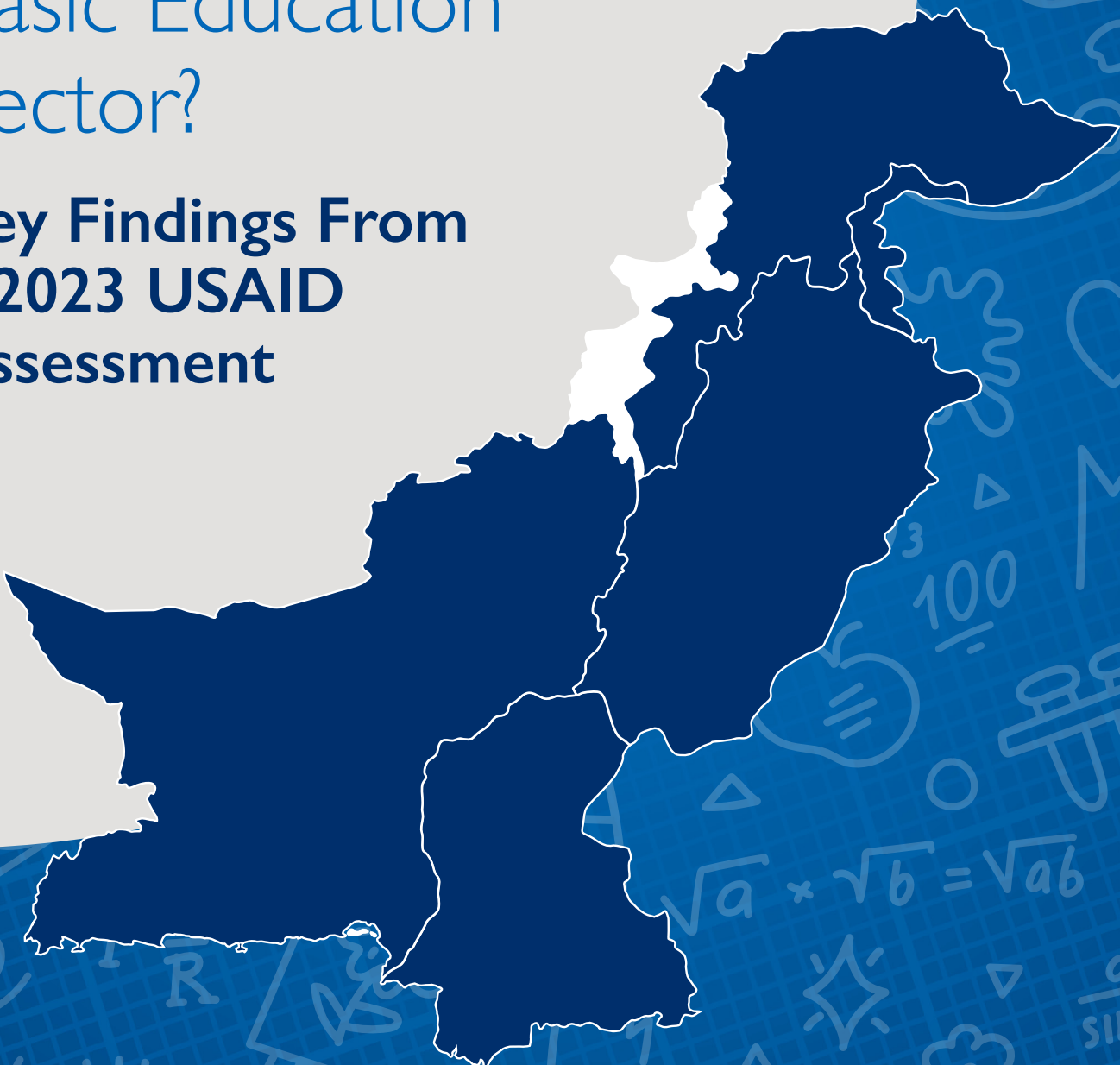




USAID
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What Are The Biggest Challenges in Pakistan's Basic Education Sector?

Key Findings From a 2023 USAID Assessment



USAID/Asia Bureau

2023 Pakistan Basic Education Sector Assessment Summary

Pakistan faces numerous challenges in meeting the educational needs of its young people across the country. According to its National Commission on the Rights of Child 2022 report, Pakistan has 22.8 million out-of-school children, representing 44% of the total school-aged population.

While progress has been made over the past 20 years, net enrollment rates overall are still well below universal, with rural and low socioeconomic status populations, girls, and children with disabilities at the greatest disadvantage. The gap between male and female enrollment in primary school, after decreasing slightly in the early 2000s, stubbornly persists to this day.

Through the Improving Learning Outcomes for Asia (ILOA) project, USAID/Pakistan undertook a basic education sector assessment to inform the development of its new Country Development Cooperation Strategy (CDCS). RTI International and the International Rescue Committee fielded a team of five experts to conduct the assessment.

Through two phases of data collection and interviews with a range of stakeholders (including federal and local government officials, school personnel, representatives of local and international organizations and development partners, and academics) on their priorities and experiences, the assessment shed light on the status of the basic education sector in Pakistan at the federal level and in five provinces and regions — Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK), Balochistan, Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa (KP), Punjab, and Sindh — and focused specifically on the following issues as requested by USAID:



Inclusive education

Equity in access to schooling for marginalized and vulnerable populations, especially girls and children with disabilities



Flood recovery and climate resilience

The education system's recovery from the recent flooding and lessons learned regarding the role that basic education can play in climate change mitigation and adaptation, and the longer-term resiliency of the education system



Private schools

Analysis of the extent and quality of private schooling, including the potential for expanded public-private partnerships

Findings

For children in school, learning outcomes fall below desired levels. According to 2021 national Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) data, only 55% of grade 5 children could read a basic story at a grade 2 level. In 2020, ASER found that less than 20% of rural students in grade 2 were able to read a story in Urdu or do basic math operations such as division. Learning losses due to the closure of school during the COVID-19 pandemic likely have compounded the issue.[1]

Pakistan has one of the world's lowest levels of domestic financing of education, spending less than 2.8% of its gross domestic product on the sector—far below the recommended 4% to 6% (Human Rights Watch, 2018). Underfunding is in part what prevents the system from expanding access rapidly enough to keep pace with population growth (at the 2021 estimated rate of 1.85%). Stakeholders interviewed consistently indicated that ongoing political upheavals and slow bureaucratic processes contribute to inefficient use of the resources that are available.

In August 2021, Pakistan launched the Single National Curriculum to foster greater uniformity and alignment across curriculum, materials, and the examination system. Seen as a vehicle for standardizing educational quality across Pakistan, the curriculum presents a well-organized framework informed by current evidence-based practices and research, but most teachers are not yet ready to deliver it in the classroom. Ensuring adequate training and support for its implementation is what will ultimately determine its impact on teaching and learning.

Other recent federal initiatives include a new Distance Learning Strategy and ongoing efforts to improve instructional quality and standards. The federal government recognizes education technology as a potentially valuable tool to reach out-of-school children across the country and to ensure continuity of learning during disruptions. However, the infrastructure, research, data, and governance that form the basis of an operational distance education system are still in the nascent phase. Data from the ASER 2021 report show that outside of Islamabad, less than 20% of households have internet connectivity.



Inclusion

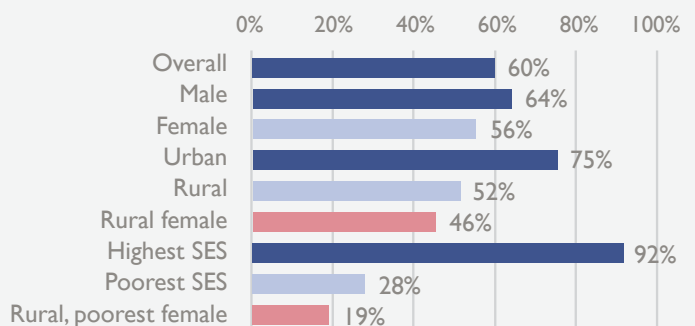
Most stakeholders interviewed acknowledged that inclusion is not a reality in Pakistan and marginalized groups face continued hardships. When asked about inclusion, most referred only to “girls’ education and children with disabilities.”

Girls’ Education: “An ongoing challenge.”

Interviewees discussed girls’ education as an ongoing challenge. It is clear from the literature and in the interview data that the challenges occur on both the supply and the demand sides. Some argued that traditionally, girls’ education has been undervalued and families see no “use” in sending a girl to school, especially in more culturally traditional provinces like Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan. Others noted that families withdraw their girls as they enter adolescence, and that child marriage is still a common practice. Some stakeholders pointed out that girls face harassment in school or on the way to school; hence, families keep their girls home to keep them safe.

On the supply side, there are simply not enough schools, thus not enough places for girls (or boys), especially in rural areas. The added distance to post-primary schools coupled with the timing of adolescence, availability of appropriate water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) and menstrual hygiene facilities, and related safety concerns are all

Figure 2: Compound inequities in primary school completion rates



Children from rural and poorer families are the most disadvantaged in terms of access to and success and persistence in school. This graph shows how gender, location, and socioeconomic status intersect to greatly disadvantage girls from poorer rural families, limiting the percentage that are able to complete primary grades.

Source: Author’s analysis of time series data taken from the World Bank DataBank, Education Statistics (World Bank, 2023)



There is no justice for children with disabilities when there is no justice in the system.”

—DISABILITY RIGHTS ACTIVIST

significant deterrents to girls enrolling in and attending school beyond primary. While demand for girls’ education certainly has increased over the past several decades, the supply of quality basic education is not keeping up. Despite some progress over the past 20 years, poor girls in rural parts of Pakistan remain the most disadvantaged when it comes to accessing school (see Figure 2).

Children with Disabilities: “Stigma and taboo persist.”

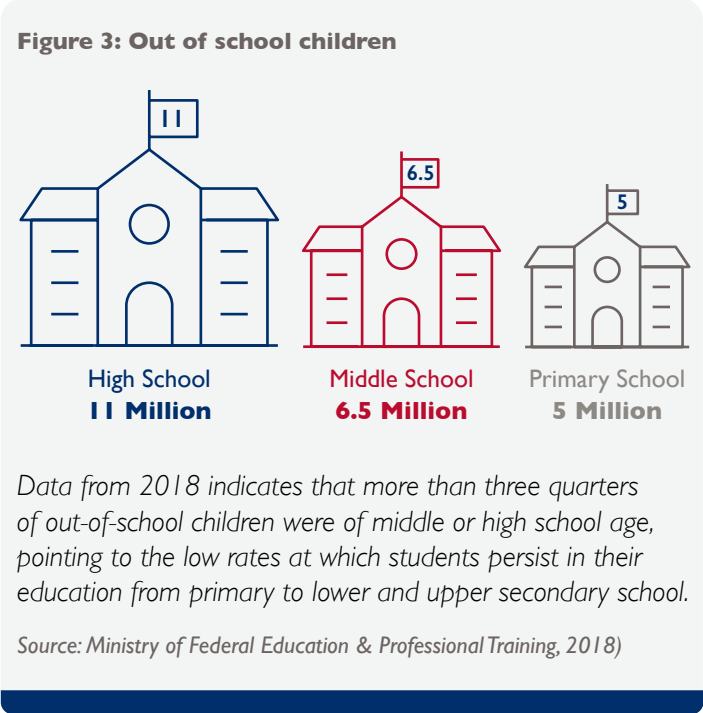
In Pakistan there are myriad constraints to providing high-quality education to all children with disabilities. Those most often cited are related to poor infrastructure, lack of resources to respond to the needs of children with disabilities, poor data on people with disabilities, and low capacity throughout the education system to screen for and accommodate children with disabilities.

Across the country, educational services for children with disabilities are delivered through Special Education Departments, which have their own budget and their own schools, located mostly in urban centers. The administrative, budgetary, and managerial segregation of responsibility for inclusive education makes the situation much more exclusive than intended and further obscures the needs and realities of children with disabilities.

At the federal level, special education is handled by the Ministry of Social Welfare, and several officials noted that there is little coordination across Ministries. UNICEF (2021) estimated that only 2% of children with disabilities could access special education programs, while another 2% were attending mainstream schools.

It is generally understood that mainstream government schools can accommodate only children with “mild physical disabilities,” but the infrastructure to accommodate them is minimal. Capacity for viable screening of children for disabilities is also very limited. Many children go unidentified.

With the exception of the few who have undertaken training related to special education, teachers do not know how to adapt the curriculum and individualize instruction for children with disabilities. Moreover, the system neither expects nor supports them to do so. There is limited, if any, knowledge of inclusive pedagogy (such as Universal Design for Learning [UDL]) across the country. Interviewees reported that stigma and taboo within families about disability persist and therefore prevalence will likely continue to be underreported.



Recommendations for Greater Inclusivity

- Inclusive Education is an under-resourced and low-capacity area in the basic education sector. It will be important to partner with other development partners to ensure funding is complementary and co-sponsor policy actions to amplify impact and make best use of resources.

- Governments need support to systematically collect data on the prevalence of disabilities; likewise, nongovernmental actors could conduct surveys focused on specific geographic areas or types of disability.
- Provincial and district authorities need assistance to map out progressive strategies for accommodating learners with disabilities over time—starting with what is doable in the short term.
- It will also be important to increase the capacity of mainstream government schools to accommodate children with disabilities, at a level that is feasible and sustainable in each district. High-impact investments could include basic infrastructure upgrades and training on UDL.
- International organizations could support provincial governments to allocate additional resources to Special Education Departments to provide adaptive technologies to students.



Climate Resilience

Given the short time that has elapsed since the floods in June–October 2022, Pakistan is still very much in the “response” phase, rather than recovery. Many schools that were partially or fully damaged are still unusable, and many functional schools are still being used as shelters for displaced populations.

A lack of resources to rehabilitate schools is a broad concern, and the floods caused foundational damage to schools, which are not constructed to withstand such emergencies. The interviewees also shared that the mobilization of funding in response to the 2022 floods was much less than what had been seen in 2009–2010.

UNICEF has worked to establish temporary learning centers in flood-affected areas, but their funding and reach has been too small. Some local NGOs also provided support, but it was limited in scope and time. The government itself does not plan for the continuation of education in flood-affected areas and there are no specific contingency funds in the budget for flood response.

Almost all the interviewees said they consider education to be one of the most important tools that can be used to develop climate resilience, but there was little consensus around what exactly should be done. Some stakeholders stated that the existing curriculum and textbooks do have content on climate change that could be improved. In contrast, others suggested the need to understand this subject better before adding anything to the curriculum.

Floods, like other climate-induced disasters, are a cross-sectoral issue requiring coordination with government efforts in water management, disaster management, health, and climate change.



Climate change can't be added as a chapter in a textbook. We need to change the curriculum and the pedagogy. People in the villages and cities need to learn about how we change our lifestyles to create more resilience in us. Education doesn't engage in vegetable farming, animal husbandry, living by the river, etc. ”

—INTERVIEWEE IN PUNJAB

Recommendations for Building Climate Resilience

- Broader agency-level investments for climate resilience across the energy, water management, agriculture, health, and basic education sectors are critical.
- The Ministry of Climate Change would benefit from focused capacity building and support for it to meaningfully engage other ministries (including the MoFEPT) and partners to develop strategies with operationalized budgets.
- The relative success of early warning systems, cash distributions to flood-affected communities, post-earthquake school construction codes, and community-based disaster risk management structures should serve as models for improving resilience.
- At a minimum, investment in preparedness — comprehensive school safety plans, contingency budgets and materials for schools, and infrastructure rehabilitation — should be a top priority.



Private Schooling

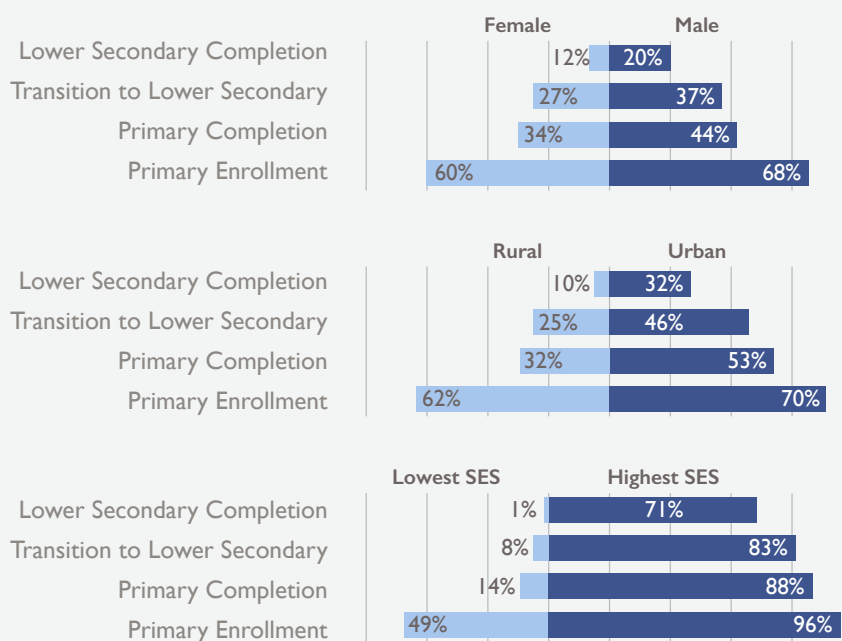
Private schools in Pakistan play a crucial role in providing access to education to millions of students.

Private schools make up 38% of all educational institutions and 44% of the total enrollment (Asian Development Bank [ADB], 2022).

Federal and provincial authorities have taken steps to encourage private sector participation in education. Five provincial and regional governments have established provincial education foundations to facilitate public-private partnerships (PPP) in education that support more than 12,000 Foundation Assisted Schools with three million students. Other successful PPP models include the provision of vouchers to low-income students to attend private schools and hiring of education management organizations to run networks of public schools.

All provinces have established directorates to register and regulate private sector schools, although they are challenged to keep pace with the rapid rise in the number and types of private schools.

Figure 4: Inequity in persistence through school



Inequities in rates of continuation to subsequent levels of schooling are stark, based on gender, location, and socioeconomic status.

Source: Data are taken from UNESCO's World Inequality Database on Education (UNESCO, n.d.a.)

Private schools in Pakistan can be classified into various categories, including elite private schools, mid-tier private schools,

and low-cost private schools. Elite private schools cater to the affluent class. Mid-tier private schools are moderately priced, attract middle-class families, and usually follow the national curriculum. Low-cost private schools provide basic education at an affordable cost to lower-income families. These schools follow the national curriculum and focus on essential literacy and numeracy skills.

Interviewees mentioned that private schools have significant presence in the taluka headquarters of rural districts. In general, both parents and district officials perceived the quality of these private schools to be better than that of public schools. But some provincial officials criticized the private schools for being of low quality and for hiring unskilled teachers.

Private schools in Pakistan have made efforts to provide inclusive education to students from varied socioeconomic backgrounds. Many private schools offer scholarships, fee concessions, and other financial support to students in need. The representative of the Federation of Private Schools in Pakistan argued that the reason for low enrollment of special needs students is the cost to private schools of teaching these children.

The capacity of provincial directorates responsible for regulating private schools is limited, and better monitoring of student learning outcomes is needed (ADB, 2019). Comprehensive and up-to-date data on student enrollment, performance, and school quality is severely lacking. Furthermore, the diversity in private provision makes it challenging for policymakers and stakeholders to thoroughly understand the issues faced by different types of private schools. Another challenge is the lack of coordination among government agencies, private schools, and other stakeholders. These disconnects lead to inefficiencies, duplication of efforts, and missed opportunities for collaboration.

Recommendations for Private Schools

- A nationwide one-size-fits-all approach will not work—each province/region is implementing its own unique set of PPPs, many of which have promised to address the significant challenge of out-of-school children that is present across Pakistan.
- The regulatory framework could be strengthened to ensure compliance with national education standards and to promote transparency in private school management.
- The public sector could design policies and incentives to encourage some of the country's large networks of private schools to serve more disadvantaged populations or areas.
- To improve equity for the poor and to raise the status of girls' education, additional assistance could focus on PPP expansion in poor and rural districts where girls' access to education is also the lowest.

Building Toward Inclusivity and Resilience

As inequity and climate change continue to have an outsized impact on Pakistan's most marginalized groups, it is clear that an inclusive and resilient education system is essential to improving learning outcomes for its millions of in- and out-of-school children. Learning poverty in Pakistan is so extreme that a laser focus on foundational teaching and learning remains fundamental, as does strengthening the capacity of the institutions supporting continuous teacher professional development to deliver high-quality instruction in the classroom. To ensure that improved foundational learning reaches those in greatest need, special initiatives are required to address the reality that inequity is a pervasive challenge across much of the country and climate change cannot be ignored. Indeed, Pakistan has outstanding education policies at the federal and provincial and regional levels, but focus on the capacity to prioritize and implement them, especially at the local levels of the system, is needed now. There are ample opportunities for the government, USAID and other development partners to collaborate across the sector to strengthen inclusive and resilient education practices in Pakistan, and coordination is critical if we are to build a future where these challenges are not simply met, but overcome.