

2ND ASIA-PACIFIC REGIONAL EDUCATION MINISTER'S CONFERENCE (APREMC II)

FACT SHEET AND KEY MESSAGES

I. EDUCATION ACHIEVEMENTS AND CHALLENGES OVERALL

Education achievements have been slow, if not stagnant – already prior to the 2019 emergence and impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus while the pandemic is not, in itself, responsible for poor education achievement in the region, it has dramatically impacted and compounded existing problems, exposed weaknesses, and introduced new challenges to educators and students that will bear on how well the region recovers and transforms education towards achieving a much more innovative, resilient, and sustainable condition for all in the years ahead.

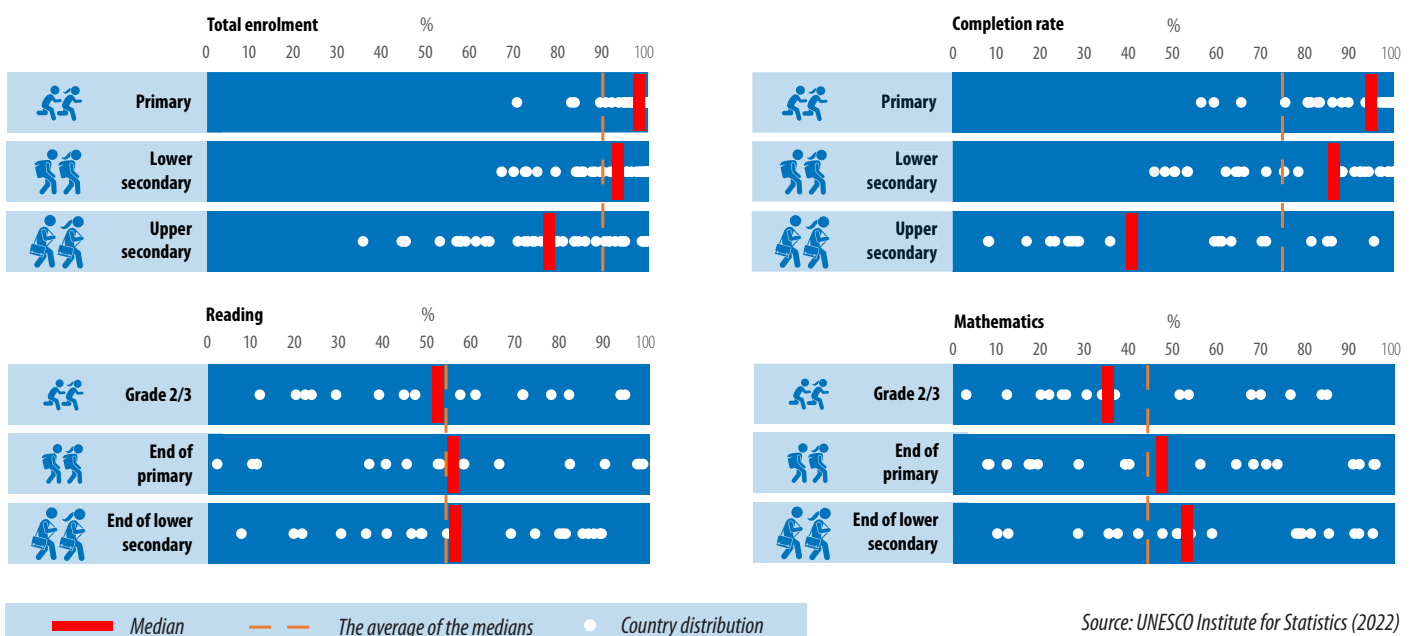
The region has been slow, if not stagnant in improving enrolment and completion since 2015, when the UN set out its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the education-specific SDG 4, which aims to 'ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all'. While all countries in the region intend to bring their students to completion of secondary school, notably upper secondary education has been falling most seriously behind, with primary education exhibiting the best overall performance, to date.

Most countries are enrolling the majority of their students in lower secondary education; the lowest rate of enrolment in the region is 2 out of 3 adolescents. Upper secondary education enrolment falls as low as 3 in 10 youth in some countries.

The completion of enrolled education levels declines with each education level. Only in half of the Asia-Pacific countries can at least 50% of the students complete upper secondary education; in the other half of the countries less than between 10% and 40% complete this level.

Learning achievements are very diverse in the region, ranging from 9 in 10 students to as low as 1.7 in 10 students. Simple reading and mathematics competencies are the lowest among students in Grade 2 and 3. In half of all Asia-Pacific countries tracked, less than 50% of their student populations achieve minimum learning competencies in reading and mathematics by the time they complete their lower-secondary education.

We have a narrow window to act and address the learning crisis. The futures of 800 million children in the Asia-Pacific region hang in the balance.



Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2022)

II. THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON EDUCATION IN ASIA AND THE PACIFIC



School closure

- The education of more than 800 million children across Asia has been disrupted due to school closures since the COVID-19 pandemic first made wide impact in Asia.¹
- More than 27 million children waited for more than a year to return to school.²
- Full school closures have lasted for considerably different durations in area countries, ranging from approximately one month in Japan, Singapore, and Timor-Leste to over a year in Bangladesh and the Philippines.³
- On average, schools have been fully closed for 35 weeks in South Asia, 28 weeks in South-East Asia, and 8 weeks in the Pacific as of February 2022.⁴
- School closures and disruptions to learning have deepened the crisis, exacerbating pre-existing inequalities in education.⁵
- Although all children suffer the consequences of school closures, younger children stand to lose the most, with losses accumulating over time.⁶



Digital divide and remote learning

- During the COVID-19 pandemic, remote digital learning was the first response to school closures for ensuring learning continuity in many countries in Asia and the Pacific. However, a UNICEF report in August 2020 showed that 147 million children (pre-primary to upper-secondary) in South Asia and 80 million in East Asia and the Pacific could not be reached by digital and broadcast solutions.⁷
- Across South Asia, just 13% of children and young people have access to the internet at home.⁸
- Limited access to devices, low connectivity, and limited teacher contact have severely constrained remote learning in South Asia. According to UNICEF research in India, 80% of children aged 14-18 years have reported lower levels of learning than when physically at school. In India, 42% of children between 6-13 years have reported not using any type of remote learning during school closures. In Pakistan, 23% of younger children have lacked access to any device that could support remote learning.⁹
- The 'digital divide' (i.e. the gap between those with internet access and those without it) can be seen across education, with the evidence becoming more visible during the pandemic as school closures forced a shift to distance learning.¹⁰
- Among South Asian countries, only 50% (comprising Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, and Pakistan) currently have a government-established Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in Education Master Plan.¹¹



Learning loss

- Learning losses are equivalent to 7% of expected lifetime learning for developing Asia.¹²
- Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and despite the resultant preventive policy responses, an estimated 10.71 million learners from Asia and the Pacific are at risk of not returning to community care centres (CCCs), schools, or universities once they reopen.¹³
- Even before the emergence of COVID-19, the region was facing a learning crisis. More than 50% of 10-year-olds in low- and middle-income countries were unable to read or comprehend a simple story. Today that figure is estimated to be as high as 70%.¹⁴
- In India, a study in Karnataka showed that the number of Grade 3 children who could read a Grade 1 text had dropped from 42% in 2018 to just 24% in 2020.¹⁵
- In Pakistan, surveys from 2021 in four districts of Punjab revealed that over 75% of Grade 3 students were unable to read a simple sentence and 85% could not perform a simple math division, reflecting a drop of over 20 percentage points from 2019.¹⁶
- Students in East Asia and the Pacific could lose an estimated 0.9 learning-adjusted years of schooling.¹⁷
- Overall, 1.1 trillion hours of in-person learning have been lost in the Asia-Pacific region.¹⁸
- Between 2016 and 2021 in Cambodia, the share of Grade 6 students who failed to meet the basic proficiency level in Khmer language increased from 34% to 45%, and in math from 49% to 74%.¹⁹
- Despite important progress made in the Asia-Pacific region, most countries in the region are off-track to achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4) targets on education by 2030.²⁰



Equity, inclusion and gender impacts

- In East Asia and the Pacific region almost 1.2 million girls are at risk of not returning to school.²¹
- It is expected that as a result of school drop-out among girls in South Asia due to COVID-19, an additional 405,640 adolescent pregnancies will occur in the region. This could lead to an additional 655 maternal and 9,986 neonatal deaths, 154,985 low birthweight births, and 29,000 children who are likely to be 'stunted' (having a height below the recommended level for a specific age) by the age of 2 years.²²
- Expected earnings losses for girls are projected to be 28% higher than for boys in developing Asia.²³
- Children, and girls especially, from the most disadvantaged households; and children with disabilities have faced the biggest challenges while learning remotely during school closures.²⁴



Skills development, employment and lifelong learning

- Nearly 220 million young workers (ages 15–24) in the Asia-Pacific region are particularly vulnerable, given their short tenure on the job, their employment in especially hard-hit sectors and their tendency to earn their livelihood in insecure, 'informal' work (i.e. work that is legal but not formally reported to the government for tax or other purposes).²⁵
- The Asia-Pacific region is still home to more than 37% of the world's illiterate youth and almost 60% of the world's illiterate adults.²⁶
- - 27 million children and adolescents in Asia-Pacific remain illiterate, 95% of whom are in South Asia.²⁷



Financial impact

- Before the advent of COVID-19, the annual finance gap to achieve SDG 4 in the poorest countries was \$148 billion; now, however, the pandemic may well increase that figure by up to 30%.²⁸
- This generation of students now risks losing \$17 trillion in lifetime earnings in present value, or about 14% of today's global GDP as a direct result of pandemic-related school closures. This new projection reveals that the impact of COVID-19 is more severe than previously thought, and far exceeds the \$10 trillion estimates released in 2020.²⁹
- Learners in the Asia-Pacific region could lose close to 7 trillion US dollars in future earnings. School closures in the region have long-term implications for its learners: learners in South Asia could stand to lose nearly 1 trillion dollars in future earnings, and learners in East Asia and Pacific could stand to lose close to 6 trillion dollars in future earnings.³⁰
- Globally, governments account for 79% of total spending, households for 20% and donors for 0.3% (12% in low-income countries). Of all monies spent on education, just 0.5% is spent in low-income countries.³¹

Pre-pandemic background

- In 2017, median public education spending was 4.4% of GDP and 14.1% of total public spending.³²
- The fiscal consequences of immigration, including the cost of immigrant education, were modest at $\pm 1\%$ of GDP. Few countries explicitly recognize migrant status in formula-based allocation of funds to schools. A majority address migrants' needs indirectly, by considering student language or socio-economic status.³³
- In 2016, aid to education reached its highest level since records began, at US\$13.4 billion.³⁴
- Multilateral development banks, such as the World Bank, have been reducing their share of loans to education to middle-income countries. A proposal for an International Financing Facility for Education aims to address this issue, but loans would need to be equity oriented.³⁵
- Humanitarian and development aid provided about US\$800 million for refugee education in 2016, but without joint planning. The UN global fund to education, 'Education Cannot Wait', set up in 2016, is indicative of recent efforts to bridge humanitarian and development aid.³⁶



Teachers

- Many countries in the region continue to face a shortage of teachers with adequate qualifications and competences, a challenge further heightened by the COVID-19 crisis.³⁷
- In East Asia teachers struggled with the sudden shift to distance learning and exhibited low levels of confidence and negative attitudes towards digital education.³⁸
- Teachers' health and well-being have been negatively affected by the pandemic. Among Asia-Pacific teachers surveyed, 28% report being concerned for their own physical health, safety and emotional well-being, as for that of their families.³⁹



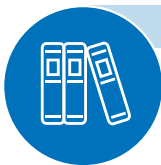
Health and well-being

Pre-pandemic, school-aged children in Asia-Pacific already faced poor health and well-being outcomes, which may be further impacted by the quality of their learning environment:

- The East Asia and Pacific, and South Asia sub-regions lead global figures with the largest percentage of 10 to 19-year-olds with mental disorders.⁴⁰
- Prior to COVID-19, close to 129 million children in the Asia and the Pacific region received school meals, primarily through government-led, national school feeding programmes. Due to COVID-19 school closures, many of these children stopped receiving on-site school meals.⁴¹
- Some 23 million adolescents aged 15–19 in the Asia-Pacific region are currently married or in a comparable union, and 400,000 adolescent pregnancies are expected in the region in 2022. Complications during pregnancy and childbirth are a leading cause of death among girls aged 15–19 years.⁴²
- Less than half of schools in the Pacific sub-region have basic sanitation services.⁴³
- According to the latest data (2019), in 20 out of 23 countries in Asia-Pacific more than 30% of students have reported experiencing bullying in school.⁴⁴
- Only 5 of the 11 Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO) member states have prohibited corporal punishment in schools.⁴⁵
- Analyses from the Southeast Asia Primary Learning Metrics 2019 data confirm that learning outcomes are negatively associated with exposure to violence at school. The more exposure to violence that learners experience, the worse their learning scores become.⁴⁶

COVID-19-related school closures have further exacerbated poor health and well-being outcomes among learners:

- 95% of South-East Asia and Western Pacific countries reported immunization disruptions as a result of COVID-19 public health control measures, with infancy and school-entry age vaccinations most impacted.⁴⁷
- UNICEF country offices report that between May and August 2020, existing mechanisms to provide services to respond to violence against children were heavily impacted in all regions, with services entirely disrupted in South Asia, Eastern Europe and Central Asia.⁴⁸
- Among young people in South Asia who participated in a 2021 U-Report study, 45% said they felt sad, afraid or angry/frustrated in coping with COVID-19. Only 41% of participants knew who to contact if they needed mental health support from a health professional, with more girls than boys not having the required knowledge.⁴⁹
- In South-East Asia, surveys conducted by UNICEF Thailand with almost 7,000 young people found that 3 out of 4 female respondents reported mental health issues such as stress, boredom, lack of motivation, and frustration caused by lockdown.⁵⁰



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