

Education in Armenia

Context

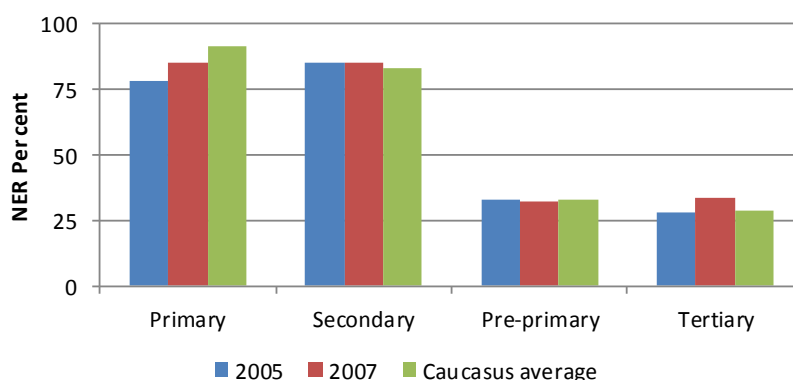
The Armenian government is increasing efforts to improve its national education system with reforms and initiatives aimed at sustainable long-term changes. This is occurring against a backdrop of national economic hardship.

Impact of the economic crisis

As a result of the global financial crisis, Armenia is experiencing its most severe economic decline since the post-Soviet transition. After six years of annual growth, the real GDP declined in 2008, and by 2009 it had dropped 16 per cent. It is expected that the GDP will have positive growth again in future years, but at a modest increase. The effects of the economic crisis have extended well beyond the national economy. Household expenditures and behavioural patterns shifted. The demand for cheap and low-quality food sharply increased, and family spending on healthcare and medicines declined. Poverty rates, which had been in decline, increased from 25.6 per cent in 2008 to 28.4 per cent in 2009. The number of people living in extreme poverty nearly doubled, rising from 3.6 per cent to 6.9 per cent of the population in 2009.

Armenia has the second highest GDP per capita (PPP) in the Caucasus, at US\$5,870. It also has one of the lowest rates of government education expenditures in the region. The government only spends 2.6 per cent of its GDP on education, which,

Figure 1. Education net enrolment rates in Armenia in 2005 and 2007, compared to the Caucasus average



along with Georgia, is the lowest in the CEECIS region. Armenia ranks 84 out of 182 countries on the UNDP Human Development Index, with a score of 0.798. Income inequality, as measured by the Gini coefficient, is 0.33, which is close to the regional average. About 8 million Armenians live outside the country, which is nearly three times the size of the population living within the country.

Education reform

The Government of Armenia has launched numerous large-scale reform efforts over the past few years in an attempt to improve the education system. These reform programmes include the following:

- The government transitioned to a 12-year school structure, which urges the enrolment of 5- and 6-year-old children at preschool institutions.
- The government approved the 2008–2015 Strategic Programme on Preschool Education Reforms.

Quick Facts about education in Armenia

Total population	3.0 million
Percentage of GDP spent on education	2.6%
Net pre-primary school enrolment, 2007 [Gender Parity Index (GPI) (girls/boys)]	33% (1.16)*
Net enrolment in primary school, 2007 (GPI)	85% (1.04)
Net enrolment in secondary school, 2007 (GPI)	85% (1.06)
Gross enrolment in tertiary enrolment, 2007 (GPI)	34% (1.20)
Primary student/teacher ratio, 2007	19:1
Out-of-school children of primary school age (per cent girls)	7,000 (34%)
Percentage of children involved in child labour (2007)	4%
Number of refugees and internally displaced persons	219,620
TIMSS 2007 average scores: mathematics, science	499.5, 486
Transition rate to secondary school, 2006	99%

Source: UNESCO EFA Global Monitoring Report 2008, 2010; Child labour in the Republic of Armenia: Report 2007

- The Ministry of Education and Science (MoES) developed a new curriculum that includes a mandatory life skills segment from grades 1 through 9.
- In 2004, the National Curriculum for General Education was approved by the government, which defined the new goals and a strategy for reform.
- In 2004, State Standards for Secondary Education were developed, which laid a basis for gradual introduction of new subject standards, syllabi and textbooks.
- The MoES instituted a new large-scale teacher training programme and raised teacher pay.
- The government invested in improving management and efficiency of the education system, with special focus on capacity development and an Education Management Information System (EMIS).
- The MoES installed a new assessment system to help monitor educational quality and to encourage objective evaluation of students.
- The government introduced a student-based funding scheme and a 10-point grading system.
- In 2009, the Law on General Education was approved.
- The government declared its intent to better enforce compulsory education laws and ensure that all children, regardless of ethnicity, gender and income level, are assured access to good quality education.

Access

Access to primary education continues to increase. However, secondary access remains stagnant and additional efforts are needed to increase access to pre-primary and tertiary education (see Figure 2).

Early childhood education

After the dismantling of centralized institutions, preschool enrolment dropped, falling as low as 21 per cent in 2006. Out of 923 communities in Armenia, it is estimated that 413 did not have any preschools in 2009–2010, thus leaving Armenian children with no access to any kind of educational services prior to grade one. The poorest families in less affluent communities were the most vulnerable. There is a strong case for investing in early childhood development and education in Armenia.



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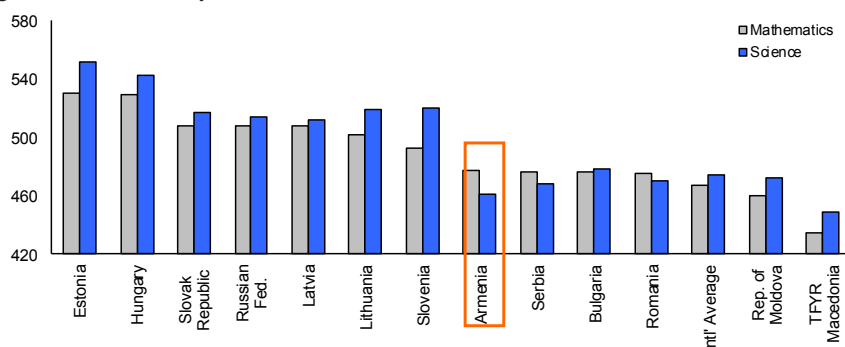
In 2008, the Armenian government launched the 2008–2015 Preschool Education Reform Strategy Programme, as well as a pilot project to introduce it. These aimed to increase access to, enrolment in and quality of early childhood education services in the country, with a special emphasis on the most vulnerable children.

In 2010, with funding provided through a World Bank loan, the Government of Armenia introduced the School Preparedness component of the Education Quality and Relevance Project. The project, in collaboration with UNICEF and the World Bank, seeks to expand effective, equitable and financially sustainable systems of early childhood development services. From 2010 to 2015, the project plans to reach 140 communities out of the 413 still without preschools.

Armenia's net enrolment rate (NER) in 2005 was 33 per cent; Armenia did not report a 2007 net pre-primary school enrolment rate. If the NER is still representative of enrolment today, it would be about average for the region. It is possible that the recent preschool reforms have impacted preschool enrolment, but further monitoring is needed to confirm this. According to the 2005 data, boys are less likely than girls to be enrolled in pre-primary education, and urban children are more likely to be enrolled than rural children.

The NER in primary school in Armenia is 85 per cent, which, while it experienced a 6 per cent increase since 2005, remains the lowest in the Caucasus. The nation's secondary school enrolment rate is also 85 per cent. This percentage is higher than secondary enrolment in Azerbaijan and Georgia. A substantial drop in enrolment occurs between secondary school and tertiary education. Gross enrolment in tertiary education is only 34 per cent. Analysis of the Integrated Living Conditions Survey data in the *Social Snapshot and Poverty in Armenia 2010* report revealed that non-poor households have higher levels of educational

Figure 2. Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), 2003: Results in science and mathematics in Armenia and the CEECIS region, grade 8 (ordered by mathematics score)



attainment than poor ones (especially in post-primary education), and welfare gains have been associated with higher educational attainment. Despite rather equitable access, there are substantial inequities in the quality of education between richer and poorer households and between urban and rural areas. Wealthier and urban households have greater access to better education, training and complementary school programmes than do poor and rural households. Changing entrance requirements, including new exams, may shift enrolment and merit further monitoring in the coming years.

Educational challenges for youth and adolescents
High drop-out and absentee rates suggest that the quality, relevance and affordability of secondary education in Armenia does not sufficiently attract and retain students who are drawn to work. A strong correlation exists between absentee and child labour rates, especially among secondary school students. The Armenian Labour Code stipulates a minimum working age of 14, but a recent UNICEF study found that about 3,500 students (6.1 per cent) between the ages of 7 and 18 are involved in some type of work in Armenia. To reduce this number, the government must continue to focus on improving the quality and relevance of secondary education.

To combat high absenteeism and drop-out rates, programmes designed to support youth have emerged in Armenian secondary schools. Life-skills education, including information on HIV/AIDS prevention, has been introduced in schools around the nation. Youth-friendly health centres have also emerged to support young adults.

Children with disabilities

As a pilot country for the EU to address child protection and violence against children, Armenia is particularly concerned about 'special' boarding schools. The concerns are due to recent allegations of violence and abuse against children residing at these institutions. The Armenian government responded by forming a monitoring group to examine boarding schools. The monitoring group is formulating recommendations on how to improve the schools and prevent further incidents.

Inclusive education is emerging in Armenia as a new model to ensure that students with disabilities have an equal right to education. For decades, special needs students have attended separate, often inferior schools where they have not had access to the same resources and experiences as mainstream students. In 2009, there were 49 inclusive schools in the country, and an additional 14 are scheduled to become inclusive in 2010. Of the estimated 8,000 special needs students in Armenia, around 900 can be taught with accommodations in these 49 inclusive institutions. Beyond the benefits for students, mainstream placements are shown to be more cost effective than separate institutions.

Equity

Efforts to reduce absenteeism and out-of-school disparities in primary school exist, but greater support for boys and disadvantaged children is necessary. Absenteeism and a high number of dropouts are continuous problems in Armenia. On average, 10 per cent of students are absent from school each day. During the years 2002–2003, 2003–2004, and 2004–2005, the total number of dropouts were 1,531, 4,823, and 7,630 respectively, at an annual average growth rate of 250 per cent. A correlation between child labour and absenteeism has emerged, and reforms are currently being explored to increase school attendance and retention. Armenia has made significant improvements to reduce the number of out-of-school children at the primary level. In 2005, 18,000 children were out of school; by 2007, that number fell to 7,000. This is in part due to a new law that reduces the number of permissible absentees from 240 to 180 hours. Also, Saturday is no longer a school day.

While gender measures are traditionally geared toward monitoring girls' access to education, in the case of Armenia, the Gender Parity Index (GPI) shows that in fact, boys are less likely to enrol and participate at all levels. Armenia's GPI is 1.04 in primary school, 1.06 in secondary school and 1.20 in tertiary education. These indicate a slight gender gap that favours girls. Additionally, boys tend to attend school less regularly than girls and have lower achievement in school assessments. Sixty-six per cent of out-of-school children are boys. An Armenian teacher reports that one reason for boys being less involved in school is that immediate employment opportunities for boys are more appealing than the long-term benefits that school offers. The teacher explains: "One of my male students works on a minibus during the day and as a door handler during the night. He makes more money than me, a school teacher."

Perhaps the most significant equity gap in educational access exists between the richest and poorest income quintiles. The gross enrolment in secondary school is 1.3 times higher in the richest quintile compared to the poorest. Furthermore, a significant majority of students who drop out after primary school are poor. There is concern in Armenia that the transition to the 12-year secondary education system could further widen this gap, as it requires a longer time commitment; this is especially burdensome for poor children living in remote, border or high mountainous communities. As a result of privatization and poor public education financing, there is also inequity in access to extra educational services meant to bolster academic achievement, such as tutoring, private schools and private financing. Rich communities and parents often invest in their schools in the form of informal fees or service purchasing. The poorest communities cannot afford these extras, and consequently have less access to quality learning opportunities.

Marginalized populations

The Government of Armenia has made notable steps to support their major ethnic minority students, including Russians, Greeks, Assyrians, Ezids and Kurds. While these students are taught in Armenian or Russian alongside their Armenian peers, they also have an opportunity to study their native tongue and culture in school programmes. Textbooks and syllabi were translated into Ezid and Assyrian between 2005 and 2007, and in-service training for language teachers has been established.

Educational quality and learning outcomes

Armenia's major challenge with regard to learning outcomes is to improve school quality and efficiency. Corruption in the post-Soviet education system in Armenia led to deteriorating academic performance and lower educational standards across the nation. Bribery and paying for grades became common practice in school and university entrance examinations. The government called for major reforms in 2006, including an additional two years of compulsory schooling, the reduction of teachers, mandatory trainings for educators to update their methodologies and a new unified examination system.

In 2006, it became compulsory for students to start school at 5.5 or 6 years of age and attend school for 12 years; under the previous system, students would start school at age 7 and attending for 10 years. The evaluation system within Armenia also shifted to a 10-point scale, providing teachers with a larger range of grades to accurately indicate student progress. Final examinations were revised in 2009, creating a unified system across the nation. The full effects of the reform will not be known until after 2018, when the first 12-year cohort graduates.

Another indicator of Armenia's educational quality is its achievement on international assessments. Armenia's eighth graders participated in TIMSS 2003. The results showed that the nation scored just slightly above the international average in mathematics and ranked 8th out of 13 participating countries in the region. In science, Armenia scored second to last in the region, just ahead of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and well below the international average. Girls scored higher on TIMSS in both mathematics and science.

Education financing

Armenia spends about 2.6 per cent of its GNP on education, which is the third lowest in the region after Georgia and Tajikistan. Its government allocates the national education budget directly to individual schools based on the number of students enrolled. This funding scheme began in 1999 and was revised in 2006. Over the past decade, the Government of Armenia has increasingly relied on private financing for education. By 2001, the private contributions to education equalled that of public allocations. Many schools now levy some kind of informal fee, although it is illegal to make such fees compulsory. In addition to informal fees,

parents are asked to make payments for textbook rental schemes and for school supplies. Private tutoring is common, sometimes by the child's own teacher, which drives up the price of education for all and limits access for the poorest children.

Currently, teachers make about 70 per cent of the average national wage, which is about average for the region. This rate is an improvement from 1993, when education sector staff and teachers were earning less than 50 per cent of the national wage.

Priority challenges in Armenian education

Armenia's priority challenges are to:

- Sharpen the equity focus in policy planning and intensify efforts to reach the most disadvantaged children
- Develop mechanisms to enhance deinstitutionalization, with special focus on transition of children with special needs from special schools into inclusive schools
- Consolidate the existing data collection mechanisms into a centralized system that will improve the data management tools to better target and plan educational interventions and services
- Improve learning outcomes for all children, especially boys
- Close the gap in educational enrolment and completion rates between boys and girls
- Reduce student absenteeism and overall school wastage (see Box 1)
- Increase the national primary school net enrolment rate and continue to reduce the number of out-of-school children
- Increase budgetary allocations for education
- Support national capacity to improve children's developmental readiness to start primary school on time, especially for marginalized children

Box 1. School wastage in Armenia

A 2008 report on school wastage has important findings about school efficiency in Armenia. The report defines school wastage as "a notion of student participation in school education, student flow inefficiency and student performance within school system where measures of student drop-out, repetition, completion, attendance and academic performance grade are used and analysed." In the past few years, school wastage in Armenia has become an increasingly worrisome problem, urgently inviting policy attention. Although there have been attempts made by the government in recent years to stop the worsening situation, recent data has indicated that no significant improvement has been made. In fact, the reality is getting worse. This issue remains a major challenge.

Source: Hua, H. (2008). School Wastage Study Focusing on Student Absenteeism in Armenia. Draft.