Policy Brief

Retention:
Just getting children into school is not enough*

All children need quality education that will help them contribute to the economic and social development of their families and nations. Universal primary education remains one of the Millennium Development Goals to be achieved by 2015. Although much progress has been made in recent years to accomplish this objective, reaching those children who remain out of school continues to be a challenge. Moreover, while an increasing number of children are provided with access to primary education, many of them never complete it.

34 PERCENT OF CHILDREN WILL NOT COMPLETE PRIMARY SCHOOL

The EPDC estimates that today 34 percent of all children will not complete primary school, 12 percent because they never enter school and 22 percent because they drop out before the end of primary school. In other words, almost two-thirds of the global gap in children completing primary school is due to children dropping out. These dropouts represent an inefficient use of resources and children's time because many probably have not learned enough to impact their lives. Many others drop out between primary and secondary school. The figures presented here demonstrate the current status of primary as well as secondary school entry and completion, showing those countries that are lagging behind the most in providing children with primary and secondary education.

GAP BETWEEN SCHOOL ENTRY AND COMPLETION

Figures 1 and 2 compare school entry[i] and completion[ii] according to household surveys for 73 countries. The surveys are for years ranging from 2000–2005. For countries with less recent data, there likely has been improvement.

The figures cover developing countries and are arranged by region. The regions are presented in the following order: Sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, Arab States, Latin America, Eastern Europe, and Central Asia. Within the regions, countries are arranged by rate of girls entering school, from lowest to highest. The grey bar shows the portion of children in the country who will enter school. The colored bars (blue for primary; red for secondary) show the percentage of children who will complete primary or secondary school. The difference between the colored bars and the grey bars is an approximation of children who will drop out.

As presented in these figures, countries within the same region and with similar economic or cultural backgrounds have very different completion rates. For example, Nicaragua and Honduras are two neighboring countries in Latin America with similar per capita GDP but with a significant difference in primary school completion. While in Nicaragua 65 percent of girls and 51 percent of boys can be expected to complete

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primary education, in Honduras these percentages are much lower and do not exceed 30 and 25 percent among girls and boys respectively. Figure 1 shows that in many countries the portion of children that will complete primary school is much smaller than those who enter primary school. Some countries with high percentages of children entering school see large numbers of dropouts, including Malawi or Mozambique. The highest entry and completion rates for primary school can be observed in Eastern Europe and East Asia, where close to 100 percent of children enter school and more than 90 percent complete it. The most disadvantaged appear to be children in Sub-Saharan Africa, where primary school completion remains lower than 50 percent in the majority of the countries.

Figure 2 demonstrates that the portion of students that will complete secondary school is small in many countries, with the lowest rates being observed in Sub-Saharan Africa. The highest overall percentage of children entering school and completing secondary education can be found in the countries of Eastern Europe and Central Asia, although it should be noted that in this region secondary school completion is not consistently high but instead ranges from 30 to 90 percent. Similarly, in Latin America, Arab States, and East Asia completion varies significantly across countries but exceeds 60 percent only in Jordan, Egypt, Philippines, and Peru. In the majority of countries in these three regions secondary school completion ranges between 20 and 50 percent but can be as low as 5 percent in countries such as Suriname and Haiti. In Sub-Saharan Africa, secondary school completion is particularly low. The portion of children who will complete secondary education in most countries of the region does not exceed 20 percent and in many is close to 5 percent or lower.
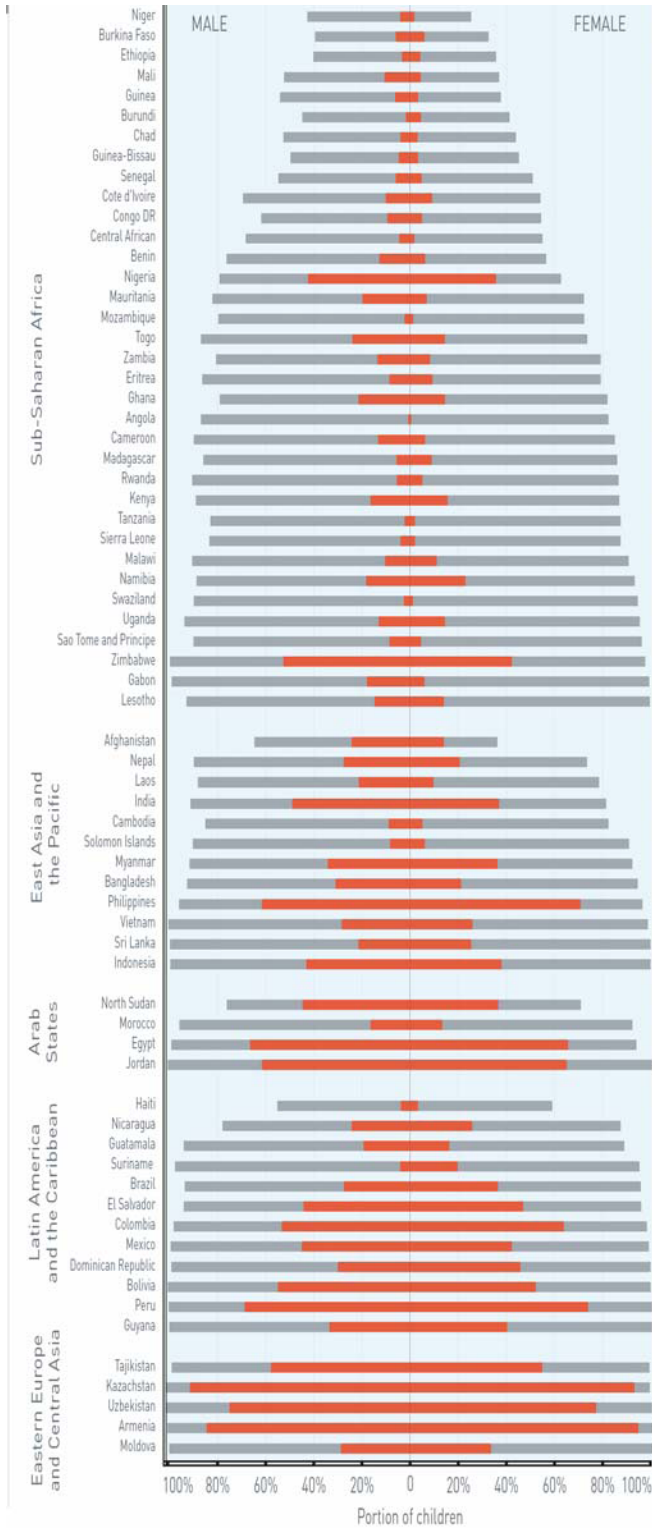
FIGURE 1. PRIMARY SCHOOL RETENTION: Portion of school-age cohort expected to complete primary school in comparison to the portion who will enter school.
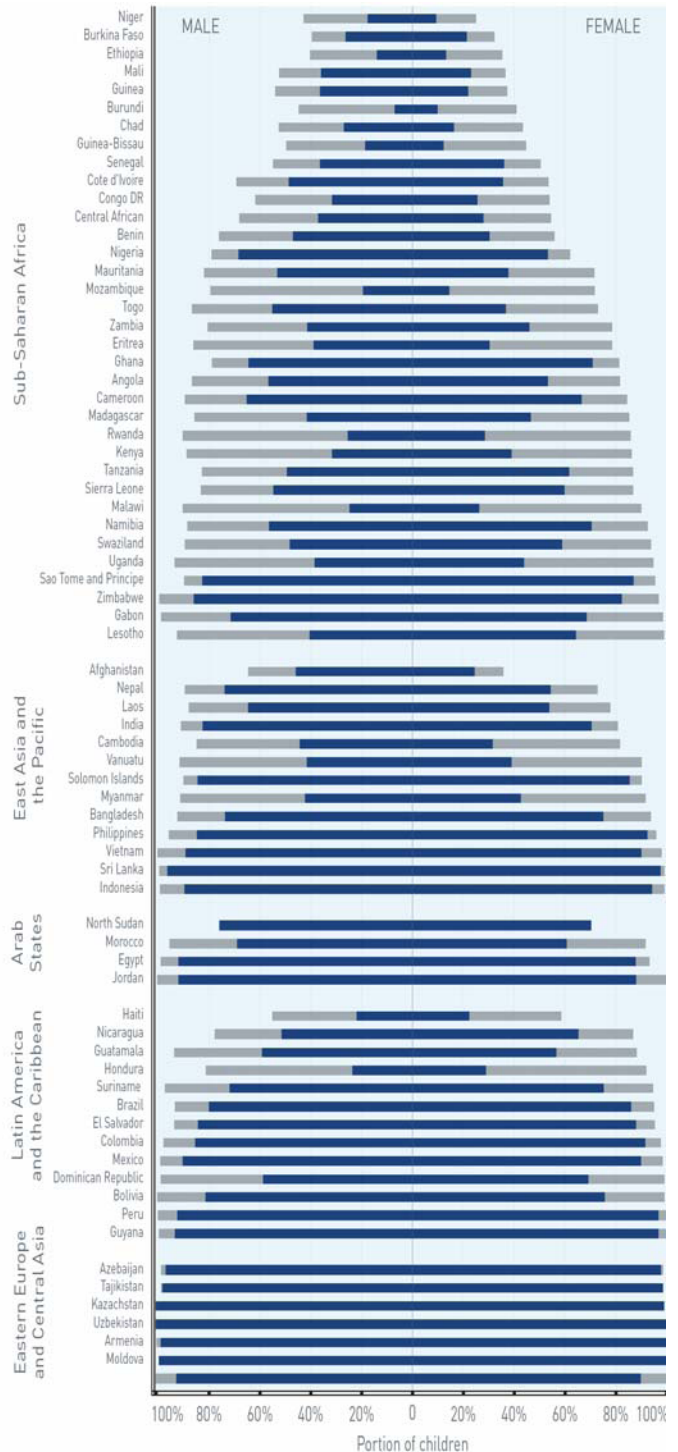
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FIGURE 2. SECONDARY SCHOOL RETENTION:
Portion of school-age cohort expected to complete secondary school in comparison to the portion who will enter school.

Some gender disparities can be observed in both figures. The percentages of girls entering and completing primary school tend to be lower than those of boys, especially in the Sub-Saharan region and some countries of East Asia and the Pacific, such as Cambodia and Nepal.   Secondary school completion is lower for girls in many countries as well, though higher percentages of girls completing secondary school can be observed in a few countries, including Philippines and a number of countries in Latin America and the Caribbean.

STRATEGIES THAT COULD HELP

Children in many developing countries now have much better access to primary education than their parents. However, retaining children in primary as well as secondary school continues to be a challenge. There are still places where children are not provided with the opportunity to attend school. In some countries, there simply are not enough schools. Moreover, there are many barriers to education, including the direct costs of school fees, transportation, and uniforms, and the indirect opportunity costs of time spent in school. Reducing these costs may be necessary for children to be able to stay in school. Some families might not have adequate information on the benefits and value of education. Encouraging parents and communities to become more involved in their children's schools may help to increase retention and school effectiveness, both by raising the parents' awareness of the benefits that come from education and by making the school environment more comfortable and friendly for children. Parents need to see that the education received by their children is going to help their future. Governments should focus on supporting economic growth that will offer educated young people job opportunities and prove the benefits of education to the parents. The school schedule may need to become more flexible for children who for various reasons are

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not able to attend school on a regular basis. Most importantly, the issue of education quality needs to be addressed. Teachers should be provided with sufficient training and support in their work. The curriculum needs to be designed to provide children with skills for future employment. Similarly, mentoring programs, internships, and work/study programs can help provide students with the wherewithal and incentives to complete their education and find future employment. With more effective policies, more children should be able to remain in school.

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* This policy brief is adapted by Anna Chaluda from: Ingram, George, Wils, Annababette, Carrol, Bidemi, and Townsend, Felicity. *The Untapped Opportunity: How Public-Private Partnerships Can Advance Education for All* (Washington, DC: Education Policy and Data Center, 2006).

[i] The portion to enter school = children who were ever in school (age 10)/all children (age 10).

[ii] The portion expected to complete primary = portion to enter school x [persons who completed primary (age 17)/persons who were ever in school (age 17)]

The portion expected to complete secondary = portion expected to complete primary x [persons who completed secondary (age 24)/persons who completed primary (age 24)]