

Abridged Report

Assessment of the Situation of Students who Migrate to Malé for Education and Strategies to Address Vulnerabilities

"I would normally just bottle up my rage because well let's get real here for a second. No one really cares 'cause we are just children and nobody thinks our problems could actually be serious".

Grade 7 boy, survey response

"Bullying is not taken seriously in the Maldives. Schools are full of it and adults simply do not understand the damage that it causes".

School Counsellor
Survey Response

"I think the Government should think about improving education on the outer islands. That would decrease the population of Malé and would also minimize the problems faced by kids who have to move without their parents for education"

Grade 12 girl, survey response

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Ministry of Education and UNICEF Maldives

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1 Introduction

Despite improvements in educational services in the Atolls, children continue to migrate to Malé in large numbers - with or without their parents - to seek better educational and other services. Because there was no information available about how these children perform at school or function within their host family or new community, the Ministry of Education requested assistance from UNICEF to assess the situation of students who migrate to Malé to education. Based on the results of this research, a series of recommendations and interventions are proposed to enable the Government of Maldives, UNICEF and other development partners to provide appropriate support services for these children.

This study was carried out in June 2015 by an international consultant who worked closely with the Educational Supervision and Quality Improvement Division (ESQID) of the Ministry of Education (MOE). The research process involved a literature review and focus group meetings with principals, counsellors, Lead Teachers, parents, students, government and NGO workers. Three surveys were also conducted; one with principals and school counsellors (22 respondents); one with students (265 respondents) and one with senior education officials and UNICEF staff on intervention options (10 respondents).

2 Development Context

Despite significant achievements in education, health, social and economic development over the past two decades, this progress has not benefited all Maldivians equally. For example, a person living in Malé is likely to complete three more years of schooling than someone living in the Atolls and the average income of a person living in Malé is nearly twice as high as for people living in the Islands¹. Disparities in access to services, particularly education and health, unemployment and uneven development reinforce divisions between those Malé and the Atolls.

Research shows a clear correlation between students who are out of school, youth unemployment, substance abuse and juvenile crime. Low rates of educational achievement coupled with family stresses, poverty, limited access to support services, employment and recreational opportunities serve to predispose children to delinquent behaviour. Gang violence is also on the rise and becoming more brutal, and there is strong evidence that many children involved in criminal behaviour first experienced violence themselves. This scenario creates a vicious cycle of vulnerability and dysfunction which repeats itself over generations. As such, schools have a vital role to play in helping children break free of this cycle and become productive, well-adjusted citizens.

The report acknowledges that not all students who migrate to Malé for education, with or without their parents, are “at-risk” as many of these children live in a caring environment and do well at school and in their new community. The term “at-risk” refers to young people with emotional problems; those who do not have adequate skills or self-esteem to cope with the pressures of life; are separated from their families and communities; have been suspended or dropped-out of school; are unemployed; pregnant; use illegal drugs; children who are neglected or abused at home; those who are depressed and in danger of committing suicide; young people in trouble with the law and those who engage in risky sexual behaviour.

3 Key findings

3.1 Number of Students Not Living with Parents

As of June 2015 a total of 20,066 students were enrolled in 22 Malé schools, of which 1,898 (or 9.46 percent) were reportedly not living with their parents. While these numbers cannot be verified without a reliable education management information system (EMIS), it is expected that school

¹ Maldives Human Development Report (MHDR) 2014: Bridging the Divide - Addressing Vulnerability, Reducing Inequality. Ministry of Finance and Treasury (with UNDP), 2014.

estimates on the number of children not living with their parents are considerably lower than reported for various reasons. Study results show:

- a relatively equal number of girls and boys not living with their parents in Malé
- a steady increase in the number of students not living with parents from Grade 6 onwards
- a large difference in the number of students not living with parents among Malé schools.

Figure 1: Percentage of students not living with parents by school

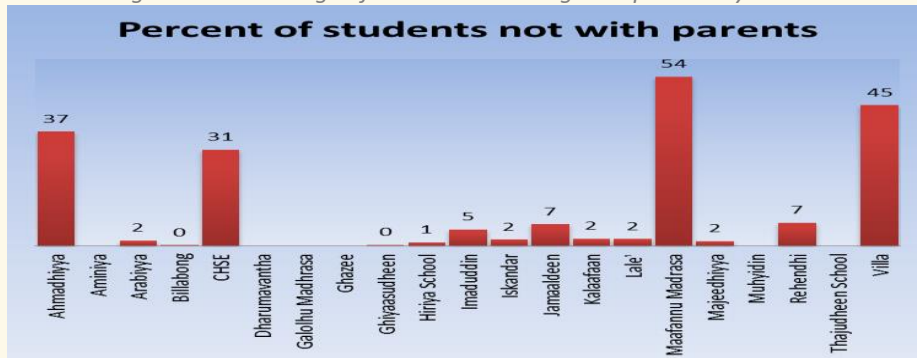
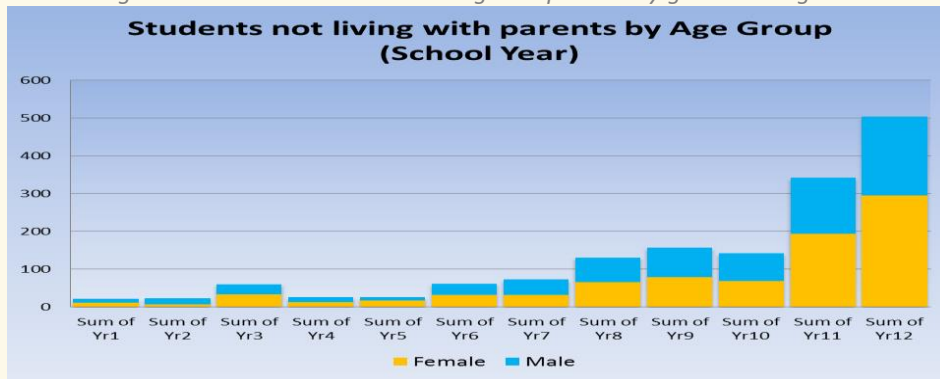


Figure 2: Students in Malé not living with parents by gender and grade



3.2 Results of Principal and School Counsellor Surveys

84% of school principals and counsellors surveyed believe that the number of children who migrate to Malé for education purposes has increased over the past five years. Close to 90% believe the main reason for this trend is the strong belief held by Island parents that education services are better in Malé than in the Atolls. The major concerns identified by principals and counsellors regarding children who do not live with their parents included, in priority order:

- lack of guidance, love and support leading to emotional instability
- deprivation of basic needs (food, protection, privacy)
- poor academic performance, frequent absence and disciplinary issues
- involvement with gangs and drugs
- lack of accountability and involvement by guardians for children’s schooling and overall well-being
- abuse and harassment in host families, including child labour
- Bullying and peer pressure.

“It’s very hard to get servants in Male now so some people just want students from the islands to stay with them so they can do all the housework and look after their children”.

Deputy Principal, Survey Response

Principals and counsellors suggested numerous strategies to better support children “at-risk” including, in priority order:

- strengthening school counselling services and facilitate referrals to community counselling agencies
- identifying vulnerable children early, taking immediate action and improving monitoring by schools
- providing life skills education and parenting programmes
- providing more extra-curricular activities for vulnerable children
- providing financial support for parents/guardian unable to care for children properly
- signing contracts between schools, guardians and parents that specify the responsibilities of all parties;
- improving Island parent’s understanding of “life in Malé” and the advantages of keeping children at home as long as possible;
- revising the enrolment policy (including provision that children under a certain age cannot enrol or transfer schools unless residing with parents);
- conducting regular student surveys to improve understanding of student experiences, circumstances and needs;
- improving education services in the Islands;
- establishing regulated boarding houses in Malé, and
- identifying alternatives to suspension.

3.3 Results of Parent Consultations

The parents consulted believe that children who migrate to Malé without their parents often have more problems at home and in school than other children because many guardians do not have sufficient time, energy, financial resources or motivation to properly care for additional children. They also expressed concern that some host families are only interested in financial benefits and gave examples of situations where eight or more children are boarding in the same residence.

With respect to schooling, parents think that Island children are frequently bullied, find it hard to make friends (at least initially) and perform poorly because of the “*higher academic standards*” in Malé. Despite these issues, Island parents continue to send their children to Malé to live with other people because they want their children to have the best possible education in order to get good jobs; they trust family members to care of their children properly, and/or because they do not always understand the problems and pressures associated with life in Malé.

Parents believe that schools can better assist Island children by:

- providing special help with academics;
- maintaining close contact with guardians and Island-based parents when issues arise;
- enforcing strict rules regarding attendance and homework;
- providing qualified counsellors in schools, and
- reaching out to families and guardians through home visits.

3.4 Results of Agency Consultations

Workers from government and non-government agencies raised a number of serious concerns regarding the welfare of children and adolescents who are without adequate support at home. They are especially concerned about young people who are out-of-school (because they were suspended, had committed an offence or were pregnant), as well as the “*overuse of suspension orders*” - both in terms of frequency and length - including the “*over use of indefinite suspensions*”. Agency workers stressed the need for the Ministry of Education to develop and enforce a clear suspension policy and to be actively involved in all suspension decisions rather than leaving this to school management teams. Respondents also stressed the need for schools to be more proactive in referring children and families to external support services so that problems can be addressed *before* suspension is necessary.

While some schools regularly involve NGOs in providing awareness and training programmes for students, agency workers believe that schools generally operate in a vacuum and are not well connected to non-educational services for children at-risk. The reasons cited for this included:

- lack of knowledge of community services available
- uncertainty regarding referral procedures
- uncertainty about the school's role in addressing issues outside the education sector
- uncertainty as to whether NGO programs have been approved by the MOE, and
- fear of reprisal by parents if personal information is shared or if "sensitive" topics are openly addressed in schools. They also noted the common belief that discussing issues like drugs or reproductive health will serve to increase involvement in these activities.

Agency workers stressed that school counsellors play a vital role in addressing the socio-emotional needs of vulnerable children and are "the critical link" between schools, parents and external agencies. They recommended that counsellors receive additional training and ongoing mentoring support from qualified experts; that they maintain up-to-date knowledge of available community service options, and develop close working relationships with external agency staff.

3.5 Results of Student Surveys and Consultations

89% of students surveyed indicated that they migrated to Malé for better educational services (standards, facilities and teachers) while an additional 3% stated that required levels or subjects were not available on their Island. Other reasons for migrating are shown in Figure 3. 85% of respondents who migrated to Malé are living with close relatives including aunts, uncles, sisters, brothers and grandparents. Only 9% reported living with friends or "others".

Fifty-three percent of students who migrated indicated that it is "hard" or "a little bit hard" living away from their parents, citing in particular: missing parental love, support and help (55%) and not getting enough attention, support and love from host families (13%); too many chores and not enough time to study (9%), crowded and noisy households (7%); restricted movement/loss of freedom (4%), difficulties "fitting in" (4%); "too much fighting" in host homes (4%); having to be independent (3%) and financial pressures (2%).

79% percent of students reported that they like their Malé School better than their Island School because Malé schools offer better facilities and more qualified teachers as well as more activities and opportunities. A significant issue for 41% of student respondents is the prevalence of serious bullying in Malé schools.

"Kids from the islands get bullied because they do not speak good English, they aren't too smart in school and they don't know how to act cool".

Survey Response, Grade 8 Boy

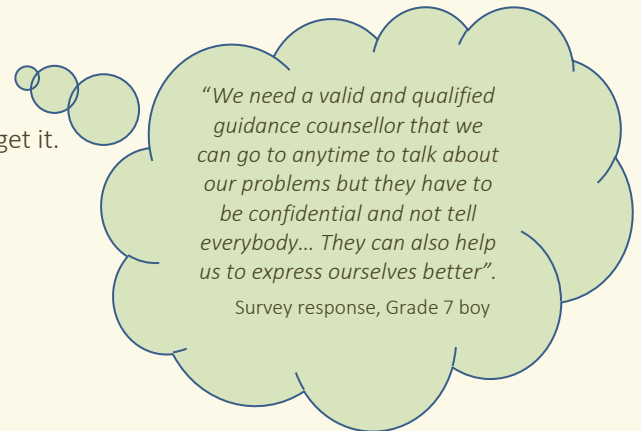
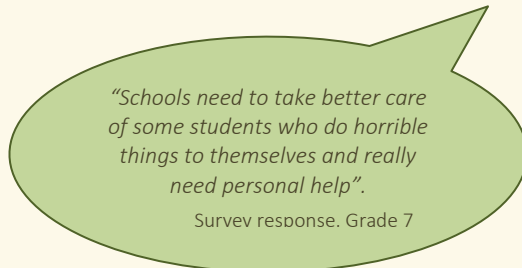
37% of children surveyed reported having current problems at school. In addition to bullying, the most common problems cited were: "no good teachers" - i.e., not friendly, helpful or qualified (34%) and school managers (9%); favouritism and discrimination (17%); difficult academic work (9%) and lack of extracurricular activities (4%).

With respect to coping strategies, 37% of students said that when they are angry or sad they "bottle of their feelings" or "be alone"; 22% said they talk to family or friends; 12% say they cry; 15% say they read, go for a walk or listen to music and 5% said they "get into a fight". When asked who they would talk to if they had a problem at home or school, 31% said their parents, 29% said friends, 18% said another family member and 9% said no one. Only 58% of students indicated that they have some

knowledge of community services available to help children and families. Almost 80% of students said that they access extra help with school work when needed.

In response to questions about how schools can help children who are at-risk, 46% of student surveyed suggested two primary strategies:

1. Provide school counsellors who are accessible, Qualified and maintain confidentiality, and
2. Identify students who need help and ensure they get it.



Other suggestions included: helping new students adjust to life in Malé; teaching life skills to build confidence and communication skills, and assisting new students to make friends.

4 Recommendations

4.1 Alignment and Assumptions

Report recommendations are aligned with key Government policies and commitments including the Government Manifesto on Education, the National Child Protection Policy for Educational Settings, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) ratified by the Maldives Government in 1991.

Recommendations are also based on the following set of assumptions:

1. That schools share responsibility for nurturing children and safeguarding them from harm;
2. That schools are ideally positioned to identify children are "at-risk" and facilitate early intervention;
3. That Government's pledge that *"no child shall be left out"* will guide all education planning;
4. That the CRC principle *"best interests of the child"* will apply to all policies and programmes;
5. That collaboration with external agencies (government and non-government) is essential in meeting the diverse needs of children and youth today;
6. That partnerships between schools and parents (or caretakers) are essential to optimize children's academic *and* social development, and
7. That all schools must be free of discrimination, harassment and violence.

4.2 Strategic Directions and Activities

Based on study findings, the following strategies and activities are proposed. The full report includes a series of guidelines for implementation and sequencing of activities over the period 2016-2020.

- Prevent the problem
- Be proactive in addressing vulnerabilities
- Create a "culture of caring" in schools
- Strengthen and expand collaboration with external agencies, and
- Strengthen and expand "second chance" education programmes.

4.2.1 Reduce the problem by improving island schools and better student education planning

Given that the primary reason that children migrate to Malé in significant numbers is to access better schooling, clearly this trend will continue unless education services improve in the islands. While it is beyond the scope of this project to address wide-scale academic standards or infrastructure issues, the project *can* play an important role in: i) helping island parents better plan for their children's

education, ii) preparing migrating students for success in Malé schools and iii) reviewing the current enrolment policy with respect to migrant children. Study results revealed that parents are often unaware of what life is really like in Malé including the pressures that both children and guardians face. Counsellors in Island schools could play an important role in ensuring that parents better understand the risks associated with sending their children away to school and by helping them to make proper arrangements for their children's care.

Activities:

1. Island schools conduct awareness programs for Island parents and students on “*life in Malé*” issues and work with parents to determine the best education plan and support systems for their children;
2. The MOE reviews and updates the current enrolment policy to ensure transparency, equity and strategic placement of Island children in Malé schools.

4.2.2 Be proactive in addressing vulnerabilities

Given that students' who migrate to Malé, especially those not living with their parents, face additional vulnerabilities, it is important that schools become more proactive in assisting these children with the adjustment process. As such, activities are proposed to help young people make friends, learn about the opportunities and risks associated with living in Malé, and how they can access help if needed. More effective early identification will reduce the need to suspend children from school which further serves to alienate vulnerable children and reduce their sense of self-worth and belongingness.

There is an urgent need to review and revise the existing suspension policy to ensure that suspension is used *only* as a last resort. The need for suspension will be reduced if teachers gain confidence and skill in dealing effectively with anti-social behaviours within the classroom setting. Building the capacity of teaching staff to more effectively address behavioural issues will require extensive training and mentoring support. As a beginning point, it is important to increase teacher understanding of social issues, the impacts on children and the role of the school in dealing with vulnerable students.

The students surveyed recommended that life skills training be provided to assist them in coping with life and preparing for the future. Life skills curricula enables children to develop listening and speaking skills, communication and negotiation skills, assertiveness and empathy; they learn self-protection, ways to recognize dangerous situations, cope with and solve problems, make decisions and develop self-awareness and self-esteem. Prior to expansion of the current life skills programme coordinated by the MOE, it is important to conduct a thorough evaluation of its effectiveness and actively involve students and parents in this process.

The study found that many Island students face adjustment problems in Malé - they have problems making friends and they get bullied at school. As such, it is critical that schools assist these children “*get off to a good start*” by providing orientation sessions and instituting a “*buddy*” system. Given that students lack adequate understanding of community services available to help them cope with personal problems, schools need to provide this information to students, parents and guardians.

The serious concerns expressed over abuse and neglect of Island children living with host families indicates a need to assess the potential benefits and drawbacks of establishing regulated boarding facilities in Malé.

Activities:

1. The MOE ensures the new Education Management Information System (EMIS) can track students at-risk (including all new Malé students) using specific indicators and a “red flag” system, and that procedures are put in place to ensure proactive monitoring;

Development cannot be achieved without good data which is critical for understanding problems, tracking progress and analysing policy and programme impacts.

2. The MOE places qualified counsellors in all Malé schools, on a dedicated basis, and up-skills current counsellors through on-going training and mentoring;
3. Schools provide annual orientation sessions for all new Malé students and their parents and guardians, and institutes a “buddy system” for all new students;
4. Schools provide up-to-date information to all students, parents and guardians on community services available;
5. The MOE fast-tracks, supports and monitors the early risk assessment process (as per the Child Protection in Educational Setting Policy) in all Malé schools;
6. The MOE evaluates the current life skills training program, identifies lessons learned, makes modifications as needed, and expands life skills training to ensure participation by all Malé students;
7. The MOE reviews and revises the current Suspension Order policy and procedures with a view to reducing the number and length of suspensions and eliminating the use of “indefinite suspensions”;
8. The MOE pilots the provision of parenting programs in designated Malé schools;
9. The MOE provides training to all Lead Teachers on identifying children at-risk, behaviour management techniques and referral procedures with the intention that LTs serve as trainers for classroom teachers;
10. The MOE requires that all schools devote at least one professional development (PD) day per year to dealing with student psycho-social and behavioral issues;
11. The MOE assesses the need to establish and regulate boarding facilities in Malé for Island children unable to secure quality host family arrangements.

4.2.3 Create a “culture of caring” in Malé schools

One of the primary issues that negate a caring school culture is the prevalence of violence and bullying in Malé schools. Research has shown that bullying (including cyber-bullying) affects children deeply and can lead to a wide range of problems including loss of self-esteem and feelings of shame and anxiety. Many bullied children will carry lifelong emotional scars, fall into depression or even take their own lives.² One of the reasons why young people join gangs in Malé is to “get revenge” from being bullied in school and to overcome feelings of powerlessness and inferiority that often began at school.

Schools in the Maldives are often a space where young people are exposed to rigid, violent, and inequitable attitudes and behaviours, resulting in physical or emotional violence, bullying, discrimination, harassment and other forms of violence.³

World Bank, 2014

Another factor that serves to diminish a culture of caring within schools is the pressure that teachers and administrators feel to compete with other schools to achieve high academic results.

“Teachers feel too much pressure for students to get high scores so they focus on the curriculum more than the child”.

School Counsellor, Survey Response

As long as schools are judged by communities, parents and the school system itself, solely on the basis of academic achievement, it is unlikely that real attention will be paid to achieving caring attributes like being inclusive, equitable and violence-free. As such, there is an urgent need to create a “culture of caring” in Malé schools and to change public opinion about what constitutes “a good school”. This sentiment was expressed by a State Minister of Education who believes that:

“Schools have failed children and not the other way around...this has to stop”.

² Asia Foundation and Maldives Institute for Psychological Services, Training and Research (2012). “Rapid Situation Assessment of Gangs in Malé”, Colombo

³ World Bank (2014). “Youth in the Maldives: Shaping a New Future for Young Women and Men through Engagement and Empowerment”. World Bank, South Asia Region.

If disadvantaged children are going to break free of the vicious cycle that repeats vulnerability over generations, it is imperative that schools become better role models for society by being places where children are safe, accepted and nurtured regardless of their academic ability or socio-economic status, and where being a good citizen is as highly regarded as being a good scholar.

While changing school culture is a complex and long-term task, there are a number of small steps that can be taken to initiate attitude change. For example, tangible measures like providing water and meals to children who are hungry; ensuring disadvantaged children have opportunities to participate in extra-curricular activities; providing counselling and referral services; recognizing students who demonstrate good citizenship qualities and rewarding schools for being inclusive, equitable and community-minded, and commending community service as much as scholarship. As a minimum standard, schools *must* provide a safe, violence-free environment for all children.

Activities:

1. The MOE, in collaboration with UNICEF, chose an appropriate, evidence-based anti-bullying programme for piloting in two Malé Model Schools and work closely with school management teams to determine implementation arrangements and train staff;
2. The MOE reviews and develops a national suspension policy in keeping with child-friendly principles;
3. The MOE institutes “*We Care*” Awards for schools;
4. The MOE creates “*I Care*” good citizenship awards for students;
5. Schools provide extra-curricular activities for at-risk students based on interest surveys;
6. The MOE conducts annual Student Satisfaction Surveys in all Malé schools to aid in setting new standards for caring and to monitor school performance from the student’s perspective;
7. The MOE designs and implements a “*We Care*” School Pilot Project with two Malé schools.

4.2.4 Strengthen and expand collaboration with external agencies

Given the complex socio-cultural and economic issues facing children in today’s world, schools must become adept at forming and maintaining partnerships with other agencies if they hope to realize the national education goal that “*no child is left behind*”. Inter-agency referral systems require urgent improvement to reduce the number of children “*falling through the cracks*” and to ensure that support is provided at the earliest possible point. Greater engagement of community organisations in working with individual students, groups of students and parents experiencing similar problems, and in conducting education and awareness programmes will ensure that children and families receive the kinds of support that go beyond what schools are mandated and able to provide. This, in turn, will take pressure off school staff to meet children’s non-academic needs. Given the current lack of awareness by both school staff and students on the range of community programs available, immediate initiatives are needed to improve access to services.

Activities:

1. The MOE, in collaboration with Child Protection, Police and Juvenile Justice authorities, develop and institute referral protocols for children at-risk;
2. The MOE provides training and information to all school senior management teams on referral procedures;
3. High-needs schools conduct regular meetings with child protection workers;
4. The MOE sends a clear message to external agencies that schools want and need their support and assistance;
5. The MOE provides all schools with an annual list of approved external agency programs/services for delivery in schools including guidelines for most effective use (i.e., targeted grade level, number of recommended sessions, best subject fit etc.);

6. The MOE conducts bi-annual "Community Resource Fairs" for school SMTs, counsellors, lead teachers, School Board and PTA members and interested parents to showcase services available and improve access.

4.2.5 Strengthen and expand vocational, apprenticeship and "second chance" education programs

Given the high number of young people under the age of 18 who are currently out-of-school in Malé, the MOE needs to expand opportunities for continued education and employment preparation. While the Ministry does provide apprenticeship and vocational education programmes, these initiatives only cater to a very small percentage of young people who are not in school. Given the country's high youth unemployment rate, combined with major deficiencies in qualified human resources and high dependency on foreign workers, increasing the practical skills of youth, especially for high demand occupations makes good economic and social sense.

It is also recommended that the MOE design and implement "second chance" education programmes that offer academic skill instruction, life skills education and case management support (i.e., personal and vocational counselling) for children who are out of school. Second chance programmes would target young people who were not successful in regular schooling due to lack of basic academic skills; expulsion due to behaviour or attendance issues; inability to pay fees and other education costs; family responsibilities; disability; pregnancy and/or involvement with juvenile justice.

Activities:

1. The MOE expand vocational training opportunities for students aligned with labour market demand;
2. The MOE develop "second chance" education programs for students who have dropped out of school in line with the national "no child is left behind" policy.