

More Children are Going to School, but Learning Outcomes are Often Neglected

Independent Evaluation Group Assesses Primary Education In Developing Countries and the World Bank's Support

Washington DC, July 13, 2006. A new report released today by the World Bank's Independent Evaluation Group (IEG) finds that in developing countries over the past 15 years, high priority was accorded to increasing enrollments in primary schools, but much less attention was directed to the crucial issue of whether children are learning adequately.

According to the report, "From Schooling Access to Learning Outcomes – an Unfinished Agenda," only 20 percent of primary education projects funded by the World Bank have an explicit objective to help children improve learning outcomes including such basic skills as reading and writing. Some 90 percent of the projects support quality improvements, usually in terms of better educational inputs such as books and teacher training, but only about 35 percent target and track improved student learning as made evident by, for example, better reading, writing and mathematical skills.

The report recommends that countries, the World Bank and development partners give the same emphasis to learning outcomes as to access, so that the world's increasing investments in primary education have a far greater impact on poverty reduction and national development

"Countries and the World Bank have done well in making primary education more accessible to children, including the disadvantaged, but there has not been adequate emphasis on whether children are improving their basic skills," said Vinod Thomas, IEG's Director General. "There must be continued efforts to provide more children with access to school, and at the same time to ensure that the necessary learning takes place in school."

One way to improve overall learning outcomes is to ensure that children learn to read in the early grades. "Though reading is the foundation of learning, only a few projects supported by the Bank focus on improved early reading skills," said Dean Nielsen, the lead author of the evaluation. "Poor reading skills in early grades are behind much of the weak performance that appears in achievement tests later on, as well as early drop-out and repetition, particularly among children of low income families."

For the evaluation, IEG reviewed over 700 primary education projects from 1990 onward. According to IEG, 69 percent of World Bank projects designed to improve access to education succeeded in achieving their expansion goals. During the past 15 years, net enrollment rates increased in developing countries from about 82 percent of the relevant age group to about 86 percent. Enrollment expansion has generally come through supply-side interventions such as new schools and classrooms within easy walking distance from children's homes, hiring more teachers, and activating community support. Governments

have also increased demand for school enrollment by eliminating school fees and providing girls' scholarships.

Contributing to these gains, the World Bank nearly tripled its lending and grants in support of primary education in developing countries since 1990, providing nearly US \$12.5 billion to nearly 100 countries. Public expenditure per student in primary education as a share of per capita GDP has also risen in most of a sample of countries studied.

The Bank has effectively assisted countries to improve enrollments even among the poorest segments of their populations, but the support has been less effective in helping them reduce school drop-out rates and increase learning outcomes.

According to IEG, there are some cases of Bank support where learning outcomes for disadvantaged have been improved, even while access was expanding (e.g., in Ghana and India). Although the mix of interventions to achieve this dual outcome will be different in each country according to context and constraints, main factors were found to be explicit political commitment to improved learning outcomes, systems to measure student learning outcomes, and the changes in the education system in support of increased instructional time, improved teacher skill and morale, increased textbook availability, and enhanced community involvement and outcome-oriented management of schools.

The Millennium Development Goal of universal primary school completion by 2015 does not emphasize learning outcomes. The Fast Track Initiative (FTI), a multi-donor partnership for accelerating progress towards Education for All goals, which is housed in the World Bank, has not given sufficient attention to learning outcomes either. In order that new and increased international funding for basic education be used more effectively, IEG recommends that countries and their development partners, including the World Bank and FTI, add improved learning outcomes as a core objective for all primary education projects. This means that countries will need to resist the persistent temptation to increase access first and improve learning outcomes later, since experience has shown that it is difficult to retrofit quality onto a system that is operating at a low level of performance.

"G8 leaders must support investments in getting all of the world's children into school, and equally also in ensuring they complete school with the knowledge and skills required in an increasingly complex and tough world," said Thomas. "Providing access for all and at the same time improving learning outcomes will likely raise the unit costs of primary education, but this is a choice that must be made for equipping the next generation of citizens and workers to live productive and rewarding lives."

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Background: An estimated 103 million 6-11 year olds in developing countries – or about one-fifth of the total – were still not in school in 2001. Two-thirds of out-of-school children were girls, a share almost unchanged from a decade before. Tens of millions drop out before completing primary school. Of those who complete, fewer than half acquire satisfactory levels of knowledge and skills. Presently, about a quarter of the adult population of the developing world is illiterate.

To download the report or order hardcopies: Please visit <http://www.worldbank.org/ieg/education>

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