

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE
FAIR AND INCLUSIVE EDUCATION
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ISSUES PAPER – SESSION D

This session will encourage discussion and recommendations on outcome measures such as numerically-defined policy targets for equity and school testing and how resources can be targeted to promote equity.

Our conclusions and recommendations are:

Provide strong education for all, giving priority to early childhood provision and basic schooling

Evidence

- Public provision of education can foster equity when it counterbalances poor home circumstances at the outset of children's lives. But it may increase inequity when it provides a common resource harvested by those who are best prepared for it. More specifically:
 - Education expenditure is shifting between sectors in many countries; in some the expansion of tertiary education is a large expenditure pressure.
 - Good quality affordable early childhood education and care has large long-term benefits, particularly for disadvantaged children.
 - While countries need a high quality well-resourced tertiary education system, public expenditure on tertiary education tends to be regressive; private sources can be tapped to fund this sector.
 - Grants to poor families for school-age children may reduce dropout at upper secondary level.

Policy recommendations

- Equity priorities will vary between countries, taking into account widely varying existing patterns of expenditure and demand, but in general:
 - There is strong evidence that early childhood education and care, alongside public policy measures to improve the lives of young children, is the highest equity priority. If fees for early childhood education and care are applied at all, they should be moderate and remitted for those too poor to pay.
 - Basic education remains an equity priority because it includes the entire cohort. Within this sector, particular attention should be given to efforts to sustain the performance of those with learning difficulties.
 - When budgets are limited, public expenditure on tertiary education will rarely be an equity priority. Countries charging fees for early childhood education and care but not for tertiary education need to review their policies. In the context of this review, recommendations to this effect have been made in Norway and Finland.
 - Countries where grants to families for school age children are tied to school performance need to review their policies, since this may in fact encourage dropout.

Direct resources to students with the greatest needs, so that poorer communities have at least the same level of provision as those better-off and schools in difficulty are supported

Evidence

- Within countries, regional autonomy in spending may cause disparities in the level of provision, unless it is balanced by mechanisms to redistribute resources to poorer regions.
- Many countries have special schemes to direct additional resources to schools or school areas serving disadvantaged pupils. Such schemes need to ensure that the extra resources are used to assist those most in need and avoid labelling certain schools as disadvantaged, which may discourage students, teachers and parents.

Policy recommendations

- Countries need adequate mechanisms to redistribute resources and minimise regional inequities of provision, so that a minimum standards are met everywhere;
- Extra resources need to be channelled through schools to help disadvantaged students. This should help overcome the disadvantaging effect of social background, help to tackle poor performance without rewarding it and discourage schools from “selecting out” children from disadvantaged backgrounds. The stigma arising from labelling of particular schools as “for disadvantaged children” should be avoided.

Set concrete targets for more equity – particularly related to low school attainment and dropout

Evidence

- Numerical targets can be a useful policy lever for equity in education, by articulating policy in terms of what is to be achieved rather than in terms of formal processes or laws. A number of countries have adopted targets for equity in education.
- International comparisons with the best-performing countries suggest that some countries could significantly reduce the number of dropouts and students failing to acquire basic skills.
- National testing of individual student performance on basic skills is a fundamental tool to measure both individual performance and the performance of elements of the education system. But test results are limited in what they measure, and results for schools depend on school intake as well as school quality.
- Many countries believe that the publication of results at school level is desirable or politically and/or legally inevitable. A minority of countries are testing but seeking to avoid publication. Some countries are pursuing value-added measures of school quality which take account of school intake.

Policy recommendations

- Countries should consider adopting a small number of numerical targets for equity, particularly for reducing the number of school-leavers with poor basic skills and the number of early school dropouts.
- Education systems need to plan carefully how to manage and respond to the public debate which follows publication of school-level test results and give strong support to those schools with weak results – using the data to bring all schools up to a level, rather than allowing the pressures of league tables to polarise school quality.

Points for discussion:

- 1) *How can resources best be targeted to schools with disadvantages populations to enhance equity?*
- 2) *How can schools test results be used to help, rather than stigmatise schools with poor results?*