

# Realizing the Promise of Education for Development

## Emerging Themes of World Development Report 2018

Education is central to improving human welfare—both inherently and instrumentally—and yet there has never been a World Development Report on education.<sup>1</sup> The WDR 2018, *Realizing the Promise of Education for Development*, represents an opportunity to take stock of what we know and to provide guidance on how to expand the scope and quality of education around the world. It will aim to lay the foundations for a sustained policy focus on *learning outcomes and skills for life and work*, and to provide guidance on *how education systems can be reformed* to deliver them.

Through this WDR, the World Bank will try to answer several key questions: How can education drive development in all its dimensions, from employment to health to social cohesion—and how does poor policy sometimes undermine this promise of education? Are students acquiring the knowledge and skills they need to thrive, and if not, why not? What can countries do to promote learning and skills for all children and youth? And how can one ensure that when improvements do happen, they happen systemwide, and not just in localized and often unsustainable interventions? The report will be organized around four main themes to explore answers to these questions.

### THEME 1: **The promise of education**

**Education is a powerful instrument for eradicating poverty and promoting shared prosperity, but fulfilling its potential requires better policies and delivery—both within and outside the education system.** Getting an education is the surest route to escaping poverty: one of the most robust results in microeconomics is that schooling leads to an earnings gain of some 6 to 12 percent for each year of education. Education's value extends beyond that into other pecuniary and non-pecuniary benefits. Educated individuals lead healthier lives and are more engaged citizens, and their families end up healthier and better educated. Education is a key intervention to narrow gender and other social gaps as well as to promote social mobility. At the societal level, education spurs productivity and economic growth, and may increase social capital and improve the functioning of institutions. Finally, education multiplies the effects of other interventions and policies, such as agricultural extension or provision of health care or improvements in infrastructure. All this evidence provides a strong rationale for investing in education.

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<sup>1</sup> Previous WDRs have touched on the role education plays in reducing poverty and inequality (WDR06), the importance of making services “work” in order to improve outcomes (WDR04), the importance of skills accumulation as a part of a youth or jobs agenda (WDR07, WDR13), and education as a marker, and driver, of gender equality (WDR12).

But education is no panacea. First, the full returns to educating a child take years to materialize, so investing in education isn't a quick fix. Nor can education do it alone: even well-managed education systems sometimes have trouble delivering on its promise, for example if a poor investment climate or barriers to women's employment constrain the returns to education. Moreover, education systems can yield "social bads" as well as social goods, if a system delivers schooling in ways that deepen social inequalities, for example by reserving better access or quality for favored groups. A final challenge—the focus of Theme 2—is that schooling doesn't necessarily lead to learning, and this reduces education's benefits.

## THEME 2: **The learning crisis and learning metrics to guide reform**

**Despite gains in access to education, many children and youth are leaving school unequipped with the skills they need for life and work.** Measuring learning provides a metric to monitor progress. Low- and middle-income countries have made great progress in getting children and youth to enter and stay in school: many countries are approaching universal primary completion, gender gaps have been narrowed and in some cases closed completely, and secondary and tertiary enrolment have surged. This section will point to remaining challenges, including fragile contexts which are off-track in terms of universal completion, as well as socially excluded groups (including girls, ethnic minorities, migrants, and others) in a number of countries that continue to lag. But even where school participation rates are high, evidence is mounting that students are learning far too little, relative both to the countries' own learning standards and to common-sense expectations about what schooling should deliver. In Malawi and Zambia over 80% of students at the end of the second grade cannot read a single word; in India only 25% of grade 3 students can do two-digit subtraction; in Colombia, Indonesia, and Peru, student performance at the 75th percentile on the PISA math test is barely above that at the 25th percentile in the average OECD country. Theme 2 will present this evidence, together with evidence on the proximate causes of the learning crisis. The Report will also discuss how to design and deploy different learning metrics (national, regional, and global) that can effectively guide reform—including the technical and political challenges of doing so.

As the global economy and the nature and demands of jobs change, due to global integration and the growth of the digital economy, education systems will need to adapt too. The types of skills imparted at various levels of education—from early child development programs through to the tertiary level—may need to change to ensure that the range of skills acquired are relevant. And the quality of the programs aimed at delivering those skills will become even more salient.

THEME 3: **Effective interventions to build learning****Ending the learning crisis requires using the knowledge on promising interventions.**

Despite the sector's reputation for conservatism in delivery, schools and systems around the world are constantly innovating, and rigorous evidence on the value of different school- and community-level interventions to improve education and learning has exploded over the past 15 years. Notably, the evidence base on "what works" is mushrooming. This evidence has identified key interventions that promote learning. Theme 3 will summarize this burgeoning evidence base. To identify which results are most important as a starting point for countries' own experimentation, the WDR will focus on the principles driving the results and on the areas with the largest gap between what evidence suggests may be effective and what systems actually do. Theme 3 will organize approaches around the themes of prepared learners, effective teaching, classroom-focused inputs, and responsive skills programs.

A growing body of evidence emphasizes how important early support is as a foundation for all subsequent learning. Skills development depends on nutrition and stimulation in the very early years, as well as cognitive and socioemotional development before schooling. The WDR will marshal this new evidence to make the case that early childhood development is integral to a holistic approach to education, and summarize recent evidence on cost-effective approaches to delivering it effectively.

THEME 4: **Learning at scale**

**Achieving results at scale is not simply a matter of "scaling up" promising interventions: instead, reforming systems requires tackling both technical complexity and political challenges.** Where system change has relied on the scaling-up of isolated interventions, it has foundered. When the Kenyan government tried to reduce student/teacher ratios by hiring contract teachers—an intervention that had worked well when an NGO implemented it—the results were negligible. Careful analysis attributed this failure to both implementation constraints and political economy forces. Improving outcomes at scale is never as easy as rolling out a proven intervention across 100 times as many schools, for two main reasons. First, education systems are complex, with many components, and achieving system-level change requires aligning these various components toward student learning. For example, if a new curriculum emphasizes higher-order analytical skills but teacher training and student assessment do not adjust too, students are not going to acquire those skills. Second, education systems have multiple social and political objectives beyond access and learning, and multiple actors. Strategies for change that fail to take those objectives and actors into account and that approach the challenge only from a technical perspective are doomed to fail. This is especially true in cases where the system is locked in a low-learning, low-accountability, high inequality equilibrium. Theme 4 will describe these technical and political challenges, and will also present strategies for taking them on: first, by seizing opportunities where the technical and political opportunities for change align; and second, by deploying information, coalitions, and innovation to create opportunities for strategic change.