



# IEG REACH

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Based on the IEGWB report From Schooling Access to Learning Outcomes: An Unfinished Agenda: An Evaluation of World Bank Support to Primary Education.

## The Unfinished Agenda in Primary Education

- Access to primary schools has improved rapidly throughout the developing world since 1990, but learning outcomes have lagged.
- It is possible and desirable to avoid a trade-off between quantity and quality, but poorly managed rapid expansion approaches can undermine improvement in learning outcomes.
- The Bank and its partners need to reorient the Fast Track Initiative toward a dual emphasis on primary school completion and learning outcomes improvement.

The proportion of children in the developing world who have access to primary education has increased considerably since 1990, when the Education for All (EFA) movement identified six goals for meeting the learning needs of children, youth, and adults. But progress has been much more limited on the EFA goal of improving learning outcomes. A majority of primary school graduates in developing countries still leave school without having met their countries' minimum learning standards.

To assess the effectiveness and sustainability of World Bank contributions to primary education access and learning improvements, IEG examined more than 700 lending projects (including 190 free-standing primary education projects), analyzed in detail a random sample of 50 projects, and conducted field studies in 12 countries.

### Access Has Improved

Improvement in primary school access is an essential step to help children acquire basic knowledge and skills, especially literacy and numeracy. Since 1990 primary education access has improved in developing countries. Net enrollment rates have risen from about 82 percent to 86 percent. In 12 countries visited by IEG, enrollments have outpaced the increase in school-age population by about 19 percentage points over the past 10-12 years. In Mali and Uganda the ratio more than doubled. Countries

have targeted the disadvantaged in enrollment campaigns and improved access for girls, the poor, and children living in remote areas. World Bank support, both lending and nonlending, has been instrumental in making many of these changes happen. It helped to build schools, distribute books, train teachers, raise community support, and, in some cases, increase demand for schooling.

### But Learning Has Lagged

Enrollment increases will have little impact on poverty reduction unless children attending schools obtain basic knowledge and skills. There is clear evidence that the poverty reducing effects of primary education come not from years of education received, but from improved literacy and numeracy. IEG found that, in general, learning outcomes were *underemphasized* in country programs and Bank support, particularly in primary education components of multi-sector projects. Among the sample of projects examined in detail, three-quarters included objectives to *improve student enrollments*, but less than one-quarter had *learning outcomes* objectives. Over 90 percent of these projects had *improving quality* in their objectives, but until recently this objective has mostly meant providing materials, training, and technical assistance to educational systems rather than ensuring improved student learning.

Not surprisingly, few lower-income countries track learning outcomes systematically. And among those that do, even those receiving quality improvement support from the World Bank, the results are generally discouraging. For example, in Ghana, Niger, Peru, and Yemen no more than 19 percent of sixth graders reached mastery levels in language; and no more than 11 percent do so in mathematics. In India, nearly 50 percent of 7-10 year olds could not read fluently in their local language at the first grade level.

This does not mean that countries receiving Bank support were unable to *improve* learning outcomes. Of the few that tried to do so, most were successful. In Ghana, India and Uruguay, three countries covered in the IEG evaluation, learning outcomes increased, even for girls and other disadvantaged.

### Rapid Expansion Can Put Learning at Risk

The IEG evaluation identified several reasons for the low emphasis on learning outcomes and limited impacts of quality improvement efforts.

The Millennium Development Goal of universal primary school completion by 2015 has added urgency to the expansion agenda, but may be pushing some countries to expand too quickly. In 2003, the Bank and its partners labeled some 70 countries “off-track” and created the Fast-Track Initiative to accelerate progress of those countries toward achieving the education goal. Under that initiative, countries like Niger have been encouraged to reach for 100 percent completion by 2015 (the current rate is below 30), even though current school graduates are barely literate.

Improved learning outcomes can even be undermined by overly rapid expansion. Countries that have taken the “big bang” approach to improved primary school access, such as Kenya, Malawi, and Uganda, have expanded so rapidly that they have been unable to deliver basic educational services effectively. In Uganda, despite a decade of support to mitigate the effects of explosive enrollment, there are still an average of 94 students per classroom and 3 students per book. Countries are often tempted to expand access first and addressing learning outcomes later, but best practice appears to be simultaneous expansion and learning improvement, as has been done in Ghana and India.

There are no standard formulas countries can apply to improve learning outcomes and simultaneously increase access. Each country will need to undertake needs and capacity assessments, field trials, policy analysis,

and planning to determine how best to do this. However, the temptation to make a trade-off between quantity and quality can and should be resisted. Doing so requires high levels of political and material commitment, plus government efforts to manage the rate of expansion, provide essential material and teaching resources, improve education efficiency, and account for results.

### Sector Management Approaches Matter

Necessary improvements in developing country education sector management have been slow to develop. For Bank projects with improvement of sector management as an objective, only about a quarter fully achieved that objective. Bank-supported efforts to improve central planning, policy making, and budgeting were especially weak. Some of these weaknesses stem from incomplete project preparation, others from poor institutional incentives, particularly for measuring and improving learning outcomes.

Efforts to shift more control to local governments and schools, especially school-based management, were found to be more successful. Yet ambiguities remain regarding who had authority for what, how funds should flow, and how to avoid cross-regional inequities. Some degree of community control has been good for building construction, renovation, and maintenance, and in cases like El Salvador and Honduras, for improved teacher attendance. In general, though, community control has had little effect on the quality of teaching or learning.

### Recommendations

**Focus primary education efforts on improving learning outcomes, particularly among the poor and disadvantaged.** Countries, in partnership with the Bank and other donors, need to make improved learning outcomes a core objective in their primary education plans and focus on the factors most likely to influence such outcomes in the local context, recognizing that improving learning outcomes for all will require higher unit costs than universal completion.

**Improve the performance of sector management in support of learning outcomes.** This implies the need for sound political and institutional analyses, including the incentives faced by officials and teachers to improve quality; accountability and supervision systems that cover learning outcomes in disadvantaged communities' schools; and cost-effective monitoring and evaluation systems that track learning outcomes.

**Re-orient the Fast Track Initiative toward support for improved learning outcomes, in parallel with the MDG emphasis on primary school completion.**