

Education in Kyrgyzstan

Context

The Government of Kyrgyzstan has made education a priority. Primary school access and enrolment figures have improved as a result of this commitment. Greater emphasis on quality at all levels will continue to move the national education system forward.

Impact of the economic crisis

The international financial crisis had a serious impact on the economy of Kyrgyzstan. The industrial sector felt the most significant effects. Imports and exports declined. Remittances, which account for 27 per cent of the GDP, declined as a result of unfavourable exchange rates and a reduction in salaries. With a US\$75 million budget shortfall, increasing government corruption and a deteriorating social sector, instability is an ongoing concern in the nation. A grant from Russia provided a short-term solution to cover the national budget, but a far more serious deficit is predicted in 2010. Kyrgyzstan ranked 162 out of 180 on the 2009 Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI).

Kyrgyzstan remains one of the poorest countries in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Its per capita GNP is the second lowest in the region, after Tajikistan, at \$1,140 (PPP). After increases in 2007 (7.6 per cent) and 2008 (8.5 per cent), the GDP real growth rate declined in 2009 by 1 per cent.

Economic instability and rising inflation continue to impact the nation's most vulnerable groups; 40 per cent of the population lives below the national poverty line and 6.6 per cent live in extreme poverty. Families with three or more children are most at risk. Nationally, 43 per cent of children live in poverty. Income inequality in the country remains high, as reflected in its Gini coefficient of 0.30.



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Unemployment rates are near 18 per cent. Around 100,000 displaced persons who live in the country and in isolated mountainous villages remain cut off from basic government services. The country is ranked 120 out of 182 countries on the Human Development Index (HDI 0.710), which is toward the bottom for the region and situated between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan in the subregion.

Education reform

The state budget expenditure on education increased from 3.9 per cent of GDP in 2001 to 5.4 per cent in 2010. However, while they are likely to meet the second Millennium Development Goal of universal primary education, the quality of education at all levels continues to be a serious concern. There have been a number of notable recent educational reforms:

- A series of trainings and online courses aimed at improving the monitoring and evaluation of school achievement is part of the 2011–2020 strategic plan for educational development.
- A school self-assessment tool has been developed and is expected to be approved by the MoES in 2010.

Quick facts about education in Kyrgyzstan

Total population	5.3 million
Percentage of GDP spent on education	5.4%
Net pre-primary school enrolment, 2007 [Gender Parity Index (GPI) (girls/boys)]	13% (1.0)
Net enrolment in primary school, 2007 (GPI)	84% (0.99)
Net enrolment in secondary school, 2007 (GPI)	81% (1.02)
Gross enrolment in tertiary enrolment, 2007 (GPI)	43% (1.30)
Primary school student/teacher ratio, 2007	24:1
Out-of-school children of primary school age (per cent girls)	32,000 (50%)
Ranking on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (out of 180 countries)	162

Source: UNESCO EFA Global Monitoring Report 2008, 2010; Transmonee database 2008.

- The government has made a \$9 million Fast Track Initiative (FTI) instalment to improve the educational system infrastructure and the financing of pre-school expansion.
- The government launched the Community Management Project, in cooperation with UNICEF, to enhance local participation in schools.
- The president and parliament passed a new preschool law legitimizing new forms of preschool and calling for universal coverage.
- The documentation of community-based kindergarten yielded three models of community-based institutions, which will ultimately provide a foundation for 450 new centres.

These initiatives have begun to revive the country's education system, but challenges remain. While the expenditure on education as a percentage of GDP and of overall government expenditure is high by international standards, the real per capita expenditure for pupils and salaries for teachers are low when examined from a comparative perspective.

Access

Kyrgyzstan has made some progress in increasing access to education, yet it lags behind its regional and subregional neighbours. In 2005, the national primary completion rate reached 98 per cent and secondary completion rates were around 86 per cent. These figures are impressive, but the education system still struggles to provide learners with the most basic skills. Student learning outcomes and instructional quality are major issues that require further attention.

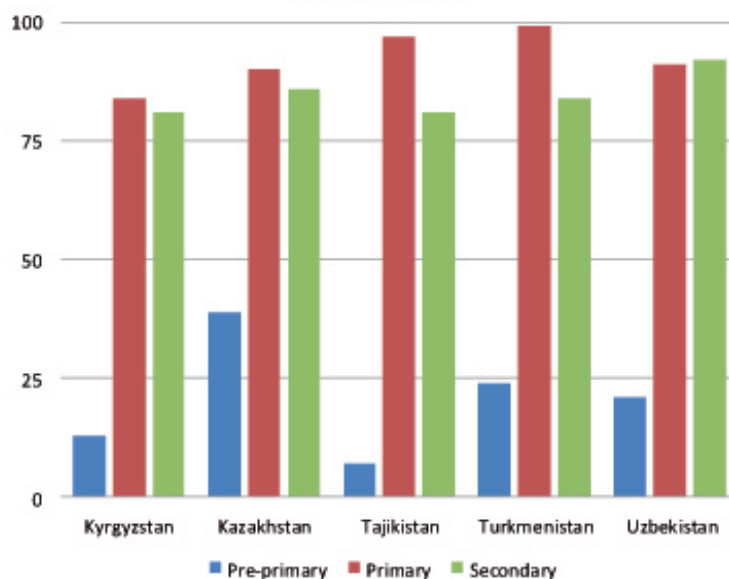
Early childhood education

Urgent attention towards pre-primary access is needed in Kyrgyzstan. Only 13 per cent of age-appropriate children are currently enrolled, a decline since 1990 when 35 per cent of the nation's children attended school. This is the second lowest national enrolment rate, with only Tajikistan faring worse. The government is aware of this problem and has supported a five-year strategic plan to address access to preschool. Second *tranche* FTI funding of \$6 million is budgeted to open preschool preparatory classes throughout the country, as stipulated by the FTI steering committee.

Basic education

The primary school net enrolment rate (NER) is 84 per cent, which is the lowest in the subregion and below the average for the Central Asian region (89.2 per cent). Completion rates in primary school are 79.2 per cent. Out-of-school children also remain a concern, amounting to over 32,000 boys and girls of primary-school age. In secondary school, 81 per cent of children of the relevant age group are enrolled, which is also below the regional average

Figure 1. Pre-primary, primary and secondary net enrolment rates (NER) in Central Asia



Source: UNESCO EFA Global Monitoring Report 2010

of 88 per cent. Tertiary enrolment (43 per cent) is also below regional and subregional averages (see Figure 1).

Children with disabilities

As of 2007, there were 19,931 children with disabilities registered in Kyrgyzstan, with 62 per cent residing in rural areas. While the government is committed to the principles of social inclusion, many boys and girls continue to be segregated and placed in specialized schools or relegated to home-schooling. A 2007 UNICEF study found that one in five children with disabilities is out of school. This is partially the result of a lack of opportunities for children with special needs to enrol in mainstream schools and other education facilities. The southern regions of Kyrgyzstan see higher integration (53.3 per cent) due to fewer specialized institutions. By the fourth grade, many children with disabilities drop out of school due to extensive absenteeism and increasing difficulty keeping up with peers.



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Educational challenges facing youth and adolescents

Some 32 per cent of people in Kyrgyzstan are under the age of 25. According to the 2009–2010 National Human Development Report by UNDP, young people value education. Many adolescents expressed concern about the overall quality of the educational system and questioned the long-term benefits of staying in school. Few believed they would find employment near their current home, and many believed they would need to migrate. While the Soviet system yielded limited choices in employment, it nevertheless provided a sense of security that is now gone.

School violence is a current concern in Kyrgyzstan's secondary schools. In parliamentary hearings in February 2010, most of the school principals stated that one or more incidents of crime or violence were reported to the police. The most prominent crimes reported were physical attacks or fighting without a weapon. Most of the serious violent crimes involved students of grades 9–11, either as perpetrators or as victims. City schools are more violent, particularly schools with over 1,000 students, where the risk of violence is greatest.

Children affected by emergencies

Many efforts are underway to address the impact of conflict on children in southern Kyrgyzstan. Pathways to Peace and Harmony and the Welcome to School initiatives supported the return to school of all affected children. Each space will receive teaching and learning packets designed specifically for primary and secondary schools. Nationwide trainings on peace education are available for teachers, and efforts to mobilize communities are occurring to ensure the safety of children in schools. UNICEF and the MoES are closely monitoring the schools in Osh and Jalal-Abad, the centre of the conflict. School-in-a box, recreation kits, as well as mathematics and science teaching kits have been made available in emergency areas.

Equity

Despite national figures on educational enrolment, disaggregation of the data illuminates disparities based on gender, geography and wealth.

Gender disparities favouring girls increase at each level of schooling following primary education. In primary school, there is basically gender equity, with a GPI of 0.99 (girls to boys). But in secondary school, girls are overrepresented with a GPI of 1.02; by tertiary education, the gap has increased, with girls outnumbering boys 1.3 to 1.

The rural/urban divide is of great concern in Kyrgyzstan. Although access to primary school is comparable in rural and urban areas, rural children are 6% less likely to attend secondary school than their urban peers. In pre-primary school, this gap is intensified. The percentage of children attending preschool in urban areas (33 per cent) is more than

three times that of children in rural areas, where only 10 per cent are enrolled. Rural children are the most difficult to reach in Kyrgyzstan, largely because they inhabit remote mountainous villages with limited access.

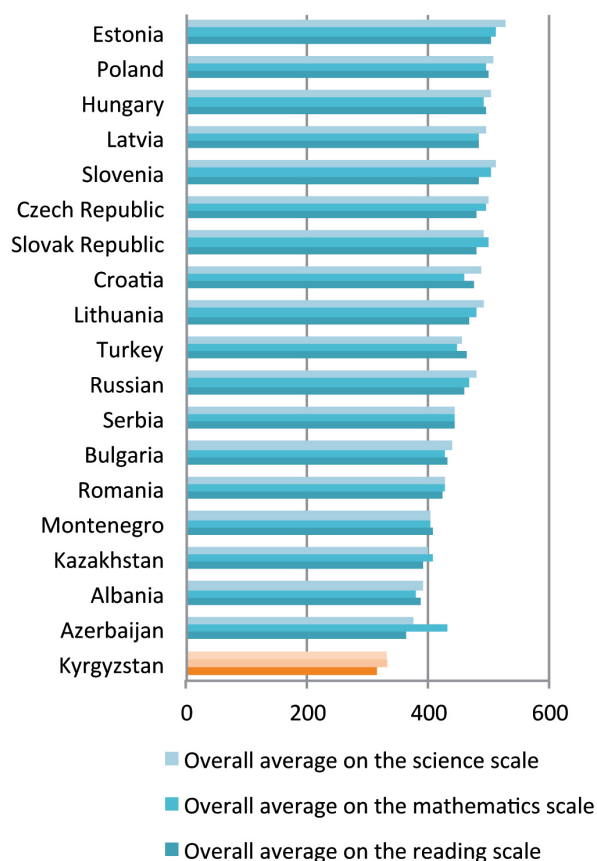
As in other countries in the region, the richest children enjoy better access to education at all levels. This gap is most pronounced in secondary education and pre-primary education, where only 7 per cent of the country's poorest children attend school, compared to 47 per cent of the country's richest children. This gap partially reflects the rural/urban gap, because rural children tend to be poorer than urban children.

Learning outcomes and quality

Subpar learning outcomes and low-quality schooling pose the most serious threat to Kyrgyzstan's educational system. International assessments and national evaluations both reveal that the quality and learning outcomes of students is bleak.

Kyrgyzstan participated in PISA 2009 and scored last out of the 65 participating countries – 19 of which were from the CEECIS region – in reading, mathematics and science. It performed particularly poorly in reading (see Figure 2). Its scores did not improve significantly since its 2006 participation in PISA.

Figure 2. Countries' performance in reading, mathematics and science on PISA 2009



Ethnic conflict in southern Kyrgyzstan

Violence broke out on 11 June 2010 between ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in southern Kyrgyzstan that seriously inhibited the access to and quality of education available to students. More than 300,000 people were displaced.

Three schools were destroyed – two in Osh oblast and one in Jalal-Abad oblast – and several other schools in the affected areas suffered damages. Refugees from Barack, a Kyrgyz enclave in Uzbekistan, are now informally settled in Kyrgyzstan's Ak-tash village, where no school is available. Tensions between the two ethnic groups remain high, and access to school for displaced children and Uzbeks remains low.

Displacement caused by the conflict will also have adverse effects on school enrolment in less direct ways. Many official registration documents were destroyed in the conflict or were left behind, and families worry about challenges in enrolling children in new schools, particularly for the many internally displaced children. Children displaced to areas where school is not offered in their language will also face severe social and academic challenges. This may increase the number of school dropouts, particularly among adolescents and at-risk populations.

The violence caused an exodus of teachers (figures are not yet confirmed) to other parts of the country and to the Russian Federation, which worsens the existing teacher shortages. This serious issue further exacerbates concerns about educational quality.

Due to their young age, preschool children have experienced additional distress due to the violence and instability in their homes, families and communities. At this time, these children require additional support to return to a sense of safety and normalcy, yet parents are less available as they focus on rebuilding their homes and livelihoods. In addition, children who will be starting school for the first time will have a special need for a safe and welcoming first experience in school.

The fear of further violence is a major barrier to enrolment. Parents and caregivers in affected areas are afraid to send their children to school because of fears of violence and discrimination; in mixed schools, the concerns focus on potential violence, bullying and discrimination within the school. Where children walk through different communities to single-language schools, families worry about the safety of their children.

While these are troubling concerns for the affected and surrounding areas in Osh and Jalal-Abad oblasts, Kyrgyzstan's small size and diverse ethnic composition make the teachers, parents and students of distant oblasts also feel vulnerable. For these teachers, parents and students, the concern that the violence could spread will make them think twice about the safety of teaching in Kyrgyzstan and of sending their children to school. The continued instability and potential for violence to flare up again exacerbate existing challenges in Kyrgyzstan's education system and threaten children's right to education.

On the National Assessment of Students' Learning Achievements (NASLA) in 2007, students' achievement was divided into four levels: below basic, basic, above basic and high. More than 60 per cent of all students in grade four demonstrated below basic achievement in all three subjects – reading and understanding, mathematics and civic education – meaning that the majority of students did not have the basic knowledge, skills and attitudes needed for academic success. Eighth grade students' performance lagged; 84.3 per cent of students scored at the 'below basic' level in mathematics, as did 81.8 per cent in science and 73.5 per cent in reading and comprehension.

Overall, student drop-out rates are about 4 per cent, which is the second lowest in the region (among countries for which data is available). Only 0.1 per cent of students repeat a grade, showing that even if students are not mastering basic skills they are being ushered through the system. Drop-

out and repetition rates vary by region.

Rising costs, inefficient school-based processes, and inadequate school conditions contribute to the low quality of education in Kyrgyzstan. The rising formal and informal costs of schooling, poor educational quality and reduced returns from school completion remain constant tensions for poor families. In 2008, school uniforms became compulsory for all primary school students, increasing the financial burden on parents. This contradicts the government's policy of free education and creates a barrier to educational access for all children, especially the poorest children who cannot afford the costs.

Inefficient school-based processes lead to poor learning outcomes. The average student/teacher ratio is 15 to 1, which is the highest in the region. Teachers earn less than 40 per cent of the average national income, making them underpaid, undertrained and overburdened. Teachers' earnings have actually decreased in comparison to average



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national earnings, since 1989. There is currently a teacher shortage and per capita financing is being considered. In addition, schools and teachers are vastly under-resourced in terms of materials and working conditions.

Education financing

Education financing is a priority issue in Kyrgyzstan. Currently, the nation spends 5.4 per cent of its GNP on education, which is above average in Central Asia and the Caucasus subregion. This equates to about 25.6 per cent of its national bud-

get, which is also above the subregional average. In spite of the fact that compulsory education is declared to be free for all children, an average of 35 per cent of the reported primary school expenditures in urban areas and 25 per cent in rural schools come from non-budget sources such as informal fees. This is a driver of inequality, because poor children cannot afford the informal fees, which are often intended to supplement teachers' low salaries.

Teachers' salaries are continually declining when compared to salaries in other fields. With their salaries unchanged and the cost of living rising, teachers often have to work two jobs to support themselves. While the country's prioritization of infrastructure improvement is important to raising teaching and learning conditions, it is essential that teachers earn a fair wage if education quality is to be supported.

Education priorities in Kyrgyzstan

Although numerous challenges remain in education in Kyrgyzstan, the current priorities for UNICEF and its partners are to:

- Increase early childhood education access and enrolment
- Update and improve the national curriculum through comprehensive reform
- Introduce and support a new child-friendly teaching paradigm
- Introduce per capita funding on a national level
- Monitor informal school fees and educational costs required of families
- Enhance teacher quality, retention and incentives for good performance