

KEY POINTS

- Pakistan has the world's second-highest number of out-of-school children, with almost 23 million children between the ages of 5 and 16 not attending school, representing 44% of the total population in this age group.
- The government should prioritize the provision of education to all children as a policy agenda. While fiscal outlays to the education sector should be increased, the budget absorption capacity should also be enhanced. Alternative modes of education provision, including the use of public-private partnerships and nongovernment organizations, should be considered.
- In terms of girls' education, the provision of all-girls schools will improve enrollment and retention rates in rural communities. In coeducational institutions, the government should prioritize the provision of separate sanitation facilities for girls, the availability of well-trained female teachers, and the inclusion of women in school administration. For low-income families, the government should expand the conditional cash transfer programs.

Access Challenges to Education in Pakistan

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INTRODUCTION

Education is a major contributor to human capital development as it enhances productivity and innovation within a country's population. The provision of free, compulsory, and universal primary and secondary education has long been a stated objective of every Pakistani government (Khan 2010). Since 2010, the provision of free and compulsory quality education for children aged between 5 and 16 years has become a constitutional obligation, as reflected in Article 25-A of the Constitution of Pakistan.

Even though Pakistan has recorded significant improvements in overall school participation, it still faces severe challenges in providing quality and adequate education to eligible children. Almost 23 million children aged 5–16 years are out of school (Table 1), representing 44% of this age group's total population (DFID 2016). The percentage of out-of-school children aged 6–16 years is significantly higher in rural (16.7%) versus urban (5.6%) areas (ASER-Pakistan 2019). More girls are out of school than boys at every level. In Sindh, 52% of the most impoverished children—of which 58% are girls—are out of school; in Balochistan, 78% of girls are out of school (UNICEF 2021).

Table 1: Number of Out-of-School Children in Pakistan (million), 2016

Age Group	Male	Female	Total
5–9	2.1	3.0	5.1
10–12	3.1	3.4	6.5
13–16	5.5	5.8	11.3
5–16	10.7	12.2	22.9

Source: Pakistan Education Statistics 2016–2017.

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Pakistan’s primary gross enrollment ratio increased from 59% in 1990 to 71% in 2000 and 94% in 2019 (UNDP 2020). In 2019, Pakistan’s gross primary education enrollment rate was 95.4% nationwide—102.3% for boys and 87.9% for girls (World Bank 2021). However, only 70% of the children entering primary school were estimated to reach Grade 5, with considerable provincial differences (Table 2). Gross and net enrollment rates at the primary, middle, and high school levels in Sindh and Balochistan consistently fall below those in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) (ADB 2019). Low enrollment and student absenteeism in primary schools are consistent concerns in rural areas (Riaz et al. 2015).

Table 2: Survival, Effective Transition, and Literacy Rates, (%) , 2013 to 2017

Indicator	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
Survival Rate^a					
Grade 5	67	69	66	67	63
Grade 8	49	51	48	50	46
Grade 9	37	42	37	40	37
Effective Transition Rate^b					
Primary to Middle	82	81	82	84	83
Middle to Secondary	91	96	92	91	93
Literacy Rate					
Age 10 years and older	58	60	58	-	62
Age Group 15-24 years	72	72	-	-	74

^a Survival Rate is the percentage of a cohort of students enrolled in the first grade of a given level or cycle of education in a given school year who are expected to reach a given grade, regardless of repetition.

^b Effective Transition Rate is the number of new entrants to the first grade of an education level in a given year, expressed as a percentage of the number of pupils enrolled in the final grade of a lower education level in the previous year

Source: Pakistan Education Statistics 2017–2018.

The secondary gross enrollment ratio rose from 22.0% in 1990 to 25.6% in 2005 and 43.8% in 2019 (World Bank 2021). The primary and lower-secondary net enrollment rates lag far behind regional peers, including India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Bhutan, and remain considerably below the average for lower-middle-income countries (ADB 2019). The average years of schooling among 15-year olds and above has increased by almost 3 years over this period, rising from 2.3 years in 1990 to 3.3 years in 2000 and to 5.2 years in 2019 (UNDP 2020). 53% of this gain is due to educational improvements at the primary level and about 47% at the secondary level. These reflect past reform efforts, which have mainly focused on improving access at the primary level.

ACCESS-RELATED CHALLENGES TO IMPROVING SCHOOL EDUCATION

In Pakistan, access-related challenges undermine the educational attainment of school-going and out-of-school children.

Limited and Uneven School Access

The public sector remains the main provider of education services across all levels (Table 3). It accounts for the majority of all educational institutions countrywide. Except for the pre-primary level, total enrollment in public schools is almost double compared to private schools. The share of public schools in total enrollment rises at higher education levels.

Table 3: Enrollment by Categories and Sector, 2017

Categories / Sector	2017
Total Number of Students (#)	51.2 million
Public Sector/Private Sector (%)	55.7 / 44.3
Pre-Primary Schools (#)	9.49 million
Public Sector/Private Sector (%)	50.9 / 49.1
Primary Schools (#)	18.7 million
Public Sector/Private Sector (%)	64.6 / 35.4
Middle Schools (#)	6.42 million
Public Sector/Private Sector (%)	66.0 / 34.0
High Schools (#)	3.35 million
Public Sector/Private Sector (%)	70.3 / 29.7

Source: Pakistan Education Statistics 2017–2018.

However, the majority of public schools in Pakistan are primary schools; only 20% are middle and secondary schools. Limited and uneven school access is one of the most daunting challenges for augmenting school enrollment and completion. Shortage of schools is reported as one of the leading causes of students’ unwillingness to attend school (Government of Pakistan 2015).

Long Home-to-School Distances

A natural consequence of limited access to schools is long home-to-school distances and commute times for students. Long home-to-school distances and poor transportation and communication facilities are among the important causes of dropout at the primary level in Pakistan. Poor children, especially girls who are not allowed to travel long distances alone, suffer the most as commuting costs and time increase (Mughal et al. 2019). Evidence from empirical literature suggests that students remain longer in schools when schools are located closer to their homes. Having a school 1 kilometer away from home had a positive and significant effect on primary school attendance (Sathar and Llyod 1994). If the school is located within the village, a girl’s entry in primary school increases

by 18%, and the female primary school dropout rate declines by about 16% (Sawada and Lokshin 2001). As the home-to-school distance increases, girls' enrollment and completion probabilities decline (Chaudhury, Christiaensen, and Asadullah 2006).

Compared to primary schools, the number of secondary-level schools is much lower, especially in rural communities. Longer physical distance and travel time from home to school serve as a major impediment to girls' school continuation. Parents are not comfortable having girls walk long distances to schools alone, especially after puberty, on account of their security and reputation (Lewin 2011).

Geographical and Gender Disparities

Geographical and gender disparities in access to education, especially at the postprimary level, are worrisome. Pakistan's primary net enrollment ratio (NER) was 67% in 2014 (56% and 61% for Balochistan and Sindh, respectively). At the middle school level, the NER was significantly lower (i.e., 37% in 2014). The proportion of students enrolled in higher levels—from middle school to universities—is lower than 30% in most provinces.

Education indicators are generally much worse for girls than for boys. For instance, except in Islamabad, the GERs among females are much lower than among males, especially at postprimary levels. At each level, more males are enrolled than females, and the ratio of male to female students increases with the level of education. Female students are increasingly more likely to drop out of school than males with higher levels of education.

Dropout rates are particularly higher in regions with difficult geographical terrains, such as the mountainous north and deltaic regions. Dropout rates are higher in conflict situations and those living in communities affected by disasters. Schools and teachers' provisions in these regions are problematic, and school commuting poses a significant challenge, especially for girls.

Nonconductive Learning Environment at Schools

A nonconductive environment for learning at schools reduces both students' and parents' motivational levels, which results in low school enrollment and high dropout. Non-availability of basic physical facilities, including drinking water, a boundary wall, electricity, and toilets for students and teachers, are the leading causes of high dropout rates. Inadequate basic infrastructure facilities (i.e., electricity, water, boundary wall, and toilets) are also one of the leading causes of students' unwillingness to attend school (Government of Pakistan 2015). The availability of electricity across the country in primary, middle, high, and higher secondary schools is 68%, 82%, 93%, and 97%, respectively. These percentages are alarmingly lower for primary and middle schools of Balochistan and the newly merged districts of KPK. Only 68% of primary schools nationwide have access to drinking water, while 74% have toilets for students (Pakistan Education Statistics 2017-18). Some schools have no physical building structure where children sit out in the open space without shelter (Lloyd et al. 2006). Lack of proper sanitation facilities, including toilets with water, becomes a major deterrent to continuing

secondary school as girls reach puberty (Adukia 2017). Classrooms tend to be overcrowded, with a dismally low teacher-student ratio, hampering effective in-class learning. The pupils-teacher ratio (number of pupils per teacher) stood at 44 for primary schools across the country (UNDP 2020).

Insufficient Public Spending for the Education Sector

Despite persistent access and quality challenges in the education sector, public spending on education was only 2.9% of Pakistan's gross domestic product in 2018, much lower than in other comparable countries. Capital or development items represent only a small portion of the federal and provincial education budgets. Recurrent items, mainly teacher salaries, account for a majority of the federal and provincial education budgets. These reflect the limited public investment in education infrastructure despite high population growth and limited school access, especially in rural areas.

Table 4: Public Sector Expenditure on Education as a Share of Total Expenditure (%), 2015–2018

	2015	2016	2017	2018	Percentage increase from 2015-2018
Federal	15	16	13	14	19
Provincial	80	79	81	80	23

Source: Academy of Educational Planning and Management, Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training, Islamabad, 2019.

Every year, provincial governments spend below the budget allocated for education. Poor spending performance can translate into substantial opportunity costs in terms of forgone school participation. It highlights the need to address systemic capacity gaps, operational inefficiencies, and other issues that affect local public service delivery performance.

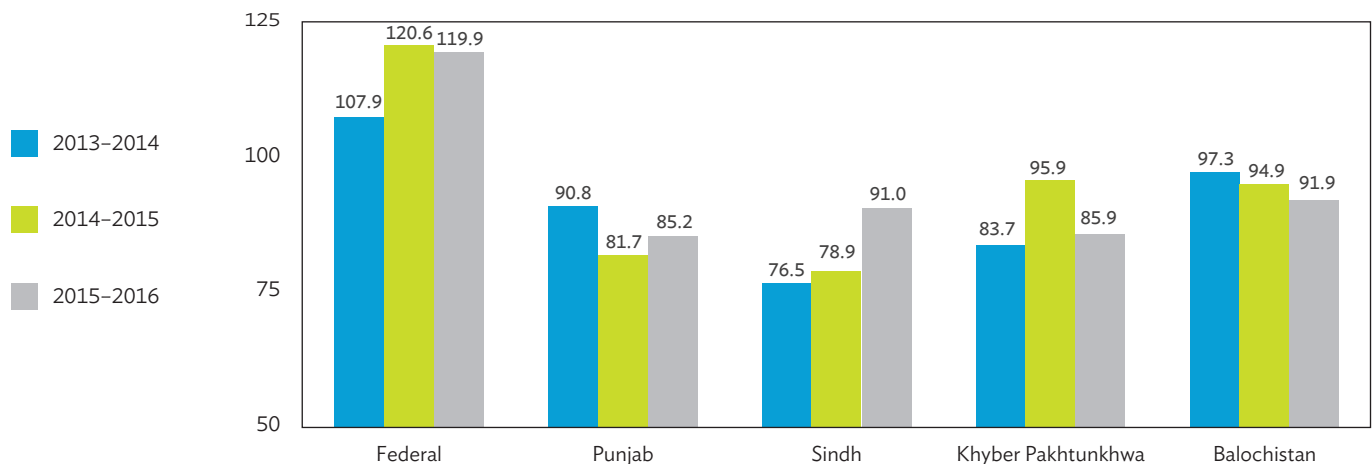
POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Pakistan's education policy has generally focused on improving the reach and quality of primary and secondary education. Further investment and reforms are needed at both levels to widen access and increase enrollment and completion. Improved education outcomes will help assuage Pakistan's high regional, socioeconomic, and gender disparities and promote robust and inclusive economic growth. We propose policy suggestions for improving Pakistan's school education access.

Expanding Fiscal Outlay for Public Schools

Expanding school access requires resources and effective financial planning and management. The government needs to increase the fiscal budget for secondary education to augment access to schools. Given the public school dominance, an increased fiscal outlay for secondary education is essential to increase the number

**Figure 1: Annual Public Education Expenditure
(% of Total Budget)**



Source: Academy of Educational Planning and Management, Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training, Islamabad, 2018.

of secondary schools and upgrade school facilities. Investing in expanding access to postprimary education is critical to encourage higher participation and completion rates in both primary and secondary education levels and upgrade the quality of basic education. Education outcome indicators should be factored in when making resource allocation decisions for districts and schools to target funds more effectively. A rule-based approach should be adopted to streamline the process of transferring funds from provinces to the districts. Such an approach will render district-level funding more “needs-based, transparent, and predictable” (World Bank 2015). In addition to increasing the fiscal outlays to the education sector, reforms are needed to improve the budget absorption rates, especially at the provincial level.

In terms of girls’ education, the provision of all-girls schools will improve enrollment and retention rates in rural communities. In coeducational institutions, the government should prioritize the provision of separate sanitation facilities for girls, the availability of well-trained female teachers, and the inclusion of women in schools’ administration (Adukia 2017).

Optimizing Local Public Education Spending

Being a high-priority sector, the fiscal allocation for the education sector grows every year at the national level (ISAPS 2016). While a higher budget can potentially finance better outcomes, improved public spending quality and effectiveness are vital for raising the quality of education and broadening access to it. Ensuring a stronger link between spending and outcomes is especially important in developing countries, where competing development priorities are often numerous and public resources are limited (Vegas and Coffin 2015).

The utilization of public funds in non-salary expenses at schools needs to be reviewed and improved. “The proportion of the

current budget that is allocated for non-salary expenses, such as operating expenses, developmental expenditures, and supplies at the school level, is low” (ADB 2019). Given the deplorable state of infrastructure in the school education sector, a larger proportion of public funds needs to be allocated for expansion and rehabilitation purposes, provision of key inputs, and execution of quality initiatives. This requires substantial increments in the non-salary budget allocations and execution rates for school education.

Sufficient public financing and the use of efficient public financial management practices, along with improvements in governance and management of the education sector, are essential to achieve better school enrollment and learning outcomes. The same level of resources can finance greater school participation, especially at the postprimary level, by addressing local capacity gaps, persistent budget-spending gaps, and other issues that affect public service delivery performance. Local governments must invest their resources in innovative ways to improve access and quality of education, particularly at the primary and secondary levels.

Developing Alternative Models of Education Service Delivery

Given its limited capacity, forcing the public education system to expand access to quality education is a challenging goal. The private sector can play an instrumental role in addressing access-related challenges to school education. Productive public-private partnership (PPP) modalities should be used to enhance the reach and quality of postprimary education. Partnering with the private sector to subsidize education for children from poor households and supporting student access to private schools, especially in rural areas and at the postprimary levels, is a crucial and cost-effective strategy to expanding access to quality education. PPP schools should be scaled up substantially, particularly in locations where public schools either do not exist or are too small.

Various PPP modalities have been tested and adopted by provincial governments. For instance, the Sindh Education Foundation supports PPPs to increase access to education for poor communities. It provides financial assistance to schools and offers incentives to deserving schools, teachers, and students (ADB 2019). Similarly, various demand-based PPP programs of the Punjab Education Foundation (PEF) have been successful in providing affordable quality education to poor students in urban, suburban, and remote rural areas, allowing them to perform better and stay longer in school while enhancing gender equity. PEF's various PPP programs are replicable, cost-effective, and competitive (Malik 2010).

In addition to PPP arrangements, the role of non-government and private sector organizations in the management of schools that cater to poor and lower-middle-income children should be expanded. The Education Fund for Sindh, CARE Foundation, and The Citizens Foundation are examples of models that demonstrate the possibility of providing good-quality education to impoverished and lower-middle-income students via innovative approaches. Improved infrastructure, good in-service teacher training, use of additional contract teachers who are provided incentives to perform well, and ongoing supervision and support to teachers and headteachers are some of the common features of these successful programs.

Consolidating and Clustering Schools

Upgrading primary schools to include higher grades could offer an immediate solution to address the shortage of postprimary schools. Expanding upgradation initiatives with “sufficient budget allocations, relevant school site selection, and planning and implementation oversight” (ADB 2019) would help broaden access speedily. Increased use of enrollment and out-of-school children data and the geographic information system mapping can help facilitate the process of consolidating and clustering schools more effectively. Transport arrangements should be made alongside the consolidation of schools to minimize student dropouts. Additionally, the use of multiple shifts for higher grades (6–8) in existing primary schools could be employed as a temporary measure to improve participation and transitions rates in the near term.

Expanding Select Demand-Side Interventions

Demand-side interventions to improve enrollment and reduce dropout rates, especially for girls, are important. Demand-side interventions include stipends, vouchers, and conditional cash transfers given to girls at the primary school level. Other demand-side interventions could be considered, like providing transport, particularly to girls in secondary schools who cannot walk to school and a school lunch program for better nutrition. In countries, such as India, demand-side interventions have proven successful in boosting enrollment and attendance.

For impoverished families, the government could extend conditional cash transfers (CCT) to promote educational attainment. In some countries, the use of CCT has improved educational attainment for disadvantaged and vulnerable groups,

particularly by addressing the demand-side of education financing and getting more children from these groups to attend schools. Cash-based incentives tied to educational achievements offered to children from low-income households have improved school completion in Bangladesh, Cambodia, Mexico, Nicaragua, Turkey, and many Latin American countries. The Waseela-e-Taleem, an education-related CCT initiative under the government's flagship Ehsaas (Poverty Alleviation and Social Safety) Program, should be expanded countrywide to include secondary schools and above. Initiatives specifically focusing on improving girls' secondary school enrollment and retention rates, such as tuition waivers and stipends, can prove fruitful under this program. The Punjab Education Foundation's Education Voucher Scheme, which covers school fees for poor children, can be replicated in other provinces.

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