



# Mongolia: Education for All

After painful streamlining and reforms, Mongolia's children have the chance to gain a decent education with modern schools, better curricula, and new textbooks.



Ulaanbaatar - Winter is long and hard in Mongolia. Even on an early morning in mid-November, the temperature is -12° Celsius and the wind bitterly cold.

Breath steaming, students bundled up in long coats and fur hats trudge down the frozen streets of Dzuunmod, a town of about 20,000, south of the Mongolian capital of Ulaanbaatar. The clanging of the School of Humanity's bell urges them to sprint the last few meters to the door to avoid being tardy.

Cheeks red with the cold, students welcome the warmth of the building. Heat is precious during Mongolian winters - and costly. Schools like this commonly spend a third of their budget on heating alone, leaving little money for paying teachers, buying textbooks, and maintaining facilities.

The School of Humanity was fortunate. It received \$120,000 from the ADB-supported Education Sector Development Project for repairing its badly decaying roof and providing chemistry and physics laboratories, computers, desks and chairs, chalkboards, and new textbooks. Under the Second Education Sector Development Project, that was approved a few years later, the School of Humanity had a new primary school built.

## Rocky Transition

During the socialist era, education was heavily subsidized with modern school and dormitory facilities built in all soum (district) centers. Every child - even those from nomadic families in remote areas - could go to school. With every school having a full staff complement, student-teacher ratios were among the lowest in the world. Although educationally these ratios were desirable, maintaining them proved expensive.

With the collapse of the Eastern Bloc, Mongolia embarked on a painful transition from a planned to a market economy. As a consequence, expenditures on education eroded drastically, with teachers' salaries having to be cut to minimal levels and textbooks becoming precious. With no budget for maintenance or repair, facilities deteriorated - particularly in rural areas - and many were forced to close.

Preschools that accommodated 97,000 children, were hard hit, with 244 out of 900 closing between 1990 and 2001. By school year 1993/94, enrollment had plummeted to 370,300 from 446,700 in 1989/90, and dropouts soared by 2,300% between school years 1988/89 and 1992/93.

Finding it impossible to guarantee adequate financing for education, the Government saw a need for streamlining and downsizing the system, and asked ADB for financial and technical assistance. So ADB began funding a comprehensive restructuring and reform program beginning 1996, and also financed basic building rehabilitation, textbook provision, and teacher training.

Using a \$6.5 million loan from the ADF, the Government merged and closed schools, and let thousands of staff members go in a bid to improve quality by concentrating scarce funds on a leaner, more compact system whose needs could be adequately financed.

## Teachers Now Well Paid

It was a painful process, but the improved efficiency provided resources for financing essential items, such as teachers' salaries. Today, Mongolia's teachers are enthusiastic and can expect to receive up to \$250 per month. A doctor in Mongolia, for example, earns \$300 a month. This figure puts Mongolia well ahead of other former socialist countries in the region.

Much remains to be done, however.

The Second Education Development Project, partially financed through a \$14 million loan from the ADF, was approved in 2002 to build on reforms and activities started in the first project. Its goal was to help provide universal access to quality primary and secondary education - including for children with disabilities - especially in rural areas and poorer urban communities.

The Third Education Development Project, backed by another \$13 million loan from the ADF - approved in June 2006 and scheduled for completion in 2012 - will focus on two major new features: a comprehensive curriculum reform, in support of the Government's decision to extend the schooling period by 2 years; and reforms to the current vocational and technical education system.

## Tradition Versus Change

Boarding education is long entrenched in Mongolia, going back to the days when monasteries provided most of the education. Today, dormitories are crucial for allowing children from poorer families to attend school.

As is common throughout Mongolia, more girls than boys are enrolled in the School of Humanity, which used to be two schools. Although the Government covers the basic expenses, parents often contribute to covering these costs as well with sheep or other livestock.

During the first few years of the 21st century, severe droughts followed by harsh winters killed millions of heads of livestock, depriving thousands of herder families of their livelihoods. Partly due to this, dropout rates in rural schools skyrocketed, with many boys leaving school to go back home to work as herders, as tradition dictates. Although droughts have abated in recent years - helping curtail dropout rates, particularly for boys - the education sector still faces the challenge of rising costs of everything from food for children to salaries of teachers and doctors.

Nyamdavaa Namjil, a 15-year-old student and dormitory resident at the School of Humanity, plans to avoid the gravitational pull of the herding life. He wants to be a doctor and to live in a town.

"I don't want to be a herder. I want to be a professional. That's why I'm interested in science," he said.

Fortunately for his family, Nyamdavaa's youngest sister, Byambadulam, loves animals and wants to take over the 150 sheep, 50 goats, 50 horses, 17 cattle, and 2 camels from her father, Zuudi Namjil, who does not mind breaking from tradition.

"I prefer Nyamdavaa to continue his studies," said Mr. Namjil. "I want him to be an excellent student and become a doctor for the people of Mongolia."

Unlike many nations, Mongolia is challenged with educating its boys, who only account for 40% of enrollment in upper secondary education. At higher education levels, female students outnumber their male counterparts by over 2:1.

## Key to the Future

Computer laboratories have made a big difference in many schools. Fifth-grade students at Ulaanbaatar's School of the Future, formerly known as School No. 80, are well aware of the importance of computers. They are enthusiastically studying the computer - and learning English in the process - because there are no computer programs in Mongolian.

"English is the world's language. Without it, it's difficult to go outside our borders," said 12-year-old Dagontsooj.

"I understand the computer is a key for my future," said Uien, also 12, who wants to be a doctor.

With 70% of Mongolia's population under 35 years old, education is the foundation of Mongolia's future. Reforms, streamlining, and repairs - mixed with ample optimism and dedication - are propelling Mongolia's education system toward achieving its goal of education for all. Teacher Surmaajav expressed this determination: "All these things will help us provide our children with an educational foundation that matches world standards."

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With Contributions from Adrian Brown, Asia-Pacific Vision

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- [34187-013: Third Education Development Project](#)

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