GLOBAL EDUCATION MONITORING REPORT SUMMARY

2026

COUNTDOWN TO 2030

Access and equity

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Sustainable Development Goals

Global Education Monitoring Report

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Photo caption: Godfred, aged six, and his friend on their way to school in a small rural town in the Eastern region of Ghana.

Photo credit: UNESCO GEM Report / Rooftop

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***Global Education Monitoring Report* series**

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2024/5	*Leadership and education: Lead for learning*
2023	*Technology in education: A tool on whose terms?*
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The Education 2030 Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action specifies that the mandate of the *Global Education Monitoring Report* is to be 'the mechanism for monitoring and reporting on SDG 4 and on education in the other SDGs', with the responsibility to 'report on the implementation of national and international strategies to help hold all relevant partners to account for their commitments as part of the overall SDG follow-up and review'. It is prepared by an independent team hosted by UNESCO.

The *Global Education Monitoring Report* team is responsible for the choice and the presentation of the facts contained in this book and for the opinions expressed therein, which are not necessarily those of UNESCO nor of its funders and do not commit the Organization. Overall responsibility for the views and opinions expressed in the report is taken by its Director.

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KEY MESSAGES

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.
- 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.

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.
- 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.

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.

The global development agenda and its perception of education have shifted. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have brought together people and planet, rich and poor countries, under a single universal framework. Unlike the Education for All (EFA) programme launched in 1990, which focused on education, the SDGs embody a broader conception of education's role, which is recognized as central for the achievement of other development outcomes. Unlike the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) launched in 2000, which focused on primary education, SDG 4, the education goal, covers all education levels.

Global ambition in the three global education agendas outpaced expansion. In 1990, EFA called for universal primary access; in 2000, Millenium Development Goal 2 called for universal primary completion; and in 2015, Sustainable Development Goal 4 called for universal (upper) secondary completion. These were unrealistically ambitious targets but expressed the changing perceptions of what the right to education would mean in the 21st century. But by 2023, midway to 2030, it was clear that not only universal secondary completion but also none of the other more ambitious SDG 4 targets were on track. For example, the latest information in this report shows that out-of-school numbers have been growing in the last seven years, now totalling 273 million, while only two thirds of youth complete secondary school.

The Countdown to 2030 series takes stock of lessons from the global education agendas. As the 2030 deadline approaches, in a context where multilateralism is under strain, there is a need to use data and country experiences to understand the diverse pathways countries have taken towards SDG 4. This edition of the *Global Education Monitoring Report* is the first of the three-part Countdown to 2030 series, designed to take stock of progress and frame the debate on a post-2030 education agenda. The series blends data and narratives by first identifying countries that have improved faster than peers in the past 25 years on key education measures, and then examining the factors and policies associated with such performance through case studies and research insights.

The Countdown to 2030 trilogy treats access, quality and relevance as interlinked pillars. The three editions each focus on one major dimension of the agenda: access and equity (2026), quality and learning (2027) and relevance (2028/9), each of which can be assessed in different ways. But the three areas are interconnected. Rapid educational expansion in poorer countries after 2000, after years of cuts in public funding due to structural adjustment programmes, seemed positive but often coincided with declining quality. Many young people disengaged with education and left school early, as they learned little and felt that their education had little relevance for their life prospects. Relevance is foundational to quality: education must prepare learners for life, especially amidst accelerating global challenges, such as the impact of technology, authoritarianism, climate change, environmental degradation and shifting social structures. Across the trilogy, equity connects the dimensions: as access grows, equity concerns shift towards learning and relevance – the capabilities learners develop and the opportunities available to them – so that education can help equalize rather than reproduce inequalities.

Access and equity are analysed through five SDG global and thematic indicators. Indicator 4.2.2 measures participation in organized learning one year before primary entry age (usually age 5) although it does not distinguish whether children attend preschool or school. Indicator 4.1.4 is the out-of-school rate for children of primary school age, adolescents of lower secondary school age and youth of upper secondary school age. It is based on administrative data, complemented by modelled estimates and analyses of late entry, over-age enrolment and repetition rates. Indicator 4.1.2 is the completion rate at primary, lower secondary and upper secondary levels, based on household surveys and defined over those aged three to five years above the official graduation age to capture late completers. Indicator 4.3.2 is the tertiary gross enrolment ratio, which combines diverse programme types and ages. It can overstate progress in countries where dropout is high, underscoring the need to consider attainment as a complementary measure. Indicator 4.5.1, the parity index, compares indicator values for disadvantaged and privileged groups, defined on the basis of characteristics, including sex, location, wealth and disability. Parity indices tend to improve as the underpinning indicator's value increases, which means that simple cross-country comparisons may not track progress in equity.

Country case studies in this report were selected using these indicators. The first step was to calculate countries' average annual growth rates over rolling periods of up to 10 years and classify those into five groups depending on their starting point, as the speed of progress depends on where countries begin from. Countries were then identified according to whether their average growth rate in that period was above the 75th percentile (fast) or below the 25th percentile (slow). Additional checks were applied for the availability of recent data and to exclude cases with unexplained fluctuations. Finally, countries were selected from the groups of fast and slow progress based on

representativeness by region, income level and population size.

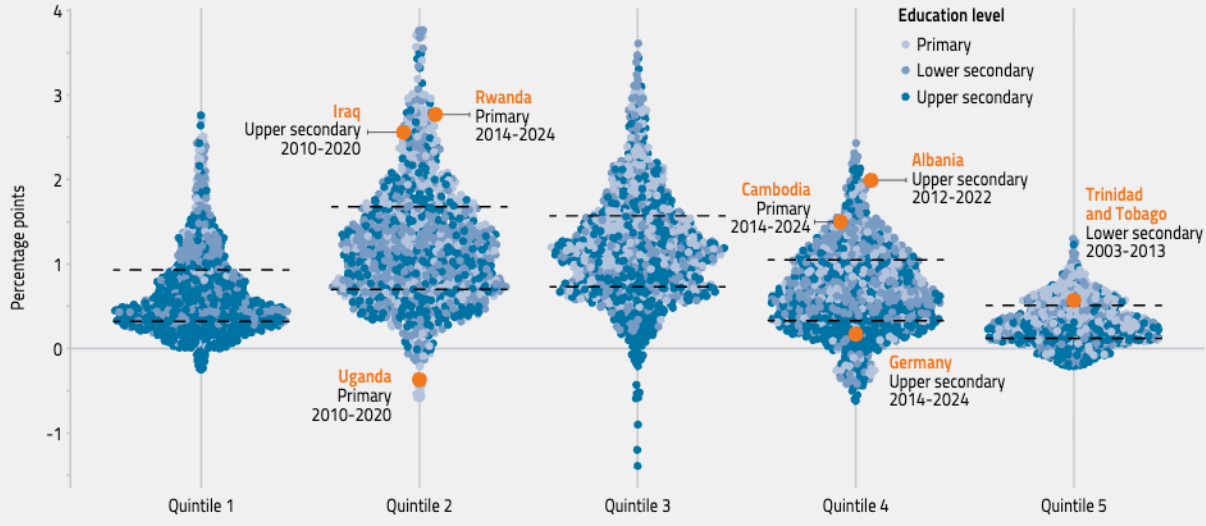
In a few cases, country selection departed slightly from this methodology. In the case of the early childhood education participation indicator (4.2.2), in order to select a high-income country, most of which have rates close to 100%, the net enrolment rate in pre-primary education was used instead. Both the out-of-school (4.1.4) and completion (4.1.2) rate indicators were analysed across three levels, with most case studies drawn from the youth/upper secondary level, where the differences in expansion patterns are the most clearly discernible (**Figure 1**). The tertiary education gross enrolment ratio (4.3.2) was straightforward for choosing countries. Finally, in the case of equity, the parity index of the completion rate was analysed for four individual characteristics: sex, location, region and wealth. Only countries that achieved progress were included. For disability, where trend data are not available, a regional UNICEF database was used, and selection was based on progress towards including students with disability in mainstream schools.

The report builds upon the principles of the SDG 4 benchmarking process. In recent years, some 80% of countries have set national targets, or benchmarks, for 2025 and 2030 on a core set of SDG 4 indicators. Led by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics and the *Global Education Monitoring Report*, this process helps translate aspirational global goals into context-specific national targets, linked to budgets. The likelihood of countries meeting their own commitments is tracked in the annual SDG 4 Scorecard. The process seeks to strengthen accountability while providing a formative mechanism for countries to set realistic but ambitious targets, offering a common reference point for national and international dialogue on education progress.

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.

Three questions are addressed using three bodies of evidence. Following the logic of the Countdown to 2030 series, the report asks: which countries improved faster, among those that started from similar levels; what factors explain their progress or lack of progress; and what do these findings imply for the access and equity aspects of a future global agenda? It then uses three broad bodies of evidence: trend analyses of international data since 2000; 35 country case studies, selected by the methodology described above; and policy reviews on what helps explain what has driven progress in some countries or held others back. Three broad sets of factors are identified: factors internal to education (policies), factors external to education (e.g. history, geography, culture, demography and politics); and in-between factors (e.g. economic growth, labour markets, poverty, urbanization and conflict) which both influence and are influenced by education.

Few studies focus on the long-term determinants of educational expansion. Under the label of evidence-based policy, there is a tendency to focus on narratives of 'what works', which are often informed by rigorous experimental evaluations of interventions. These have shed light on important drivers of change in education, notably non-education factors, such as health and nutrition. But most of such studies have examined short-term effects in controlled settings. They have rarely followed outcomes beyond a few years and almost never captured how to sustain large-scale expansion in participation over decades, which is this report's timescale of interest. The report urges readers to shift perspective: from asking which discrete interventions have statistically significant effects, to asking what drives long-term, nationwide increases in participation and equity. It concludes that progress at scale almost never comes from a single measure but from coordinated action across sectors, sustained political commitment, implementation capacity and adaptation to local contexts.

While context matters, certain principles appear across countries. A political commitment to leaving no one behind needs to be supported by better disaggregated data and an alignment with legal, financial and social protection frameworks. As for the role of an international agenda, it is to inform dialogue rather than prescribe one-size-fits-all solutions. It must balance universal commitments, made in the course of the past 80 years and underpinned by a basic package of principles and mechanisms, with national ownership: countries should be able to adapt these principles and implement these mechanisms according to their circumstances.

Special attention in this report is paid to financing for equity. While recognizing the various types of policies that influence education inequality, this report has selected one set of policies, 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. All countries have been profiled for the PEER website, and an index has been developed that assesses the extent to which countries intentionally reallocate resources to improve education equity. The analysis also features how countries' policies in this area have changed over the past 25 years. This is part of a reshaping of the PEER website, which will start exploring how selected laws and policies have evolved since 2000, starting with inclusion.

The report follows a different structure than its previous editions. Four core chapters – on pre-primary, primary and secondary, post-secondary, and equity – follow a common structure. First, there is a review of the trends of the focus indicators, alongside the identification of core issues that deserve more attention and should be considered when monitoring a future education agenda. Second, seven country case studies are presented in alphabetical order for each of the five focus indicators (the chapter on primary and secondary education groups together the case studies on out-of-school and completion rate indicators). Third, an education policy analysis follows, combining input from three externally commissioned reviews with the GEM Report team's own analysis of the literature, as well as the lessons that have emerged from the case studies.

PRE-PRIMARY EDUCATION

KEY TRENDS

Early childhood education has expanded over the past 25 years. Single-age data suggest that globally about 42% of 3-year-olds, 59% of 4-year-olds and 80% of 5-year-olds are enrolled in school. Although the steepest age-related increase in participation happens between ages 4 and 5, in low-income countries the largest jump occurs between ages 5 and 6. The participation rate one year before primary entry, which varies between countries, rose from 64% in 2003 to 75% in 2024.

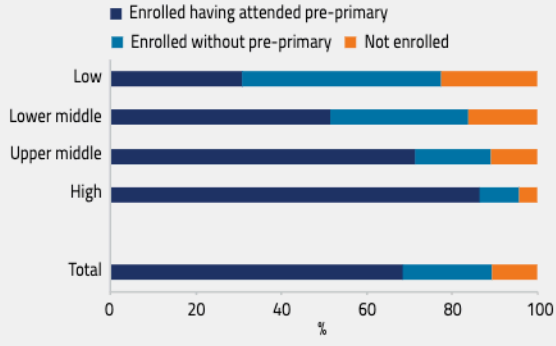
But progress has slowed sharply since 2015, partly due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Progress in participation slowed down by two thirds after 2015 compared to the period between 2000 and 2015. COVID-19 caused a temporary 5% drop in enrolment rates of pre-primary school age children, rising to 10% in some regions. Regional differences remain large: Europe's pre-primary enrolment rose from 73% to 90% between 2000 and 2024, while in sub-Saharan Africa fewer than 25% of children of pre-primary age are enrolled.

Assessing progress in pre-primary education is harder to interpret than headline indicators suggest. The practice of children going to primary school earlier than the official age confuses measurement, which only assesses whether a child of a certain age is in education, not what level they are in. Globally, 27% of children aged one year before primary are already in primary, a figure largely driven by India, where 51% of 5-year-olds are already in primary school. In Rwanda, participation of 5-year-olds increased, but this was because a growing share were already in primary, while in Cameroon overall participation fell, even though the share of 5-year-olds in pre-primary was increasing. These cases show that headline participation indicators can rise just because children start primary earlier or can look flat or even declining when early childhood provision expands.

Estimating how many children have attended preschool requires a different approach. The indicator of ultimate interest is how many children have attended preschool before entering school. One approach to estimate it could be to exclude children who have enrolled early in primary, which would lower the global figure from 75% to roughly 55%. A more precise method uses single-age, level-specific enrolment to infer whether current primary school entry age children are likely to have attended pre-primary: this approach estimates that 59% have attended preschool (ranging from 36% in low-income to 86% in high-income countries), 30% are already in primary without pre-primary experience and 11% are not yet enrolled (**Figure 2**). However, this method relies upon cohort sizes remaining stable as well as there being no rapid expansion, which, if not true, would overstate participation.

Monitoring participation of children under 3 is very challenging. Differing interpretations of what counts as early childhood education and varied governance approaches make it difficult to measure participation for young children. For example, a broader definition that combines education with care increases enrolment rates in France from 5% to 59% and across Europe from 20% to 39%. Universal participation is not always the preferred outcome, as families' preferences vary. The European Union has set a target to reach a participation rate of 45% by 2030.

FIGURE 2:
It is estimated that 6 in 10 children have ever attended pre-primary education
Estimated distribution of children of official primary entry age by enrolment status and pre-primary participation, by country income group, 2024 or latest available year



Note: The estimation is based on enrolment data by single year of age and education level, assuming that the cohort size remains stable and that children stay at least until the first grade of primary, once enrolled in pre-primary.
GEM StatLink: https://bit.ly/GEM2026_Summary_fig2
Source: GEM Report team analysis based on the UIS database.

COUNTRY CASE STUDIES

Country case studies highlight a range of experiences around the world since 2000. In **Azerbaijan**, almost universal access to pre-primary education was achieved within five years through a comprehensive legal framework and the introduction of free and fully state-funded school readiness classes established within existing primary schools, accompanied by the transfer of responsibility to the education ministry. The fast rollout brought some implementation challenges such as the need for more teacher capacity; continued attention is needed to close disparities in access by wealth and disability. In **Cameroon**,

about 41% of 5-year-olds are enrolled in education, a rate that has remained broadly constant since 2015. While overall participation has not increased, the composition has shifted, with a growing share of enrolled children attending pre-primary rather than entering primary school early. Progress has been severely constrained by armed conflict, insecurity and displacement, particularly in the Far North, Northwest and Southwest regions, where schools have closed. At the same time, low and declining public investment has increased reliance on private providers whose high cost has exacerbated income- and location-based disparities.

In the **Lao People's Democratic Republic**, enrolment rates for 5-year-olds jumped from around 10% in 2000 to 67% in 2023, mainly because the government opened hundreds of kindergartens, introduced preparatory programmes attached to primary schools, and encouraged the opening of community-based settings. The government prioritizes 40 districts, selected based on location, poverty and the presence of ethnic minorities, where development partners have also directed their support, helping reduce inequality. In **Lebanon**, enrolment for 5-year-olds had already been almost universal in 2000 but conflict, displacement, crises and a weak state have been challenging provision in recent years. A comparison of kindergarten 3 and grade 1 enrolment suggests about one in seven children have not attended preschool. With just 20% enrolled in public preschools and public education spending below 2% of GDP, the system remains highly privatized and inequitable. This has left it vulnerable to the increase in poverty levels, following a severe financial crisis, that has reduced attendance, especially for the youngest children. Only 18% of Syrian refugee children access pre-primary education.

In **Lithuania**, early childhood participation among children aged 3 to 5 increased from about 82% in 2013 to 95% in 2023, while participation among children under 3 rose sharply. This was driven by policies that progressively guaranteed access to early childhood education from age 2 supported by substantial increases in public spending and the introduction of a per-child funding model. Equity outcomes have also improved, although significant income-based and rural–urban disparities in participation persist. In **Madagascar**, the enrolment of 5-year-olds increased from 10% in 2000 to 66% in 2024 despite some of the highest poverty levels in the world. Pre-primary education was integrated into the national system and the number of public schools offering it increased sixfold within three years. This was possible due to large-scale investment in low-cost community centres in rural areas, although affordability still remains a barrier. In **Uzbekistan**, participation rates one year before entering primary entrance age increased from 38% in 2008 to 82% in 2022. This growth reflects policy reforms anchored in the Law on Preschool Education, the creation of a dedicated ministry and large-scale public–private partnerships. Subsidies, alternative models and inclusion efforts have further contributed to improved access.

POLICY ANALYSIS

Early childhood care and education of high quality is critical, especially for disadvantaged children. While the role of early learning is critical for brain development, many countries still struggle to offer even one year of pre-primary education for all children because of costs, weak institutionalization and lack of demand; political leadership has therefore often been decisive. The review considered three broad categories of policies: developing institutions, supporting demand and strengthening supply.

Expansion is not only driven by policy but also by broader socioeconomic shifts. Rising maternal employment and changes in family structure in high-income countries have prompted governments to expand and regulate services and introduce subsidies. At the same time, universal or heavily subsidized preschool can raise mothers' employment by several percentage points, although short service hours, high transport costs and weak regulation in many low- and middle-income countries dampen this effect.

SYSTEM-LEVEL POLICIES

Making pre-primary compulsory and/or free makes it an entitlement. Internationally, the call for at least one year of free, compulsory pre-primary early education is backed by international conventions and statements, while a proposed protocol of the Convention for the Rights of the Child would make free pre-primary education a binding right, helping increase state responsibility for its provision. Between 1998 and 2023, among 182 countries with data, the number of those with at least one year of compulsory pre-primary education increased from 20 to 44. Several countries lowered the compulsory school starting age. Among 119 countries with data, those guaranteeing at least one year of free pre-primary rose from 46 to 69, many extending to two or three years. A comparison of 73 countries finds that countries on average witnessed a larger increase in pre-primary net enrolment rates between 2003 and 2023 when they made pre-primary free (by 28%) or compulsory (by 30%) than when they did not (by 23%). However, the full benefits of universal pre-primary programmes follow when quality and implementation are ensured. Abolishing fees should help expand the public pre-primary system as it did in the Bahamas, Belize, Jordan and Malta, but in Chile, Kazakhstan, Türkiye and England (United Kingdom), cutting fees saw the private share of pre-primary education rise.

Integrated governance is needed. Early childhood education placed within education ministries tends to support smoother transitions, aligned curricula and sustained learning gains. Fragmented governance weakens data systems, as private and community programmes may be excluded from records, and may lead to inequitable access. Of 181 countries reviewed, 76% assign early childhood education to the education ministry, 21% split responsibility with other ministries, and 3% assign it elsewhere. In Mongolia, aligned policy has expanded access to education, health and social welfare services, while in Uzbekistan a dedicated preschool ministry has accelerated participation. Fragmentation in Bangladesh, India and Pakistan has limited quality assurance and curriculum coherence. In sub-Saharan Africa, the degree of fragmentation is above average, with 13 of 47 countries splitting responsibility and budget lines across ministries. In Latin America, intersectoral early childhood strategies, such as in Brazil and Colombia, have strengthened coordination.

Pre-primary education is generally underfunded. Many governments rely heavily on non-state provision. Only 10 countries with data spend at least 1% of GDP on pre-primary education. Among 61 countries with comparable data, median spending rose from 0.29% to 0.43% of GDP over two decades. Higher public spending is unrelated to total enrolment but positively associated with enrolment in public institutions: doubling spending from about 0.25% to 0.5% of GDP correlates with roughly tripling public participation one year before primary. Lithuania increased both pre-primary and broader early childhood spending as a share of GDP, raising expenditure per child even as the number of children enrolled increased as well. The design of financing also shapes equity. Denmark combines municipal responsibility, substantial subsidies, capped parental fees at 25% of costs, and extra funding for disadvantaged centres, maintaining high access with limited inequality.

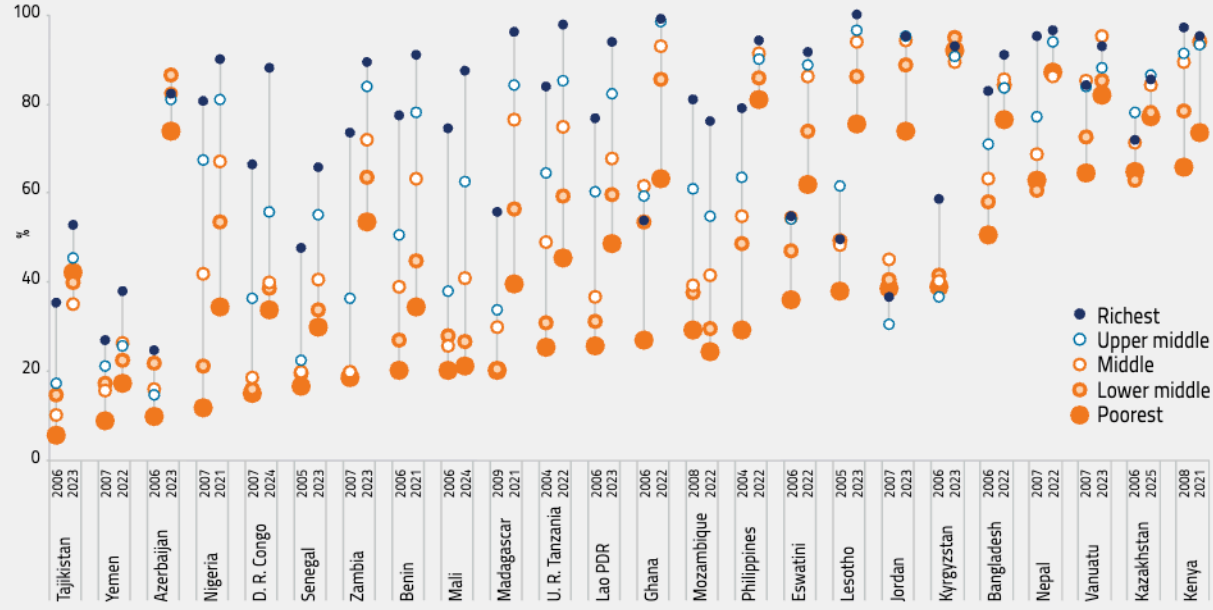
DEMAND-SIDE POLICIES

Wealth gaps in access to pre-primary education remain large. Between 2005 and 2020, preschool participation one year before primary school increased by about 30 percentage points in 25 countries across Africa, Asia, and the Pacific, with strong gains in Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan and the Philippines. However, the gap between rich and poor children in those countries remained large, at around 30 percentage points (**Figure 3**). In contrast, poor children closed the participation gap with wealthier peers between 2000 and 2024 in eight Latin American countries.

FIGURE 3:

In Africa and Asia, early childhood education participation levels have increased, but participation gaps between the poorest and the richest have remained the same

Participation rate in organized learning one year before the official primary entry age, by wealth quintile, selected African, Asian and Pacific countries, 2004–08 and 2020–24



GEM StatLink: https://bit.ly/GEM2026_Summary_fig3

Source: UIS database.

Countries use different targeted schemes to allocate resources where they are most needed. PEER profiles show that, in addition to making it free, countries use three other mechanisms to make pre-primary education more affordable: 54% of countries make transfers to institutions serving disadvantaged children; 26% make transfers to families through the education ministry; and 55% make transfers to families through some other ministry, usually social protection. Transfers to institutions mainly assist children with disabilities (59% of countries), while transfers to students and households focus primarily on addressing poverty (92%). School feeding coverage in preschool is low, ranging from 2% in low-income countries to 22% in high-income countries.

Cash transfers targeted at disadvantaged groups help make early education more affordable and accessible. In rural Karnataka, scholarships covering preschool fees raised participation by 20 percentage points. Transfers which are tied to attendance have raised enrolment in several countries. In Chile, Colombia, El Salvador, Mexico and the Philippines, they increased preschool participation by 6 to 15 percentage points, particularly in rural and marginalized areas. In high-income countries such as France, Germany, Norway and the United States, income-based incentives, tax relief and cash bonuses promote preschool attendance, though administrative barriers and stigma may reduce their effectiveness.

Home-based programmes can help close early developmental gaps. Survey evidence from 63 low- and middle-income countries shows that activities that stimulate 3- to 4-year-old children, such as reading, storytelling and playing, are twice as common (72%) as being enrolled in organized learning programmes (34%). Community outreach and home visiting programmes, such as Brazil's Criança Feliz and Indonesia's Early Childhood Education and Development Project, raise awareness of early learning; in Indonesia, this approach helped increase preschool enrolment by up to 9 percentage points.

SUPPLY-SIDE POLICIES

Several countries have expanded public preschool infrastructure. Colombia, through its De Cero a Siempre programme; Mozambique, with its rural preschool initiative in 10 districts; and Viet Nam's investment in new facilities have all helped increase participation. Several countries, including Ethiopia, Guatemala and South Africa, increased access by integrating pre-primary classes into existing primary schools, lowering costs and extending coverage.

Private providers account for over 50% of enrolment in one third of countries with recent data. The share of private provision has remained stable over two decades, with growth in some regions offset by declines in others. A mapping for the PEER website found that 81% of countries offer incentives to encourage non-state providers to operate. Community and non-government organization providers are often supported by governments to bridge access gaps for disadvantaged groups, as seen in the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Madagascar, and Trinidad and Tobago. Governments also partner with private providers through contracting, subsidies or voucher schemes. Brazil, the Philippines, Samoa and South Africa use contracting or grants to align private centres with national standards, while Bahamas, the Republic of Korea and Saudi Arabia use vouchers to make private preschools more affordable. While most countries license such providers, regulations frequently focus on administrative compliance rather than equity-enhancing measures like fee caps or inclusive admission rules. Only 45% of countries regulate fees and just 15% regulate profit making.

Families are more likely to enrol their children when programmes visibly benefit them. Observable factors like positive teacher–child interactions help shape family decisions. System-strengthening measures, including teachers' professional development and coaching, can enhance educator practices and drive demand. In Chile, Un Buen Comienzo (A Good Start), a two-year teacher professional development programme, contributed to a decrease in students' absenteeism from 54% to 35%. In Ghana, preschools whose teachers received professional development recorded higher attendance and stronger parental engagement. Playful, positive environments are another key quality component, which require minimal resources but foster school readiness and strengthen parent–child bonds.

Inclusive environments also attract disadvantaged children. Inclusive facility standards in South Australia, multifunctional resource rooms in Brazil, and additional assistants and rehabilitation staff in several European countries support the enrolment of children with disability. Multilingual and intercultural approaches, such as Cambodia's community preschools, Ecuador's bilingual intercultural programme, New Zealand's bicultural curriculum and Papua New Guinea's use of over 400 indigenous languages, promote inclusion for children from ethnic and linguistic minorities. Colombia's itinerant rural strategy and Mongolia's mobile kindergartens serve children in remote areas. For displaced children, access to early learning remains fragile and heavily dependent on short-term funding.

PRIMARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION

KEY TRENDS

Between 2000 and 2024, the number of learners in school has grown rapidly. Primary enrolment increased by 19%, lower secondary by 28% and upper secondary by 73%, adding 327 million students. Since 2000, sub-Saharan Africa has more than doubled primary enrolment and more than tripled secondary enrolment; in low-income countries, secondary enrolment has almost quadrupled. Over the same period, the school-age population fell by 9% in upper-middle- and high-income countries, rose by 25% in lower-middle-income countries and doubled in low-income countries.

Despite this growth to 1.4 billion children, adolescents and youth studying in primary or secondary school, 273 million were out of school in 2024: 79 million of primary school age, 64 million of lower secondary age and 130 million of upper secondary age. Numbers fell by 33% between 2000 and 2015 but rose by 3% by 2024. In low-income countries, the out-of-school population has increased by 29% since 2015, while remaining broadly flat elsewhere. Three quarters of all out-of-school children, adolescents and youth are in sub-Saharan Africa and in Central and Southern Asia. The global out-of-school rate for the primary and secondary school age population dropped from 27% in 2000 to 17% in 2015 but has since stalled.

Out-of-school populations are underestimated in conflict-affected countries. Conflict disrupts schooling and data collection. Analysis of humanitarian agency and other reports on the 10 countries most affected by conflict in 2024 – Burkina Faso, Haiti, Lebanon, Mali, Myanmar, the State of Palestine, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan and the Syrian Arab Republic – suggests that projections based on official data undercount the global out-of-school population by about 13 million.

While the out-of-school rate has stagnated, the completion rate has been increasing at an almost constant rate. Since 2000, the completion rate has increased from 77% to 88% in primary education (92% if very late completers are considered), from 60% to 78% in lower secondary education (82% with very late completers) and from 37% to 61% in in upper secondary education (64.5% with very late completers). In other words, the upper secondary completion rate has grown by 0.8 percentage points per year since 2000. Looking at historical rates of progress, the world would achieve 95% upper secondary completion by 2105 in the average scenario, by 2081 in the fast expansion scenario (at the 75th percentile), and by 2062 in the fastest expansion scenario (average of top 25%) (**Figure 4**).

Dropout is a process rather than a discrete event. Children typically pass through phases of irregular attendance and partial disengagement before exiting the system permanently, as household constraints, community challenges and school practices interact over time. Attention therefore needs to be paid to addressing structural barriers that relate to attendance, transition and retention.

Absenteeism is an early warning signal for early school leaving. Measuring absenteeism is usually done at the school level and is rarely aggregated or reported at the national level. Reported absenteeism rates in low- and lower-middle-income countries from research studies range from under 10% to about 30%, depending on age, context and definition. In richer countries, learning achievement surveys provide some self-reported estimates. The Programme for International Student Assessment asks 15-year-olds whether they skipped a whole day of school in the previous two weeks. In Italy, Romania and Saudi Arabia around 7 in 10 students report having done so at least once, with 13% to 16% reporting three or more days absent over that short period. Early detection of absenteeism is needed to trigger a response. A European Union target for reducing early school leaving led most member states to adopt policies linking attendance, behaviour and achievement data to student support.

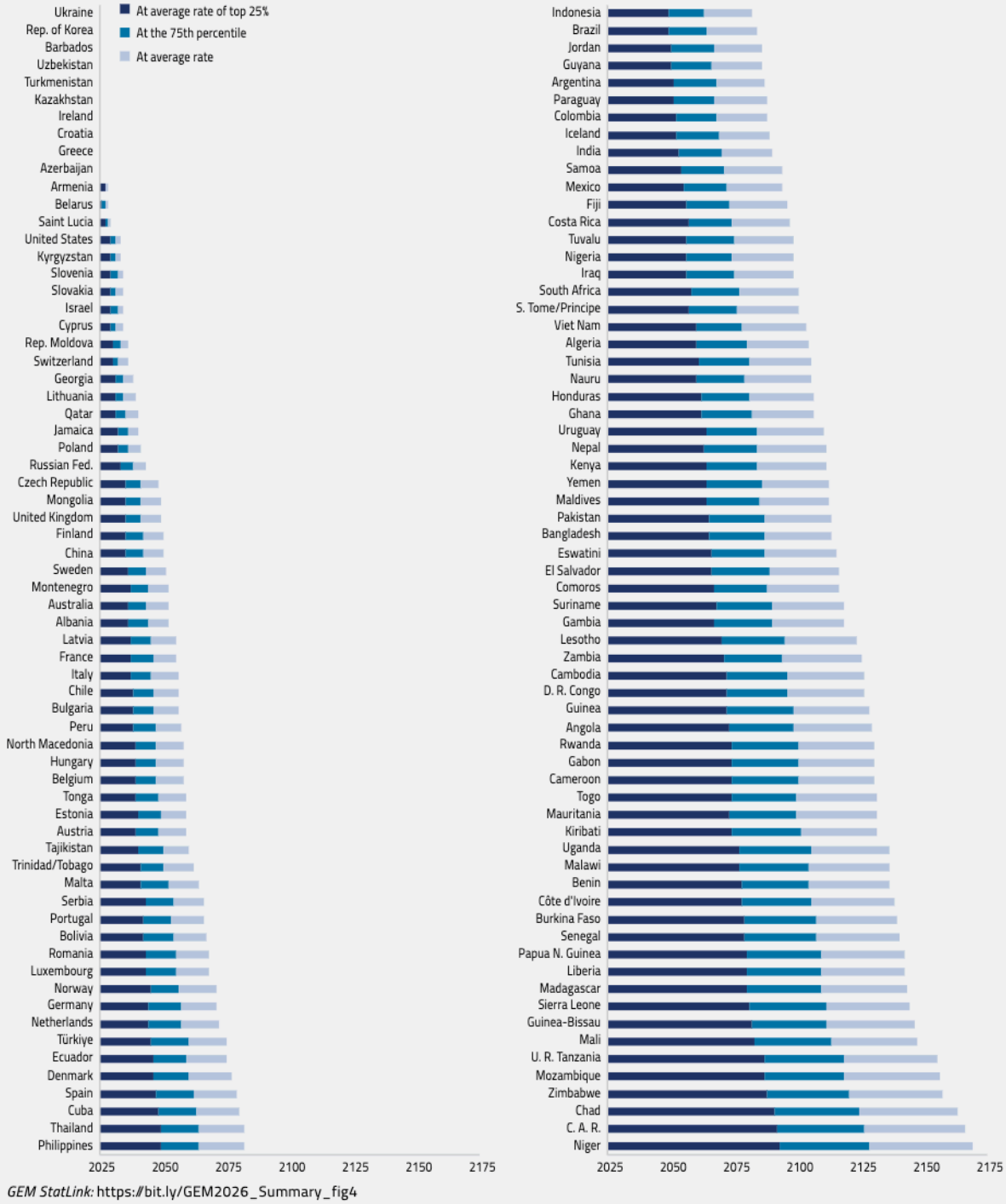
Transition between education cycles is another critical point at which learners are lost. Historical data on the effective transition rate from primary to lower secondary showed the rate increased from 78% in 1985 to 88% in 2000, followed by much slower gains to 91% by 2015. In low-income countries, transition rose steadily from 56% in 1982 to 80% in 2007 but then plateaued over the next 10 years. Between 2000 and 2017, transition stagnated in Chad, Mali and Togo, while the United Republic of Tanzania saw its transition rate jump from about 20% in 2000 to 71% in 2017.

Progress in reducing repetition explains much of completion and out-of-school patterns. Between 2000–04 and 2020–24, repetition rates fell by two thirds in primary and by 40% in lower secondary education. As systems expanded and quality declined, repetition rose and slowed progress, but over time students improved their progression. Having said that, repetition is likely to be undercounted in a few countries, as new analysis for this report shows.

FIGURE 4:

At the average observed pace of expansion of the past 25 years, it would take 80 years for the world to achieve a 95% upper secondary completion rate

Projected year of achieving a 95% upper secondary completion rate, by three expansion scenarios



GEM StatLink: https://bit.ly/GEM2026_Summary_fig4

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

Over-age enrolment and repetition explain very late completion rates in poorer countries. The combination of late enrolment and repetition has intensified in low-income countries since 2000; in lower-middle-income countries, it has eased at the primary level but not yet at secondary. But countries differ significantly: the gap between timely and ultimate completion is 21 points in Malawi at the primary education level but near zero in India at the lower secondary education level.

The COVID-19 pandemic raised concerns but seems not to have impacted participation rates. Trends in access to lower secondary education before, during and after COVID-19 in 29 countries showed that gross enrolment ratios remained high and largely stable and many countries saw declines in over-age rates. But a smaller group experienced rising over-age enrolment, indicating that enrolment figures may be masking some delays in progression and that some longer-term, though limited, impacts on completion could eventually emerge. The main concern remains the pandemic's impact on learning.

COUNTRY CASE STUDIES

Country case studies highlight a range of experiences around the world since 2000. **Albania** doubled upper secondary completion rates in 20 years. It did so by increasing spending, reforming the curriculum, introducing second-chance programmes, expanding compulsory education and offering targeted scholarships. But the decisive factor may have been growing demand for tertiary education at home and abroad, in the context of a very high level of emigration. In **Bangladesh**, targeted initiatives, including secondary school stipends, advanced girls' education, lowered fertility and supported women's labour force participation. Expanded vocational options and some easing in lower secondary examination progression rules helped improve boys' access. Between 2000 and 2020, **Cambodia** increased primary completion from 34% to 82%. This was driven by policies to remove financial and geographic barriers, including by primary school fee abolition, direct school operational funding, rural school construction, teacher recruitment, school feeding and scholarships for disadvantaged students.

In **Costa Rica**, the youth out-of-school rate fell from 28% in 2002 to 4% in 2023 and the upper secondary completion rate increased from 36% to 78%. Upper secondary education was made compulsory. Gains have been particularly strong among disadvantaged groups, thanks to free school meals, transport subsidies, a conditional cash transfer programme, early warning mechanisms, flexible promotion systems and expanded vocational pathways. In **Côte d'Ivoire**, the lower secondary completion rate doubled in 15 years, helped by a fourfold expansion in the number of secondary schools, bridging classes for students who dropped out, mothers' clubs to support girls' education, and free and compulsory education up to age 16. However, high repetition at the lower secondary level still leaves many upper secondary school age youth enrolled in lower secondary. **Dominica** achieved universal secondary education in the early 2000s, but challenges remain. The expansion brought in underprepared students, pushing repetition rates above 10%, with boys disproportionately affected.

In **Germany**, upper secondary completion has lagged behind the European average in recent years. Students are tracked at age 10, much earlier than in most countries, and decisions are strongly shaped by socioeconomic status: almost four in five children from wealthy households but less than one in three from disadvantaged households are recommended for an academic secondary school. Migrant students are overrepresented in vocational tracks, although recent reforms aim to strengthen support for underserved groups. In **Iraq**, the upper secondary completion rate more than doubled from a low starting point of 20% in 2000 despite multiple crises. The lifting of sanctions and rising oil prices facilitated an increase in public spending and a decline in household poverty, allowing for reinvestment in school reconstruction. Multiple school shifts also supported internally displaced populations to continue their education, while improved security increased opportunities to return to learning.

Morocco reduced its out-of-school population of adolescents and youth by 72% from 2000 to 2023. Preventative measures, including awareness campaigns, family involvement and social services, combined with a cash transfer programme, investments in transport, and boarding facilities in rural areas improved access and retention. A new early warning system is now helping identify at-risk students. Primary education enrolment in **Mozambique** more than tripled since 2000. Large-scale post-war school construction and primary school fee abolition in 2004 played central roles. More recent initiatives supported girls' education and reduced repetition to strengthen progression. However, recent household survey data indicate that progress has stalled, as structural barriers persist. Poverty, child labour, limited school feeding coverage, weak infrastructure, conflict, climate-related shocks and language challenges continue to constrain regular attendance.

Romania continues to record some of the highest youth exclusion levels in Europe, with the youth out-of-school rate at 27% in 2023. Despite adopting a national Strategy for Reducing Early School Leaving in 2015, progress

has been limited by weak interministerial coordination, uneven local implementation and fragmented support programmes. Recent initiatives, including the National Roma Inclusion Strategy, school desegregation measures and targeted upper secondary placements for Roma students signal a growing institutional commitment to inclusion. In **Rwanda**, the primary completion rate increased from under 20% in 2001 to around 70% in 2024, demonstrating political commitment since the 1994 genocide. Reforms such as free basic education and the Nine-Year Basic Education programme expanded access and closed gender gaps, supported by major classroom construction and curriculum reforms under Vision 2020 and Vision 2050. Yet high repetition rates prevent further progress.

Trinidad and Tobago raised secondary completion rates by 10 percentage points between 2010 and 2020, after having received support from two major Inter-American Development Bank projects since the late 1990s, which helped build new schools in rural areas and introduce a two-cycle secondary system. However, schools are stratified by type and the Secondary Entrance Assessment at the end of primary school continues to entrench inequality. **Uganda** launched its Universal Primary Education programme in 1997, which initially boosted access but completion has stagnated. Amidst declining education spending and high private provision, households are covering a high share of total education spending. Teacher shortages and large class sizes have weakened quality and efficiency. Regional and gender disparities persist, especially in the north, where poverty and early marriage drive dropout.

POLICY ANALYSIS

The period since 2000 has been characterized by two main phases. When restrictions on public spending eased in the late 1990s in low- and middle-income countries, access to primary and secondary education accelerated sharply, to the extent that, by 2010, the resulting optimism led to the adoption in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development of a universal upper secondary completion target of 12 years of schooling. However, possible side effects during the rapid expansion period were overlooked, which included increased repetition, over-age enrolment, higher dropout and concerns about quality, which countries have been addressing since 2015.

SYSTEM-LEVEL POLICIES

Legislation has expanded the scope of universal education. Globally, between 1998 and 2023, the average duration of compulsory education increased by 1.2 years, and the average duration of free education increased by 0.8 years. In 49 low- and middle-income countries, extending compulsory education beyond primary school increased the transition rate to secondary education by 7.3 percentage points. In sub-Saharan Africa, fee abolition in the 1990s and 2000s increased primary enrolment and attainment, especially for girls. Although the long-term effects on completion have been weaker than initial enrolment surges suggested, a study of 14 countries found that making lower secondary education compulsory and free increased attainment by 1.6 years for girls and 1.4 for boys compared to only making education free. Child labour regulations have complemented compulsory education legislation.

Well-designed decentralization strengthens attendance and retention. Analysis for 65 countries has shown that giving local authorities the capacity to tackle context-specific concerns yields positive education outcomes. In Indonesia, decentralization increased resources, textbooks and enrolment among disadvantaged students. School-based management and community monitoring in Mexico reduced dropout as a result of a credible and adequately supported accountability mechanism.

Extra public spending reduces dropout, especially when resources are targeted. Improvements in enrolment and completion in Costa Rica, Côte d'Ivoire and Mozambique were accompanied by a sustained higher share of education in total public expenditure. Other countries relied on short-term surges for specific interventions like school construction. But there were also countries, including Bangladesh and Cambodia, which expanded participation despite very low spending levels. Micro-level evidence, especially from the United States, shows that sustained, targeted funding boosts attainment and upper secondary completion, particularly for low-income students.

Policies on grade repetition strongly shape students' trajectories. Keeping struggling students in the same grade leads to over-age enrolment, a strong predictor of dropout in contexts as varied as Bangladesh, Panama and Rwanda, partly because older adolescents face pressures to work and marry and partly because of effects on their motivation. Disadvantaged students are more likely to repeat grades, for instance in Brazil, Egypt and South Africa. In OECD countries, students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are about 50% more likely to repeat grades than peers with similar academic achievement. At the same time, automatic promotion in early grades needs to be complemented with remedial support, otherwise eventual dropout is simply postponed to later grades.

Countries differ in how early and strictly they track students into academic or vocational routes. Early tracking in several European countries lowers completion probabilities, while delaying tracking tends to raise completion and reduce inequality. Many OECD countries have expanded mixed school-based and work-based training, increasing the share of students in combined programmes over the past decade to diversify routes to completion and strengthen links with the labour market.

Examinations and certification requirements can act as bottlenecks to transition. In Uganda, of those children who did not transition into secondary education, one third had failed the primary school leaving examination. In the United States, high-stakes exit examinations reduced lower secondary school completion by two to four percentage points, especially for disadvantaged groups. Reforms in South Africa show that adjusting certification requirements can expand completion while seeking to reduce inequality.

Catchment areas and zoning rules are often introduced to improve equity but have unintended effects. In France, the establishment of priority education zones that would receive extra funding prompted flight by better-off families that considered this designation as a negative signal, reinforcing segregation. In Indonesia, zoning reforms that aimed to reshape the intake of elite public secondary schools were watered down. Conversely, some systems have experimented with segregation by design, such as single-sex schooling in the Republic of Korea and in Trinidad and Tobago, with some links to increased attainment or completion, raising complex equity and policy questions.

Flexible pathways are essential in a policy package to support completion. As disadvantaged young people face barriers in completing compulsory or upper secondary education, many countries have developed flexible and second-chance programmes, differing in modality, certification and target groups. Large-scale equivalency schemes, such as the Indonesian Paket C and the Laotian primary equivalency programme, offer modular or part-time learning linked to recognized credentials. Initiatives in Argentina, Bangladesh, India and Tunisia combine catch-up and vocational components for groups such as marginalized women and out-of-school adolescents. In sub-Saharan Africa, accelerated education programmes have helped those whose schooling has been disrupted, often in conflict-affected areas. However, transition rates back into formal education remain highly variable, estimated between 3% and 90% from across 40 programmes. It appears that learners face the same barriers upon return, leading to dropout or repetition. Strengthening institutional bridges is needed for flexible pathways to become genuine routes to completion rather than parallel tracks.

DEMAND-SIDE POLICIES

Various policies seek to strengthen demand for schooling by making it more affordable and attractive. The most influential policies involve financing mechanisms that transfer funds to subnational governments, schools and students with an explicit equity orientation; this is covered in depth in this report's chapter on equity.

Free textbooks have been shown to increase enrolment and attendance. Apart from cash, in-kind transfers can also alleviate household constraints. Textbook rental programmes have been implemented in the Caucasus and Central Asia. In China, under the Two Waivers, One Subsidy programme, waiving textbook fees combined with cash subsidies to poor, rural households increased junior secondary enrolment by 12 percentage points. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, textbook availability increased the probability of students passing the end-of-primary examination by seven percentage points. Uniforms can also be a substantial burden for families, but programmes supporting the purchase of uniforms need to be offered as a package, combined with waivers of other costs.

School-based health and health-promoting schools affect participation and progression. Experimental studies have shown that deworming improves school attendance and increases transition into secondary school and attainment. This led to large treatment campaigns, which mostly had a positive impact, although not at the same scale. This suggests the need to also invest in sanitation. Malaria treatment and prophylaxis have increased attendance and attainment in a range of settings from the Gambia to Mozambique and Sri Lanka.

Interventions also seek to strengthen relationships between students at risk of early school leaving, parents, and schools and experts. Provision of accurate information, either on education benefits or on student obligations, have been linked to some attendance and completion benefits but mostly on an experimental basis. Efforts to mobilize parents and communities should in principle improve attendance, but causal studies have been rare and results often point at differences in social capital between disadvantaged and privileged families. Adolescents at risk of leaving school early benefit from trusted adults who can help them navigate difficult situations by setting high expectations, following up regularly with them, facilitating positive relationships and providing guidance services.

SUPPLY-SIDE POLICIES

Investments in infrastructure are critical for participation. Building schools closer to communities was instrumental in Indonesia and Türkiye but the building of new schools stagnated or declined in much of sub-Saharan Africa from 2010 to 2020 with the notable exception of Rwanda towards the end of the decade. Community schools, such as in Egypt and Honduras, have been another approach. Boarding facilities played a major role in China and Ghana. A government sex-specific latrine construction programme increased girls' enrolment in India. Rural electrification of homes or schools have supported attainment in Brazil, Cambodia and Kenya. Distance education in the Cook Islands, New Zealand, Niue and Tokelau and for grades 10 to 12 in Papua New Guinea offered new opportunities to rural, remote and other disadvantaged youth. Investment in pre-primary education facilities have also filtered through to higher education attainment, from Austria to Guatemala and Uruguay.

Private schools grew, mostly shifting the distribution of, rather than expanding, enrolment. Across 42 countries, children from the richest households were 10 times more likely than those from the poorest to attend private schools. Many studies focus on whether private schools may have increased enrolment indirectly by being more efficient and more effective than public schools. Systematic reviews of contractual agreements for services with private providers show substantial heterogeneity in results, depending on contracting rules, monitoring and regulatory capacity, but generally did not expand enrolment, including in well-publicized cases in Liberia and Pakistan.

Countries are increasingly committed to inclusive education. Inclusive environments, which help disadvantaged learners enrol in, progress through and complete school, have been increasingly promoted in three ways. First, the share of countries that broadened the definition of inclusive education beyond disability to include other forms of disadvantage rose from 75% in 2020 to 82% in 2025. Second, in terms of student assignment, the share of countries whose legislation supports the assignment of learners with disability into mainstream schools increased from 17% to 29% (**Figure 5**). Third, shifts in mentality are also observed away from an approach that asks some children to adapt and towards inclusion.

FIGURE 5:
Inclusive education legislation is being widely adopted
Distribution of countries by school organization for students with disabilities, 2025

GEM StatLink: https://bit.ly/GEM2026_Summary_fig5
Source: GEM Report team analysis based on the PEER country profiles.

The role of safe learning environments is becoming more important. School safety is affected by violence, attacks and natural disasters, all of which can reduce attendance and eventually lead to dropout. Measures to address violence include school- and community-level interventions to promote social and emotional development; introducing strict but fair and respectful school rules; cultivating socially responsible behaviour to stand up to violence; and building relationships that connect students. Just as education systems collapse with conflict, they often catch up afterwards if predictability, legitimacy and trust in public institutions are restored, for example in Cambodia. Disaster risk reduction combines structural interventions (e.g. hazard-resilient school design) with non-structural measures (e.g. contingency planning, teacher training and school-based preparedness protocols).

POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION

KEY TRENDS

Tertiary education participation has expanded rapidly but completion has not kept pace. In the past 25 years, there has been a growing gap between access and graduation. The tertiary education gross enrolment ratio more than doubled from 19% in 2000 to 44% in 2024, a one percentage point increase per year, while the graduation ratio increased at less than half that rate over the same period, rising from 17% to 27%.

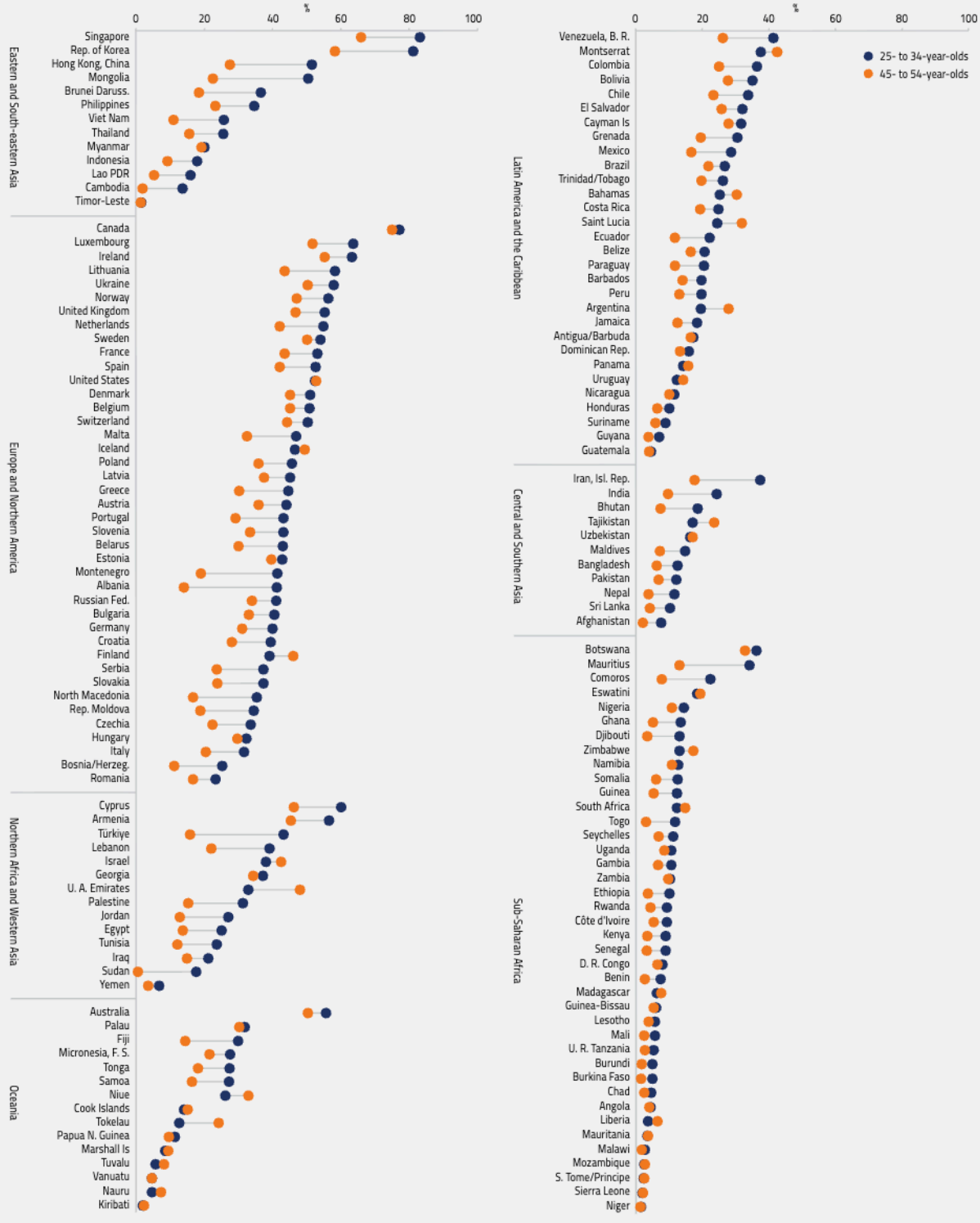
Measuring progress in tertiary education by enrolment alone is insufficient. Enrolment measures ignore wide variations in age patterns, programme duration and part-time study. Systems with longer study durations can appear to have higher participation without actually reaching more learners. This type of measurement can double count individuals who enrol in multiple programmes or return for additional degrees. In OECD countries, around 25% of bachelor's degree graduates in several countries already hold another tertiary qualification. Enrolment ratios are further inflated in systems that host many international students: in at least 40 countries, more than 10% of tertiary students are internationally mobile.

Attainment captures the share of the population with a degree. In 2024, global tertiary attainment ranged from 15% among 45- to 54-year-olds to 24% among 25- to 34-year-olds (**Figure 6**). Focusing on the attainment of 25- to 34-year-olds means that the progress of the most recent cohort will only be understood with a delay. Yet it is a more transparent and comparable measure. Across countries, attainment among 25- to 34-year-olds is consistently only about 60% of the tertiary gross enrolment ratio observed 10 years earlier, confirming that enrolment ratios substantially overstate how many people end up with a degree. In several middle- and high-income countries, dropout among first-year bachelor's programme students is between 15% and 20% or more. The European Union has set the target that at least 45% of 25- to 34-year-olds should hold a tertiary qualification by 2030, up from 40% in 2020. The age group of 25- to 29-year-olds may be the most reasonable choice globally, while attainment among 30- to 34-year-olds could be used for an 'ultimate' completion rate measure, mirroring the approach used for primary and secondary completion. On-time completion ranges from 13% in Chile to more than 65% in Ireland and the United Kingdom. Attainment should be complemented with information on age profiles and programme types.

FIGURE 6:

Tertiary attainment rates have increased across generations

Share of 25- to 34-year-olds and of 45- to 54-year-olds with tertiary education, 2024 or more recent year



GEM StatLink: https://bit.ly/GEM2026_Summary_fig6

Source: ILO database.

COUNTRY CASE STUDIES

Country case studies highlight a range of experiences around the world since 2000. **Belarus** saw gross enrolment in tertiary education rise from 48% in 1991 to 96% in 2013 before declining to 70% by 2024, alongside a sharp drop in the number of students enrolled due to demographic shifts. This recent contraction reflects evolving institutional and labour market dynamics. Nevertheless, Belarus retains comparatively high levels of tertiary participation relative to other upper-middle-income countries, reflecting the legacy of a historically broad-based higher education system. **Chile** increased tertiary participation from below 40% in 2000 to above 100% by 2022, exceeding regional and high-income group averages. A market-oriented access model diversified institutions and combined selective admission to prestigious universities with more open entry in non-university tracks, broadening participation but reinforcing stratification. A tuition-free programme recently expanded accreditation requirements, while targeted initiatives signalled a shift towards more public support to improve equity.

China expanded access to tertiary at unprecedented rates, from 7% in 1999 to 77% in 2024. This traces back to 1998, when enrolment spaces opened up leading to an increase in the supply of higher education programmes and institutions. Provincial governments were granted autonomy to establish institutions, many of them short cycle and vocational, while the central government focused spending on a few top-tier universities. Access is stratified, although a robust student aid system has been developed. **Fiji** increased tertiary enrolment by 46 percentage points over the past 18 years, building one of the most expansive higher education systems in the Pacific despite the constraints to scale faced by Small Island Developing States. Fiji's role as a regional cooperation hub and the expansion of digital and distance learning, which was critical during COVID-19, helped attract students from the region while widening opportunities for its population. This growth has been supported by public funds, including scholarships, income-contingent loans and subsidies to tertiary education providers.

Saudi Arabia expanded its higher education system in its shift from an oil-based to a knowledge-based economy. Government investment widened access through free or low-cost tertiary options, raising the gross enrolment rate at an annual rate of five percentage points between 2009 and 2019. Policy attention has turned towards aligning education with the national plan, Vision 2030, emphasizing engineering, information and communication technology, and business management degrees.

In **Thailand**, the tertiary gross enrolment ratio increased from 39% in 2001 to 53% in 2011 but then fell and has not recovered to earlier levels. Bottlenecks in the national admissions system and declining public spending have constrained expansion. On the positive side, a stronger technical and vocational education system and shifting labour market returns have redirected students away from traditional tertiary pathways. **Togo** increased tertiary enrolment from 5% in 2006 to 15% in 2020, above the sub-Saharan African average. Improved progression through secondary education has fuelled demand for higher education, supported by widely available scholarships. Rapid expansion has exposed challenges related to wealth and gender disparities, quality, relevance and completion, prompting government efforts to align programmes with labour market needs and improve data for allocating scholarships.

POLICY ANALYSIS

Post-secondary education has shifted from a privilege for the elite to mass participation. Policies have focused on reducing financial constraints and diversifying provision, as well as steering, rather than controlling, the system, with more institutional autonomy, quality assurance and cost sharing. Yet equity challenges remain, both vertical – by individual characteristics – and horizontal – as institutional hierarchies determine students' access to and return from programmes. Challenges also exist within institutions and households: financial pressures, caring responsibilities, mental health, institutional cultures and the language of instruction shape who progresses and who benefits fully from their studies. Overall, equitable expansion depends less on any single policy than on coherent combinations of demand- and supply-side measures, underpinned by quality assurance, flexible pathways and evaluation of who benefits.

DEMAND-SIDE POLICIES

Demand for higher education is constrained by affordability. Countries use a mix of tuition waivers, scholarships, grants and loans to lower financial barriers. About four in five countries grant student aid, targeting poverty, geographic disadvantage or disability. Evidence from mostly high-income countries suggests that lowering the cost can raise enrolment, but the impact depends on existing participation levels and the design of programmes.

Tuition policies vary widely. About one third of countries declare public universities tuition free – and 52% in Latin America. However, free tuition alone does not eliminate inequality. In Brazil and Chile, targeted fee subsidies for low-income students raised enrolment. In Colombia,

a recent free tuition decree for low-income youth expanded access to public universities but nearly half of the students failed to graduate. Other middle-income countries, including Ghana and the Philippines, also introduced free tuition for specific groups that increased participation among the poor but did not reduce persistently high dropout rates. In Germany, even moderate fees led to a decline in enrolment; in England (United Kingdom), steep tuition increases did not reduce enrolment or widen inequality, primarily due to income-contingent loans and living-cost support. Governments also regulate and set reference prices for fees, including in the private sector, to curb excessive charges.

Scholarships exist in about three in five countries. Indonesia's Bidikmisi and its successor KIP scholarships, as well as scholarship reforms in Japan and Sri Lanka have expanded access for disadvantaged students, although enrolment successes are not always reflected in completion. Countries including the Plurinational State of Bolivia, Ecuador, Mexico and Viet Nam require institutions to devote a share of income or places to scholarship recipients, while evidence from Brazil, Cambodia, India and Pakistan shows that expanded public financial aid has increased the participation of disadvantaged groups.

Subsidies to students cover a wide range of cost items. Evaluations in France, Ireland, Italy and Portugal indicate that needs-based grants reduce dropout and improve timely graduation, especially when they keep pace with living costs and are complemented by measures such as student housing policies. Many countries run targeted financial aid for specific groups. Canada, Colombia and South Africa offer grants or maintenance support that prioritize disadvantaged students, including those with disability. In-kind subsidies are also common: almost 5 in 10 countries subsidize student accommodation costs, 4 in 10 transportation costs, and just under 3 in 10 textbook costs.

Student loans generally follow three models. There are government-funded loans, shared-risk schemes with private lenders, and income-contingent loans repaid via tax or social security. Middle-income countries like Jamaica, Ghana, Malaysia and Viet Nam have experimented with loans, though design flaws including high interest rates and guarantor requirements often limit access for the poorest. Where well-designed, as seen in New Zealand, Japan and South Africa, loans can raise enrolment and persistence. However, debt burdens are a significant deterrent. For every USD 1,000 of debt, dropout rates have been estimated to rise by 3%, while debts exceeding USD 1,000 are strongly associated with lower graduation rates. In England (United Kingdom), average graduate debts are among the highest in the world and maintenance loans often fail to cover the full cost of living. Information policies support students from low-income or first-generation backgrounds who frequently lack understanding about admissions and aid. In Chile, publishing earnings data by course and providing mentoring shifted applicants away from low-return programmes. Outreach initiatives like Uni Connect in England and similar programmes in Australia build aspirations, but evaluations found that sustained counselling is more effective than one-off messaging.

Some high-income countries fund institutions to meet inclusive policy goals. About 18% of countries give conditional grants to institutions, ranging from 4% in low-income to 18% in middle-income and 27% in high-income countries. Of these grants, 64% focus on poverty, 49% on geographic disadvantage, 46% on disability or special educational needs, 34% on indigenous and ethnic minorities, 26% on gender and 14% on refugee populations.

Compensatory measures such as academic bridging, mentoring and peer support are critical for completion. This is evidenced by foundation programmes in southern Africa, integrated support models in Colombian universities, and mentoring schemes in India. The language of instruction remains a hurdle, with English-medium programmes offering opportunities but also negatively impacting graduation rates for disadvantaged students.

SUPPLY-SIDE POLICIES

Governments must balance public and private provision and diversify without entrenching stratification. Countries, including Argentina, China and Saudi Arabia, have expanded enrolment while keeping public provision high, using state funding and new universities in underserved areas to widen access. Ethiopia pursued a mixed model, rapidly scaling up both public universities and accredited private providers. Three times as many countries have decreased than increased public spending on tertiary education since 2015.

In some countries tertiary education expanded through private institutions. Private tertiary education institutions account for about one third of enrolment globally, a share that appears to have remained constant since 2000. Their growth is correlated with overall enrolment increases in countries with high secondary completion and urbanization rates, such as in Central and Eastern Europe. In Chile, too, the sector was opened to private universities in the 1980s, driving enrolment from 8% to over 50%, with support from state-backed loans and targeted tuition waivers. By 2024, 87% of countries had established a national

quality assurance agency to manage private expansion. In Indonesia, Libya and Togo, licensing requirements have been tightened to curb fraudulent providers. In Botswana, India and Mexico, limited capacity or voluntary accreditation mean that oversight has been weaker, potentially exposing disadvantaged students to degrees of lower quality.

Open and distance education have helped expand access. The world's largest open universities in China, India, Indonesia, Nigeria, Pakistan and Türkiye account for 4% of total higher education enrolment. In Brazil, half of tertiary students use distance modalities, mostly in private institutions. In Ethiopia, Kenya and Nigeria, non-state providers have filled gaps in flexible, short professional programmes. While digital technology offers expansion, the digital divide remains a barrier, requiring subsidized internet access and infrastructure investment.

Short-cycle tertiary programmes have served tertiary expansion in some countries. It is estimated that about 15% of global tertiary enrolment is in short-cycle institutions, with a slightly declining trend. But such institutions play an important role in China, Côte d'Ivoire, Colombia, Spain, Türkiye and the United States, offering applied, often labour market–oriented alternatives. When well designed, they provide entry points into higher degrees.

Post-secondary vocational education is a potentially powerful indirect route into higher education for under-represented groups. The effectiveness of post-secondary vocational education depends on the quality and relevance of training, flexible pathways linking vocational and academic strands, and recognition. In Austria, the Netherlands and Switzerland, bridges have been built from vocational secondary qualifications into universities of applied sciences, supported by modular curricula, articulation agreements and recognition of prior learning. In Argentina, Australia and Canada, transferable credits, joint programmes and flexible admissions turn colleges and non-university institutions into stepping stones rather than dead ends.

Internationalization plays a small role in expanding participation. A growing share of foreign students is part of the higher education strategy of countries such as Canada, Qatar, Türkiye and the United Kingdom. While this may simply shift enrolment geographically, the prospect of studying abroad is opening opportunities in some countries that may not have been available domestically, with examples ranging from Albania to Pacific Island states.

Diversification can promote equity in some circumstances. National qualifications frameworks and credit-transfer systems, such as in Bhutan, China and Malaysia, aim to standardize levels, enable progression from vocational to academic routes, and validate non-formal and informal learning. However, processes are often complex and underused. Even in Europe, only about 1 in 10 students enter university through non-standard paths. Micro-credentials offer flexible, modular learning but only expand higher education participation if they are integrated into qualifications frameworks and clearly contribute to recognized degrees.

Admissions processes and affirmative action policies shape how inclusive expansion is. About one third of countries have some form of affirmative action for admissions, such as targeted quotas. A review of affirmative action policies in 27 countries in various sectors, including education, found a positive outcome for targeted groups in two thirds of cases. This is confirmed by countries such as Brazil, China, India, Israel and Sri Lanka where targeted measures substantially increased enrolment among under-represented groups, although the impact on non-targeted groups and the long-term effects on stratification require careful monitoring.

EQUITY

KEY TRENDS

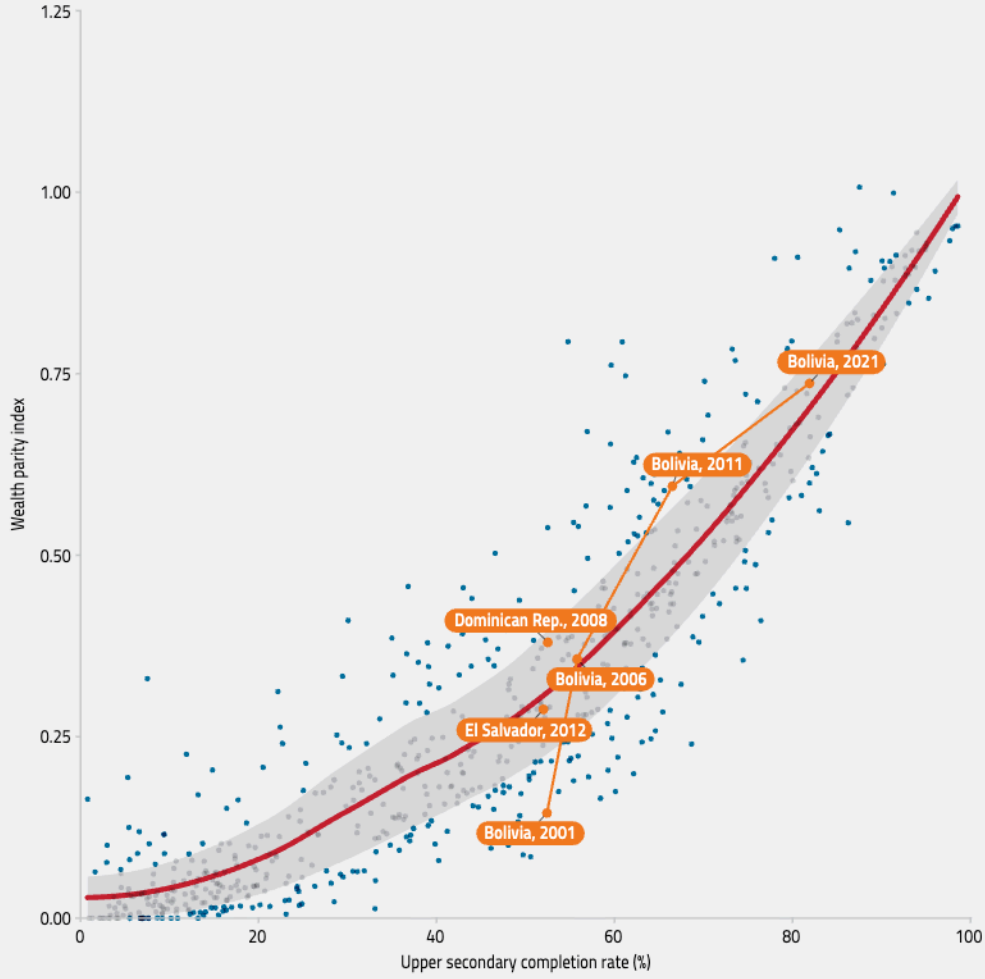
Monitoring equity in education is not straightforward. The expansion of standardized multipurpose household surveys in the 1990s, such as the Living Standards Measurement Survey (LSMS), the Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) and the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS), enabled key development outcomes to be disaggregated by individual characteristics, fuelling optimism that they could help monitor the fulfilment of the 'leave no one behind' principle of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. In education, these surveys supported the creation of the World Inequality Database on Education (WIDE), which visualized inequalities across and at the intersection of multiple characteristics. However, experience over the past 25 years shows that the initial optimism that global monitoring would provide clear insights into equity trends has been tempered by three issues: the relevance of the global indicator, data availability and the comparability of key characteristics. While the global monitoring level remains important, it may have been overemphasized relative to embedding equity monitoring in national systems.

Global monitoring of education inequality centres on the parity index. The parity index compares the value of an education indicator for a disadvantaged group with that for a privileged group. Its appeal lies in compressing information into a single number. But for most of the SDG 4 indicators of interest, such as the out-of-school and completion rates, which are bounded between 0% and 100%, the parity index tends to look better simply because the overall level of the indicator increases, not necessarily because system fairness improves. Despite this limitation, the parity index remains useful in two ways. First, it can be used to compare inequality between countries at similar levels of the indicator. For example, at an upper secondary completion rate of 52%, the wealth parity index was 0.15 in Bolivia (2001), 0.29 in El Salvador (2012) and 0.38 in the Dominican Republic (2008), suggesting important structural differences. Second, it can be used to track how disparity evolves within a country over time relative to the global average trend. For example, the wealth parity index in Bolivia was worse than the global average in 2001 but improved rapidly to rise above the global average by 2011 (**Figure 7**).

FIGURE 7:

Lessons from the parity index on the level and trend of education inequality in countries are limited without contextual analysis

Wealth parity index of the upper secondary completion rate, all countries with data, 2000–24



Notes: The wealth parity index is the ratio of the indicator value (in this case, the upper secondary completion rate) for the poorest 20% of youth relative to the indicator value for the richest 20% of youth. Each dot represents a country-year observation. The red line shows the expected relationship between completion and wealth parity estimated using a regression. The shaded area indicates ±1 standard deviation around the expected parity level.

GEM StatLink: https://bit.ly/GEM2026_Summary_fig7

Source: GEM Report team analysis of the UIS database.

Data availability is lower than desired, but the causes are complex. Although most countries have household surveys that could be used for education – except for the poorest, those affected by conflict and Small Island Developing States – their potential is sometimes not appreciated by education ministries or data are not shared out of concern about the political implications of showing inequality. Data availability is one thing when it refers to whether countries report data for national purposes and another thing when it refers to international reporting. Compiling these statistics is more efficient at the global level. The UNESCO Institute for Statistics and the *Global Education Monitoring Report* do that through publicly available microdata sets.

Taking the lower secondary completion rate as an example, data availability improved between the early and late 2000s but has remained constant since then, with about two thirds of countries covered by recent location disparity data and about half of countries covered by recent wealth disparity data. Coverage gaps persist because no systematic process exists for countries to share data sets: of 59 countries whose last analysed survey predates 2020, 42 have since conducted relevant surveys but restrict microdata access. The closure by the US government of the Demographic and Health Surveys programme in 2025 exposed the vulnerability of global data availability, as well as the need for strong national ownership of surveys.

Global comparability of many characteristics is limited. National definitions of urban and rural areas vary widely and are not sufficiently objective (e.g. based on building and population density). Wealth indices rank households within countries at a point in time but are less suited to comparison between countries and over time. For characteristics such as ethnicity, language, race and religion, limitations are even greater, as categories are context-specific, socially constructed and politically sensitive. The paradox is that the characteristics most tied to structural disadvantage are often the least suited to stable, comparative global monitoring. While there is progress in defining and monitoring disability, this development is too recent to provide enough data to describe trends.

How has education disparity evolved in the past 25 years? Between 2000 and 2024, the share of countries with gender parity in enrolment rose from 42% to 57% in lower secondary and from 17% to 31% in upper secondary education. The share of countries with high disparity disadvantaging girls fell from 20% to 4% in lower secondary and from 18% to 5% in upper secondary. Location-based gaps have also narrowed. The share of countries achieving parity between rural and urban areas in enrolment rose from 47% to 67% in primary, from 24% to 45% in lower secondary and from 5% to 19% in upper secondary. Yet in the early 2020s, 43% of countries still had extreme gaps at the upper secondary level, with fewer than 8 youth enrolled in rural areas for 10 youth enrolled in urban areas. Wealth-related disparities remain the strongest type of disparity. In the early 2020s, 83% of countries had extreme wealth disparities in pre-primary education, compared with 21% in primary, 29% in lower secondary and 55% in upper secondary education.

COUNTRY CASE STUDIES

Country case studies highlight a range of experiences around the world since 2000. **Armenia** reduced the share of children with disabilities in special schools from 38% in 2015 to just 7% in 2023. A 2019 policy shift converted most special schools into support centres, although mainstream schools remain underprepared, and barriers such as inaccessible buildings and social stigma mean many children with disabilities are enrolled on paper but not genuinely included in practice. The **Plurinational State of Bolivia** sharply reduced wealth-based disparities. The lower secondary completion rate for adolescents from the poorest one fifth of households rose from 31% in 2000 to 94% in 2021. Debt relief and nationalization of natural resource monopolies expanded fiscal space for education. Social inclusion policies, such as school feeding, scholarships and conditional cash transfers redistributed resources.

Ethiopia expanded access to primary education, reducing the urban–rural completion gap by 24 percentage points since 2000, although it remained substantial at 34 percentage points in 2022. Decentralization reforms which were launched in the 1990s and strengthened in the early 2000s transferred greater resources and decision-making authority to districts, enabling more responsive local governance. Districts accelerated school construction, expanded teacher recruitment and improved deployment, with equity gains. However, progress is threatened by conflict and crises in the past six years. In **Mongolia**, completion rates rebounded after the end of the financial contraction brought about by the economic transition in the 1990s. Moreover, boys have nearly caught up with girls in lower and upper secondary education. Rural-to-urban migration has particularly benefited boys, with many migrant families citing education as a motive. Technical and vocational tracks offering stipends after grade 9 have also attracted boys.

In **Nepal**, girls have rapidly caught up with, and in some areas surpassed, boys through sustained reforms. Between the 1990s and 2010s, targeted investments in

public secondary schools, cost reductions and scholarships closed historic gaps, leading to parity in lower and upper secondary completion. In the **Philippines**, the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao has historically lagged behind the rest of the country due to conflict and poverty. Economic growth, targeted poverty reduction policies, an extension of compulsory education in 2013, and new tracks in secondary school aligned with labour market pathways have helped reduced the gap. The **Republic of Moldova** transformed its special education system, with the share of children with disability in mainstream schools increasing from just 29% in 2010/11 to 95% in 2023/24. Driven partly by its aspirations to join the European Union, the country introduced inclusive legislation, integrated support services and dedicated district funding, while teacher support for inclusion has also increased.

POLICY ANALYSIS

Financing policies can promote equity in education. To improve equity in education, countries can limit stratification, promote common standards, provide targeted pedagogical support, expand early childhood services and use financing mechanisms. A higher volume of public spending for education tends to be redistributive in favour of more disadvantaged populations. However, it also matters how public resources are spent and, in particular, the extent to which countries intentionally redistribute resources to help disadvantaged schools and populations overcome challenges related to poverty, geography and other factors leading to exclusion. Building on an earlier attempt to monitor SDG indicator 4.5.3, this report maps how countries use five types of transfers: to subnational governments; schools; students and families (funded out of education budgets); students and families (funded out of social protection budgets) and students, in the form of school meals.

Transfers to subnational governments. Overall, 58% of countries channel funds for education to subnational governments, but only 47% of these explicitly build equity into their formulas. Five broad models of such transfers exist. First, central governments channel funds without adjusting for inequality (e.g. Bangladesh, Jordan and the Lao People's Democratic Republic). Second, dual-channel systems, where the central government pays salaries through one channel and uses another channel for programmes, may or may not aim to to reduce inequality (e.g. Algeria and Mongolia). Third, per student grants are used, with no extra weight for disadvantaged areas (e.g. Kenya). Fourth, per student grants with equity adjustments are used (e.g. Brazil and Colombia). Fifth, national or federal authorities redistribute resources to reduce disparities (e.g. China). Equity-oriented transfers are most common in Central and Southern Asia and Europe and Northern America and least common in Northern Africa and Western Asia.

However, such transfers tend to have little effect on regional inequality. In Argentina, provincial own revenues, federal equalization transfers and smaller programme grants narrow but do not eliminate per-student spending gaps. In Ethiopia, a devolved block grant system weighted by population, poverty and performance helped improve education and health outcomes, yet an evaluation argued that the positive effects were more likely due to increased local control rather than increased resources. In high-income countries such as Germany, Japan and the Republic of Korea, long-standing fiscal equalization frameworks redistribute resources to local governments based on needs and fiscal capacity, promoting more consistent education provision but not fully eliminating territorial gaps.

Transfers to schools. Globally, 76% of countries reallocate resources in favour of disadvantaged schools. Grants to schools might be in the form of a set amount per student, grants for day-to-day costs or special funds for particular projects or students. Stability, simplicity and clarity, backed by capable administration, training and accountability, are preconditions for success but such transfers are often short-lived and small: at least half of the countries with such policies and programmes allocated less than 0.5% of their total education expenditure to them.

Some long-standing systems use school-level formulas as a core tool for redistribution, e.g. in Benin, Bulgaria, Fiji, Indonesia and Papua New Guinea. Indonesia's BOS grants, a large share of education spending, give schools capitation funding, but uneven support from local governments, insufficiently coordinated parallel schemes and limited clarity for school committees have constrained their effectiveness.

In many low- and middle-income countries, donor-funded school grant schemes have produced short-term gains which often faded once external funding ended without being built into national budgets. In Cambodia, grants disappeared after programmes closed. The Gambia and Zimbabwe took over donor-initiated grants, yet both continue to face problems such as delayed disbursements, weak school-level involvement and the inadequacy of the size of grants. In Zimbabwe, the main school improvement grants still do not come from domestic funding, unlike the separate grant for disadvantaged students.

Transfers to students and households (from education ministries). About 62% of education ministries offer some form of cash or in-kind support to students. Scholarships and targeted grants matter most where students move between levels of education, when the dropout risk is highest. They also need to be sufficiently large, well-functioning and well-targeted to have an impact. In Nepal, very small stipends for Dalit students, girls and students with disabilities reach many learners but are too low to cover basic schooling costs, so their effect is mostly symbolic. In Mexico, the PROBEMS scholarship for poor urban secondary students reached nearly a quarter of those enrolled but the monthly value was just below the extreme poverty line and did not reach beneficiaries who were as poor as intended; as a result, they did not improve the share of graduates.

Many student support programmes are designed to reach disadvantaged learners, but it is hard to know how well they do in practice. UNICEF's MICS social protection module gives partial evidence by asking the families of school-going children whether they receive tuition support or other school-related help. In 44 countries, the median coverage is low (around 5% of the school-age population). Some low-coverage programmes, such as Madagascar's school-kits scheme, strongly favour the poorest households, while others in countries like the Central African Republic and Chad are spread almost evenly across the rich and the poor. Among high-coverage systems, Algeria and Benin manage to tilt support towards the poorest, whereas in Jamaica and Thailand broad or near-universal schemes end up benefiting richer households significantly.

School meal programmes. School meals are one of the most widespread and politically robust equity mechanisms, sitting at the intersection of education, nutrition and social protection. In 25 countries, school feeding was found to increase enrolment by around 3%. A review of low- and middle-income countries found that meals increased attainment by up to half a year per USD 100 invested. As of 2025, about 84% of countries have some form of school meal programme, with coverage highest in Latin America and the Caribbean (100%), Eastern and South-Eastern Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa (both regions over 90%). On average, 29% of primary school students receive free or subsidized meals.

Since 2020, countries from Angola, Mauritania and the Netherlands to New Zealand, Sierra Leone and Uzbekistan have launched or expanded national programmes, often with universal coverage for primary grades or equity-oriented targeting of regions or schools in need. Long-standing schemes such as China's rural nutrition programme and the United States' National School Lunch and Breakfast Programs continue to scale up or adopt universal, free models in high-poverty areas. Many low- and lower-middle-income countries, however, struggle to sustain programmes as donor support declines, as highlighted by recent funding crises in Mali, Nigeria and Yemen. Some innovative financing using earmarked taxes (Bolivia, Guatemala) or blended instruments (United Republic of Tanzania) is emerging to address this gap.

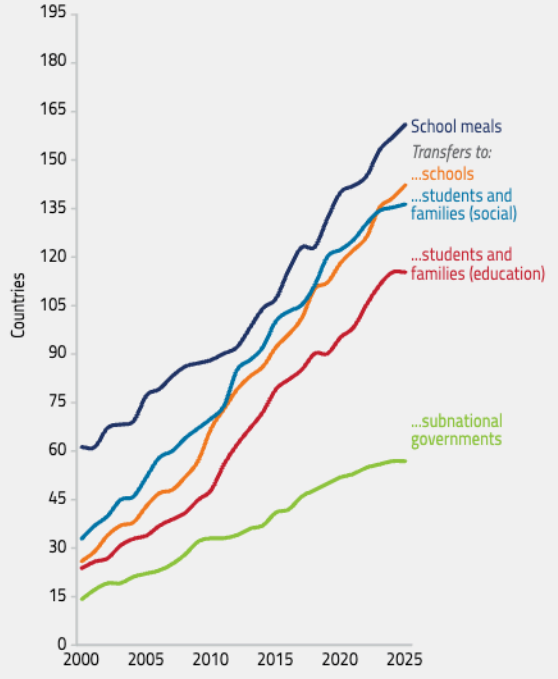
Transfers to students and households (from social protection ministries). Around 73% of countries operate social policies that support students and families, from child grants to targeted cash transfers, with prevalence rising from just over one third of low-income countries to nearly all countries in Europe and Northern America. Evaluations of conditional cash transfers have generated strong evidence, with meta-analyses suggesting that recipient children are one third more likely to enrol than non-beneficiaries, with larger effects for girls and those at key transitions. Latin America has been a hothouse, notably in Brazil (Bolsa Família), Colombia (Familias en Acción) and Mexico (Progresa, Oportunidades and Prospera), although the last two programmes were recently abolished. In Southern Asia, programmes have focused on girls' education, such as in Bangladesh and in the Punjab province of Pakistan. Indonesia's transfers, North Macedonia's secondary school grants and the Philippines' Pantawid programme each raised adolescent enrolment or completion by 7, 12 and 8 percentage points respectively. Algeria's allowance for school supplies and Morocco's Tayssir scheme show that even relatively small education-linked stipends can, when scaled nationally, reach millions and increase completion, though they may also overcrowd classrooms and increase repetition.

Unconditional cash transfers are more common in low- and middle-income countries and, just as with universal child benefits in high-income settings, also tend to increase enrolment, though generally by less than conditional programmes. Transfers in Burkina Faso, Ecuador and Malawi raised participation. In Türkiye, the Emergency Social Safety Net for Syrian refugees dramatically reduced out-of-school rates and child labour. Overall, the evidence suggests that design features, such as transfer size, predictability, targeting method and conditionality, are crucial to maximizing education benefits and avoiding perverse effects.

Responsiveness to equity concerns is growing but not universal. Equity orientation in financing has spread rapidly since 2000, but in different ways across the five mechanisms. Equalizing transfers to subnational governments remains less common, but their rise is linked

to decentralization reforms in the late 2000s. Transfers to schools are the fastest-growing tool and cover a very heterogeneous set of grants, from long-standing core redistributive schemes such as South Africa's quintile funding and the Netherlands' weighted per-student formula to newer, narrower programmes targeting rural schools or learners with disabilities in countries such as Bahrain, Benin, Curaçao and Djibouti. Transfers to students and families have also expanded sharply since the 2000s, with some running for years at scale, such as Ireland's School Transport Scheme or Kenya's Elimu scholarships. School meal programmes are the most widespread mechanism throughout the period, growing from an already high base but increasingly being moved from donor-funded projects into national budget commitments. Social protection transfers linked to education have also expanded.

FIGURE 8:
Equity-oriented financing mechanisms in education have become global
Number of countries with equity-oriented programmes in education, by financing mechanism, 2000–25



GEM StatLink: https://bit.ly/GEM2026_Summary_fig8
Source: GEM Report team analysis of policies and programmes for the PEER website.

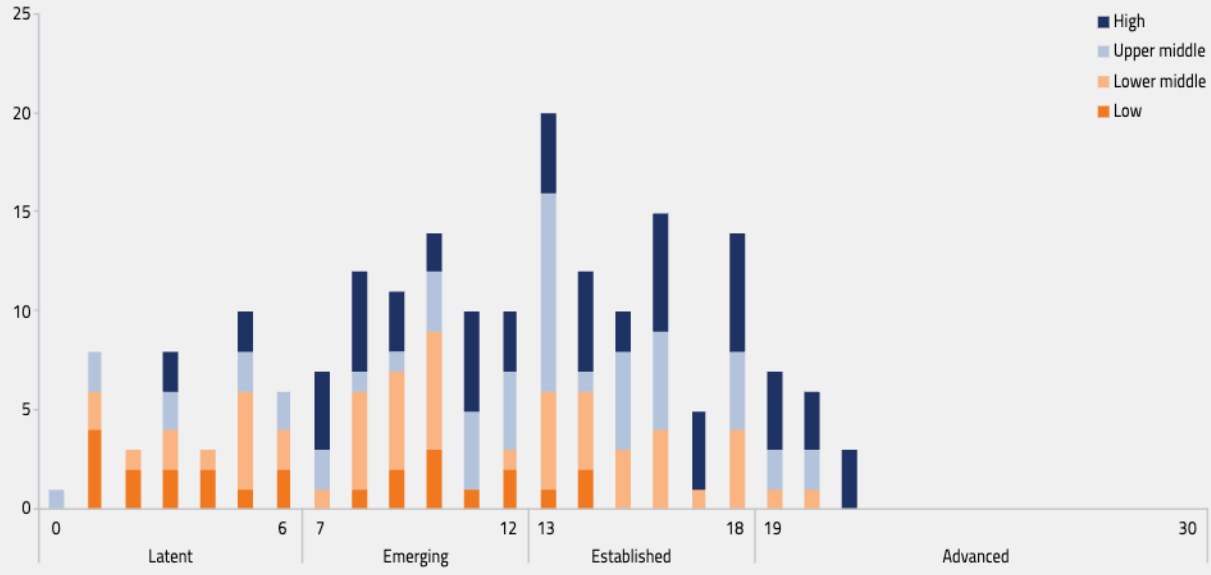
A new index highlights the equity orientation of education systems. Using information on coverage (share of relevant population reached) and spending volume (programme spending as a share of education or total public spending) across the five mechanisms, this report has constructed a new index of the equity orientation of national financing systems. A three-scale rating has been given of countries' main policies and programmes under each mechanism, classifying them as low, medium or high based on empirically derived thresholds. Each mechanism is scored from 0 (no relevant or non-equity-oriented programme) to 6 (high equity focus in both coverage and volume), giving a total possible score from 0 to 30 across all mechanisms, with equal weights to avoid imposing strong assumptions about the relative importance of different tools.

Around 20% of countries are classified as having only a 'latent' equity focus, 33% 'emerging', 39% 'established' and just 8% 'advanced', where equity considerations are embedded systematically across financing mechanisms (**Figure 9**). The share of countries with established or advanced equity orientation rises from 12% in low-income to 58% in high-income countries, and median scores range from 6 in low-income countries to 14 in Europe and Northern America, with Latin America also scoring highly. The index does not measure policy and targeting effectiveness; instead, it signals policy intent and financial effort within public funding architectures.

FIGURE 9:

Less than 1 in 10 countries has a strong equity focus in its financing mechanisms

Distribution of values in index of equity focus in national financing mechanisms, by country income group, 2025



GEM StatLink: https://bit.ly/GEM2026_Summary_fig9

Source: GEM Report team estimates.

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.

MONITORING EDUCATION IN THE SDGS

With five years remaining to the 2030 deadline, data gaps continue to present significant challenges to monitoring progress. Data availability varies widely across indicators. The out-of-school rate (indicator 4.1.4) has the strongest coverage, with nearly 95% of countries having recent data, but early childhood development (indicator 4.2.1) has limited coverage as it depends mostly on a single source (MICS). Availability also differs by other dimensions (e.g. disaggregation by sex is far more common than by location and wealth) and by country income.

TARGET 4.1. PRIMARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION

This report focuses on the main trends in school participation and completion. To recap, the out-of-school population in 2024 was 273 million, comprising 140 million boys and 133 million girls. By age group, there are 79 million of primary, 64 million of lower secondary and 130 million of upper secondary age who are out of school. This population has been rising since 2017, but the rate has remained stable at around 17% since 2015, ranging from 3% in high-income to 36% in low-income countries. Globally, the percentage of the respective cohorts who completed each level on time in 2024 was 88% in primary, 78% in lower secondary and 61% in upper secondary education. In low-income countries, these rates were only 60%, 37% and 20%, respectively, although considering that many reach the last grade with several years of delay due to late enrolment and repetition, it is estimated that ultimately completion rates are 71%, 46% and 25%.

Data on learning outcomes are updated less frequently. For instance, globally, it is estimated that 58% of students achieve minimum proficiency in reading and 44% in mathematics at the end of primary education, a figure that has not been updated since COVID-19. The respective percentages rise by the end of lower secondary education to 64% and 51%, respectively, which reflects the fact that these estimates refer to students and not the entire population – and therefore exclude one quarter of the population in low- and lower-middle-income countries who do not reach the end of lower secondary – and who would also be less likely to achieve minimum proficiency.

International assessments from upper-middle- and high-income countries indicate a deterioration in recent years. This decline, according to the results of the 2022 Programme for International Assessment (PISA)

featured in the 2024/5 *Global Education Monitoring Report*, predates COVID-19 in the case of reading but appears to have been caused by COVID-19 in the case of mathematics. Data from the 2023 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) confirm this finding for mathematics, albeit for a smaller number of countries than PISA. The percentage of students who achieved minimum proficiency in mathematics according to TIMSS increased from 51% in 2011 to 56% in 2019 but fell back to 52% in 2023, ranging from 26% in the few mostly upper-middle-income countries to 60% in the high-income countries in the sample of countries with observations in each of the three years.

FIGURE 10:
The share of students at the end of lower secondary achieving minimum proficiency in mathematics in richer countries rose in 2019 then fell back to 2011 levels
Percentage of grade 8 students achieving a minimum level of proficiency in mathematics, selected middle- and high-income countries, 2011, 2019 and 2023

GEM StatLink: https://bit.ly/GEM2026_Summary_fig10
Source: GEM Report team analysis of TIMMS data.

TARGET 4.2. EARLY CHILDHOOD

Among the few countries reporting on the number of children under 5 developmentally on track in health, learning and psychosocial well-being, as measured by the Early Childhood Development Index 2030, outcomes vary widely, from fewer than 40% in Côte d'Ivoire and Mozambique to over 90% in Jamaica and in Trinidad and Tobago. While gender differences are typically small, disparities by wealth are substantial. In Nigeria, 77% of children in the richest quintile are developmentally on track compared with 30% in the poorest quintile.

Participation in organized learning one year before primary, as reported earlier in this report, has stagnated globally at around 75% since 2015, despite substantial gains in low-income countries, from 29% in 2008 to 48% in 2023. After adjusting for early entry into primary school, only about 60% of children attend at least one year of pre-primary education. Participation is considerably higher in countries guaranteeing free or compulsory pre-primary education, a reminder of the importance of supportive policy frameworks.

TARGET 4.3. TECHNICAL, VOCATIONAL, TERTIARY AND ADULT EDUCATION

As described earlier in this report, tertiary enrolment has expanded in all income groups since 2000, reaching 44% in 2024, ranging from less than 15% in low-income to more than 80% in high-income countries. The most rapid increase was observed in upper-middle-income countries, many of which, including China, are approaching mass participation.

Technical and vocational education and training participation among youth aged 15 to 24 has grown worldwide from 2.7% in 2000 to 4.2% in 2024. Participation in education and training among adults aged 25 to 64 increased worldwide from 2% in 2000 to 2.4% in 2024. High-income countries record both the highest level and highest growth in participation, rising from 4.6% to 6.7%. In contrast, the rate has remained low and constant at just 1.2% in lower-middle-income countries.

TARGET 4.4. SKILLS FOR WORK

The definition of the global indicator on information and communications skills has been evolving, in an effort to keep up with the rapid changes with which youth and adults engage with digital technology. One significant downside of global reporting is that 85% of those countries that report data are from the upper-middle- or high-income category and therefore these estimates are

not globally representative. The latest data covering the period 2022–24 show that some practices are widespread but relatively more sophisticated ones remain limited. In the median country, 68% of adults participated in social networks, 54% could copy and move files, 33% could prepare electronic presentations, and 24% verified online information. Just 6% had programming skills.

TARGET 4.5. EQUITY

Gender disparity is small on average but varies considerably by income level: 79 young women complete upper secondary school for every 100 young men in low-income countries, but 106 young women do so for every 100 young men in high-income countries. Gaps by location are more pronounced: in low-income countries, 30 youth in rural areas complete upper secondary education for every 100 urban youth. Wealth remains the strongest driver of inequality. In low-income countries, the number of those from the poorest quintile who complete each education cycle for every 100 of those from the richest quintile is 40 in primary, 20 in lower secondary and 13 in upper secondary education. Even in high-income countries, 66 of youth in the poorest quintile complete upper secondary education for every 100 youth in the richest quintile.

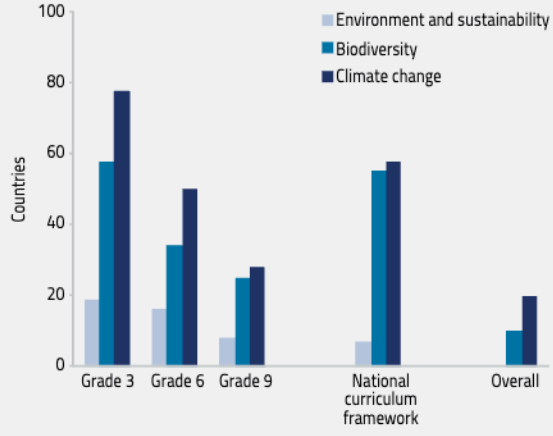
TARGET 4.6. YOUTH AND ADULT LITERACY

Globally, youth literacy increased from 90% in 2000 to 92% in 2024 and adult literacy from 81% to 88%, driven primarily by strong gains in lower-middle-income countries. However, low-income countries lag behind, with an estimated one in four youth being illiterate in 2024. The global number of illiterate young people is estimated to have declined from 143 million in 2000 to 86 million in 2024, although the number in low-income countries increased from 30 million to 37 million, as rapid demographic growth outpaced literacy gains.

TARGET 4.7. SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP

As part of the second and final Comprehensive Review of SDG indicators in 2025, the global indicator for target 4.7 was expanded to incorporate a new direct measure, which covers the curricula of education for sustainable development. It measures the presence of keywords in national curriculum frameworks and science and social science subject syllabi of grades 3, 6 and 9 in three domains: environment and sustainability, climate change, and biodiversity. Findings from 110 countries reveal substantial variation in overall coverage and balance across domains. Differences across countries are driven primarily by whether a domain is mentioned at all rather than by major differences in intensity among those that include it. Climate change is the least integrated domain: it is absent from syllabi of 78 countries in grade 3 syllabi, 50 countries in grade 6, and 28 countries in grade 9. Even in national curriculum frameworks, more than 50 countries omit biodiversity and/or climate change. Coverage generally increases with grade level, but uneven inclusion suggests selective prioritization rather than systematic mainstreaming.

FIGURE 11:
Half of countries make no reference to climate change in their late primary curricula
Number of countries that include selected keywords in national curriculum frameworks and grade 3, 6 and 9 syllabi, by domain, 2024



GEM StatLink: https://bit.ly/GEM2026_Summary_fig11
Source: GEM Report team analysis of the GEM Report, MECCE project and UNESCO database.

TARGET 4.A. EDUCATION FACILITIES AND LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

School facilities in low-income countries remain inadequate. In 2024, only 40% of primary schools had handwashing facilities (up by 4 percentage points since 2015) and 52% had access to drinking water (up by 11 percentage points since 2015). Access to electricity has generally remained constant at 28% since 2015, while it increased considerably in middle-income countries from 66% to 82%. School meal provision has expanded, reaching 466 million children globally in 2024, a 20% increase since 2020, with the largest increase in low-income countries, where coverage rose by 60% in just two years.

Learning environments are also monitored globally for violence. Over 50% of lower secondary school students reported experiencing bullying in 70 out of 83 countries with data. In 2024, 3,909 attacks on education were recorded in 69 countries, the highest since the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack began reporting in 2013.

TARGET 4.B. SCHOLARSHIPS

In 2023, 2.8% of tertiary students worldwide were internationally mobile, with higher rates in Small Island Developing States (7.2%) and sub-Saharan Africa (4.9%). Comprehensive data on individual scholarship recipients are unavailable; therefore, the global indicator only tracks official development assistance allocated to scholarships. In 2024, USD 1.7 billion was disbursed for scholarships within the education sector, rising to USD 1.9 billion across all sectors. After growth between 2015 and 2019, funding declined during the COVID-19 pandemic and recovered by 2023, before falling again in 2024.

TARGET 4.C. TEACHERS

Globally, about 90% of primary teachers meet minimum national academic qualifications requirements and 82% meet professional qualifications requirements. In low-income countries, the share of academically qualified primary school teachers fell from 89% in 2013 to 78% in 2024. In high-income countries, the share of professionally qualified primary school teachers fell from 97% to 92%. National standards vary widely: only 11% of low-income countries require a bachelor's degree for primary teachers, compared with 79% of high-income countries.

FINANCE

In 2024, median public expenditure on education stood at 4.2% of GDP, down from 4.3% in 2010, and at 12.6% of total public expenditure, down from 14.4% in 2010. By 2023, among 159 countries with comparable data in 2015, 54% had reduced education spending as a share of GDP and 64% as a share of total public expenditure. Only 41 out of 183 countries with data (or 22%) met both international benchmarks, spending at least 4% of GDP and at least 15% of public expenditure.

Official development assistance has entered a period of decline. Whether defined as sector-allocable aid (USD 12.2 billion in 2024, i.e. explicitly directed to basic, secondary and post-secondary education, excluding imputed student costs) or as country programmable aid (USD 10.5 billion in 2024, i.e. funding considered predictable and available for country-level planning, therefore excluding imputed student costs and scholarships), aid fell by 8% between 2023 and 2024. Aid to basic education fell by 16%. Education's share of sector-allocable aid fell to 7.5%, its lowest level in two decades.

Households account globally for about one quarter of total education expenditure, but the burden is uneven. As a share of their total consumption, households allocate to education 0.5% in low-, 2.5% in lower-middle-, 1.4% in upper-middle-, and 1.3% in high-income countries.

Access and equity

COUNTDOWN TO 2030

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.

Accordingly, the 2026 *Global Education Monitoring Report* identifies countries that have improved faster than peers – but also countries that appear not to have done as well – over the past 25 years in terms of participation in pre-primary, primary and secondary, and post-secondary education, including by reducing disparity by sex, location, wealth and disability.

It then examines the education and non-education factors associated with such performance through a representative sample of country case studies that span different geographic and country-income contexts. A closer examination tends to corroborate the official statistics but also reveals alternative interpretations, offering an entry point to propose ways in which monitoring can be improved in the coming years.

Finally, the report combines the case study findings with broader research insights. Rather than searching for best practice, which may be isolated and context-specific, this report argues for understanding what sustains change at scale over long periods of time. Such progress emerges from coherence between domestic policies, responsiveness to external circumstances, and a long-term commitment to equity.

Two in-depth country-by-country reviews for the PEER website examine how legislation and policy have evolved in the past 25 years: first, how countries deliberately reallocate education and social protection resources to subnational governments, schools, students and their households to promote equitable outcomes – proposing an index of policy intent; and second, how countries have adopted and adapted laws and policies on inclusive education.

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4 QUALITY EDUCATION

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