

## Ten Steps to Equity in Education

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### Introduction

Education plays a key role in determining how you spend your adult life – a higher level of education means higher earnings, better health, and a longer life. By the same token, 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 social security systems.

So a fair and inclusive system that makes the advantages of education available to all is one of the most powerful levers to make society more equitable.

Education has expanded significantly in the past half-century, but hopes that this would automatically bring about a fairer society have been only partly realised. Women have made dramatic advances, but overall social mobility has not risen and in some places inequalities of income and wealth have increased.

As ever more students go on to university or professional education, many are still being left behind. Across OECD countries nearly one in three adults have only primary or lower secondary education – a real disadvantage in terms of employment and life chances.

At the same time, 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.

This Policy Brief looks at how to improve equity in education in three key policy domains: the design of education systems, practices both in and out of school, and resourcing. It proposes ten steps which would help reduce school failure and dropout rates, make society fairer and help avoid the large social costs of marginalised adults with few basic skills. ■

**What are the challenges for equity in education?**

Equity in education has two dimensions. The first is *fairness*, which basically means making sure 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*, in other words 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.

Both equity and fairness are issues for OECD countries. Children from poorer homes in most OECD countries are between three and four times more likely to be among the poorest scorers in mathematics at age 15 (see Figure 1).

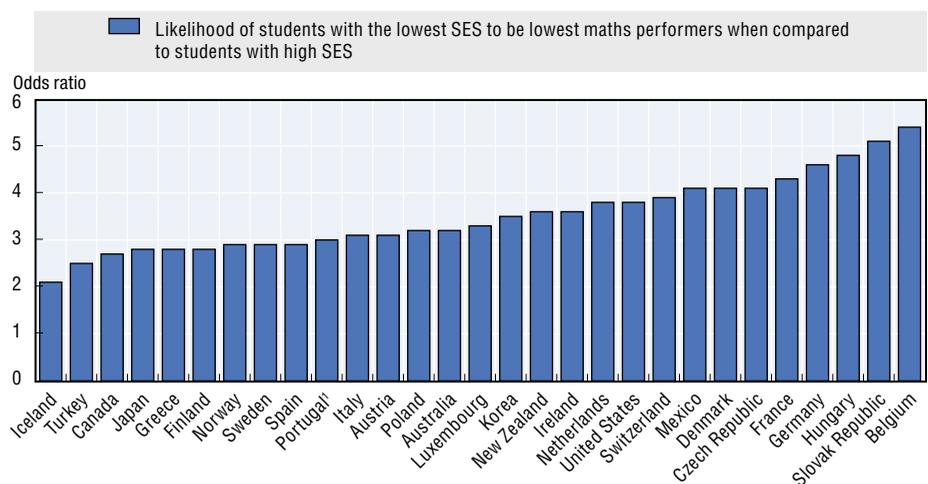
And when it comes to inclusion, many students in OECD countries struggle with reading and risk, leaving school without basic skills for work and life in the 21st century. Significantly, there are big differences between countries (see Figure 2).

Achieving the necessary reading and mathematical skills is often especially difficult for migrants and minorities, who often lose out on both fronts – lower performance and low socio-economic background. Approaches to overcoming these hurdles include strengthening early childhood education and care, not streaming immigrants into special education, improving language training and strengthening teachers’ professional development to deal with multiculturalism. Measures to reduce discrimination in the labour market can also increase incentives for immigrants to obtain a good education.

Three key policy areas can affect equity in education: *the design of education systems, practices in and out of school*, and *how resources are allocated*. The OECD has developed ten practical steps that governments can take in these three areas to enhance equity in education. ■

**FIGURE 1. HOW SOCIAL BACKGROUND AFFECTS PERFORMANCE IN MATHEMATICS**

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



1. 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.

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

**How to improve the design of education systems?**

The basic structure of education systems affects equity. Traditionally, education systems have sorted students according to attainment. Evidence from studies of secondary and primary schools suggests that such sorting can increase inequalities and inequities, particularly if it takes place early in the education process. Early sorting can also weaken results overall.

This prompts two conclusions: early tracking and streaming need to be justified in terms of proven benefits; and school systems using early tracking should postpone it to a later stage to reduce inequities and improve outcomes.

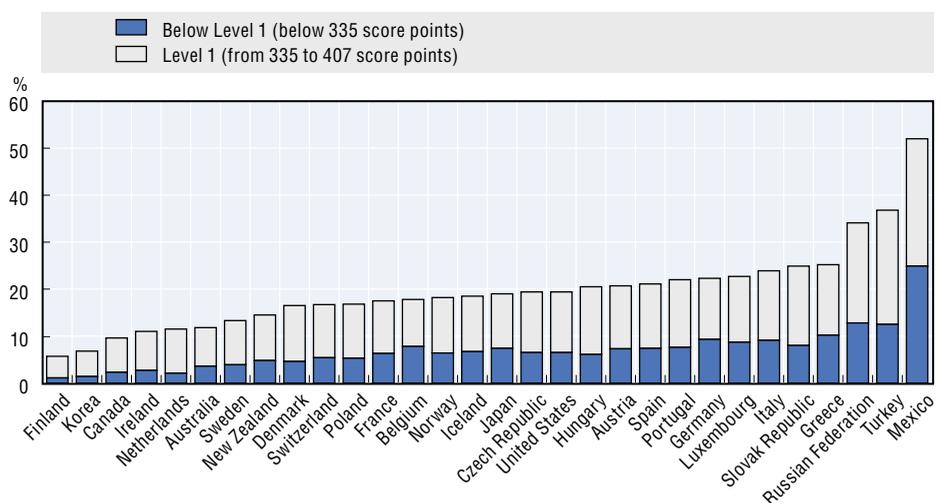
The socio-economic structure of education systems is also important. Secondary school systems where there are large socio-economic differences between schools tend on average to have worse results in mathematics and reading and a greater spread of reading outcomes. Indeed, social background is more of an obstacle to educational success than in systems without such socio-economic differences between schools.

Selecting pupils on the basis of academic achievement tends to create great social differences between schools. It also increases the link between socio-economic status and performance – it tends to accelerate the progress of those who have already gained the best start in life from their parents – and is also associated with stronger performance at the top end of the scale in mathematics and science. So academic selection needs to be used with caution because of the risks it poses to equity.

Governments often allow parents a choice of schools, partly in the interests of equity. But this may in fact increase the risk of inequity because better-educated parents make better-informed choices. In many OECD countries, greater choice in school systems is associated with larger differences in the social composition of schools.

The conclusion is that school choice requires careful management from an equity perspective, particularly to ensure that it does not result in increased differences in the social composition of schools. Popular schools are likely to be

**FIGURE 2. HOW MANY STUDENTS STRUGGLE WITH READING<sup>1</sup>**  
 Percentage of students below and at Level 1 of proficiency in the OECD PISA reading scale<sup>2</sup> (2003)



1. Countries are ranked in descending order of percentage of 15-year-olds in Levels 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6.  
 2. The PISA scale has six levels of proficiency. Level 2 represents the baseline at which students begin having skills that allow them to use reading actively. Level 1 and below imply insufficient reading skills to function in today's societies.

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

oversubscribed, and need ways to ensure an even social mix. This could include selection methods such as lottery arrangements. Financial premiums to schools attracting disadvantaged pupils may also help.

Students struggling within the system face a further risk as they get into the final years of compulsory education – lack of future choice, and a high risk of dropping out altogether. Between 5% and 40% of students drop out of school in OECD countries, finishing with low skills and high rates of unemployment. The reasons for dropping out include disenchantment with school, lack of support at home, negative learning experiences and having to repeat years because of poor performance.

The best cure is to stave off the risk of dropout as early as possible. Basic schooling should support and engage those who struggle at school as well as those who excel.

One way of improving performance and preventing dropout is to identify at-risk students early and take action quickly. This means monitoring information on attendance, performance and involvement in school activities, and having a concrete response to improve outcomes and prevent dropout.

Upper secondary education needs to be attractive not just to an academically-inclined elite, but also to offer good quality pathways without dead ends and effective links to the world of work. Offering at-risk students good career guidance and counselling, as well as making the curriculum more flexible and diverse is helpful. Additional learning support at the end of secondary school may also 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.

In the modern knowledge economy, one shot at education which determines once and for all your future life choices is not enough. But 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. However, there are big differences between countries.

Second chances for those who lack basic education and skills can be provided in a number of ways, including programmes that provide literacy training, work-based programmes, and arrangements to recognise informal learning. In the United States, almost 60% of dropouts eventually earn a high school credential (GED certificate) through second chance education programmes. ■

### **How to improve practices in and out of the classroom?**

What happens in the classroom obviously affects equity, but the relationships between schools, parents and communities also matter. Student learning benefits from an effective school-home relationship, but weak support at home can hold back children from deprived backgrounds. Effective provision for migrants and minorities in the education system is also a key challenge.

Making students repeat a year if they are not keeping up is a popular option – in some school systems, up to one-quarter of students repeat a year at some point. But it is costly and there is little evidence that children benefit from it. High rates of year repetition in some countries need to be reduced by encouraging alternative approaches in the classroom.

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.

Many countries could usefully follow the Finnish approach to learning difficulties, which offers a sequence of intensifying interventions to draw back into the mainstream those who fall behind. It certainly appears successful: only 1% of Finnish 15-year-olds are unable to demonstrate basic functional reading skills, while the OECD average is 7%.

For classroom interventions to work, however, teachers need support to develop their techniques to help those pupils who are falling behind.

And classroom intervention is not enough – more than 20% of the learning time of children in OECD countries takes place out of school, in the form of homework, working with a tutor, or other activities. And attitudes at home, including parental support for education, involvement in children’s learning and cultural habits like having books around, are also associated with stronger school performance.

Expecting homework to improve performance may threaten equity, since some children do not have the parental support needed to bring results. But encouraging parental involvement – working with children at home and actively participating in school activities – does improve results. Schools that foster participation by parents, and help parents to support their children in their school work tend to have better outcomes.

For this to work, schools need to target their efforts on improving communication with parents in the most disadvantaged homes and to help develop home environments conducive to learning. After-school homework clubs at school may also help those with weak home support.

Minorities and migrants face particular difficulties, and systems need to respond to their needs. Success in both education and employment varies widely between immigrant and minority groups and between different countries. But in many cases minority groups are 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 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, first and second generation immigrant students tend to perform less well than their native counterparts in OECD assessments of mathematics, science and reading, and analysis suggests that much of this is explained by social background.

To combat these disadvantages, early childhood education and care is helpful and provides a strong environment in which to learn a second language. Special measures may encourage participation by immigrants’ children.

Where immigrant and minority groups are disproportionately streamed into special education institutions, attention needs to be given to the risk of cultural bias in the selection process and whether separate schooling is in the best interests of the students involved.

Newly-arrived immigrant children often need special language training, for example, but this should not isolate the children from mainstream classes for more than a year at most. Particularly in countries where immigration has risen sharply, teachers need training to deal with language issues but also a multicultural curriculum and teaching antiracism. ■

### How to improve resourcing for equity in education?

It is likely to prove difficult in many countries to increase education spending to deal with equity issues, so it is perhaps more helpful to focus on targeting existing education expenditure to ensure that it contributes to equity.

Clearly, education systems need to provide strong education for all, giving priority to early childhood provision and basic schooling. Public provision of education can foster equity if it counterbalances poor home circumstances at the outset of children's lives. But it may increase inequity if it offers a common resource that is primarily claimed by those least in need of it.

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.

Existing education resources are already being reallocated in ways that may not help equity in basic education. There is pressure for money from an expanding tertiary education system, for example. But while countries need a high quality

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#### BOX. TEN STEPS TO EQUITY IN EDUCATION

The OECD has recommended ten steps which would reduce school failure and dropout rates, 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.
10. Set concrete targets for more equity, particularly related to low school attainment and dropouts.

well-resourced tertiary education system, public expenditure is not the only solution. Private sources can be tapped to fund this sector. So countries charging fees for early childhood education and care but not for tertiary education need to review their policies.

Grants to poor families for school-age children may help reduce dropout rates at upper secondary level, but countries where grants to families for school age children are tied to school performance also need to review their policies, since this may in fact encourage dropout.

Since national education resources are limited, governments need to ensure that they are being directed to the poorer students and regions so that minimum standards are met everywhere. 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.

Extra resources also need to be channelled through schools to help disadvantaged students. This should help overcome the effect of social background and help to tackle poor performance. The stigma arising from labelling of particular schools as “for disadvantaged children” should be avoided.

Teaching quality is also an issue. Disadvantaged schools have the greatest need of experienced teachers, but in many countries the “difficult” schools can only attract the less experienced teachers. There should be incentives for more experienced teachers to work in these schools.

As with all policy changes, governments need to be able to measure success in improving equity, performance and school dropout rates. Numerical targets can be a useful tool, by articulating policy in terms of what is to be achieved rather than in terms of formal processes. A number of countries have adopted targets for equity in education. Numerical targets for reducing the number of school-leavers with poor basic skills and the number of early school dropouts are particularly useful.

National testing of individual student performance on basic skills is a fundamental tool to measure both individual performance and the performance of schools. But test results only measure certain things, and a school's results depend on who its pupils are as well as the quality of the school.

Many countries believe that publishing results at school level is desirable or politically and/or legally inevitable and a number of countries are testing such systems. But countries need to think 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. They need to use the data to bring all schools up to a level, rather than allowing the pressures of league tables to polarise school quality. ■

**For further information**

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### For further reading

- OECD (2007), Field, S., M. Kuczera, B. Pont, **No More Failures: Ten Steps to Equity in Education**, ISBN 978-92-64-03259-0, € 24, 155 pages.
- OECD (2005), **Promoting Adult Learning**, ISBN: 978-92-64-01092-5, € 25, 148 pages.
- OECD (2006), **ICT and Learning: Supporting Out-of-School Youth and Adults**, ISBN 978-92-64-01227-1, € 24, 170 pages.
- OECD (2007), **PISA 2006, Science Competencies for Tomorrow's World**, ISBN 978-92-64-04000-7, € 40, 390 pages (especially Chapter 4, "Quality and Equity in the Performance of Students and Schools"), or visit [www.pisa.oecd.org](http://www.pisa.oecd.org).
- For additional information on OECD work on equity in education:  
[www.oecd.org/edu/equity/equityineducation](http://www.oecd.org/edu/equity/equityineducation).

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