. Countries need to set national targets within a global monitoring framework.

Global agendas tend to be determined by their effectiveness in mobilizing the international community, using a common language to reach shared goals, such as eradicating extreme poverty or keeping the increase in the global temperature below 1.5°. But actual progress happens at the country level: what matters is what national decision makers state publicly as their targets, what resources they allocate to achieve them, and how they confirm whether these targets are being achieved. However, while the foundational documents of the 2030 Agenda clearly stated the expectation of 'each government setting its own national targets', this expectation seems to have been lost.

There is a clear role for international actors. They can and should help develop a common monitoring framework and a process through which countries can communicate these targets. This is what has happened in education. With the support of the UIS and the GEM Report, the SDG 4 national

benchmarking process has offered countries an opportunity to declare their targets.

Moving forward, two things need to happen. First, countries need to more actively embrace the benchmarking process. While 80% of countries have contributed national targets for 2030 for at least some of the eight SDG 4 indicators and 56% of potential target values have been set, more of these target values could also be set. Target-setting processes can be more firmly embedded in national planning and budgeting processes, informed by past rates of progress and other countries' experiences. And these targets can be better communicated domestically. Second, countries also need to actively embrace the benchmarking process at the international level, beyond just education, as the basis of any future broader development agenda post 2030. It should be countries that decide how far they are prepared to go, reflecting their starting points and unique conditions. The global target should be the aggregation of these national commitments.

b. More efficient use of data is needed to monitor education participation and equity.

One of the improvements brought about by the 2030 Agenda across various development sectors is adopting multiple data sources for understanding progress. This is a trend that began in the 2000s, facilitated by the increased production of information and by methods to link such sources. Important steps were also taken in recent years at the international level in education. The UIS and the GEM Report have developed a model to estimate out-of-school rates, which has broken the artificial divide between administrative and survey sources, helping make the most of each source, while also addressing their respective weaknesses along the way. The GEM Report had earlier developed a model to estimate completion rates, helping make much more effective use of the data available in surveys and censuses. Such estimates make it possible to track trends in these two headline indicators consistently, whereas relying solely on estimates for individual years would have limited the timeliness and comparability of findings.

However, many education ministries are yet to embrace multiple data sources for monitoring progress, continuing to opt for the administrative sources they have traditionally relied upon, even if they often show an incomplete picture. The use of multiple data sources is crucial for monitoring equity in education, yet there is a lack of awareness of the variety of data sources that can help disaggregate education participation and attainment indicators by individual characteristics specific to countries' contexts. Collaboration between education ministries and national statistical offices needs to be further developed.

c. The education monitoring framework needs to be refined to produce more accurate education participation and attainment statistics.

Each international agenda has helped improve the monitoring of education progress, incorporating changes made possible by improved data collection. For example, the gross enrolment ratio and the gross intake rate to the last grade have been

gradually replaced by the out-of-school rate and the completion rate, which have contributed to more realistic assessments of progress. But more refinements of this kind are needed to give the right information to policymakers.

This report presents examples. In pre-primary education, the global indicator overestimates the proportion of children who have ever attended preschool because it includes students who may be enrolled too early in primary school. In primary and secondary education, there is a need for a mechanism to monitor children who are out of school in conflict-affected countries. In post-secondary education, it is also time to move beyond the gross enrolment ratio, which overestimates progress, given high levels of dropout and very different ways of participation by age across countries, to instead adopt an attainment measure. The education community now has a governance mechanism through the process of the Education Data and Statistics Conference, first convened in 2024 and next scheduled for 2027, which countries need to use as the focus of efforts for an inclusive development of the monitoring framework of a future international education agenda.

d. Policies also need to be monitored, not just outputs and outcomes.

Since 2020, the GEM Report, through its PEER website, has been systematically reviewing the laws and policies that countries have adopted to improve education outcomes. This year there are two extensions. First, a comprehensive set of country profiles on policies to improve equity through five financing mechanisms has been added and summarized into an index of equity orientation in policy intent. Second, this year some of the policy indicators first reported in its 2020 edition on inclusion have been updated, reporting on their evolution since 2000 and providing insights into long-term change. PEER country profiles were originally designed to document the situation in a certain policy area at a particular point in time. Interest in this approach has generated demand on the GEM Report team to follow progress in certain policies over time.

International policy dialogue needs more structured information on national policy choices. As is clearly stated in this report, this does not mean that policies should be ranked or prescribed. There are multiple paths to achieve the same result. Moreover, it is widely documented that policies are often not implemented. But better documentation and mapping of policy intentions can still offer a solid basis for understanding how countries eventually make progress, inform advocacy and guide technical support. It is therefore recommended that more emphasis be placed on monitoring how key policies are evolving and how governments respond to shared challenges.

How should policymaking respond to monitoring evidence?

This report has tried to identify why some countries have moved much faster than their peers in expanding access and improving equity. The stories that emerge are full of relevant insights. Some are straightforward, especially when the change was the result of a clear political decision that was carried

out effectively. Others are less clear cut, especially when the change was the result of multiple factors, including some from outside education.

A key message of this report is that there has been too much emphasis on the ability of certain solutions to deliver drastic improvements. These solutions were usually not applied as nationwide policies. Rather they were well-curated interventions, followed by high-quality evaluations. These policy experiments indicate where change is needed but have usually not been applied system-wide. They were evaluated within a year of implementation and on a small scale. In contrast, the change documented in this report had a longer horizon, often a decade or more, and has taken place at a system level. The drivers of change may have been more mundane, related to the development of institutional and system capacity. Yet policymakers can be tempted to follow simple and well-publicized recipes with 'proven' results. The following four recommendations, which span all levels of education, point to core principles and advise exercising caution.

a. Make appropriate policy choices that are relevant to the country context.

Learning from peers is a priceless and yet affordable opportunity in an era of frequent exchanges and low-cost communications. Other countries' experiences are a rich source of ideas. But these ideas need not be seen as solutions to be copied and applied elsewhere. Rather they need to be studied carefully to understand which institutional structures and policy combinations were effective (or not) and why. They call for reflection on which elements of other countries' choices are applicable and which problems they tried to solve. While this may sound obvious, there is a tendency for countries to focus on transposing 'what works' elsewhere to their systems – and sometimes international actors perpetuate the idea that there are off-the-shelf solutions. Yet no policy can be imported wholesale unless it has gone through the scrutiny of whether it is appropriate. Policies need to respond to a country's unique combination of assets and barriers.

b. Design education policies with an equity orientation and evaluate their results.

Equity in education requires a range of policy tools that predict, identify and compensate for disadvantage. It needs fair and inclusive institutions that facilitate enrolment, progression and completion. It calls for support rather than penalties for struggling students. It favours comprehensive solutions that open opportunities rather than selective solutions that concentrate disadvantage. It champions flexibility over rigidity. Some of these approaches need financing to subnational governments, to schools, to students and their families, in cash or in kind, that redistribute resources to those who need them the most. But even poor countries that cannot afford reallocation can achieve results by committing to inclusion. Many education ministries are still missing important elements. They need to recognize the relevance of social protection mechanisms that can complement their efforts; to coordinate with other sectors; to improve the quality of their targeting

mechanisms; and to evaluate whether policies designed to be equity oriented are actually achieving this goal. A peer learning network on the implementation of equity in education policies would be particularly relevant and help countries assess their policy choices.

c. Think long term: change takes time.

One of the challenges of education policymaking is the slow pace with which it translates actions to results. A child that reaches preschool age today will have lived through, on average, six different ministers of education before they are lucky enough to reach the last year of secondary school. Yet, at a time when everything seems to accelerate and attention spans shorten, the appetite for quick fixes seems to be growing. Expanding access and improving equity typically result from sustained interventions, not short-term projects that fit within a political cycle. They require institutions that have their capacity developed patiently over many years to be transformed. Countries that made the fastest gains combined steady investment, kept core policies in place, and adjusted them gradually in light of emerging evidence and experience, recognizing that institutions, behaviours and expectations around schooling shift slowly. This message is also relevant in the context of declining external financing for education: rather than seek even quicker results, now is the time to correct past mistakes and stop counting effectiveness in terms of numbers of children sent to school at a cost that was never going to be sustainable.

d. Choose a balanced and consistent policy mix: no single reform will increase access and improve equity sustainably.

The four policy reviews included in this report, at the pre-primary, primary and secondary, and post-secondary level, as well as on equity through financing, all serve as a reminder that a combination of policy instruments is needed to achieve long-term outcomes. System-level measures (related to legislation, governance and general financing) need to be supported by demand-side policies (targeted financing to reduce costs for more disadvantaged populations) and supply-side policies (e.g. infrastructure, regulation and learning environments). An effective package, whose elements are well aligned, treats education as an integrated system. It tackles access alongside equity and quality so that once learners enter the schooling system, they are supported to progress and graduate.


RELATED RESOURCES


Seven country case studies are featured in the report for each of the five focus indicators


- **Pre-primary education:** Azerbaijan, Cameroon, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Lebanon, Lithuania, Madagascar and Uzbekistan.
- **Primary and secondary education:** Albania, Bangladesh, Cambodia, Costa Rica, Côte d'Ivoire, Dominica, Germany, Iraq and Morocco, Mozambique, Romania, Rwanda, Trinidad and Tobago and Uganda.
- **Post secondary education:** Belarus, Chile, China, Fiji, Saudi Arabia, Thailand and Togo.
- **Equity:** Armenia, the Plurinational State of Bolivia, Ethiopia, Mongolia, Nepal, the Philippines and the Republic of Moldova.


Accompanying content:

- Three systematic reviews
- Summary version
- Gender edition (forthcoming)
- Three regional editions (forthcoming)
 - Arab States: early childhood education
 - Africa: Spotlight on late enrolment and repetition
 - Caribbean: gender gap in secondary completion

 **The World Inequality Database on Education (WIDE)** analyses data from over 160 countries to allow you to compare education outcomes on 3 levels, according to factors that are associated with inequality, including gender, location, wealth, and ethnicity.
www.education-inequalities.org

 **Scoping Progress in Education (SCOPE)** summarizes the key facts and trends in education around the world through five themes: Access, equity, learning, quality and finance.
www.education-progress.org

 **Visualizing Indicators of Education for the World (VIEW)** provides estimates of the out-of-school and completion rates by using multiple data sources to calculate time series by country and region and to address challenges of timeliness and consistency associated with survey data.
www.education-estimates.org

 **Profiles Enhancing Education Reviews (PEER)** provide comparable qualitative data on education policies and laws at the national level, covering inclusion, financing for equity, climate change education, regulations of non-state providers in education, comprehensive sexuality education, technology and leadership. New PEER profiles analyse in depth the use of public financing to channel resources to disadvantaged subnational governments, schools and students (or their households) to equalize education opportunities. The analysis also features how countries' policies in this field have changed over the past 25 years. This forms part of a reshaping of the PEER website, which will be exploring how selected law and policy indicators have evolved since 2000, starting with inclusion.
<https://www.unesco.org/gem-report/en/peer>

<https://doi.org/10.54676/OHTY3397>
ED/GEMR/MRT/2026/ES1



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The *Global Education Monitoring Report*: informing education action since 2002.

