

Secondary Education Guidance

Multiple and Flexible Pathways

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1. Introduction

Education for adolescents: A second window of opportunity

There are nearly 200 million lower and upper secondary age adolescent girls and boys out of school globally¹, and if current trends continue, another 825 million children will not acquire basic secondary-level skills by 2030.² Global momentum to achieve universal primary education has placed increased demands on secondary education systems to serve more students, from a wider range of backgrounds, and to do so more effectively and inclusively. Many of the most marginalized adolescents in lower income countries who are enrolled in school have fallen years behind their peers.

Expanding provision of formal secondary education and non-formal education for out-of-school adolescents has distinct benefits for adolescents themselves, as well as their families, communities, and countries. According to UNESCO³, the global poverty rate would be more than halved if all adults completed secondary school. Secondary education is a prime opportunity to refine foundational skills and develop skills for employment, active citizenship and personal empowerment.

Adolescence is a time of opportunity

We now recognize two stages of rapid development in a child's life: in the early years and in adolescence. In most LICs and MICs, marginalized adolescents did not benefit from quality early childhood development, including pre-primary education. In addition to early educational investment, targeted education interventions for marginalized adolescents are important to ensure they realize their potential during their second window of developmental opportunity, a period with life-long lasting effects.

There is strong evidence that **completing secondary education is associated with greater economic, social and political benefits than primary education alone.**

Multiple studies show that secondary education has a positive effect on cognitive skills, which in turn correlate strongly with increased wages and GDP growth⁴, poverty reduction, and reduced fertility and population growth.⁵ Secondary education returns have been demonstrated for low and middle income countries, with women experiencing higher returns than men⁶, reinforcing that the education of adolescent girls remain a priority.

UNICEF's ambition

UNICEF's goal is that girls and boys, in particular the most marginalized and those affected by humanitarian situations, are provided with inclusive and equitable quality education and learning opportunities, including lower and upper secondary education. UNICEF will support Governments to achieve the SDG4 commitment of 12 years of free, quality and inclusive education, including advice and support on how to expand access to secondary education equitably and progressively.

The equitable expansion of secondary education in LICs and MICs, a key objective within UNICEF Strategic Plan (2018-2021), is not only a requirement for achieving SDG4 but also underpins broader SDG targets on gender equality, skills development, global citizenship and sustainable development, and reducing the proportion of youth not in employment, education or training. To do this, UNICEF works with governments, communities and other key partners to improve access to learning and skills development across the life cycle through both formal and non-formal education, including in fragile and humanitarian contexts.

UNICEF Education Strategy 2019–2030 focuses on marginalized children. Fulfilling marginalized secondary school-age children's right to education requires a focus

on strengthening multiple flexible education pathways, including catch-up education, vocational training, apprenticeships, and formal primary and secondary education. One of the strategic shifts in the Education Strategy is a greater focus on the education of marginalized adolescents.

Acknowledging that needs will differ significantly according to country context, UNICEF will adopt three core strategies for secondary education:

- supporting quality formal primary education (for those currently in primary education and for those who never attended school but are still age-eligible to enter primary) and secondary education, with a particular focus on reaching the most marginalized adolescents;
- strengthening non-formal education and alternative delivery models (e.g., catch-up classes, bridging and accelerated education, second-chance education, skills development training and apprenticeships), including the recognition, validation and accreditation of non-formal learning outcomes;
- advancing adolescent girls' secondary education, learning and skills development (including in science, technology, engineering and mathematics [STEM]) as part of the UNICEF Gender Action Plan targeted priorities; this will be complemented by cross

To achieve these goals, UNICEF will support governments to progressively universalize secondary education and prioritize disadvantaged adolescents while maintaining a commitment to strengthening education systems, including those at the primary level. Progress for those left furthest behind needs to be even more accelerated than it is for adolescents who enjoy greater access to learning opportunities.

UNICEF can assist governments to make phased plans to achieve the ambition of 12 years of fee-free primary, lower and upper secondary education by 2030 by identifying strategic actions/entry points depending on context. UNICEF can provide technical assistance to create plans containing interim targets and monitoring frameworks for accountability and measuring progress. **UNICEF can also engage in policy dialogue at the country level** so that governments consider trade-offs in terms of priorities both across and within sectors.

UNICEF will advise governments to continue to invest in improving the quality of education and learning outcomes at the primary level, as they are important predictors of adolescent learning outcomes at the secondary education level. Likewise, UNICEF will advise governments to expand secondary education progressively and emphasize quality, since access to secondary education without achieving basic learning outcomes is a wasted investment for both families and governments.

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