

Education in Rwanda

A situation analysis

Key achievements

- **Rwanda has sustained near universal access to primary education** and gender parity in basic education for over a decade.
- **In 2023/24, the budgetary allocation for the education sector was 15.6 per cent of the national budget**, the first time it has met the internationally recommended benchmark range of 15-20 per cent of public expenditure.
- **Continuous teacher professional development has been institutionalized**, to enhance teacher competencies, especially on effective pedagogies and digital skills.
- **The pupil to teacher ratio at primary level has improved** from 61:1 in 2017 to 44:1 in 2021, and salaries have increased by up to 88 per cent to enhance teacher motivation.
- **Rwanda has fostered a culture of digital literacy and innovation** through establishing technology hubs and nurturing a new generation of tech-savvy youth to position Rwanda as a leader in ICT innovation in Africa.



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Key challenges

- **The majority of children complete primary education without solid foundational skills:** 33 per cent of Primary 3 students are unable to read and understand a grade-level text in Kinyarwanda. Nearly 90 per cent are unable to do so in English, the official language of instruction.
- **The net enrolment rate in 2021 in pre-primary was only 24 per cent**, part of the reason why most children lack foundational skills.
- **More than a quarter of primary students repeat a year.** As a result, only 38 per cent of Primary 1 learners reach Primary 6 in six years.
- **The transition rate from primary to lower secondary for age-appropriate girls and boys is very low**, with a net intake rate of only 17 per cent.
- **Over a million children of secondary-school age are still studying at primary school.**
- **One in three youth (aged 16-30 years) are not in employment, education or training (NEET)**, according to the 2022 Rwanda Labour Force Survey.

Children play on a slide at Bugarama Mining Company's Early Childhood Development Center. Thanks to UNICEF's advocacy, ECD services in the mining sector mirror the achievements seen in the tea industry, where numerous companies in Western Rwanda have established child-friendly spaces, prompting other businesses to recognize the benefits of investing in employer-backed childcare.

1. Introduction

Education is a fundamental human right, enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child and other human rights treaties, as well as in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Education directly contributes to reducing poverty and inequalities; drives sustainable economic growth; leads to better health, particularly for women and children; and empowers children and adolescents. With Rwanda's predominantly youthful population, education is critical for Rwanda to leverage the demographic dividend. Rwanda has clearly articulated this in its National Strategy for Transformation and Vision 2050.

Rwanda has achieved important progress over the last two decades, particularly in dramatically increasing access to primary education. Building on successes achieved so far, current priorities are increasing access to pre-primary and secondary education (especially technical and vocational education and training), increasing equity at all levels, and improving the quality of education. Further progress will be needed to put the country on track to achieve SDG 4 on quality education¹ and contribute to achieving other SDGs that are indirectly linked to educational attainment.

The 2022 census shows that about 6 million (45 per cent) of Rwanda's population is under 18 years old. This presents opportunities for the future workforce, but also critical challenges if this large proportion of the population does not acquire the quality education needed to attain the highly skilled human capital that Rwanda aspires to achieve by 2035.

2. The education system

Article 20 of Rwanda's constitution guarantees the right to education.² Over the years, this commitment has been supported by progressive policies and reforms.

Universal access to high-quality education is one of the key priorities of Rwanda's "Vision 2050".

Priority 4 of the Social Transformation pillar of the National Strategy for Transformation 1 (NST-1) focuses on granting access to quality education, including at pre-primary level.

English became the official language of instruction in 2008. In the short term, this reform has created significant challenges for the education system due to limited competency in English among teachers. In the long term, however, this reform will benefit development of human capital, enabling more access to information and global markets. Other education reforms include the introduction of a Competence-Based Curriculum in 2016 to promote learning that focuses on life skills and competencies. Some key sectoral policies include the Girls' Education Policy, the Education Technology Policy and the National School Feeding Policy.

The new Education Law, approved in 2020, paved the way for a new Education Sector Policy. Once finalized, the policy will address the main sectoral challenges, particularly related to equity, pupils' learning outcomes and teachers' welfare and competencies. Government policies also support the integration of refugee children in national education systems. Over 90 per cent of refugee children of primary-school-age access education in host community schools.

The government has progressively allocated more resources to the sector. In the years since 2018/19, between 10 per cent and 14 per cent of total public expenditure was spent on education. In 2023/24, the education sector was allocated 15.6 per cent of the national budget,³ the first time it has met the internationally recommended benchmark of at least 15 per cent of total public expenditure.⁴ Recent investment includes a budgetary commitment to increase teachers' salaries by up to 88 per cent; and spending on infrastructure, which reduced the average number of pupils per class from 71 to 59 between 2020 and 2022.

3. Early learning

While Rwanda has achieved near universal access to primary education, the pre-primary net enrolment rate (NER) has only increased modestly over the last decade, from about 13 per cent in 2012 to 24 per cent in 2021.⁵ Lack of expansion has been due to the government prioritizing basic education (primary and secondary) over pre-primary schooling. Pre-primary education is mainly offered by private providers, including community initiatives.

¹ For analysis of Rwanda's progress against the SDG 4 targets, please refer to the [global SDG dashboard](#).

² Constitution of the Republic of Rwanda, 2003 with Amendments through 2015.

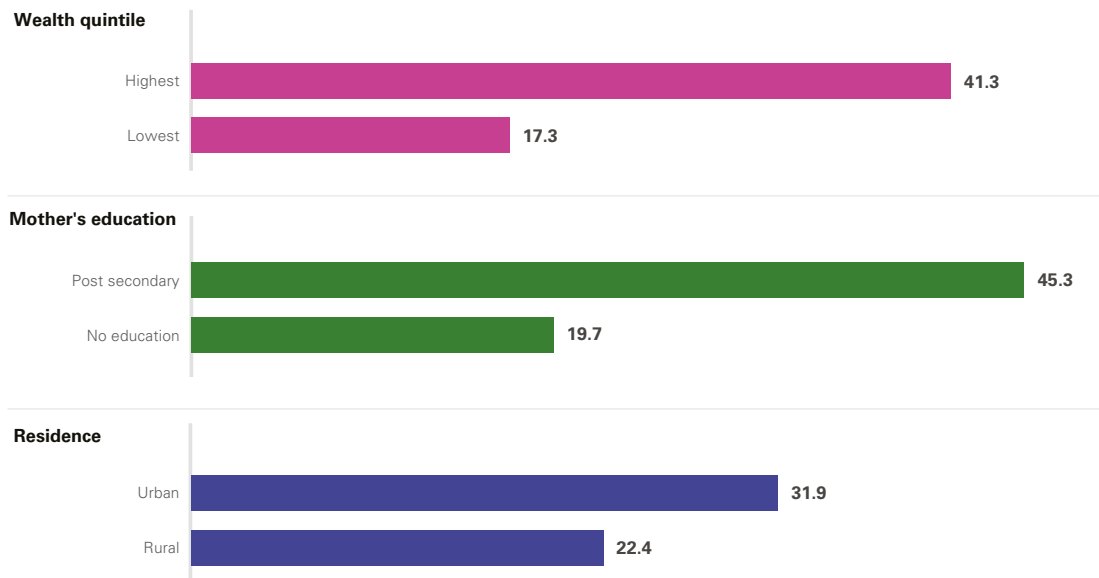
³ UNICEF, *Education Budget Brief 2023/24*, 2023. Unless otherwise stated, subsequent data are taken from this report.

⁴ UNESCO, *Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action*, 2015.

⁵ Ministry of Education, *Education Statistical Yearbook*, 2022.

The 2019/20 Demographic and Health Survey⁶ shows wide disparities in access to organized early learning opportunities. As shown in Figure 1, children living in urban areas have greater access to preschool services (31.9 per cent) compared to their peers in rural areas (22.4 per cent). Children of mothers who have attained at least secondary education are much more likely to access pre-primary education than those whose mothers have no education. Similarly, children from families in the richest quintile are able to access early learning in far greater numbers than their peers in the poorest quintile.

Figure 1:
Proportion of children (aged 24-59 months) who access organized early learning opportunities



While Rwanda has policies and clear targets for early childhood education, they are not sufficiently backed up by the commitment of resources and accountability. Responsibility for school readiness programmes is spread across at least three ministries, and coordination is weak. Parents often do not see the value of pre-primary education, especially in rural areas, and the cost of programmes is often a deterrent. As a result, most Rwandan children miss the opportunity to acquire foundational skills before being enrolled in primary school. This missed opportunity, coupled with ineffective teaching practices, has contributed to persistently low learning outcomes and high repetition rates in primary schools.

The Ministry of Education has prioritized the expansion of access to quality pre-primary education in the current Education Sector Strategic Plan (2018–2024), with the target of increasing the net enrolment rate to 45 per cent by 2024.⁷ A three-year pre-primary curriculum which promotes learning through play has also been rolled out. For the first time, budget was allocated in 2019 for teacher salaries and training at pre-primary level, an important first step that has put pre-primary teachers on the government payroll. The government has committed to an annual increase in the number of pre-primary teachers: there are currently 9,312 pre-primary schoolteachers on the government payroll, an 18 per cent increase compared with 2019.

4. Basic education

Rwanda has made great progress in securing access to basic education. Basic education comprises six years of free, compulsory primary education (for 6–11-year-olds) and another six years of secondary education (for 12–17-year-olds). The gross enrolment rates for primary school (141.5 per cent) and secondary school (42 per cent) are among the highest in Sub-Saharan Africa. However, net enrolment rates in 2021/22 were much lower (primary 87.3 per cent; secondary 25.4 per cent), suggesting many schoolchildren are studying in grades that are not appropriate for their age, particularly at primary school.⁸

The transition rate from primary to lower secondary for age-appropriate girls and boys is particularly low, with a net intake rate of only 17 per cent. Late enrolment, high rates of repetition with poor learning outcomes, and school dropout⁹ contribute to students' slow transition to secondary education. The latest data show that over a million pupils of secondary school age are still in primary school.

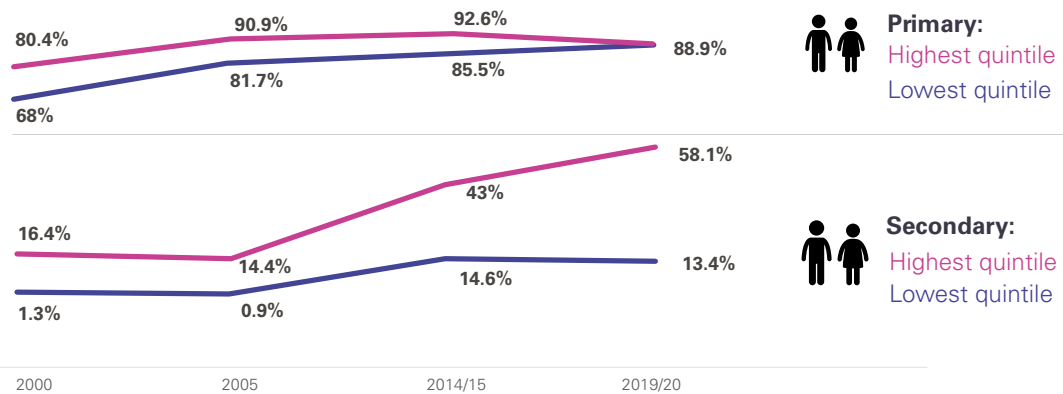
⁶ National Institute of Statistics, Ministry of Health and RCF, *Rwanda Demographic and Health Survey 2019-20 Final Report*, 2021.

⁷ Ministry of Education, *Education Sector Strategic Plan 2018/19 to 2023/24*, 2018.

⁸ Ministry of Education, *2021/22 Education Statistical Yearbook*, 2022.

⁹ Between 2019 and 2021, dropout rates increased from 7.8 per cent to 9.5 per cent in primary education and from 8.2 per cent to 9.2 per cent in secondary education.

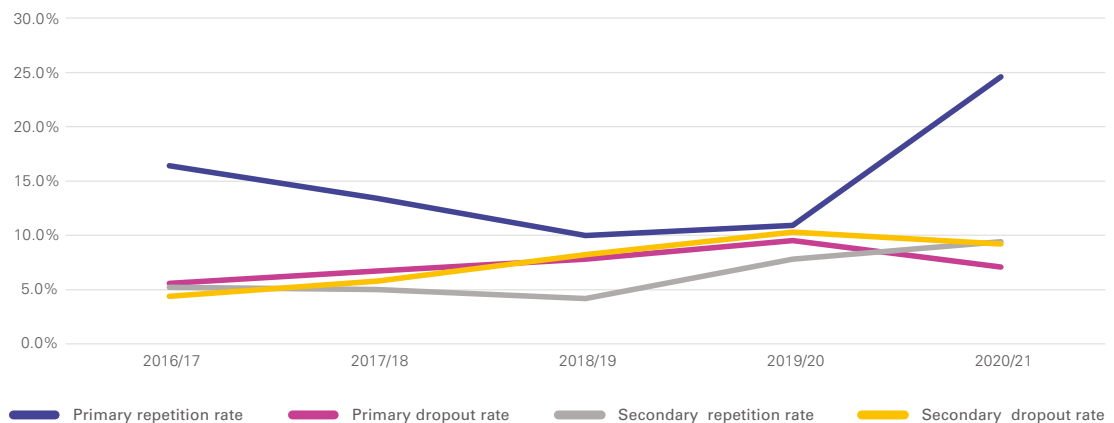
Figure 2:
Net attendance rate, primary and secondary, by income quintile (DHS)



The 2019/2020 Demographic and Health Survey data show significant wealth and location disparities in the net attendance rate (NAR) for secondary schools. The NAR for the highest quintile increased from 16 per cent to 58 per cent, while the ratio for children in the lowest quintile increased only modestly to 13 per cent.

Repetition rates (25 per cent in primary; 9 per cent in secondary) are particularly high in lower primary school (see Figure 4), reflecting the lack of school readiness caused by poor access to pre-primary education, as well as stunted brain development. As a result only 43 per cent of girls and 33 per cent of boys reach Primary 6 in the expected six years. Completion rates are low: 61 per cent, 34 per cent and 18 per cent for primary, lower and upper secondary education respectively.¹⁰

Figure 3:
Trends in repetition and dropout rates, by year (Ministry of Education statistics)



A study conducted by UNICEF estimated that 20 per cent of the education budget in 2021/2022 was spent on students who were repeating grades or who dropped out. This is a huge burden on the education sector, limiting the ability of the government to invest the resources required to improve quality.

5. Learning outcomes

Learning outcomes, particularly at the foundational levels have been persistently low. Most recent national learning assessment results (in 2021) show that 33 per cent of Primary 3 students are unable to read and understand grade level texts in Kinyarwanda, while nearly 87 per cent of boys and 92 per cent of girls are unable to do so in English, the official language of instruction.¹¹

Meanwhile, 37 per cent of girls and 41 per cent of boys are not meeting numeracy-related benchmarks.¹² When the numerary test was given in English, over 80 per cent of students did not meet the expected learning benchmark. There is also significant variation in achievement of expected learning benchmarks across the country: while 32 per cent of Primary 3 children in the City of Kigali met the expected benchmark in English, only 4 per cent did so in Eastern Province, and 7 per cent in Northern Province. Failure to develop critical foundational skills makes it significantly harder for children to acquire the technical and higher-order skills needed to thrive in increasingly demanding labour markets, and for countries like Rwanda to develop the human capital needed for sustained, inclusive economic growth.

¹⁰ Ministry of Education, *2020/2021 Education Statistical Yearbook*, 2022.

¹¹ *Learning Assessment in Rwandan Schools*, 2022.

¹² *Learning Assessment in Rwandan Schools*, 2022.

Gaps in teacher capacity and competencies are a major barrier to learning in Rwanda. The average student to trained teacher ratio is 57:1, and in some cases 120:1. This challenge has been compounded by the introduction in 2021 of English as the official medium of instruction at lower primary level, to match older classes; a World Bank study showed that only 38 per cent of teachers in lower primary met the standards required to effectively teach in English.

Poor school infrastructure is another challenge. Recent investment by the government has reduced the average students to class ratio from 73:1 in 2019 to 59:1 in 2021. But class sizes in lower grades (Primary 1-3) remain high, especially in Primary 1 and Primary 2 where the ratios are 78:1 and 73:1 respectively in 2021. The government has introduced double shifts to reduce the number of students per teacher during lessons. Currently, 64 per cent of primary schools operate double shifts, which limits effective learning time. The current school timetable shows students in the double shift schools receive only 22 hours teaching time per week, compared to 42 hours per week in single-shift schools. The double shift arrangement predominantly affects lower primary grades, a period that is crucial for building foundational skills.

To facilitate improvement in the quality of education, the government continues to recruit new teachers. This has led to a reduction in the pupil-to-teacher ratio in primary schools from 61 in 2017 to 44 in 2021. In addition, continuous teacher professional development has been institutionalized, particularly through school-based mentorship, to improve teacher competencies in effective pedagogies and digital skills. The Ministry of Education has also developed a national strategy for foundational learning. The five key priorities in the strategy¹³ include improving the quality of instruction, and mobilizing parents and communities to support learning.

6. Job relevant skills and employment

In total, 36 per cent of youth aged 16-30 years in Rwanda are not in education, employment or training (NEET), according to the 2022 Rwanda Labour Force Survey. The rate is higher for females (41 per cent) than males (30 per cent). The district with the lowest NEET rate is Kicukiro (City of Kigali), and the districts with the highest rates are Nyamagabe (south) followed by Ngororero (west) and Rulindo (north).¹⁴

Unemployment among youth is partly high due to a lack of appropriate technical and vocational education and training (TVET). To expand and upgrade institutions and increase TVET enrolment will require additional human and material resources. For every 100 male students enrolled in technical and vocational education and training (TVET), there are only 76 female students.

There is a significant gap between the skills young people acquire in the education system, and what is in demand in the labour market. For example, the government is promoting tourism and hospitality industry, but there are not enough schools training students in these areas. Closer collaboration is required between the education sector and employment industries, especially the private sector.

While boys do better than girls in learning outcomes, more girls reach the last grade of primary on time, partly due to lower grade repetition rates than boys. However, this situation is reversed at secondary level, where 56 per cent of boys who start Senior 1 reach Senior 6 in six years (on time) compared to 52 per cent of girls. Gender norms limit girls' participation in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) activities, and in higher education. Adolescents have few role models who have broken gender barriers, while pressure from social norms, particularly for girls, puts them at risk of adolescent pregnancy, and of engagement in unpaid domestic and care work and family agriculture.

7. Opportunities and recommendations

Rwanda's legislative and policy framework provide a solid foundation for the country to continue to make progress. The following areas of action are crucial enablers and should be prioritized to accelerate progress towards addressing the remaining barriers and bottlenecks:

- **Prioritize more investment in the early years of education,** including establishing a distinct budget programme dedicated to pre-primary education within the legislative framework, and increasing investment in pre-primary education and early childhood development. Acceleration of access to school-readiness and progress with schooling at the right age is crucial for improving the quality of education in Rwanda. Allocating resources to expand access to quality preschool programmes, ensuring that teachers are qualified, and providing learning materials can lay strong foundations for children's educational success and overall development.

¹³ The five priorities of the foundation learning strategy are: i) Improving the quality of instruction in pre-primary and lower primary; ii) Implementing an evidence-aligned foundational skills curriculum; iii) Providing high-impact iv) Mobilizing parental and community support for foundational learning; and v) Strengthening systemic quality assurance and performance management.

¹⁴ National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda, *Labour Force Survey, 2022*.

- **Sharpen focus on foundational learning** in early years to improve learning outcomes and reduce grade repetition and risk of early school dropout. The Foundational Learning Strategy is a step in the right direction and full implementation will be crucial.
- **Initiate alternative learning pathways for out-of-school and over-age children** to enable them to re-enrol, as well as for offering opportunities to develop job-related skills. These pathways should take into consideration the conditions that prevent children from accessing education.
- **Accelerate improvement in teachers' proficiency in English** to enable teachers to effectively support progressive learning for children in the official language of instruction. In parallel, enhance focus on improving reading skills and comprehension in Kinyarwanda to facilitate the transition to reading in English.
- **Strengthen teacher training and professional development.** Allocating resources to support comprehensive pre-service and in-service training – including pedagogical skills development, subject knowledge enhancement, classroom management strategies and digital skills – will enable implementation of the competence-based curriculum, as well as enhance teachers' effectiveness in tackling learning challenges.
- **Focus on addressing pockets of inequalities that limit children's transition to secondary education.** Wealth remains a key barrier, and interventions should address this root cause of deprivation through inter-sectoral collaboration.
- **Provide young people with opportunities to develop skills (including digital skills) and access employment.**
- **Establish partnerships to leverage the private sector** in support of early childhood development, digital education and school-to-work transition.
- **Support integration of technology in teaching and learning** to significantly enhance teaching and learning outcomes in Rwanda. Technology can be used effectively to support interactive and engaging learning experiences.
- **Support access to learning for marginalized children,** including children with disabilities, by addressing barriers hindering their participation and completion of school.
- **Strengthen school inspection, and monitoring and evaluation systems,** to assess the quality of education and inform evidence-based decision making. Enhancing the capacity for data collection and analysis, and using the data to identify gaps, measure learning outcomes, and inform policy adjustments will lead to targeted interventions and resource allocation.