Education and Training Policy

No More Failures

TEN STEPS TO EQUITY IN EDUCATION

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SUMMARY AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

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SUMMARY AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EQUITY IN EDUCATION

This report argues that education systems need to be fair and inclusive in their *design, practices, and resourcing.* It advances ten steps – major policy recommendations – which would reduce school failure and dropout, make society fairer and avoid the large social costs of marginalised adults with few basic skills.

Design

1. Limit early tracking and streaming and postpone academic selection.

2. Manage school choice so as to contain the risks to equity.

3. In upper secondary education, provide attractive alternatives, remove dead ends and prevent dropout.

4. Offer second chances to gain from education.

Practices

5. Identify and provide systematic help to those who fall behind at school and reduce year repetition.

6. Strengthen the links between school and home to help disadvantaged parents help their children to learn

7. Respond to diversity and provide for the successful inclusion of migrants and minorities within mainstream education.

Resourcing

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

9. Direct resources to the 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.

10. Set concrete targets for more equity, particularly related to low school attainment and dropouts.

The report advances recommendations on priorities for spending within a limited budget, allowing for public expenditure constraints. Actual costs or savings arising from these recommendations have not been estimated, as they will depend on national contexts.

Introduction

Defining equity in education

Equity in education has two dimensions. The first is *fairness*, which implies ensuring that personal and social circumstances – for example gender, socio-economic status or ethnic origin – should not be an obstacle to achieving educational potential. The second is *inclusion*, which implies ensuring a basic minimum standard of education for all – for example that everyone should be able to read, write and do simple arithmetic. The two dimensions are closely intertwined: tackling school failure helps to overcome the effects of social deprivation which often causes school failure.

Why does equity in education matter?

The benefits from education are large. In the United States, for example, workers with tertiary qualifications earn more than double the income of those with no post-compulsory qualifications. Education is associated with better health, a longer life, successful parenting and civic participation. Fair and inclusive education is one of the most powerful levers available to make society more equitable.

Fair and inclusive education is desirable because:

- There is a human rights imperative for people to be able to develop their capacities and participate fully in society. The right to education is recognised, for example, in the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of the Child and in the constitution of most nations.

- The long-term social and financial costs of educational failure are high. Those without the skills to participate socially and economically generate higher costs for health, income support, child welfare and security.

- Increased migration poses new challenges for social cohesion in some countries while other countries face longstanding issues of integrating minorities. Fair and inclusive education for migrants and minorities is a key to these challenges. Equity in education enhances social cohesion and trust.

Is education a friend to equity?

- In the past half-century education has expanded, but hopes that this would bring a fairer society have been only partly realised. Women have made dramatic advances (see Figure 2.2), but social mobility has not risen overall and inequalities of income and wealth have increased in some places.

- Income differences are greater within groups of more highly qualified persons than within groups of those less qualified. This means that the general upgrading of qualifications may tend to increase income equality.

- The general upgrading of qualifications has highlighted the position of those who have not shared in this advance. Many adults remain unqualified and some young people still do not successfully complete secondary education. Across the OECD nearly one in three adults

(31%) have only primary or lower secondary education[1] – a real disadvantage in terms of employment and life chances.

Women moving ahead? (Figure 2.2, Chapter 2)

Difference between men and women in number of years spent in formal education, for two different age groups (2004)
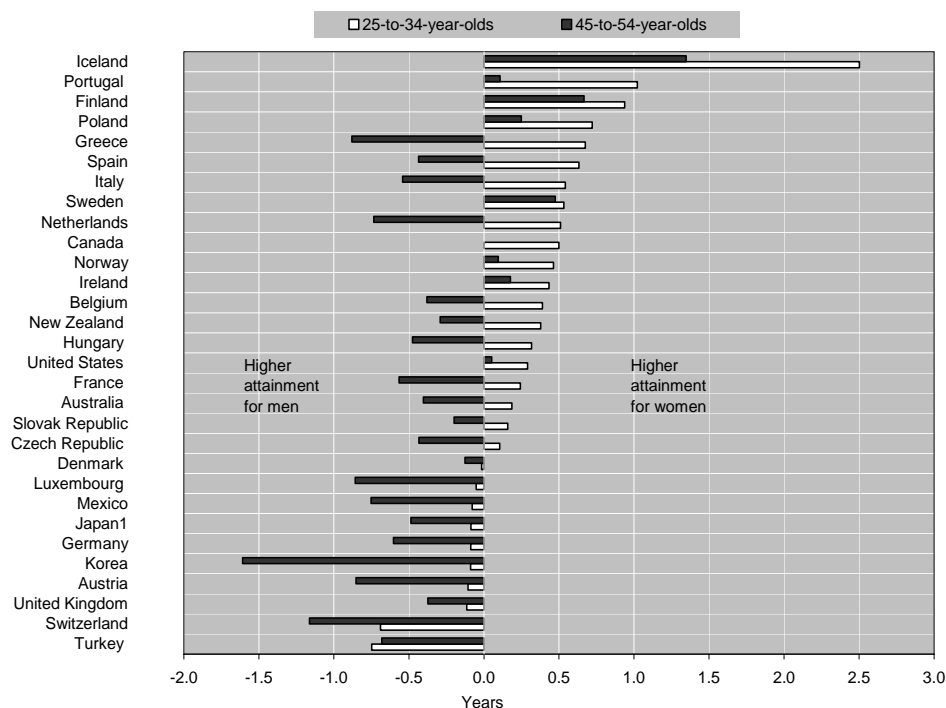
Note: 1. Year of reference 2003.

Source: OECD (2006), *Education at a Glance: OECD Indicators 2006*, OECD, Paris.
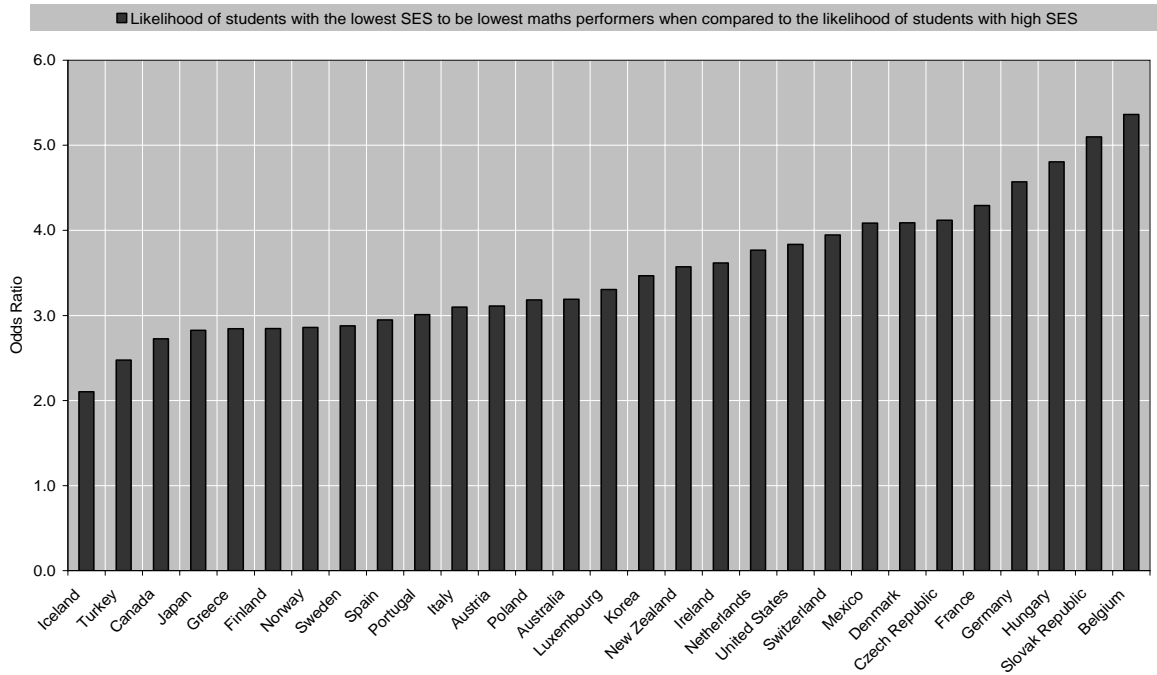
Where are the big problems?

Figure 2.3 illustrates the problem of *unfairness*. It shows that in most OECD countries children from poorer homes are between three and four times more likely to be in the lowest scoring group in mathematics at age 15.

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[1] 14% have only attained pre-primary or primary education and 17% lower secondary education (OECD [2005], *Education at a Glance: OECD Indicators 2005*, OECD, Paris, Indicator A1).

How social background affects maths performance (Figure 2.3, Chapter 2)

Relative chances of students in lowest and highest socio-economic group ending up with very poor (level 1 and below) performance in mathematics (2003).

(For example, in Portugal a student with low SES is three times more likely to be a low mathematics achiever than a student with high SES.)

■ Likelihood of students with the lowest SES to be lowest maths performers when compared to the likelihood of students with high SES

Source: OECD (2006), *Education at a Glance: OECD Indicators 2006*, OECD, Paris.

Figure 2 .8 illustrates the problem of a lack of *inclusion.* It shows how many students struggle with reading in OECD countries and how many risk leaving school without basic skills for work and life in the 21st century. Significantly, it also shows that there are big differences between countries.

How many students struggle with reading (Figure 2.8, Chapter 2)

Percentage of students below and at Level 1 of proficiency in the OECD PISA reading scale (2003)
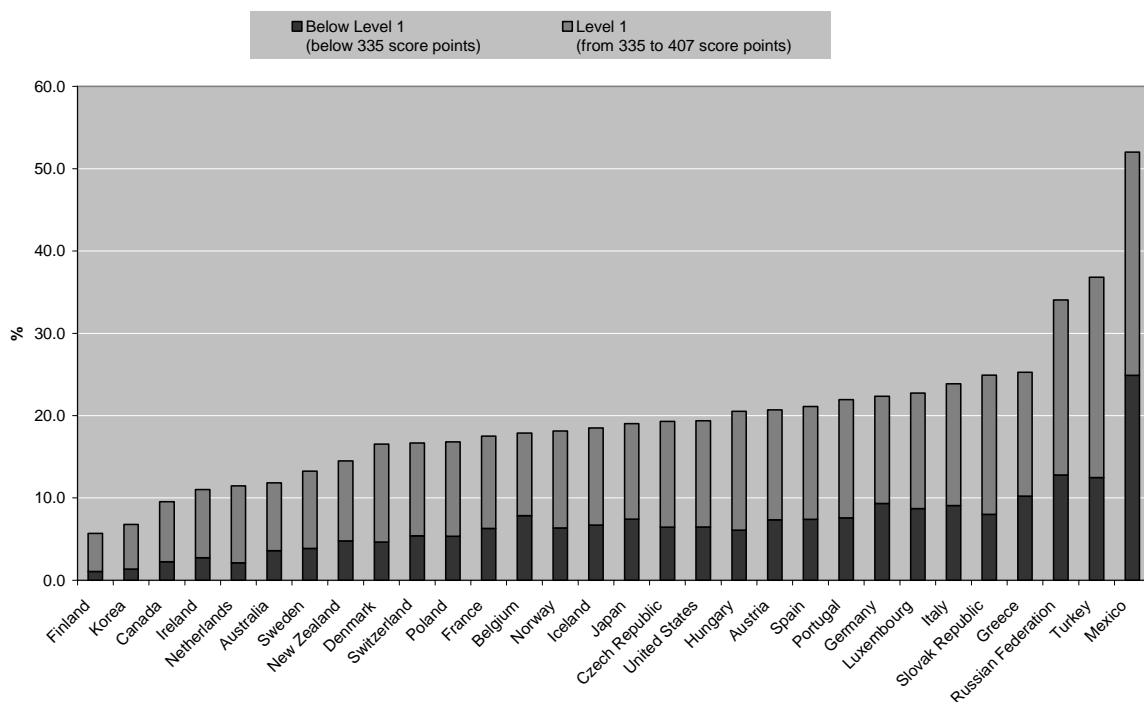
Note: Countries are ranked in descending order of percentage of 15-year-olds in Levels 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6.

Source: OECD (2004), *Learning for Tomorrow's World: First Results from PISA 2003*, OECD, Paris.

There are three domains in which policy may bear on equity in education: the *design* of education systems (covered in Chapter 3), *practices* in and out of school (Chapter 4) and *resourcing* (Chapter 5). Chapter 6, which examines the special case of migrants and minorities, also contains policy recommendations on practices. Within these domains, we advance ten steps – major policy recommendations – to enhance equity in education.

Steps 1 to 4: Design for fair and inclusive education (Chapter 3)

The structure of education systems and the pathways through that system can help or hinder equity. Traditionally, education systems have sorted students into different tracks, institutions and streams according to attainment. This sorting sometimes increases inequalities and inequities.

Step1: Limit early tracking and streaming and postpone academic selection

Evidence

- Secondary school systems with large social differences between schools tend on average to have worse results in mathematics and reading and a greater spread of reading outcomes. Social background is more of an obstacle to educational success than in systems where there are not large socio-economic differences between schools.

- Academic selection by school systems is associated with great social differences between schools and a stronger effect of socio-economic status on performance, but also with a stronger performance at the top end of the scale in mathematics and science.

- Evidence on secondary students from PISA (OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment) compared to evidence at primary level from PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study) and evidence from countries which have introduced comprehensive schooling suggest that early tracking is associated with reduced equity in outcomes and sometimes weakens results overall.

Policy recommendations

- *Early tracking and streaming* need to be justified in terms of proven benefits as they very often pose risks to equity.

- School systems using *early tracking* should consider raising the age of first tracking to reduce inequities and improve outcomes.

- *Academic selection* needs to be used with caution since it too poses risks to equity.
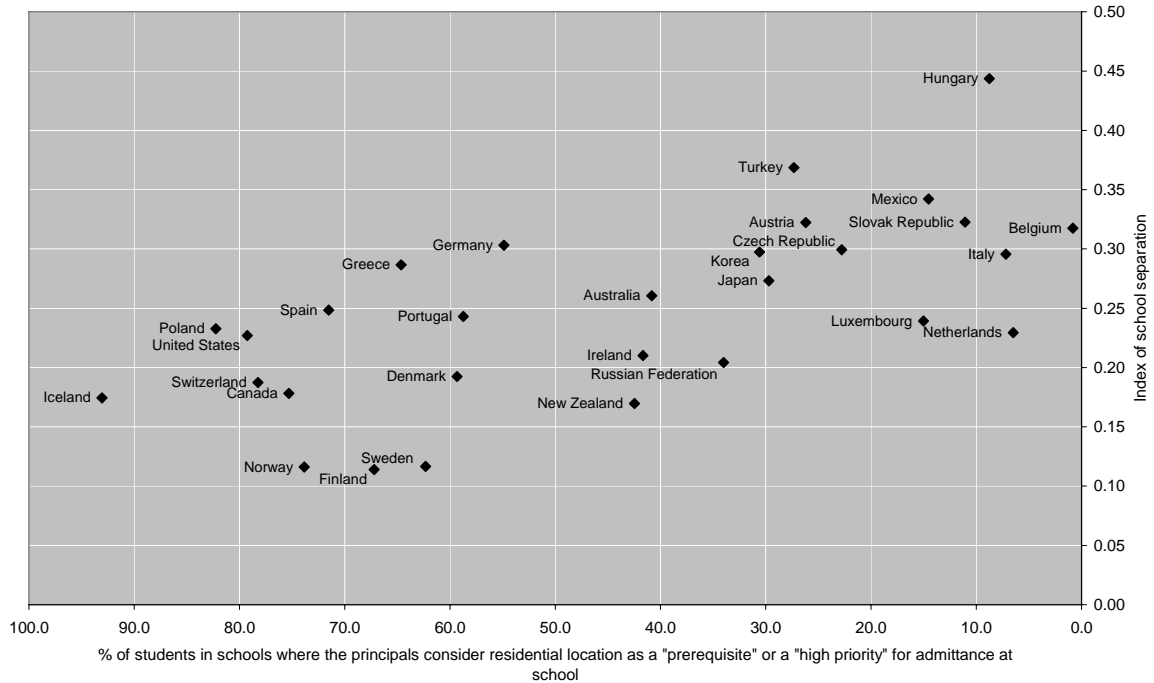
Step 2: Manage school choice so as to contain the risks to equity

Evidence

- School choice may pose risks to equity since well-educated parents may make shrewder choices. Better-off parents have the resources to exploit choice, and academic selection tends to accelerate the progress of those who have already gained the best start in life from their parents.

- Across countries, greater choice in school systems is associated with larger differences in the social composition of different schools (see Figure 3.3).

Does school choice increase the social differences between schools? (2003) (Figure 3.3, Chapter 3)

% of students in schools where the principals consider residential location as a "prerequisite" or a "high priority" for admittance at school

Note: The index of separation shows the extent to which a country has sorted children (15-year-olds) from different socio-economic backgrounds into different schools, with zero representing a country in which all schools have a similar social composition. The index is developed with the ESCS, the PISA index of economic, social and cultural status. See Annex A1 in OECD (2004b), *Learning for Tomorrow's World: First Results from PISA 2003*, Paris.

Source: OECD (2004), *Learning for Tomorrow's World: First Results from PISA 2003*, OECD, Paris.

Policy recommendations

- *School choice poses risks to equity* and requires careful management, in particular to ensure that it does not result in increased differences in the social composition of different schools.

- Given school choice, oversubscribed schools need ways to *ensure an even social mix in schools* – for example, selection methods such as lottery arrangements. Financial premiums to schools attracting disadvantaged pupils may also help.

Step 3: In upper secondary education, provide attractive alternatives, remove dead ends and prevent dropout

Evidence

- Between 5% and 40% of students drop out of school in OECD countries (measured by the proportion of 20-to-24-year-olds not in education and without upper secondary education). They go on to have low skills and suffer high rates of unemployment.

- Among other factors, dropout stems from disenchantment with school, lack of support at home, negative learning experiences and repeating years.

- Early identification of students at risk helps to improve outcomes and prevent dropout.

- Good career guidance and counselling combined with a more flexible and diverse (and therefore attractive) curriculum help to reduce dropout rates.

Policy recommendations

- *Early prevention* of dropout is the best cure. Basic schooling should support and engage those who struggle at school as well as those who excel.

- *Monitoring* of those at risk (using information on attendance, performance and involvement in school activities) should be linked to interventions to improve outcomes and prevent dropout.

- *Upper secondary education* needs to be attractive not just to an academically inclined elite, offering good quality pathways without dead ends and effective links to the world of work.

- *Smooth transitions* prevent school failure and dropout. Additional learning support at the end of secondary school may help to encourage students to stay in school.

- *Good quality vocational tracks* are essential. Removing an academic hurdle from entrance to general upper secondary education, and allowing access to tertiary education from vocational programmes as Sweden and Norway have done, can increase the status of the vocational track.

The well-qualified make most use of adult education (Figure 2.5, Chapter 2)

Relative chances of adults with tertiary education participating in adult learning compared to those with only primary education (2003)

■ Ratio between participation of adults with tertiary education to those with primary education
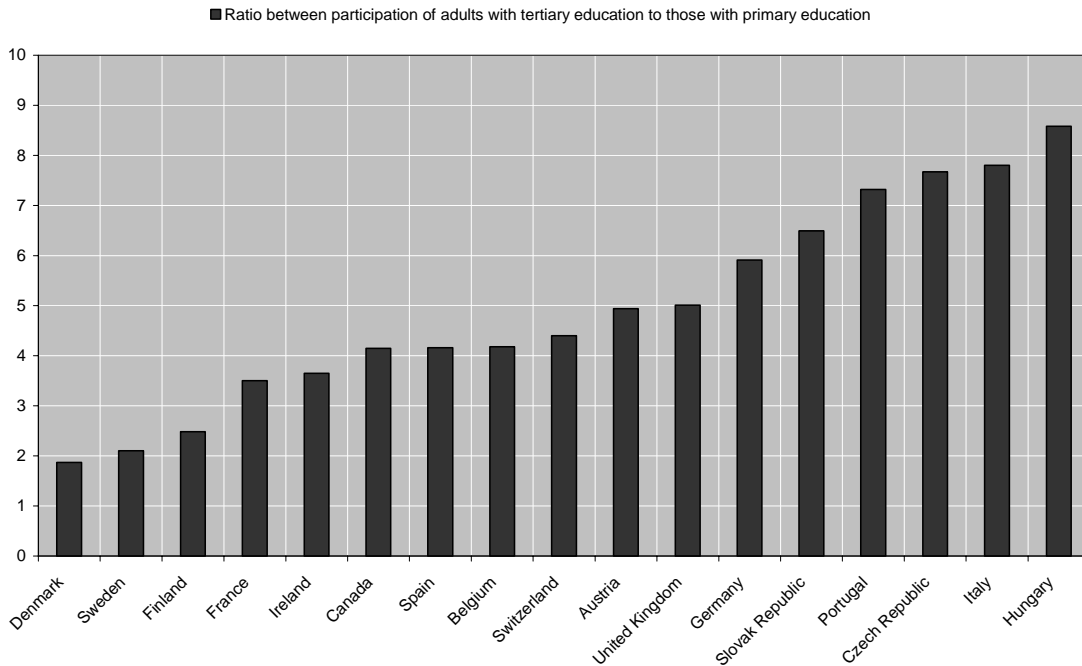
Source: European Labour Force Survey, 2003.

Step 4: Offer second chances to gain from education

Evidence

- Those who fail at school often find it difficult to recover later on. In all OECD countries, those with weak basic qualifications are much less likely to continue learning in adult life (see Figure 2.9). Significantly, this figure also shows that there are big differences between countries.

- Across OECD countries, many adults and young dropouts without basic education obtain school qualifications through second chance programmes. In the United States, almost 60% of dropouts eventually earn a high school credential (GED certificate).

Policy recommendations

- *Second chances are necessary* for those who lack basic education and skills. These include programmes that provide literacy training, primary and secondary education, work-based programmes and arrangements to recognise informal learning.

Steps 5 to 7: Fair and inclusive practices (Chapters 4 and 6)

Step 5: Identify and provide systematic help to those who fall behind at school, and reduce high rates of school-year repetition

Evidence

- In some school systems, up to one-quarter of students repeat a year at some point. In others it is rare.

- Although year repetition is often popular with teachers, there is little evidence that children gain benefit from it. Repetition is expensive – the full economic cost is up to USD 20 000 equivalent for each student who repeats a year – but schools have few incentives to take into account the costs involved. Some countries, such as Luxembourg, are taking steps to reduce the extent of repetition.

- The classroom is the first level of intervention for equity. Evidence shows that it is possible to improve classroom attainment with methods such as formative assessment – a process of feeding back information about performance to student and teacher and adapting and improving teaching and learning in response, particularly with students at risk.

- "Reading recovery" strategies – short-term, intensive interventions of one-on-one lessons – can help many poor readers to catch up.

- Finland uses a hierarchy of successive formal and informal interventions to assist those falling behind at school. This approach appears to be successful: only 1% of 15-year-olds are unable to demonstrate basic functional reading skills, while the OECD average is 7%.

Policy recommendations

- *High rates of year repetition in some countries need to be reduced* by changing incentives for schools and encouraging alternative approaches.

- *Interventions in the classroom* can be very effective in tackling underachievement. Among the approaches available, we can highlight formative assessment, reading recovery strategies and careful monitoring.

- Many countries could usefully follow *the successful Finnish approach to learning difficulties*, offering a sequence of intensifying interventions which draw back into the mainstream those who fall behind.

- *Teaching professionals need to develop their in-classroom techniques* to support those in the class who are falling behind.

Step 6: Strengthen the links between school and home to help disadvantaged parents help their children to learn

Student learning benefits from an effective school-home relationship, but children from deprived backgrounds may not benefit from this advantage because of weak support at home.

- On average, children in OECD countries spend more than 20% of their total learning time out of school – doing homework, working with a tutor or on other activities.

- Home factors, including parental support for education, engagement with children's learning and cultural assets (like books) are associated with stronger school performance.

- Homework can improve school outcomes, but reliance on homework may also threaten equity, since some children lack the home support necessary to realise its benefits.

- Parental involvement – working with children at home and actively participating in school activities – does improve results. All other things being equal, schools that foster communication and participation by parents, and encourage and assist parents to support their children with their school work tend to have better outcomes.

Policy recommendations

- To support learning among disadvantaged children, *schools need to target their efforts* to improve communication with parents in the most disadvantaged homes and help develop environments conducive to learning.

- *After-school homework clubs* at school may provide an environment that supports homework for those with weak home support.

Step 7: Respond to diversity and provide for the successful inclusion of migrants and minorities within mainstream education

Evidence

- Success in both education and employment varies widely between immigrant and minority groups and between different countries.

- Minority groups are, in many cases, less likely than others to participate in early childhood education and care, more likely to be in special education and more likely to drop out or end up in low status tracks and streams.

- For some "visible minority" groups, labour market discrimination is sometimes extensive. This limits employment prospects and reduces the incentives to obtain qualifications.

- In most countries, immigrant students of first and second generation tend to perform less well than their native counterparts in the PISA assessments of mathematics, science and reading, while second-generation students tend to outperform first-generation students. Analysis suggests that much but not all of this is explained by social background factors.

Policy recommendations

- *Early childhood education and care* is helpful for disadvantaged children and provides a strong environment in which to learn a second language. Special measures may encourage participation by the children of immigrants.

- Where immigrant and minority groups are *disproportionately streamed into special education institutions* attention needs to be given to a) the risk of cultural bias in the diagnosis and b) whether separate schooling is in the best interests of the students involved.

- Newly arrived immigrant children often need *special language training*, but funding mechanisms and the approach selected to deliver this training should not encourage the isolation of such children from mainstream classes after an initial period of at most one year.

- Particularly in countries where immigration has risen sharply, teachers need *professional development* to deal with new demands on matters such as second language learning, a multicultural curriculum and teaching for tolerance and antiracism.

Steps 8 to 10: Fair and inclusive resourcing (Chapter 5)

In many countries, aggregate increases in educational expenditure will be hard to justify in terms of their contribution to equity, although they may contribute to economic growth. This highlights the importance of targeting education expenditure – both across education sectors and across regions and institutions – to ensure that it contributes to equity. National targets for equity outcomes can help.

Step 8: 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.

Starting strong: big returns from early interventions (Figure 5.3, Chapter 5)

The Perry Preschool study: the impact of early childhood education and care as measured in two randomised samples
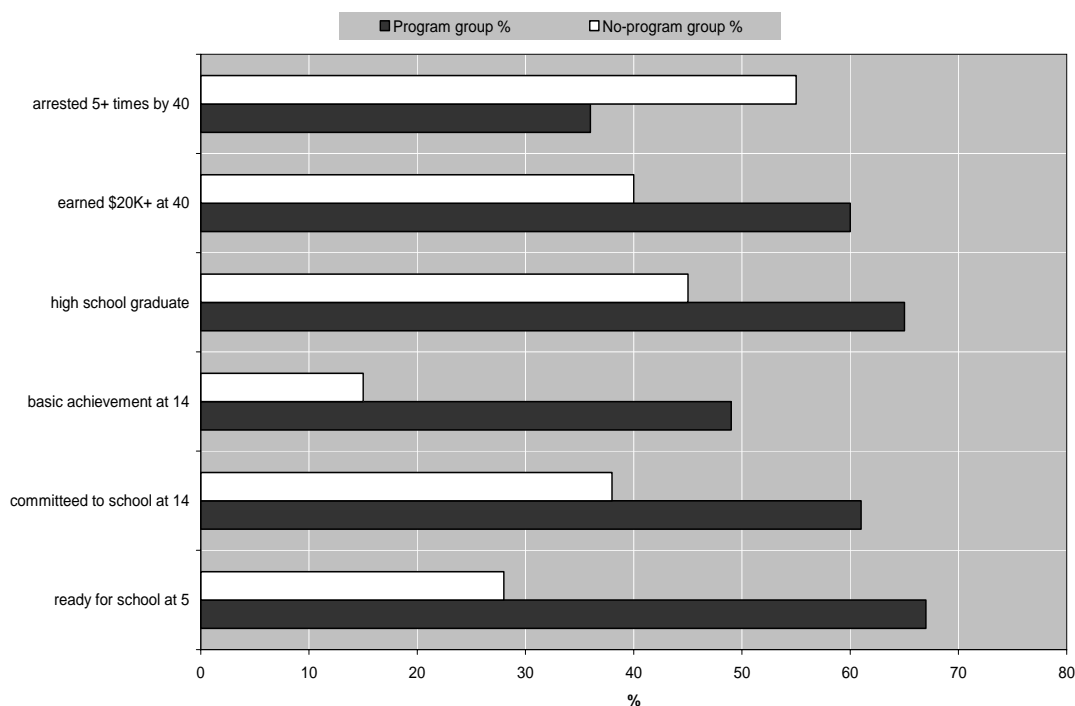
Source: OECD (2006), *Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care*, OECD, Paris, Figure 5.1.

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.

Regional variations in education spending: the example of Spain (Figure 5.5, Chapter5)

Public expenditure on education (other than universities) in Spain and in two autonomous communities of Spain, with the highest and lowest spending on education per student
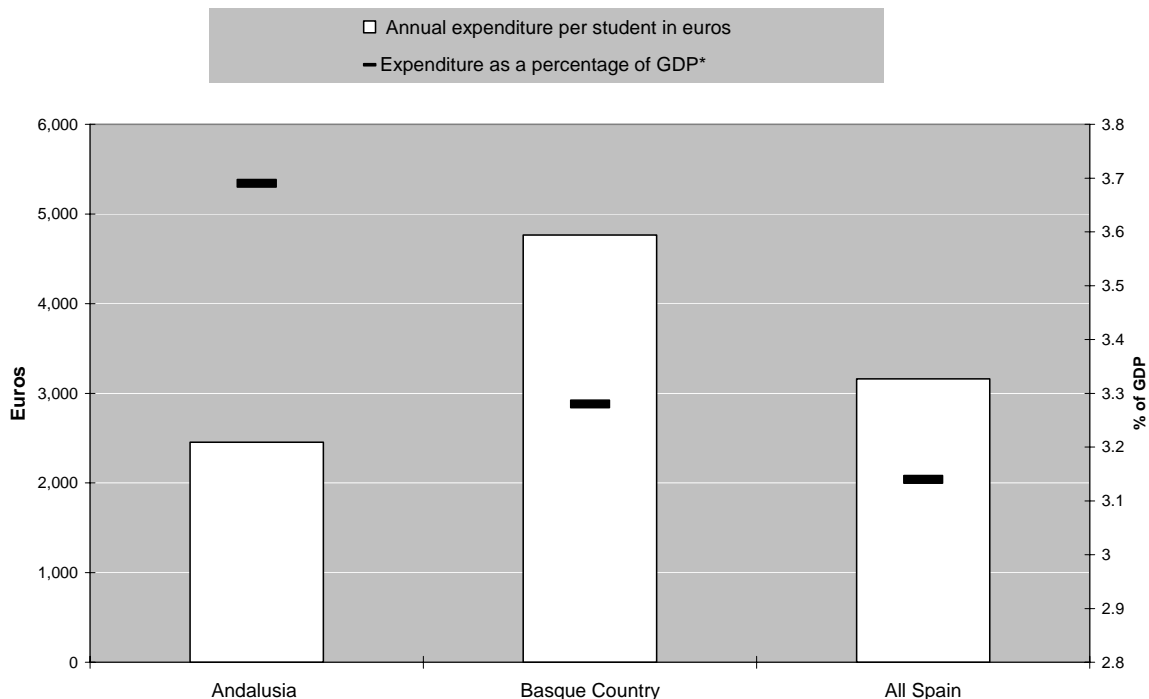
Note: * In Andalusia and Basque Country, expenditure as a percentage of GDP in the autonomous communities.

Source: Teese, R., S. Field, B. Pont (2005), *Equity in Education Thematic Review: Spain Country Note*, OECD, Paris; Calero, J. (2005), *Equity in Education Thematic Review: Country Analytical Report – Spain*.

Step 9: 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 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.

Step 10: 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.