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The urgency of educational recovery in Latin America and the Caribbean

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Executive summary

The main purpose of this document is to provide materials for the construction of agreements at the Special Meeting of Ministers of Education of Latin America and the Caribbean, held in Santiago, Chile, in January 2024, with a view to ensuring compliance with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4) by 2030. To this end, it presents a monitoring of educational trends in the region from the beginning of the pandemic until the most recent period, with an analysis of its main impacts and the policies that countries have implemented to address these.

This document is a continuation of the first regional SDG4-Education 2030 monitoring report (UNESCO, UNICEF & ECLAC, 2022), which addressed the monitoring of education from 2015 to 2021, with updated indicators and a characterization of the most recent trends. The first part presents an analysis of the main educational trends in the region based on available information, focusing on those dimensions most affected by the pandemic. The second section presents a characterization of the most relevant educational policies that emerged in the region in the period following the COVID-19 pandemic until the end of 2023.

A monitoring of educational trends reveals that during the pandemic there was a drop in attendance rates at all educational programmes, mainly in 2020, with pre-primary education being the most affected. The true magnitude of the setback caused by this crisis remains unknown, and we can anticipate that its consequences will last for several years.

The most current data show a rapid recovery of some indicators: one of the most prominent is attendance, which by 2022 reached magnitudes similar to the pre-pandemic scenario in primary and secondary education, and slightly lower in pre-primary education. In 2022, there were an estimated 9.6 million children out of school, a number that shows a sustained downward trend at least since 2015, reaching historic lows in the latter year. The countries' efforts to increase coverage and changes in demographic dynamics contribute to this.

Despite this, this rate of expansion of education systems to incorporate the out-of-school population proves insufficient to guarantee universal primary and secondary education: there is a hard core of excluded children that countries have not yet managed to enroll in school, and we have also observed that one out of every three young people does not complete upper secondary education. Males are less likely to complete this level of education: there are 68 females for every 60 male students who complete upper secondary education.

The region's learning achievements were low even before the pandemic: just over half of third-grade primary school students reached minimum proficiency levels on the 2019 ERCE tests. In sixth grade, performance showed a decline compared to third grade, especially in mathematics. For lower secondary education, the 2018 PISA tests showed that barely one-third achieved minimum proficiency levels in mathematics.

Post-pandemic standardized assessments applied by countries, although not strictly comparable, show a major variation in results based on years and areas of education. Almost all countries have shown a significant decrease in learning and increase in inequalities, which has been sharper in primary education. The recently published PISA results for 2022 show a similar scenario to 2018 in the average of participating countries in the region, with a concentrated decline in mathematics, which strains and complicates interpretations of the impact of the pandemic as it does not reflect the expected setbacks.

In addition, there has been an increase in inequalities: the poorest population, rural girls and boys, and indigenous students have been the most affected by increased exclusion during the pandemic, with wider gaps in pre-primary and upper secondary education. Only in the first two cases do recent data show a narrowing of the gaps. In the case of indigenous students, inequalities in terms of attendance were maintained or widened in 2022 with respect to previous years. Paradoxically, the PISA 2022 results in mathematics do not show an increase in inequality with respect to 2018, although there are very marked differences in performance associated with socioeconomic level.

Several countries in the region faced the pandemic without additional economic resources. The sector has not been prioritized in the allocation of these supplementary funds compared to other social expenditures. Government expenditure on education as a percentage of total public expenditure has been declining steadily over the last five years. If in 2019 countries allocated 14.1 % of total public expenditure to education, three years later this proportion fell to 12.9 %. In relation to GDP, over these years educational expenditure has remained around 4 % on average, with an increase in 2021 explained by the dramatic drop in GDP that year.

The education policy agenda for the post-pandemic scenario (2022 to 2023) shows a series of advances and also some debts and difficulties. Several countries in the region were able to continue to consolidate policies that were specifically developed as an emergency response to the pandemic. To address socioeducational gaps, compensatory actions were implemented focusing on the most vulnerable populations. Specifically, progress was made in early warning systems to use statistical information disaggregated by student to monitor their educational pathway.

The chapter on digital education policies, which showed significant progress and innovation during the suspension of in-person education, has not been continued to the same extent and represents an opportunity for the coming years. Constant progress in the technology industry open the door to new educational opportunities, such as the development of automatic correction systems, customized learning platforms and tutoring with generative artificial intelligence.

In the analysis of policy trends related to the improvement of the quality of learning, there are several noteworthy agendas in the countries of the region, particularly the new assessment policies focused on feedback to schools for pedagogical decision-making. Outstanding actions also emerged to address the socioemotional wellbeing of students affected by the pandemic crisis.

In some cases, an emphasis has been placed on policies to lengthen the school day, in an effort to expand learning opportunities for the most disadvantaged sectors. Some countries have focused on early literacy processes as the starting point for systemic improvement. In other countries, the focus has been on curricular transformation, with new models based on the teaching of competencies and emerging knowledge such as sustainable development, programming and robotics.

Curricular policies have included a specific chapter that connects to what happened in many countries during the pandemic: the need to prioritize and better organize the curriculum. In some cases, this was combined with policies to expand the public availability of textbooks.

Teachers have not been at the center of the policy agenda, despite the fact that many countries have made efforts to support their work in such an adverse context. A comprehensive rethinking of the teaching profession to achieve a comprehensive virtuous cycle of prestige for the profession is still an open challenge for most of the countries in the region.

Finally, the importance of approaches to post-pandemic learning recovery deserves a central mention. Few countries have managed to develop a comprehensive approach with an action plan to address the educational emergency of learning loss caused by the interruption of in-person classes. This coordinated, systemic vision of actions poses a challenge to governance and allocation of educational resources, two central issues in a context of discontinuity and political polarization and educational budget limitations.

Introduction

The global health emergency caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has had an unprecedented impact on education systems in the region, which has shown its most damaging effects during school closures between 2020 and 2021, and continues to affect education systems with consequences that will be felt for years to come.

Latin America and the Caribbean was one of the regions where educational institutions were closed for the greatest number of weeks. During the suspension of in-person classes, millions of students were excluded from education and millions more were insufficiently engaged with education, resulting in learning loss, increased inequalities, and impacts on the health and psychosocial wellbeing of students and teachers, with younger children and students associated with the most vulnerable groups suffering the greatest losses (UNESCO, UNICEF & ECLAC, 2022; IDB, 2020; World Bank, UNICEF & UNESCO, 2022).

The educational setback caused by this crisis adds to the inauspicious trends of previous years. The SDG4-Education 2030 regional monitoring report, *Education in Latin America and the Caribbean at a crossroads* (UNESCO, UNICEF & ECLAC, 2022), reported on the complex and challenging scenario that the region faced at the beginning of the pandemic, with a spotlight on the slowdown and stagnation of the main educational variables. The indicators for coverage and completion of educational levels showed a growth ceiling and stagnation in learning achievements. The projection of these trends, even without considering the impact of the pandemic, already revealed that the region would not achieve the main SDG4 targets by 2030.

It is in this scenario that the educational crisis caused by the pandemic showed its most damaging effects: the suspension of in-person classes, together with the unequal conditions under which the continuity of learning and pedagogical support were addressed, widened the gaps and increased uncertainty and unpredictability in terms of progress towards ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all.

The path to be taken by education systems in the post-pandemic period is complex. The effects of the pandemic and the new challenges on local and global levels add to the urgent challenge of facing the historical debts of ensuring the right to education. The global report on the futures of education states that it is impossible for education systems to return to the pre-pandemic scenario: current challenges call for the construction of a new social contract for education that will make it possible to reimagine the education of the future to ensure that no one is left behind (International Commission on the Futures of Education, 2021).

In this context, it is imperative for the region's educational actors to promote a recovery strategy that allows children to return to school quickly, to recover learning and socioemotional wellbeing, and to value and train teachers within a sustainable policy framework and with sufficient funding.

At the Third Regional Meeting of Ministers of Education of Latin America and the Caribbean, held on May 22-23, 2022, in Buenos Aires, commitments were ratified to take urgent actions to recover and transform education systems, recognizing that recovery cannot mean going back to business as usual, but that it entails the need to promote a profound transformation that addresses the structural and systemic factors that have contributed to the region's educational debt and injustice (UNESCO OREALC, 2022).

The countries of the region also actively participated in the Transforming Education Summit (TES),[1] convened

1 In preparation for the TES, twenty Latin American and Caribbean countries developed national consultation processes on how

by the United Nations in September 2022. At TES, efforts were made to overcome the educational crisis resulting from COVID-19 and to reimagine the educational systems of the future. In addition, the global commitment to education as a public good was renewed through the mobilization of action, ambition and solidarity in search of solutions within the framework of existing commitments.

Subsequently, a high-level regional meeting was held on Commitment to Action on Basic Learning and its Recovery in March 2023 in Bogota by the Colombian Ministry of Education, the World Bank, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), UNESCO, the Inter-American Development Bank, The Inter-American Dialogue and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). This meeting expanded the regional commitment to promote urgent educational recovery in the region after the losses recorded during the pandemic and to guarantee basic learning for all children.[2]

In keeping with these commitments, the main purpose of this document is to provide material for the educational debate and the construction of agreements at the Special Meeting of Ministers of Education of Latin America and the Caribbean to be held in January 2024 in Santiago, Chile.

To this end, this regional report characterizes educational trends in the region from the beginning of the pandemic until the most recent period, analyzing its main impacts and the policies implemented by countries to address these. The report responds to the mandate that emerged from the last three regional meetings of Ministers of Education of Latin America and the Caribbean, which defined the regional monitoring mechanisms for SDG4 (UNESCO OREALC, 2017, 2022; UNESCO, 2018).

This document is a continuation of the first SDG4-Education 2030 regional monitoring report, which addressed education trends from 2015 to 2021 (UNESCO, UNICEF & ECLAC, 2022), with updated indicators and a characterization of the situation in recent years. That publication developed a comprehensive monitoring of a broad set of dimensions of education systems in the region, while this document prioritizes only those that have been most affected by the pandemic and excludes some others. It also presents as background other regional scale studies on the impact of the pandemic that have been carried out in recent years.[3]

To present a comprehensive characterization of the educational situation in the region, while prioritizing the key issues to represent the challenges of educational recovery, this report is organized into two main blocks: the first block presents an analysis of the main educational trends in the region based on available information, focusing on those dimensions most affected by the pandemic. The second section presents a characterization of the most relevant educational policies that emerged in the region in the post-pandemic period, between 2021 and 2023. Finally, it presents a set of conclusions and challenges arising from the analysis of the previous sections.

to transform their education systems, eighteen member states participated in the pre-Summit in Paris (June 28-30, 2022), and twenty member states participated in the Summit in New York (September 16-19, 2022).

2 «Latin America and the Caribbean reiterate their commitment to strengthening and recovering basic learning», UNESCO, March 22, 2023, available at https://on.unesco.org/46OxqXX.

3 **Box 5** of the chapter on educational policy trends provides details on the studies used as background.

Chapter 1

Educational trends in the region

This section presents the main educational trends for the 2019-2022 period based on the information available to characterize the impacts of the pandemic on the region's education systems. It identifies the magnitude of the setback in its main dimensions, both in relative terms and in the size of the affected population. It takes a look at the characterization of the region as a whole, complementing this global view with some approaches that highlight the main inequalities, in order to reflect the heterogeneities that unfold in terms of education in the countries of the region.

It uses the SDG4 monitoring framework[1] as a conceptual and methodological reference to align the diagnoses with the main targets established for 2030 and adopted by the countries. Within this reference universe, priority is given to those dimensions that have been most affected by the pandemic: access to and completion of early childhood, primary and secondary education, learning achievements and inclusion gaps, with a focus on the most excluded populations.

The preparation of this quantitative monitoring exercise encountered limitations in the availability and characteristics of the information available for the region, since some dimensions do not have comparable data between countries, while others have limited updates or methodological weaknesses that do not allow for an accurate representation of the phenomena analyzed.

To maximize the use of the data, we used a combination of regional data with information constructed from national averages. In the case of the analysis of learning achievements, in the absence of recent results of regional or international assessments, we opted for an initial approximation based on the assessments published by the countries and with the results of PISA 2022 for the countries in the region that participate in the assessment.[2] This scenario will be completed as more updated information becomes available, and with the publication of the post-pandemic 2023 ERCE.[3]

1 The SDG4 monitoring framework is composed of twelve global indicators for monitoring its seven targets and three means of implementation, complemented by 32 other thematic indicators that delve into different dimensions of education. The full list of the 44 indicators can be found on the website of the Technical Cooperation Group on SDG4-E2030 Indicators, the organization leading the monitoring of the SDG4-E2030 Agenda: https://tcg.uis.unesco.org/.

2 The quantitative data used in this report have been carefully selected to present the main educational trends in the region based on comparable, robust and relevant information for the major educational challenges, considering the document's dimensions of analysis. The data source used is the information published by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics in its September 2023 update, together with the database of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (CEPALSTAT) and specific processing developed by ECLAC from the Household Surveys Databank (BADEHOG). Additionally, we work with the database of the PISA and PISA-D assessments, implemented by the OECD. We also use the results of the assessments implemented by some countries in the region, published in the official national reports of the Ministries of Education. We prioritized the use of indicators available for a broad set of countries in the region, comparable over time and between education systems, and available for the 2019-2021 period. To ensure international comparability, the indicators analyzed are organized under the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED 2011), developed by the UIS (2013).

3 The post-pandemic ERCE is a reduced version of the ERCE 2019 assessment that was applied in 2023 to gather information on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the learning achievements of students in the region. It also seeks to learn about the strategies implemented by schools to guarantee schooling in the same period and to provide information on the socioemotional wellbeing of the students. For more information, see «Laboratorio Latinoamericano de Evaluación de la Calidad de la Educación (LLECE)», UNESCO, November 29, 2023, available (Spanish only) at https://on.unesco.org/484vCLy.

Access to and completion of early childhood, primary and secondary education

For the child and teen population, school attendance is a basic, albeit insufficient, condition for the fulfillment of the right to education. For this reason, identifying and characterizing the out-of-school population is one of the central concepts of SDG4 monitoring. Pre-primary education and the eleven or twelve years of primary and secondary education, constitute the minimum basis in the Education 2030 Agenda on which actions must be developed to provide children and adolescents with the necessary knowledge, skills and values that will enable them to live with dignity, build their own lives and contribute to their societies. For this reason, monitoring access to education is a key element in understanding the scope of the pandemic and its most detrimental effects on the educational opportunities of the population.

Reporting on students' engagement with the teaching proposals during the period in which in-person classes were suspended is a monitoring objective as important as it is complex. Many children in the region were excluded from education because they did not have the conditions for it. For those who have managed to maintain continuity, in many cases it has not been possible to develop in a regular and sustained manner over time. By 2021, about 79% of countries in the region claimed that remote learning proposals had not reached all primary and secondary students, and about 15% indicated that at least one in four had been excluded (UNESCO OREALC & UNICEF, 2022). Remote education was not effective for all students because of the social inequalities that the region was already experiencing before the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic: conditions of poverty and extreme poverty for many families, lack of technological devices and connectivity (digital divide) and digital illiteracy, among other reasons. As described in **Box 1**, this scenario is aggravated by the fact that Latin America and the Caribbean was one of the regions with the most weeks of suspended in-person classes.

The available data on access that are usable for regional monitoring are based on attendance rates. This information provides an initial approximation of the degree to which the child and teen population dropped out or disengaged from school during the pandemic, although it should be considered that they are limited given the complexity of the phenomenon, and should be interpreted with caution, since the fact that the population remained enrolled in a pandemic and remote education environment does not necessarily imply sustained continuity of learning activities (Abizanda et al., 2022).

Pre-primary education was the most affected by the increase in educational exclusion during the pandemic.

For the diagnosis of access to education, **Figure 2.1** presents the population's attendance rates for the age ranges corresponding to different educational programmes, for the group of countries with information through 2022.[4]

All educational levels show a decline in attendance rates in 2020, with varying degrees of intensity. The steepest drop is in pre-primary education, which declines by 7 points. In primary and lower and upper secondary education, this drop is around 2 percentage points. For the age range of 0 to 2 years, the decrease is close to one percentage point.

A recent ECLAC document on dropout, which delves into the decline in pre-primary education, reports that in the Caribbean the percentage of the population attending the last year of pre-primary education fell by almost 17 percentage points in 2022 compared to 2019, using estimates based on administrative data (ECLAC, 2023b).

For primary and secondary education, the drop in attendance represents a first look at school dropout, associated with a complete disengagement from the educational system by those who previously attended. On the other hand, in the earlier educational programmes (ECED and early childhood),[5] which is

4 This document uses two strategies to present regional estimates: in some cases, regional estimates of the indicators are available, in which case the title of the figure indicates «Latin America and the Caribbean». When these estimates are not available, the document provides simple averages for countries with available data for the period. In this second case, the title of the figure indicates «Countries of Latin America and the Caribbean». Their interpretation requires a consideration of the corresponding safeguards, since the simple averages do not take into account the different sizes of countries according to their population. Likewise, in cases where data is missing for specific years, the missing data in the intermediate years is replaced with the values resulting from a simple linear projection based on the trends between the closest data available before and after the missing year.

5 According to the International Standard Classification of Education, educational programmes prior to primary education are

Box 1

Suspension of in-person classes during the COVID-19 pandemic

The rapid spread of the coronavirus during 2020 around the world, and its manifestation in the COVID-19 pandemic, triggered the decision by most national governments to suspend classroom teaching on a massive scale.

This was the largest simultaneous global disruption of educational services in recent history, affecting more than 90 % of the world's student population, from pre-primary to higher education. The pandemic has brought with it various consequences and costs, many of which are still difficult to estimate, especially for the most marginalized and vulnerable populations.

The greatest challenges imposed by the pandemic have been concentrated in the 2020-2021 period. After an initial massive shutdown of schools, countries have addressed different strategies to return to in-person education. These have ranged from total return, partial return, alternating between shutdowns and returns, in all cases accompanied by strict health protocols and policies to support students and teachers. The situation has varied between countries and regions depending on a wide range of factors, such as levels of virus spread, progress in vaccination, school infrastructure conditions, regional and national characteristics, and national circumstances, among others.

The data in Table 2.1 provide an estimate of the amount of time that in-person classes were suspended. Latin America and the Caribbean is the region with the second highest number of weeks of school closures, according to country averages, surpassed only by South and West Asia. The period in which education was completely remote averaged 29 weeks, followed by another 33 weeks with a prevalence of partially open schools.

This category of "partially open" schools covers a wide spectrum of situations: some were open only in certain regions, or only for certain grade levels or age groups, or with reduced in-person class time. To further understand the scope of the pandemic in these settings, UNESCO estimated how many students were affected in each country when only some schools remained open.*

In Latin America and the Caribbean, the impact was very high from the beginning of the pandemic. By May 2020, 99 % of primary and secondary school students did not have access to in-person classes, while this figure reached 53 % around the world.

* Information obtained from UNESCO's partial school closure monitoring database: «Partial school closures dashboard», UNESCO COVID-19 Education Response, available at https://on.unesco.org/3NpnhKm.

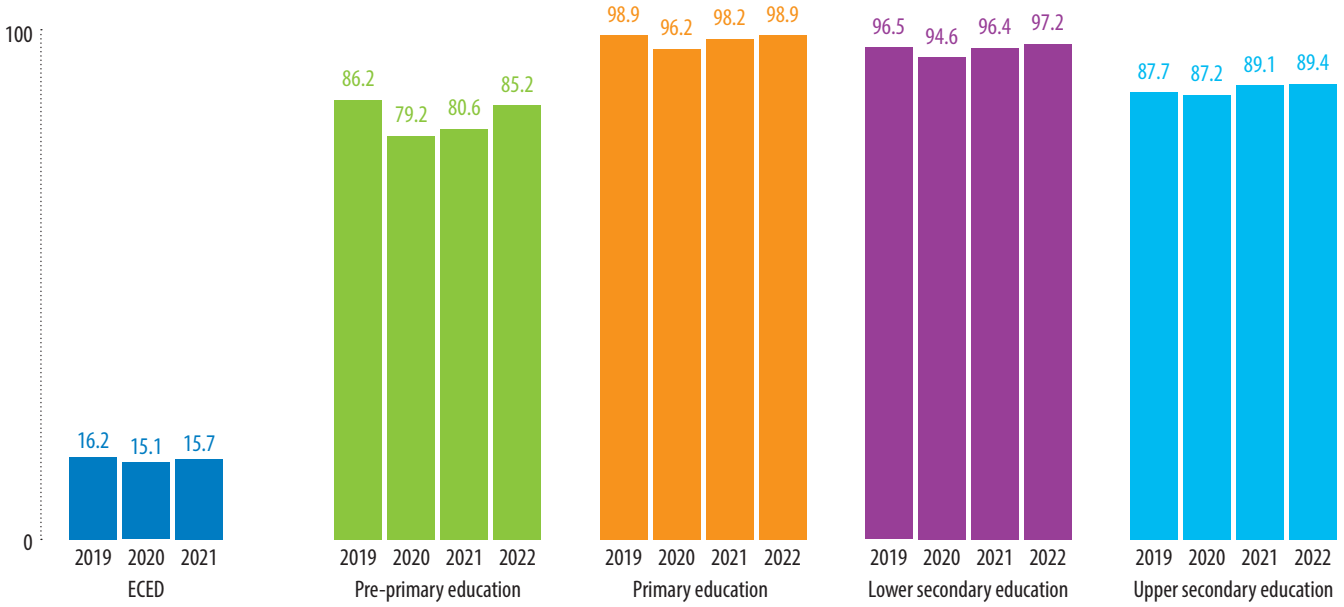
Table 2.1. Average number of weeks with schools closed or partially open (in weeks). SDG4 monitoring regions. 2020-2022.

Regions	2020	2021	2022	Total
Latin America and the Caribbean	27	30	4	62
Arab States	26	19	3	48
Central and Eastern Europe	20	16	1	37
Central Asia	18	9	2	29
East Asia and the Pacific	14	15	5	34
North America and Western Europe	14	12	0	26
South and West Asia	32	33	6	71
Sub-Saharan Africa	22	9	0	32
Total	**21**	**17**	**2**	**41**

Data source: UNESCO school closure mapping. Available at https://on.unesco.org/41i40QB (accessed on October 10, 2023)

This is equivalent to nearly 125 million children and adolescents who did not have in-person education. By June 2021, half of the region's students had not yet returned to in-person or hybrid education, well above the global average of 25 % of affected students. By early 2022, full in-person education was resumed in practically all countries.

Figure 2.1. Total net attendance rate, by educational level (in percentages). Countries of Latin America and the Caribbean. 2019-2022.



Note: ECED: Early childhood educational development programmes, which correspond to the age group from 0 to 2 years.

For pre-primary education, the net attendance rate is used for the population one and two years younger than the starting age of primary school.

Simple ECED averages are based on data from Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, Cuba, Dominica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Peru and St. Lucia. Pre-primary averages come from data in Argentina, Chile, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Mexico, Panama, Peru, the Plurinational State of Bolivia and Uruguay. Primary and secondary school averages use data from Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, the Plurinational State of Bolivia and Uruguay. Missing data for some countries in this series were replaced by linear projections of data from adjacent years. The 2019 data are from 2017 for Chile and 2018 for Mexico. Data for 2022 are from 2021 for the Plurinational State of Bolivia.

Data source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC). Household Surveys Databank.

when children have their first experience with access to formal education, this drop in rates represents the postponement of entry into the educational system: families whose children started school at 3, 4 or 5 years old before the pandemic, in 2020 and 2021 postponed their entry to the following year.

If this drop in attendance, based on some countries in the region, were projected to the total school-age population, it would be equivalent to approximately 2.4 million children and adolescents dropping out or postponing school entry.[6] These would add to the total population already out of school based on previous exclusion levels.

By 2021, attendance rates show a recovery of pre-pandemic levels in primary and secondary education.

called «early childhood education», which is equivalent to ISCED 0, and cover the age from zero to the age prior to the theoretical start of primary school. This educational programmes is subdivided into two stages: the «early childhood educational development» (ECED) programmes, which are equivalent to ISCED 01 and are aimed at the population from zero to 2 years old; and the « pre-primary education» programmes, which are equivalent to ISCED 02 and are aimed at the population from 3 years of age to the age that children start primary education (UIS, 2013).

6 This approximation is based on a simulation and should not be considered as precise data. It was prepared by estimating a drop in school attendance in each country of the region of a similar magnitude to that observed in the average, applied to the total school-age population for each educational level.

On the other hand, levels of pre-primary and ECED remain low, which represents greater challenges for children's access to education at these ages. This may be associated with the specific complexity of bringing learning proposals to the early childhood education in the context of connecting remotely.

These figures should be read in consideration of the fact that pre-primary education is not compulsory in many countries and that there is still low coverage in the region, debts that are of concern considering the relevance of this stage in the learning and development process. The lack of schooling in pre-primary education is of concern not only because of the unequal learning and socioemotional development opportunities it represents for many children in the region, but also because of the impact it has on future schooling. There is a strong relationship between the number of years of accumulated pre-primary education and learning achievement, and the probability of completing primary and secondary education.

As for primary and secondary education, although the decline in attendance seems to be concentrated in 2020, the pathways of these children and adolescents may be affected in the future by this interruption, even if the previous attendance levels are recovered. We can anticipate that in the coming years they will face more challenges in their educational pathways, which are expressed in a higher risk of dropout and low learning achievement. They require prioritized follow-up to intervene and strengthen their learning experience and pathways.

Although there was a rapid recovery in attendance levels, the magnitude of the decline is unknown, and its effects will last for several years.

The use of internationally comparable data to characterize schooling levels in 2020 and 2021 presents some limitations in reporting effective access to education during the period of suspension of in-person classes.[7] Some countries have made progress through surveys to monitor the continuity of learning in remote formats. ECLAC estimates that at least 23 of the 33 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean published national reports with dropout estimates, but they are not comparable to each other and therefore are not suitable for regional monitoring of access to education (ECLAC, 2023b). Some of these studies focused on estimating the intensity of educational engagement, generally considering three elements: the regularity of teaching proposals, the medium used for their dissemination, and the frequency and intensity of student participation in them.[8]

Some simulations and projections have also been developed to estimate the magnitude of school dropout (UNESCO, 2020a; IDB, 2020), which have been useful but do not constitute empirical evidence. Some publications even point to a certain divergence between these projections and the magnitude of the observed decline (Abizanda et al., 2022; ECLAC, 2023b).

It is possible that the real impact of the pandemic on a regional level in terms of educational engagement remains unknown, given that the tools that countries have used to gather information have proven to be limited for monitoring during the remote teaching period (UNESCO OREALC and UNESCO IIEP, 2021).

In 2022, when all countries in the region were returning to full in-person classes, attendance rates at all levels of education reached values similar to -and even higher than- pre-pandemic levels. Given that the data are directly comparable with 2019, since both years involved in-person education, this information allows us to affirm that the reopening of schools has succeeded in schooling the entire population at the same levels that were achieved in the years prior to the pandemic.

7 The measurement of the school attendance population, according to internationally comparable methodologies, is based on attendance rates, and the data for these are obtained from household surveys. These surveys ask whether children and adolescents attended school during a given period of time -usually at the time of the survey-. There is an implicit idea of physical presence in this question about attendance -in other words, attending school implies regular physical attendance at a school institution-. However, this question was not adapted to remote teaching contexts, where teaching and learning had to be separated from the co-presence of bodies and the occupation of a shared physical place (Dussel, 2020).

8 Based on conceptual frameworks similar to that of «educational engagement», these studies sought to characterize and classify the different scenarios under which different modes and frequencies of contact between students and teachers were deployed for learning purposes, framed in the diversity of technological media and formats that were used as support. Although each survey had its own design, in general the variables considered were the existence of engagement with teaching proposals, the media used and the average time children spent at school. Some of these studies were: #ENCOVID19Infancia in Mexico (UNICEF, 2020b), RECOVR Survey in Colombia (Gobierno de Colombia & IPA, 2020), UNICEF Telephone Survey in Panama (UNICEF, 2020a), Red ACTÚA in Dominican Republic (Red ACTÚA, 2020) and UNICEF Argentina Survey (UNICEF, 2022).

While the recovery to pre-pandemic attendance levels is a positive sign, it is also important to note that in these three years, had the pandemic not occurred, education systems could have expanded even further, considering the previous growth rate observed. In this sense, the years of suspension of in-person classes have also resulted in a postponement of progress in the region.

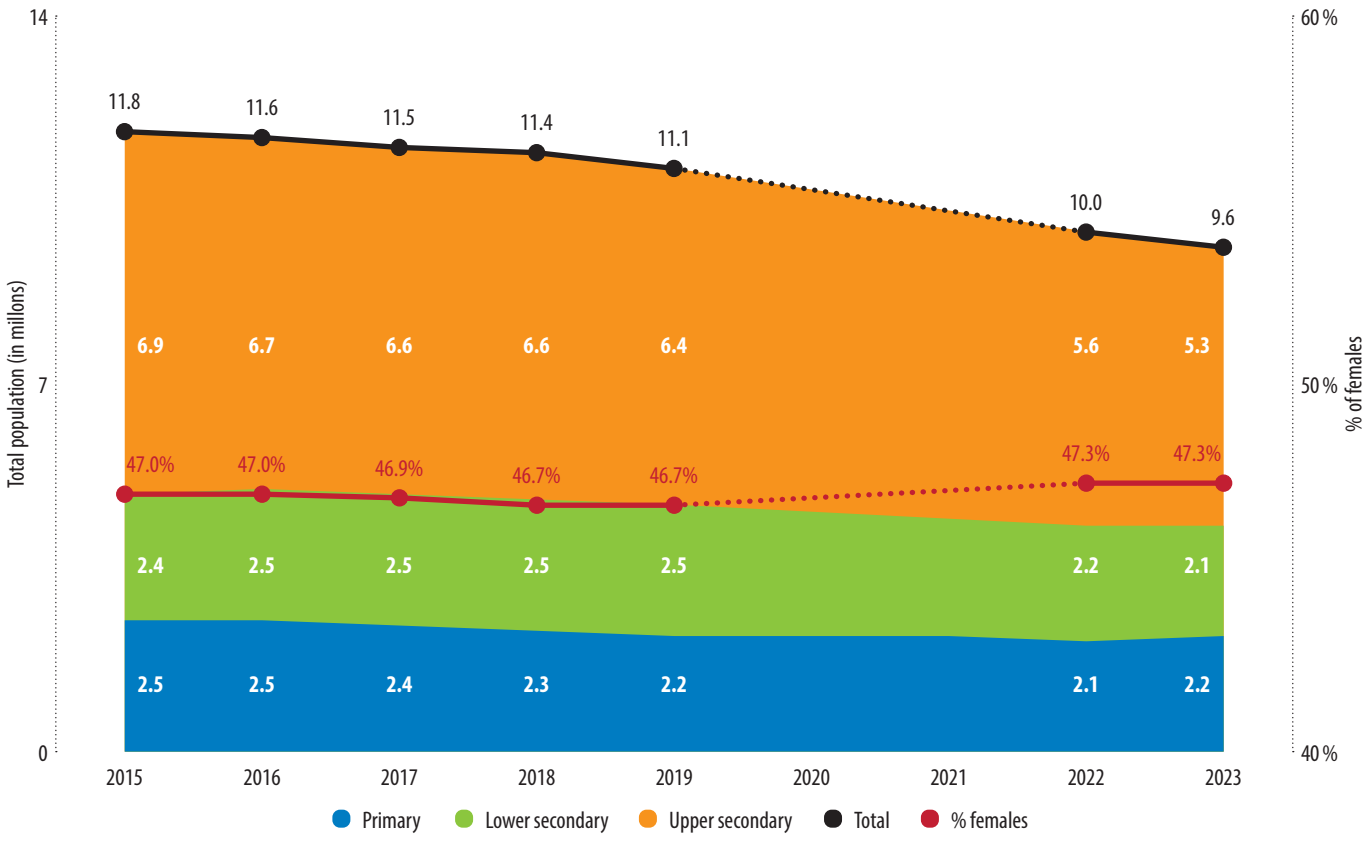
The out-of-school population shows a downward trend, which is sustained in the years following the pandemic. The countries' efforts to increase coverage and changes in demographic dynamics have contributed to this.

Taking into account the scenario of exclusion analyzed and the questions raised -albeit unresolved- regarding the continuity of learning during the suspension of in-person classes, the question that arises is to what extent the child and teen population has managed to return to school after the pandemic. In 2022, the education systems in the region already had full in-person operations, and here lies the relevance of monitoring whether everyone has managed to return to school or whether the out-of-school population has increased.

In 2015, the year SDG4 was adopted, it was estimated that nearly 11.8 million children and adolescents in Latin America and the Caribbean were out of school. Of these, 47 % were women, reflecting greater exclusion and dropout levels in the male population. Six out of ten out-of-school children and adolescents were of upper secondary school age (6.9 million).

Figure 2.2 depicts how the total out-of-school population progressively decreases over the period (omitting data for 2020 and 2021 for methodological reasons). By 2023, the out-of-school population decreased significantly to 9.6 million. In other words, in those eight years the total out-of-school population has reduced by 2.2 million. This trend shows that

Figure 2.2. Out-of-school children and adolescents by educational level, and percentage of females (in millions). Latin America and the Caribbean. 2015-2023.



Note: The percentage of females represents the participation of females in relation to the total number of children and adolescents out of school. Although the estimates published by UNESCO present data for 2020 and 2021, the methodology implemented does not consider the incidence of context-specific factors of the pandemic in the measurement of the out-of-school population. Therefore, the research team decided not to represent the estimates for those years.
Data source: Global Education Monitoring Report (GEMR) and UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS); Visualizing Indicators of Education for the World (VIEW), available at https://education-estimates.org/ (accessed on October 10, 2023).

education systems have been able to recover quickly from the effects of the pandemic, at least in terms of student re-entry.

The decrease in the out-of-school population has been much steeper in the upper secondary education programmes, which shows a greater dynamism in this educational level for dropout reduction: estimates show that in 2023 there are 5.3 million adolescents in these ages who do not attend school.

In the case of primary and lower secondary education, educational exclusion was reduced at a much slower rate, to the point of stagnation (UNESCO, UNICEF & ECLAC, 2022). In 2023, an estimated 4.3 million primary and lower secondary school children are out of school, while this number was 4.9 million in 2015: the region has barely managed to incorporate about 600,000 children in eight years. These data reveal that, despite the progress made in education, the universalization of primary education is still a pending issue. This difficulty represents the limits of education policies in reaching the most excluded populations, such as children with disabilities, inhabitants of remote rural areas and members of poorer households. They make up the most significant core of educational exclusion, the greatest debts of educational systems to include the entire population without leaving anyone behind.

There are two main factors that explain this progressive and accelerated decrease in the out-of-school population: on the one hand, countries have made progress in increasing opportunities for access and permanence. However, the slow rate of growth in attendance rates does not adequately explain this decline. There is a second factor that must be considered, and which has implications for the projection of the SDG4 targets to 2030: there are fewer and fewer children in the region. Due to a drop in birth rates, the total number of births is decreasing year by year. As population cohorts shrink, there are also fewer children out of school, as described in **Box 2**. But as a consequence, the total school enroled population is also reduced. It is estimated that about 40 % of the reduction in the out-of-school population is explained by this drop in the total population.[9]

9 This estimate is obtained by calculating the difference between the observed values of the decrease in the out-of-school population in relation to a hypothetical scenario that applies the improvement in coverage rates for the same period, keeping the total population of the base year constant.

Box 2

Demographic trends in the region, an opportunity for educational planning

One of the main functions of educational planning is the ability to anticipate future scenarios. This makes it possible to anticipate needs and act in time so that they can be resolved in a timely manner. One of the usual central concepts in planning in countries is to estimate the demand for access to educational services, especially at the ages when everyone is expected to be in school.

Ministries of Education must provide adequate resources and conditions for all children and adolescents to access and complete early childhood, primary and secondary education. In compliance with this, a key exercise is to understand the population dynamics. Universalization goals imply that the entire population in certain age ranges be in school, so the size of the population in those age ranges is the potential demand to be covered by the educational supply.

Latin America and the Caribbean are experiencing unprecedented population dynamics, which has important implications for planning current and future educational demand: accelerated changes in the reproductive dynamics of the population have led to a decrease in the birth rate, and subsequently there are fewer and fewer births. What are the implications for the region? That it is possible to anticipate a decrease in enrollment in the coming years.

According to **Table 2.2**, in 2015, an estimated 63.9 million children aged 6 to 11 years - the age corresponding to primary education in most countries - inhabited the region. By 2030, this number is estimated to decrease to 57.5 million. In other words, for this age range alone, the population will have reduced by 6.3 million. This magnitude is equivalent to one in ten children in 2015. Therefore, it is possible to anticipate that enrollment will reduce by similar amounts.

Five-year data show that this decline has been manifesting itself for a few years now and is expected

Table 2.2. Projected population aged 6 to 11 years (in millions), and five-year relative variation (in percentages). 2015, 2020, 2025 and 2030. Latin America and the Caribbean

Years	Population age 6 to 11 (in millons)		Differences	
	Year T	Year T+5	Total (in millons)	% over year T
2015 to 2020	63.9	63.0	−0.9	−1.4%
2020 to 2025	63.0	61.3	−1.7	−2.7%
2025 to 2030	61.3	57.5	−3.8	−9.9%
2015 to 2030	63.9	57.5	−6.3	−9.9%

Data source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC). CEPALSTAT Statistical Databases and Publications, available at https://on.unesco.org/3yUvboL.

to accelerate: between 2015 and 2020 the population decreased by 0.9 million (about 1.4 % compared to 2015), and between 2025 and 2030 there will be an estimated 3.8 million fewer, a reduction of 6.1 %.

These trends have a set of implications in the region that are already being anticipated and will be farther reaching in the coming years: on the one hand, it is one of the factors that explain the reduction in the out-of-school population observed in recent years. On the other hand, it is also associated with the drop in enrollment: for a set of thirty countries in the region, enrollment of 6 to 11 year-olds fell by 2.8 million between 2010 and 2022, about 2.8 % compared to 2010.*

We can therefore anticipate that in the coming years demand for primary and secondary education will reduce in many countries of the region, in some cases at an accelerated rate. This scenario may be an opportunity to reorganize the supply of education and allocate available resources to strengthen education for the population that attends school and those who have yet to enroll, with strategies such as extending the school day, reducing the average classroom size, increasing the number of teachers per school and improving teachers' salaries, to mention some of the more structural variables of educational investment.

Along with these trends, it is also important to recognize that in recent years the migratory flow of population between countries in the region has intensified, with an increase in the proportion of school-aged migrants (International Commission on the Futures of Education, 2021). Immigration flow increased from 9.4 million in 2015 to 14.8 million in 2020.† Countries that are currently receiving international migrant populations should incorporate these trends into their scenarios and plan the education of children and adolescents in situations of mobility accordingly, since the reduction of population cohorts may be offset -and even surpassed- by the entry of children from other countries, with the aggravating factor of the potential situation of vulnerability of the population in situations of mobility.

This trend toward demographic decline is an opportunity for countries but can become problematic if not taken into account in planning. While this scenario will be a certainty in the coming years, ministries of education will have to prepare their own national diagnoses and plan strategies to capitalize on it.

* Calculations based on data from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (updated September 2023).

† Information obtained from the international migrant stock database of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs: «International migrant stock», United Nations Population Division, available at https://on.unesco.org/48fJN04.

The expansion rate of education systems is insufficient: one out of every three young people still does not finish upper secondary education.

To monitor compliance with the SDG4 targets related to guaranteeing at least eleven or twelve years of primary and secondary education, it is not enough to analyze coverage. The fact that the vast majority of children and adolescents of primary and secondary school age are in school does not mean that they complete their education. The relationship between the age of students and the level they attend is not linear: the high percentage of students falling behind in the region is a sign that many of them attend school at grades or levels below their age.

For this reason, we must complement the diagnosis with an analysis of the completion rate by educational level, which characterizes the extent to which countries are able to ensure that their entire child and teen population completes primary and secondary education. This indicator makes it possible to answer the question of how many of them manage to complete the educational levels considered as the minimum number of years of schooling by SDG4.[10]

Figure 2.3 shows that 93 out of every 100 children in the region complete primary education, while 7 never enter the level or drop out before completing it. This ratio is 95 out of 100 for women and 92 for men.

In lower secondary school, the proportion drops to 84 out of every 100 adolescents. Of the 16 who do not finish, considering the 7 who did not complete primary school, this would imply that about 9 out of every 100 are in a position to start lower secondary education, but do not enter or drop out before completing it. Again, differences are observed, with males showing greater exposure to situations of exclusion.

Completion of upper secondary education is the minimum threshold of years of education committed to in the Incheon Declaration and one of the SDG4 targets. Currently, nearly one out of every three adolescents (36 %) does not reach this educational programmes. This proportion increases to 40 % in the case of males. Based on the difference between lower and upper secondary education rates, we can estimate that about 20 out of every 100 adolescents complete lower secondary education, but do not start upper secondary education or drop out during the transition to this level. This indicates that the likelihood of dropping out of school increases as they move through educational levels.

The trends in educational level completion in recent years show a sustained growth despite the pandemic years: between 2020 and 2022 the percentage of students completing lower and upper secondary education grew by 1.3 percentage points, and primary education completion grew by 0.6.[11] This is because it is the result of a process that accumulates several years of educational pathways for children and young people. Therefore, it responds to the structural trends of education systems and is not prone to sudden changes in short periods of time.

These rates of increase are markedly low at all three levels of education. Medium-term trends reveal that the degree of progress toward inclusion goals has been slowing down. This can be explained by two combined trends. On the one hand, the pandemic context has contributed to this slowdown: the difficulties in guaranteeing continuity in learning and the prolonged closure of schools, among other factors, limit the possibilities for a timely transition and completion of educational levels. On the other hand, the region was already showing signs of deceleration in the five-year period prior to the pandemic (UNESCO, UNICEF & ECLAC, 2022). If countries fail to reverse this trend, primary and secondary education completion levels are likely to stagnate in the coming years.

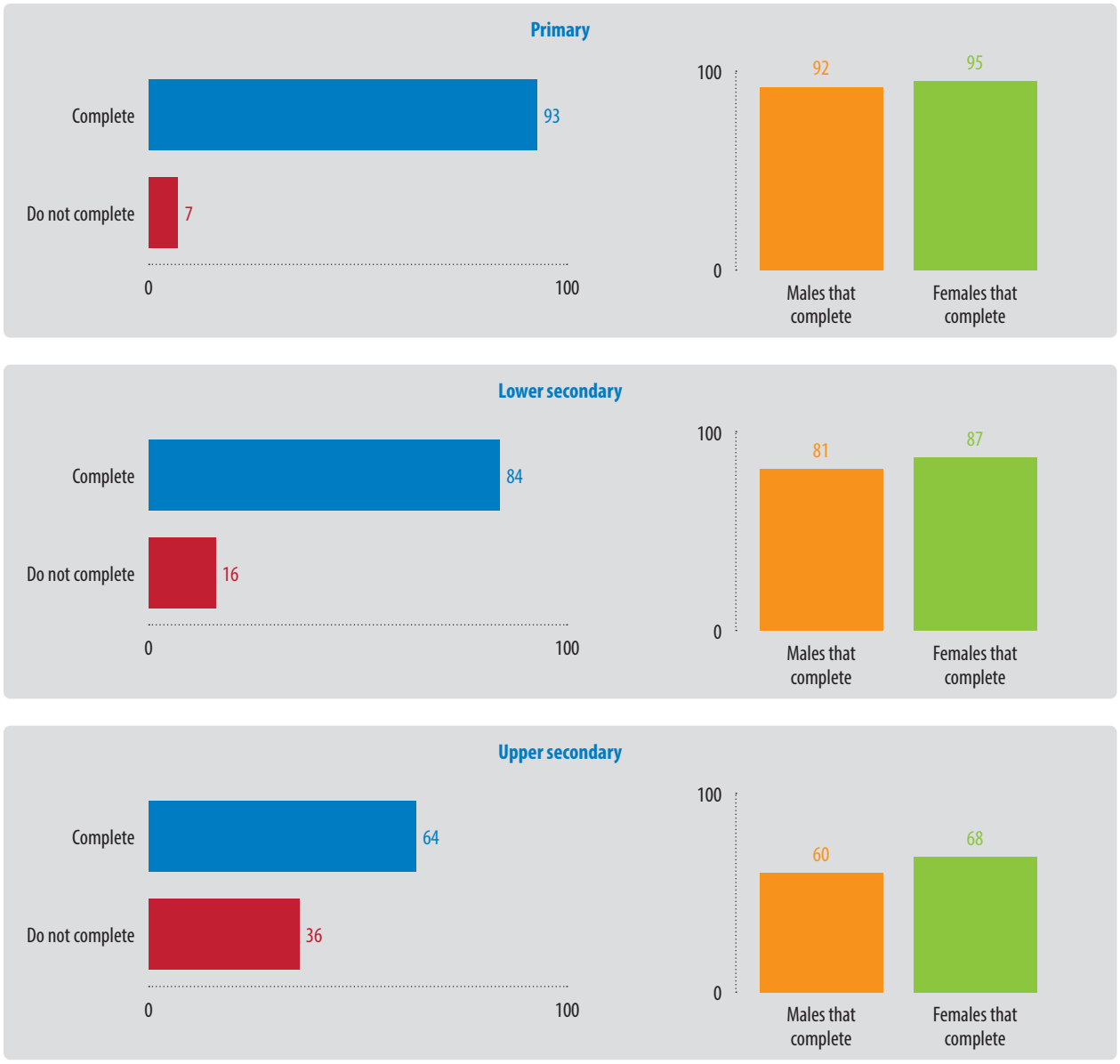
During the pandemic, countries have decreased their repetition rates as a consequence of the implementation of flexible promotion regimes. However, the subsequent years have seen a return to previous levels.

Along with access to and completion of primary and secondary education, the monitoring of educational trends includes an analysis of student pathways. This dimension focuses on identifying the difficulties that arise in the transition through educational levels and

10 The completion rate estimates the percentage of the population that completes a given educational level, considering an age range between 3 to 5 years above the theoretical age of completion for the level. For example, if the expected age of completion of upper secondary education is 17, the rate represents the percentage of the population aged 20 to 22 who have completed upper secondary education. It thereby includes those who complete the level with some degree of delay (UIS, 2021).

11 Information obtained from the UIS database, available at https://on.unesco.org/3vnhYT5 (updated September 2023).

Figure 2.3. Completion rate by educational level, total and by sex (in percentages). Latin America and the Caribbean. 2022.



Data source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS). UIS database, available at https://on.unesco.org/3vnhYT5 (accessed on October 10, 2023).

allows us to account for inefficiency in the educational systems. The accumulation of difficulties in the school pathway is a frequently used tool for the early detection of exclusion (UIS, 2012).

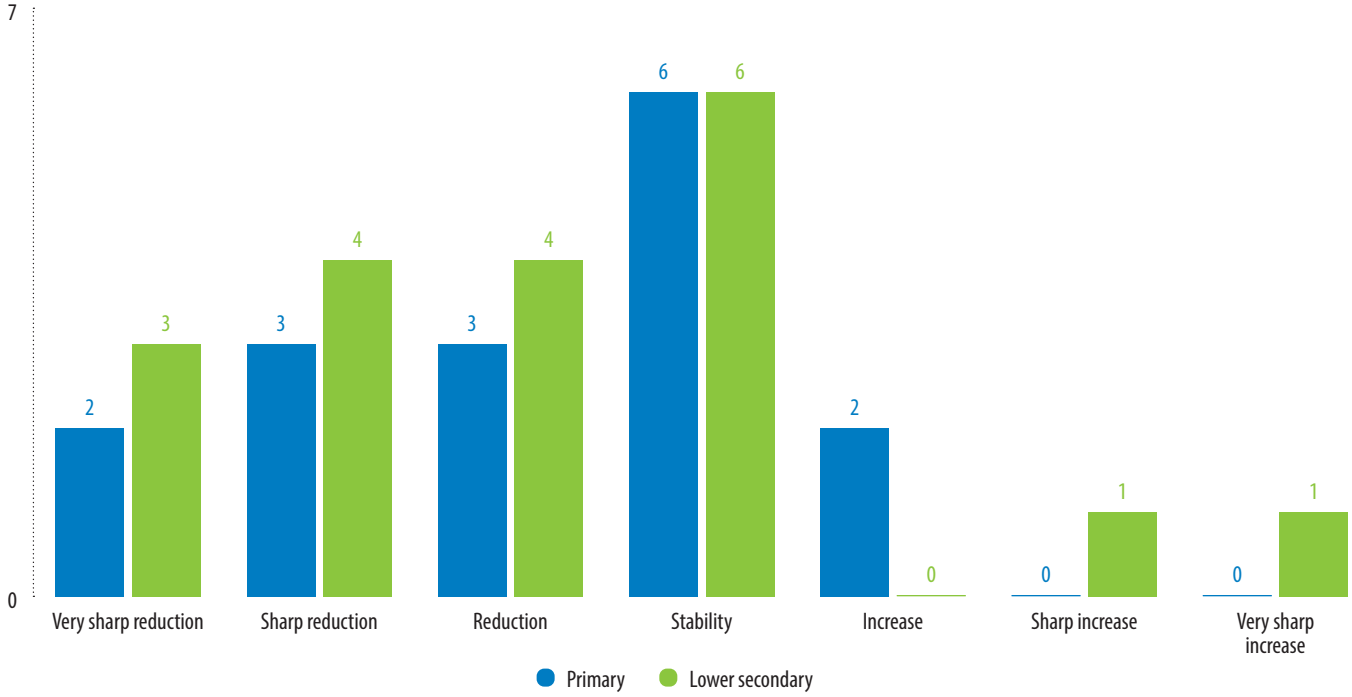
The containment strategies implemented during the pandemic had an impact on pathway indicators, as many countries promoted more favorable conditions for grade promotion than in previous years. Thus, as shown in **Figure 2.4**, in some cases the repetition rate reduced significantly.

Most of the countries reduced grade repetition, in some cases to a sharp or very sharp degree, which shows the effect of the implementation of policies to make pathways more flexible. The combined effect is expressed in a decrease in percentages: 2020 registers an average of 2.4 % of primary school students and 3.9 % of secondary school students repeating a grade. In the year prior to the pandemic, these percentages were 3.9 % and 5.4 %, respectively.[12]

Of the countries analyzed, six showed no changes in primary education and six in secondary education. In four cases, an increase in repetition was observed, one of

12 Simple average of countries. Information obtained from the UIS database, available at https://on.unesco.org/3vnhYT5 (updated September 2023).

Figure 2.4. Number of countries by magnitude of observed change in grade repetition between 2019 and 2020, by educational level (in percentage points). Primary and lower secondary.



Note: "Stability" is considered when the difference between 2019 and 2020 is less than one percentage point. A "reduction" or "increase" is considered when the difference is between 1 point and 2 points; a "sharp" increase or reduction when the difference is between 2 points and 4 points; and it is "very sharp" when it is 4 points or more.

Simple averages for primary education are based on data from Argentina, Barbados, Belize, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Peru, Suriname and Uruguay. Data from the British Virgin Islands, Panama, and Trinidad and Tobago are included for lower secondary. In Peru and Uruguay, 2018 lower secondary education data were used for 2019, and in Peru, 2017 primary education data were used for 2019.

Data source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS). UIS database, available at https://on.unesco.org/3vnhYT5 (accessed on October 10, 2023).

them of very sharp magnitude. In this group, the strategy of repeating grades has been adopted to address learning difficulties associated with the suspension of in-person attendance and the pandemic context. International studies report a strong relationship between grade repetition and the future probability of dropping out early or obtaining low learning outcomes (UNESCO OREALC & LLECE, 2021). Therefore, we can presume that these strategies imply an increase in the probability of further exclusion in the future.

The most updated data, available only for eight countries, reveal that the percentage of repeaters in the following year returns to values similar to those of the years prior to the pandemic,[13] which would provide preliminary indications that this phenomenon of flexible pathways has been confined to the pandemic context.

Student learning

Promoting quality learning is a central goal of SDG4. Only through comprehensive and ambitious learning achievements is it possible for education to fulfill its central purposes, as proposed by the Incheon Declaration: to promote human development based on a perspective of human rights and dignity, social justice, inclusion, protection, cultural, linguistic and ethnic diversity, promoting peace, tolerance, human fulfillment and sustainable development, achieving full employment and eradicating poverty (UNESCO, 2016). The monitoring of learning in the SDG4 agenda, although it covers different dimensions,[14] has a

13 Simple average of countries. Information obtained from the UIS database, available at https://on.unesco.org/3vnhYT5 (updated September 2023). Averages are based on data from Barbados, Belize, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Guatemala, Honduras and Peru.

14 In addition to fundamental learning in reading and mathematics, the SDG4 monitoring framework includes other learning indicators, which are not characterized due to the lack of information from the countries that would provide a regional approach. These are the following: SDG 4.4.2, "Percentage of youth/adults who have achieved at least a minimum level of proficiency in digital literacy skills"; SDG 4.6.1, "Proportion of population in a given age group achieving at least a fixed level of proficiency in functional (a) literacy

priority focus on fundamental learning in reading and mathematics in primary and secondary education, which are addressed in this section.

A concern for the quality of learning is a central theme in the educational agenda in Latin America and the Caribbean. Data prior to the emergence of the pandemic already outlined a worrisome scenario. Student performance in international assessments reaches low learning achievements, with a pronounced stagnation in proficiency levels with respect to previous years and a marked inequality (UNESCO, UNICEF & ECLAC, 2022).

The results of the Regional Comparative and Explanatory Regional Study (ERCE) assessments for primary school are alarming: just over half of third grade students (55.7 % in reading, 52.3 % in mathematics) reached minimum proficiency levels in 2019, as defined by SDG4. These results dropped to 31.2 % in reading and 17.4 % in mathematics for sixth grade. This difference between grades reveals a very serious problem in the progression of learning throughout the level. The results, moreover, do not show statistically significant improvements in relation to the assessment implemented in 2013 (UNESCO OREALC, 2021b).

In secondary education, PISA results show similar trends. Of the ten participating countries in the region in 2018, the average showed that 49 % of 15-year-old students reached minimum proficiency levels in reading and 34.7 % in mathematics. Compared to 2015, the results of the countries as a whole did not show significant variations (UNESCO, UNICEF & ECLAC, 2022).

The impacts on learning caused by the suspension of in-person classes during 2020 and 2021 only add to this scenario. As analyzed in the previous section, a number of children and adolescents have discontinued their schooling. Among those who have remained engaged with school, this has been in a scenario of minimal interaction between students and teachers (Abizanda et al., 2022), in unequal and insufficient conditions for the continuity of learning. This discontinuity in educational activity affects the achievement of learning, both through the loss of knowledge already acquired and through knowledge that has not been attained, with projections of a sharp increase in the proportion of students below minimum proficiency levels (World Bank, UNICEF & UNESCO, 2022).

The information available shows a setback in learning and an increase in inequalities, with greater intensity in primary education.

At the time this report was written, there was still no updated information from regional ERCE assessments that would allow us to measure the impact of the pandemic on primary education. In the case of secondary education, the data published for PISA 2022 very close to the closing date of this document provide a first approximation of the impacts on secondary education only for the countries participating in this assessment in 2022 and 2018.

The results presented in **Figure 2.5** show that, for the twelve Latin American countries that participated in both applications,[15] the results have been on average similar in reading and lower in mathematics: in 2022, the percentage of students who reached minimum proficiency levels was 0.4 points higher than 2018 in reading, fell back 4 points in mathematics and improved 1.8 points in science.[16] This difference in mathematics is approximately equivalent to the learning acquired in a quarter of a school year. Within this average, there are heterogeneous situations: there are four countries that have worsened their performance with statistically significant differences in at least one area, and three others that have improved (OECD, 2023).

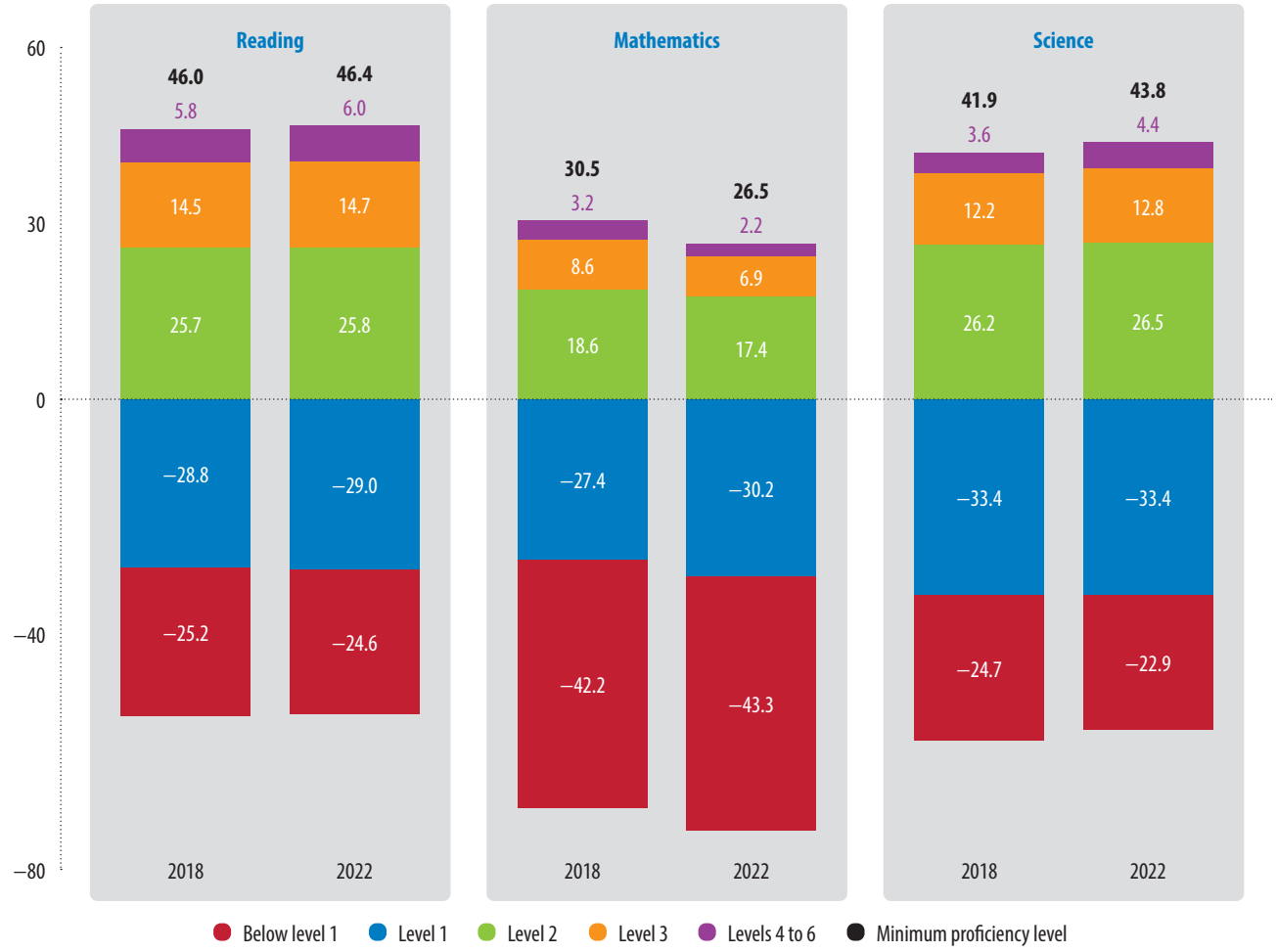
These changes show a clear contrast with those observed in the OECD average, which shows a greater decline (a drop of 3.6 points in reading and 7.1 points in mathematics in the percentage of students with minimum proficiency levels). In this regard, it is noteworthy that, in general, the countries with the

and (b) numeracy skills"; SDG 4.7.4, "Percentage of students in lower secondary education showing adequate understanding of issues relating to global citizenship and sustainability"; and SDG 4.7.5, "Percentage of students in lower secondary education showing proficiency in knowledge of environmental science and geoscience."

15 The Latin American and Caribbean countries that participated in PISA 2022 are: Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Jamaica, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Peru and Uruguay. Of these, El Salvador and Jamaica participated for the first time.

16 The global definition of minimum proficiency levels for SDG4 monitoring refers to the areas of reading and mathematics (ACER-GEMR, 2019). The PISA science results do not have a similar methodological framework, so there is no underlying disciplinary exercise to support the definition of a "minimum proficiency level". However, the publication of the PISA 2022 results decided to use the same level for science as for reading and mathematics, in order to report results more consistently. Science results are included in this analysis to broaden the outlook on the monitoring of learning.

Figure 2.5. Percentage of students at each PISA proficiency level in reading, mathematics and science, and percentage of students at the minimum proficiency level (in percentages). Countries of Latin America. 2018 and 2022.



Note: Simple averages are based on data from Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Peru and Uruguay.

Data source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS). UIS database, available at https://on.unesco.org/3vnhYT5 (accessed on October 10, 2023).

lowest PISA performances are those that have also regressed the least between 2018 and 2022. On the other hand, the application of PISA on a global level also shows that no direct relationship was identified between the number of school days with closed schools and the regression in the performance of countries in the assessment (OECD, 2023).

Thus, the scenario presented by the region for 2022 in terms of learning in lower secondary education, for the countries participating in PISA, is the persistence of low results, with only 45.0 % of students achieving minimum proficiency levels in reading, 26.6 % in mathematics and 42.6 % in science, levels that have not improved in the last ten years.

To expand on the limited availability of comparable regional information, a complementary approach to measure learning loss is the use of national and subregional assessments. While most countries had suspended or postponed standardized assessments in 2020 (UNESCO OREALC, 2021a), assessment policies were resumed as early as 2021.

To prepare a diagnosis, a number of assessments of countries in the region were selected -together with an assessment applied in Caribbean countries-, which are presented in **Figure 2.6**. This only considers major national assessments implemented in the 2020-2022 period that have an application in previous years with comparable results. Diagnostic assessments that are not comparable with previous years were excluded from the analysis, since they do not allow for the analysis of learning loss.

This intertemporal view of results should be approached with caution. The assessments are not comparable between countries, since they are designed with

Figure 2.6. National assessments selected for analysis, according to educational level, grade and year applied.

Country	Level	Assessment	Grade	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Argentina	Primary	Aprender	G6		●			●	●
	Upper secondary		G12			●			●
Brazil	Primary	Saeb	G2			●		●	
			G5			●		●	
	Lower secondary		G9			●		●	
	Upper secondary		G11			●		●	
Chile	Primary	SIMCE	G4		●				●
	Upper secondary		G10		●				●
Colombia	Upper secondary	SABER 11	G11			●	●	●	
Ecuador	Primary	Ser Estudiante	G3					●	●
								●	●
	Lower secondary		G9					●	●
	Upper secondary		G11					●	●
Peru	Primary	EM	G2			●			●
			G4			●			●
	Lower secondary	EVA 2021	G8			●		●	
		EM	G8			●			●
Uruguay	Primary	Aristas	G3	●			●		
			G6	●			●		
	Lower secondary		G9		●				●
Caribbean countries	Upper secondary	CSEC	G11			●		●	

● Year of application of the selected national assessments for analysis.

Source: Authors.

different criteria, adapted to the purpose of the evaluation in each national context, and use different scales of measurement, so that similar amounts may represent different magnitudes. The comparability of the assessments may also have been affected by the exceptional application conditions during the pandemic.[17] Finally, not all national assessments have the methodological standards required to be comparable over time.[18]

Figure 2.7 presents a summary of the changes observed in the last two assessments from each country for the selected set. These changes are represented in the measurement unit of the assessment.

17 Comparability is a property of assessments that requires complex technical development and is subject to a multiplicity of factors (Berman, Haertel & Pellegrino, 2020). Particularly in the pandemic context, there was a broad set of exceptional factors affecting the quality of the comparison of assessments implemented during that period, some of them very difficult to control. Among these, the main factors are changes in content and teaching modes, instructional time allocated to certain content, assessment administration conditions, student participation rates, and differences in student motivation (National Academy of Education, 2021).

18 The comparability of standardized assessments is a complex technical property, requiring sophisticated design definitions. In general, countries do not have public documents that specify all the information necessary to describe the design characteristics of this comparability of results (Rivas & Scasso, 2020).

Figure 2.7. Changes in the assessments performance implemented during the pandemic relative to previous applications (in measurement units of each assessment). Selected countries.

Note: Each graph represents the results in the measurement unit of the assessment corresponding to the country; therefore, the magnitudes are not comparable. We have tried to represent the vertical axis in an amplitude equivalent to half a standard deviation in the cases where it is defined by design. The measurement units per assessment are as follows. Argentina: percentage of satisfactory and advanced achievement; Brazil: average score (mean 250 in G5, ~190 in G5, ~290 in G11, standard deviation 50); Chile: average score (mean 250, standard deviation 50); Colombia: average score of those assessed in calendar A (scale of 0 to 100); Ecuador: average score (scale of 400 to 1,000); Peru: average score (mean 500, standard deviation 100); Uruguay: percentage of students in level 3 or higher; Caribbean countries: percentage of students accredited to continue to higher education.

Data source: Ministerio de Educación de la Nación Argentina (2023a, 2023b), Ministério da Educação (2020, 2022), Agencia de Calidad de la Educación (2023), ICFES (2021), INEVAL (2023a, 2023b, 2023c, 2023d), Oficina de Medición de la Calidad de los Aprendizajes (2022, 2023), INEEd (2021, 2023) and ECLAC (2022).

This systematization of trends in national assessments provides a first approach to the question of what has happened to learning during the pandemic. There has been an evident setback in student performance in the vast majority of countries, the magnitude of which has varied.

In general, results in primary education (between second and sixth grade) show greater signs of setback, although there are some exceptions, such as Chile or Ecuador, where the greatest decline is observed in secondary education. There seems to be no overlap in the areas that declined the most. In some countries there is evidence of a very large drop in reading scores (such as Ecuador, Brazil in grade 2 and Argentina in grade 6), and in other cases there has been a marked decline in mathematics (such as Chile, or Peru in grades 2 and 4).

It is difficult to determine the magnitude of this setback, since the assessments use different scales. In some cases they reach half a standard deviation -represented approximately by the height of the scale of each graph-, which implies a serious decline.[19] Even in some countries, no regression is observed, as in the case of Colombia in the Saber 11 test, and in Uruguay in the Aristas test for primary and secondary school. Also striking is the case of Argentina, where the Aprender test for sixth grade (primary school) showed a setback between 2018 and 2021, and a recovery to the 2018 results in 2022.

A common factor in most of the assessments analyzed is the increase in inequalities. A recurring element in both those that have shown a large regression and those that have remained almost unchanged is the widening of the gaps in results, with unfavorable trends for the most vulnerable populations.

In summary, the results of the national assessments indicate that in most of the countries there has been a setback in learning, the magnitude of which in some cases is worrisome, and, as a major warning sign, a more unequal distribution of learning. In contrast, the PISA 2022 results show a more stable scenario in relation to 2018, with a setback concentrated in mathematics and more accentuated only in some countries.

This heterogeneous scenario imposes the need to step away from linear readings and quick interpretations.

The results should be analyzed and interpreted based on the context of each country and the characteristics of each assessment. The publication of the results of the post-pandemic ERCE (2023) will make it possible to complement this diagnosis with rigorous and comparable information on the primary education programmes.

The challenges of equity in access to education

The central principles of SDG4 focus on inclusion and equity, i.e., ensuring conditions to provide equal opportunities for all and leave no one behind. The Incheon Declaration states in its seventh point:

> Inclusion and equity in and through education is the cornerstone of a transformative education agenda, and we therefore commit to addressing all forms of exclusion and marginalization, disparities and inequalities in access, participation and learning outcomes. No education target should be considered met unless met by all (UNESCO, 2016).

Accordingly, the fifth target of SDG4 proposes to:

> Eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples, and children in vulnerable situations (UNESCO, 2016).

For Latin America and the Caribbean, this prioritization highlights the need to focus on the educational situation of marginalized or vulnerable people. Before the crisis caused by the pandemic, this was the most unequal region in the world (UNESCO OREALC, SUMMA & UNESCO GEM, 2020). The first year of the pandemic saw an increase in social inequalities, measured in terms of income distribution and poverty (ECLAC, 2022). The most recent data show that in 2022 income inequality decreased to levels below those recorded before the onset of the pandemic (ECLAC, 2023c).

This worsening of inequalities in 2020 and 2021 was also seen in the educational sphere, where the most vulnerable populations were excluded from opportunities for continued engagement with educational proposals during school closures. This was compounded by the fact that the region accumulated the highest number of days with schools closed, compared to most regions (**Box 1**).

19 The note in **Figure 2.7** presents the standard deviations corresponding to the standardized scales of the assessments.

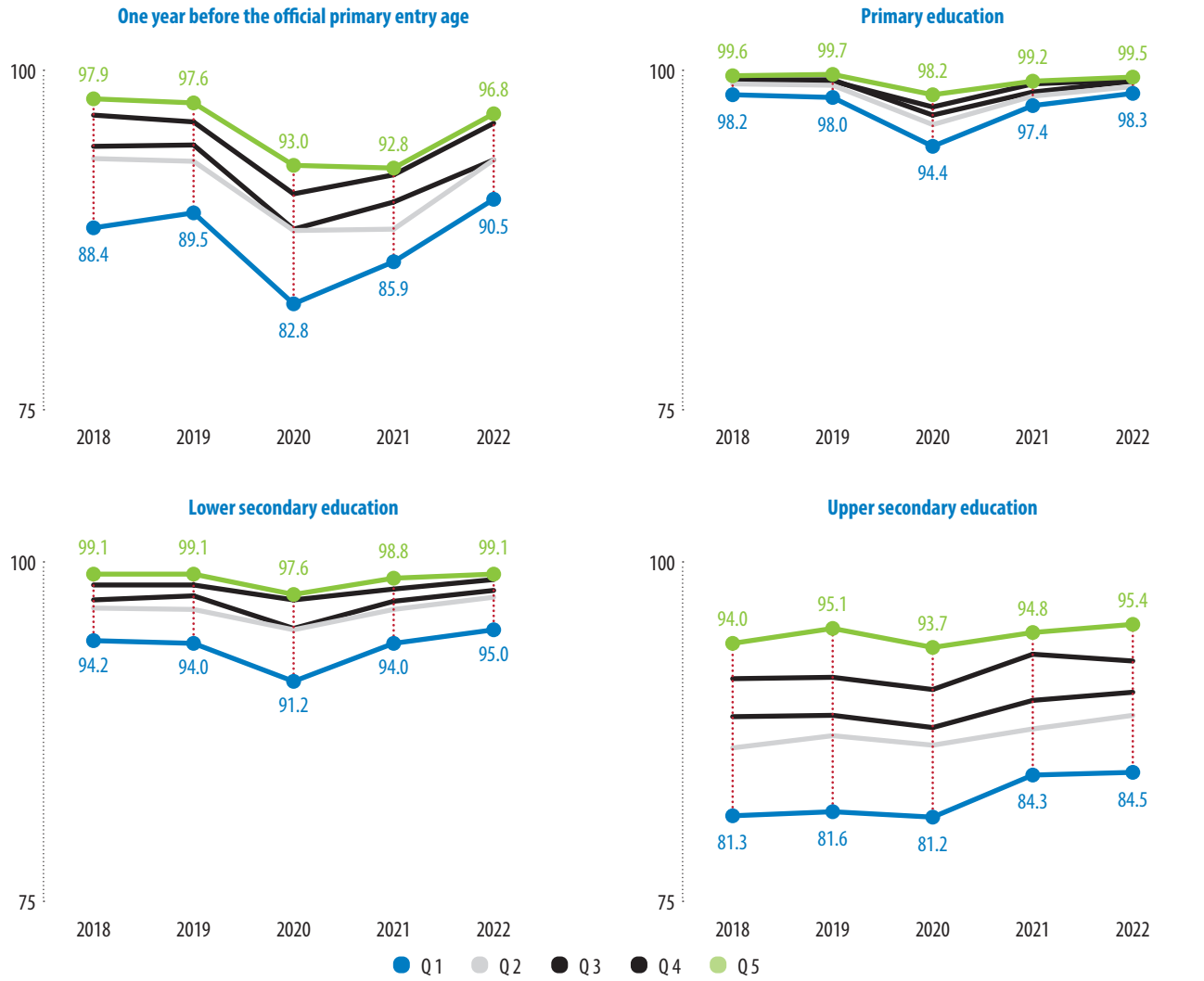
These aspects make it essential to incorporate a specific equity perspective into the monitoring of educational trends. To this end, we have analyzed the behavior of the gaps in the main educational indicators, focusing on women and the most vulnerable populations. Although there are limited information resources available to characterize certain groups (World Bank, UNICEF & UNESCO, 2022; UNESCO OREALC, SUMMA & UNESCO GEM, 2020; Vera, Scasso & Yáñez, 2022), it is possible to focus on some of those most affected by educational inequalities in the region.

To this end, we analyzed attendance rates by educational level, disaggregated based on variables that allow us to focus on gender equity and certain vulnerable populations. As mentioned in the section on access to and completion of early childhood, primary and secondary education, this indicator provides an initial approach to the phenomenon of dropout during the pandemic, but it has a limited scope in terms of explaining its complexity.

The poorest population has been the most affected by the increase in exclusion during the pandemic, with wider gaps in pre-primary and upper secondary education. The data show that progress is still insufficient for 2022.

Figure 2.8 characterizes the inequality gaps for the population from lower income households. The disaggregation of school attendance indicators by

Figure 2.8. Total net attendance rate by educational level, by household per capita income quintile (in percentages). Countries of Latin America and the Caribbean. 2018-2022.



Note: Simple averages are based on data from Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, the Plurinational State of Bolivia and Uruguay. Missing data for some countries in this series were replaced by linear projections of data from adjacent years. 2018 data are 2019 data for Argentina, Paraguay and Uruguay.

Data source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS). UIS database, available at https://on.unesco.org/3vnhYT5 (accessed on October 10, 2023); and Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC). Household Surveys Databank.

household per capita income quintile highlights the unequal opportunities for access to education, which in turn are a consequence of the mechanisms of social exclusion combined with the way in which education systems reproduce and magnify these inequalities.

The inequality gap associated with educational access opportunities for the lower-income population is represented by the distance in attendance rates between the lowest and highest quintile. The greatest inequities are observed in access to education one year before primary school enrollment and in upper secondary education.

In both primary and secondary education, the gaps did not show a reduction in the pre-pandemic years, at least not between 2018 and 2019. The regional SDG4-Education 2030 monitoring report, which covered a longer period of time, already reported a slowdown in the closure of gaps in the 2015-2019 period (UNESCO, UNICEF & ECLAC, 2022).

The year 2020 shows a considerable increase in inequalities on all educational levels, with the exception of upper secondary school. For example, in 2019, 99.1 % of the population in quintile 5 of lower secondary school age reported attending school, but this percentage dropped to 94.0 % for the population in quintile 1, a gap of 5.1 points. This gap widened to 6.5 points in 2020, as a result of a steeper drop in attendance among the lower-income population.

The indicators thereby represent the existence of fewer opportunities for children and adolescents from the poorest sectors of the region's countries to access educational proposals, which furthers pre-existing inequalities. Even primary education, which reached near-universal levels of access before the pandemic, showed lower access for the lower-income population in 2020.

On the other hand, in 2021 the magnitude of inequality assumed values similar to 2019, which leads us to assume that access conditions that year were better compared to 2020, even though the persistence of the gaps is still significant. Likewise, in 2022, the gaps continued to show a downward trend.

Students in rural areas had fewer schooling opportunities during the first year of the pandemic, although in subsequent years attendance improved and gaps narrowed to levels below those previously observed.

Children and adolescents living in areas with a low population density face greater challenges for educational inclusion, due to multiple reasons: lack of supply, distant schools and difficulties in transportation, shortage of trained teachers, precarious infrastructure and lack of learning resources are some of the factors that affect this situation. Rural inhabitants represent 19 % of the region's population, but 44 % of the population that lives in extreme poverty (ECLAC, 2022).

During the period when in-person teaching was suspended, children and adolescents in rural areas had fewer opportunities to access remote teaching options, due to the scarcity of computer equipment and less availability of internet access (UNESCO & IDB, 2020). The data in **Figure 2.9** show the extent to which these unequal conditions for ongoing learning affected the engagement of children and adolescents in rural areas during the pandemic years.

There were already significant gaps in access to education in rural areas before the pandemic, particularly for the population in upper secondary education and the last year of pre-primary education: in 2019, 89.6 % of the urban population in upper secondary age was attending school, and this percentage was nine points lower for the rural population (80.9 %).

The primary and lower secondary education levels show the smallest gaps between the different areas, but they are also the ones that show the highest attendance levels during 2020. In both cases, the difference in attendance increased over the previous year, which shows that these children and adolescents are less engaged with the teaching proposals.

This increase in the gap is not observed in upper secondary school, where the attendance rate drops slightly in both groups, nor in the population that is one year below primary school enrollment age. In the latter case, the regression shows that both groups have been similarly affected.

In addition, when the gaps by area are cross-referenced with other variables, inequalities increase. For example, one in four poor or extremely poor rural youth of upper secondary school age has left school (ECLAC, 2023b).

It is noteworthy to recognize that in the last year of pre-primary education in 2022, the gaps associated with area of residence were reduced to values below pre-pandemic values. While still a preliminary finding, this would indicate that there are greater opportunities for

Figure 2.9. Total net attendance rate by educational level, by area (in percentages). Countries of Latin America and the Caribbean. 2018-2022.

Note: Simple averages are based on data from Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, the Plurinational State of Bolivia, and Uruguay. Missing data for some countries in this series were replaced by linear projections of data from adjacent years. 2018 data are 2019 data for Paraguay and Uruguay.

Data source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS). UIS database, available at https://on.unesco.org/3vnhYT5; (accessed on October 10, 2023); and Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC). Household Surveys Databank.

returning to school at this level after schools reopened than in the previous period.

Indigenous students have been further excluded from access to education during the pandemic, especially in pre-primary education. Despite recovering attendance levels in 2022, inequality gaps remain or have widened.

Latin America and the Caribbean are characterized by a wide and persistent disparity based on ethnicity (UNESCO GEM, 2022), which is also reflected in educational indicators. There are an estimated 42 million indigenous people in Latin America, 7.8 % of the population. However, 43 % are affected by poverty. Although indigenous populations are often depicted in isolated rural contexts, about half of them live in urban areas. Structural inequalities that exclude the population from access to decent living conditions still persist: for example, 36 % of indigenous people living in urban environments live in poor neighborhoods. They are also less likely than the rest of the population to have access to running water, electricity and adequate housing (World Bank, 2015).

Educational indicators also highlight the exclusion levels affecting indigenous children and adolescents. The data show that they are less likely to access and complete primary and secondary education (for example, only 59 % complete secondary education, compared to 74 % of the non-indigenous population in seven countries analyzed), show lower learning achievements in the

ERCE assessments and -most concerning- indicate that these gaps persist over time, which reflects the difficulties encountered in the region to ensure conditions of equity (UNESCO, UNICEF & ECLAC, 2022; ECLAC, 2022).

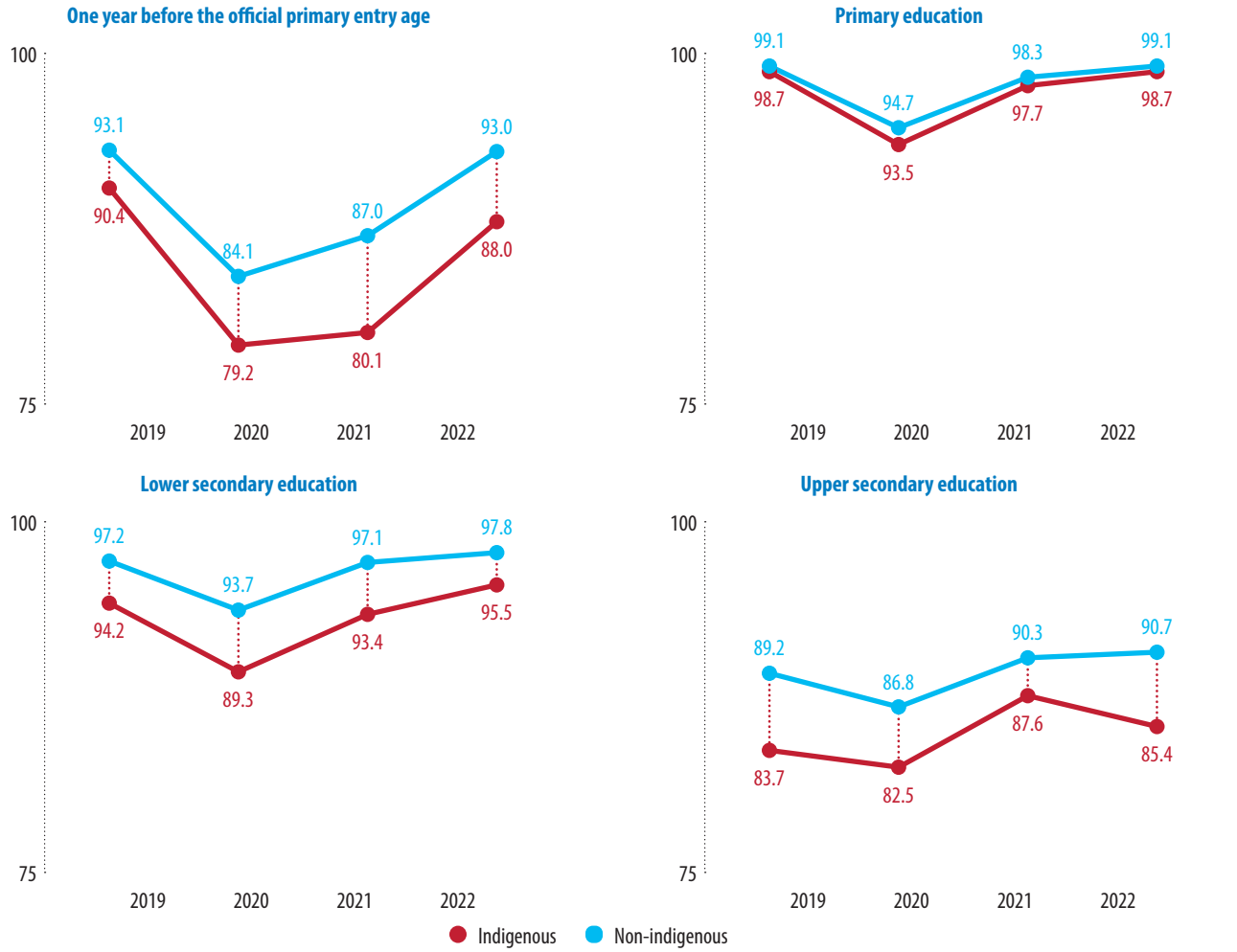
The data in **Figure 2.10** show that children and adolescents from indigenous populations have been more excluded from access to education than non-indigenous students during the years of school closures. This implies an increase in educational inequalities. Moreover, in some cases this increase persisted in 2022 in the context of the return to in-person teaching, and even worsened, as was the case with upper secondary school.

In 2021, the greatest increase in gaps can be seen in pre-primary education, as well as the persistence of inequalities in post-pandemic education. This was the least prioritized educational level during the pandemic and the one most affected by the lack of schooling, and it also felt the strongest impact of the exclusion of the indigenous population. This is particularly concerning, given the importance of this level in strengthening the conditions for indigenous children to successfully complete the first years of primary school.

On the other hand, the ethnic-racial inequalities that emerge in educational indicators are more accentuated in rural territories than in urban ones (ECLAC, 2023b).

Exclusion affects males more, especially in upper secondary education. Gender gaps have not changed significantly in recent years.

Figure 2.10. Total net attendance rate by education level for the indigenous population (in percentages). Countries of Latin America and the Caribbean. 2019-2022.



Note: Simple averages are based on data from Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, Mexico, Panama, the Plurinational State of Bolivia and Uruguay. Missing data for some countries in this series were replaced by linear projections of data from adjacent years. The 2019 data are from 2018 for Mexico and from 2017 for Chile.

Data source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC). Household Surveys Databank.

Box 3

Increasing inequalities in national assessment results

Standardized learning assessments applied in the region are usually accompanied by questionnaires for students, school principals and teachers, which gather a wide range of information on the characteristics of the subjects and institutions. This information is cross-referenced with student performance to measure the unequal learning opportunities associated with these characteristics. This makes it possible to focus on the most vulnerable population and identify the extent to which they have fewer opportunities to achieve quality learning. A comparison over time allows us to determine whether countries are moving towards fairer education systems by reducing inequalities, or whether gaps are being maintained or worsening.

For some of the national assessments analyzed, we were able to represent the behavior of inequality gaps in the assessments applied in the pandemic, in comparison to the previous application. **Figure 2.11** shows how inequalities in results have increased within each country. It shows the magnitude of the differences observed in different populations, using the unit of measurement for each assessment. For example, assessments in Colombia -where overall results have remained stable- and Argentina include results according to socioeconomic level (measured in quartiles of a socioeconomic level index, in the first case, and in tertiles in the second). This shows us how the difference in results increases in Colombia from 76 to 78 points, and in Argentina from 39 to 49 points in reading and from 35 to 43 in mathematics. This reveals that the most damaging effects of the pandemic have hit hardest among the poorest.

The four assessments also show how the differences between the results from public and private schools have increased significantly, to the detriment of the former. The unequal conditions and resources to guarantee continuity of learning have had a greater impact on students in public schools, which in turn also concentrate students from lower socioeconomic levels.

Students attending schools located in rural areas have also been more affected by learning loss, as revealed by assessments in Peru. This is not the case in Brazil, where the data show gaps that remain the same over time.

In the results by gender, the trends show much smaller gaps and milder impacts. In Argentina and Brazil, the results of the reading tests were favorable to women, and in mathematics they were favorable to men. The gaps changed very little in the application during the pandemic. In Colombia, where the overall score of the assessment is represented, the results were higher for males, although the gaps narrowed in 2021 in relation to 2019.

This exploratory analysis reveals how the pandemic has had a sharper effect on the most vulnerable population, which had fewer opportunities to access teaching proposals while classes were held remotely. Aspects such as the scarcity of technological devices, the absence or poor quality of Internet connection, the lack of study spaces, the greater time dedicated to homework and the lower availability of resources by schools are some of the factors that may have had an impact on the fact that students from the poorest sectors, from less densely populated areas and from public schools show greater setbacks in their learning outcomes.

The recently published PISA 2022 results reveal that inequality in the learning of 15-year-old students, measured as the difference in results according to socioeconomic level, has not worsened between the two applications. However, profound inequities persist in learning opportunities for adolescents in the region: on average, only 11.9% of students in the lowest socioeconomic quartile achieve minimum proficiency levels in mathematics, compared to 45.2% in the highest socioeconomic quartile (OECD, 2023).

Figure 2.11. Difference in results associated with student and school characteristics (in assessment measurement units). National assessments in Colombia, Peru, Brazil and Argentina. Circa 2019 - 2021.

Note: The resulting gap is expressed in the measurement unit of results for each assessment. In Argentina this unit is the percentage of satisfactory and advanced achievement, in Brazil it is the average score (mean 250, standard deviation 50), in Colombia it is the average score of those assessed in calendar A (mean 250, standard deviation 50 for disaggregation by socioeconomic level, scale of 0 to 100 for disaggregation by sex and type of management) and for Peru it is the average score (mean 500, standard deviation 100).

Data source: Ministerio de Educación de la Nación Argentina (2023a), Oficina de Medición de la Calidad de los Aprendizajes (2023); Saber 11 databases, available at https://on.unesco.org/46URgAH; SAEB 2019 and 2021 results spreadsheets, available at https://on.unesco.org/47Lwe8V.

The gender gap in attendance rates is worth mentioning here, which is an essential objective for achieving gender parity in education. In the region, males show higher levels of educational exclusion, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. This is not a recent phenomenon; indicators of access to upper secondary education have been lower for males for at least the last twenty years. Since 1997, for every 100 females enrolled in upper secondary education, there have been no more than 90 males (UNESCO GEM, 2018; UNESCO, 2022b). The attendance rate disaggregated by sex shows gaps in upper secondary education: in 2022, an average of 90.6 % of females and 88.4 % of males attended. Details of trends are not presented, since the gaps did not change during the years without in-person classes.[20]

As a result, there is a higher concentration of males outside of school. As shown in **Figure 2.2**, 52 % of the out-of-school population of primary and secondary school age is male, a percentage that rises to 54 % in primary education.

Funding for education

The allocation of resources to education is an unavoidable issue when assessing post-pandemic challenges. Implementing the necessary policies to guarantee educational inclusion, overcome stagnation and move towards a transformation of educational systems, together with the development of the educational recovery plans required in the short term to reverse the most harmful effects of the pandemic, cannot be considered without a review of the levels and criteria for the distribution of resources allocated to education.

The Education 2030 Framework for Action recognizes that progress towards meeting SDG4 targets requires an increase in educational investment and proposes that countries make a commitment to bring public expenditure on education to a threshold of at least 4 % to 6 % of gross domestic product (GDP) or 15 % to 20 % of total public expenditure (UNESCO, 2016).

In recent years, there has been consensus around the need to increase state funding for education and improve the efficiency of spending as a necessary pathway for the development of education systems, and this has resulted in a set of regional agreements and declarations ascribed by the Ministers of Education of the countries (UNESCO OREALC, 2017, 2022).

Although all sources of financing, both public and private, national and international, play a decisive role in education, government resources are the main and most important source of educational investment and therefore the central focus of monitoring.

Expenditure on education has hardly increased during the pandemic. The sector has not been prioritized in the allocation of additional funds, compared to other social expenditures.

When analyzing the distribution of social expenditure by governments in the region, we can observe that in 2019, 35.5 % was allocated to education, the second most important item after social protection, which was 36.8 % (ECLAC, 2023a). This shows that, in general, education is a priority within social expenditure,[21] compared to other items such as health or housing. However, during the pandemic years, the availability of resources for education changed.

Table 2.3 represents education expenditure, in constant values based on 2019, compared to other areas of social expenditure. It enables us to make a comparison to the year immediately prior to the pandemic and characterize the extent to which the countries had additional public funds available to implement the necessary measures for the continuity of learning in the context of remote education, to adapt school infrastructure for reopening, and to provide socioemotional support to teachers and students, among others.

20 Simple averages of the total attendance rate in upper secondary education, based on data from Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, the Plurinational State of Bolivia and Uruguay. Information obtained from the UIS database, available at https://on.unesco.org/3vnhYT5.

21 The breakdown of social expenditure includes the categories of social protection, health, housing and community services, education, environmental protection and recreation, culture and religion. This breakdown by government function follows a functional classification, i.e., it considers all fiscal resources designated for financing educational policies as part of public education expenditure, regardless of the public institution that executes them. In addition, it is important to consider that these data, collected by ECLAC, are only available on a central government level for most countries in the region, not on a general or total government level, so in some cases it does not reflect expenditures on a subnational level.

Table 2.3. Public social expenditure by government function classification (per capita in US dollars at constant prices). Year 2019 = base 100. Latin America and the Caribbean. 2019-2021

Area	Latin America			Caribbean		
	2019	2020	2021	2019	2020	2021
Social protection	100	122	123	100	114	143
Health	100	113	121	100	122	134
Housing and community amenities	100	103	113	100	126	151
Education	100	96	96	100	108	105
Environmental protection	100	83	86	100	144	146
Recreation, culture and religion	100	75	80	100	120	119
Social expenditure	**100**	**110**	**112**	**100**	**116**	**128**

Note: Constant prices were calculated in US dollars based on 2010.
Data source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC). CEPALSTAT statistical databases and publications, available at https://on.unesco.org/42g6gZm.

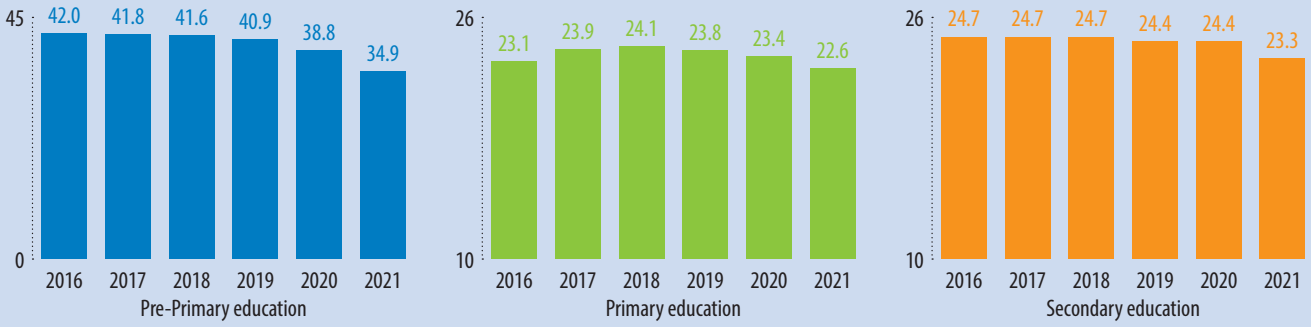
Box 4

The transfer of students to public schools

The pandemic years were exceptional times for the region's educational systems. This has given rise to unprecedented situations, such as the widespread adoption of remote teaching, and also to behaviors that differ from the trends observed in previous years.

One of these is the massive transfer of students attending private schools to public schools. This behavior breaks with historical trends, which show a growing participation of the private sector in enrollment in the region, especially in primary education, where it has grown over the last twenty years (Verger, Moschetti & Fontdevila, 2017; UNESCO GEM, 2022; UNESCO, UNICEF & ECLAC, 2022). In secondary and pre-primary education, historical trends are more stable, although regional averages do not reflect the very heterogeneous situations that occur between countries, where there are cases in which the participation of the private sector has grown significantly, particularly in pre-primary education (UNESCO GEM, 2022). The pre-pandemic period estimated that about 20 % of primary and secondary students in Latin America and the Caribbean were enrolled in private schools (UNESCO GEM, 2022). Figure 2.12 shows a decrease in the

Figure 2.12. Percentage of students in private schools, by educational level (in percentages). Countries of Latin America and the Caribbean. 2019-2021.



Note: Simple pre-primary averages are based on data from Argentina, Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Brazil, British Virgin Islands, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Jamaica, Mexico, Peru, the Plurinational State of Bolivia, Turks and Caicos Islands, Trinidad and Tobago, and Uruguay. Due to lack of data, Turks and Caicos Islands is excluded at the secondary level, and Bahamas, Turks and Caicos Islands and Trinidad and Tobago are excluded at the primary level. Panama is added in primary education. Missing data for some countries in this series were replaced by linear projections of data from adjacent years. 2016 and 2017 data are from 2018 for Trinidad and Tobago.
Data sources: UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS). UIS database, available at https://on.unesco.org/3vnhYT5.

percentage of students attending private schools during 2020 and 2021, with different intensities between educational levels.

In primary education, the percentage of students in private schools decreased from 23.8 % to 22.6 % between 2019 and 2021. In secondary school, this reduction was similar, decreasing by 1.1 points between both years, with a greater concentration of the transfer between 2020 and 2021. Pre-primary education shows a much more intense transfer of students to public schools, reducing the participation of students in private schools from 40.9 % to 34.9 % in just two years.

If these data are projected to the region as a whole, this would imply a transfer of approximately 2.6 million children and adolescents from private to public schools, of which a little less than half (1.2 million) correspond to pre-primary education.

Although an in-depth study is required to understand the causes of this transfer and the differences that can be observed between countries, it is likely that one of the main reasons is related to the economic crisis, which reduced household income.

This information shows that the supply of education managed by the public sector was under pressure during the pandemic -and possibly afterwards- to serve a growing pool of students coming from private schools.

As analyzed in the previous paragraphs, this increased pressure occurred in a context that required a response to the exceptional situation imposed by the pandemic without additional financial resources, which constitutes an extremely complex scenario for the countries.

Preliminary data for 2022, for which information is available for only ten countries in the region, show no evidence of a return to pre-pandemic levels. Nor is there any evidence of further widening of these levels. In contrast, the distribution of students observed in the second year of the pandemic appears to remain unchanged.*

* Information obtained from the UIS database, available at https://on.unesco.org/3vnhYT5 (updated September 2023).

The data represent how many dollars were allocated to each area of social expenditure in 2020 and 2021 for every US$100 invested in 2019. In Latin America, social expenditure prioritized investment in social protection policies (which grew by 22 % in 2020 and by one more point in 2021), in health (which grew by 13 % in 2020 and by another 8 points in 2021) and, to a lesser extent, especially in 2021, in housing and community services. In contrast, investment in education in both 2020 and 2021 was slightly below 2019 values, in constant terms. This means that countries in the region did not allocate, on average, more funds to education during the pandemic than in the previous year. In absolute terms, US$326.5 per capita was invested in Latin America in 2020, 13.2 less than 2019, while total social expenditure increased in the same period from US$1,036.1 to US$1,138.6 per capita, a positive difference of US$102.5 per capita.

In the Caribbean, resources allocated to education in 2020 increased by 8 % in 2020 over the base year, reflecting a greater availability of funds, and decreased by three points the following year. However, when compared to other social expenditures, the increase in funds is the lowest in relation to the base year. All other areas have increased resources in greater proportions. In absolute terms, in the Caribbean, education expenditure in 2020 was US$621.1 per capita, an increase of US$45.8 per capita over 2019 (US$575.3 per capita), while total social expenditure increased by US$273.6 per capita (from US$1,676.6 to US$1,950.2 per capita between 2019 and 2020).

In summary, what these data show is that education was not prioritized when increasing the resources available to respond to the emergency imposed by the pandemic. The countries in the region had to carry out their educational policies with budgets very similar to those available in the previous period. The possibility of additional funds to invest in education, in many cases, came from other sources, mostly from international organizations. For example, information available for sixteen countries shows that education expenditure from international sources increased from 0.054 % of GDP to 0.07 % between 2019 and 2020.[22]

22 Information obtained from the UIS database, available at https://on.unesco.org/3vnhYT5.

Government educational expenditure as a percentage of total public expenditure has been declining steadily over the last five years.

As a result of the situation caused by the pandemic, in 2020 the region experienced the most significant crisis of the last century, with the worst economic performance among all regions of the world (UNESCO, UNICEF & ECLAC, 2022). By 2020, GDP is expected to drop by 6.8 %. The following year, GDP recovered to a similar magnitude.[23] This regional scenario of decline and recovery reveals very heterogeneous situations among countries, since in many cases the increase in GDP in 2021 was well below previous levels.

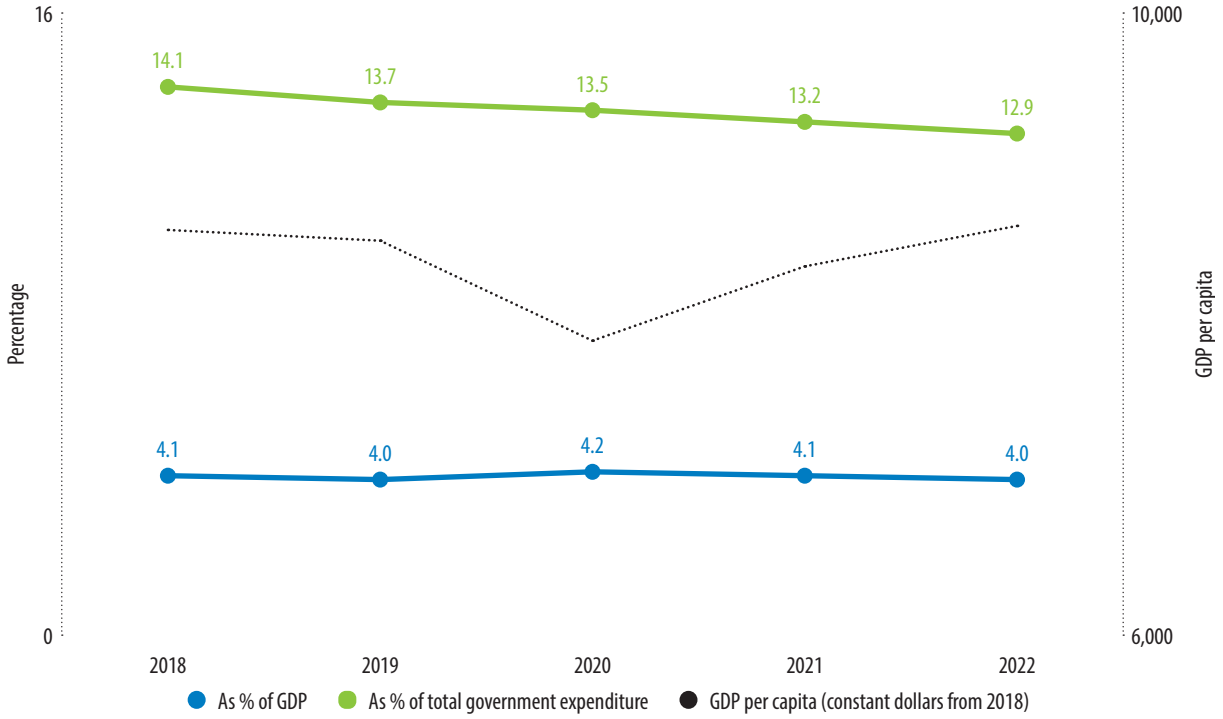
In this context of contraction of national economies, it is important to understand how much has been allocated to education in relation to the total resources produced by the country -i.e., as a percentage of GDP- and in relation to the total resources invested by the State -i.e., as a percentage of total public expenditure.

Figure 2.13 shows the average trends of the main indicators of educational expenditure in recent years, considering 2020 as a critical point, revealing the sharp drop in the region's GDP as a result of the pandemic.

Regarding expenditure as a percentage of GDP, an increase can be identified in 2020 (when it rose from 4 % to 4.2 %, on average), followed by a subsequent decline. This behavior is to be expected in crisis contexts, when GDP tends to fall more rapidly than educational expenditure. This is due to the fact that the latter includes structural components that are not susceptible to significant short-term changes -such as teachers' salaries-, which makes it less flexible to annual variations.

23 Information obtained from the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) and CEPALSTAT databases and statistical publications.

Figure 2.13. Government expenditure on education as a percentage of total public expenditure and as a percentage of GDP (in percentages), and GDP per capita (in constant 2018 dollars). Countries of Latin America and the Caribbean. 2019-2022.



Note: Simple averages of government expenditure on education as a percentage of total public expenditure are based on data from Anguilla, Antigua and Barbuda, Argentina, Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Bermuda, Cayman Islands, Curacao, Dominica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Grenada, Haiti, Jamaica, Montserrat, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, St. Kitts and Nevis and St. Lucia. Government expenditure on education as a percentage of GDP includes Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua, and excludes Montserrat due to lack of data. Missing data for some countries in this series were replaced by linear projections of data from adjacent years. In government expenditure on education as a percentage of total public expenditure, the 2022 data for Argentina, St. Kitts and Nevis, Jamaica and Paraguay are from 2021. In government expenditure on education as a percentage of GDP, the 2022 data for Anguilla, Argentina, Costa Rica, Curacao, El Salvador and Nicaragua are from 2021.
Data sources: UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS). UIS database, available at https://on.unesco.org/3vnhYT5; and Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC). Databases and statistical publications, available at https://on.unesco.org/3yUvboL.

In terms of government expenditure on education as a percentage of total public expenditure, a sustained decline can be identified throughout the period. This trend shows that, proportionally, States are allocating fewer and fewer resources to education in relation to spending in other sectors. These data reaffirm the previous diagnosis of the low priority given to the allocation of resources to education during and after the pandemic. As we have seen, this does not mean fewer resources, but rather that the countries' additional public investment efforts were used for other purposes. If countries spent $14.1 on education out of every $100 spent by the state in 2019, three years later this ratio dropped to $12.9.

These indicators show wide heterogeneity when analyzed by country. There are cases of countries that have increased or decreased one or both indicators, considering 2019 as the base year. According to a recent ECLAC report, all the countries that show evidence of an increase in the financial effort directed toward education -with the exception of one single case- correspond to countries with relatively low total expenditure on education in 2021 (ECLAC, 2023a).

Nine countries, out of twenty-two analyzed, do not meet the minimum financing thresholds suggested by the Education 2030 Framework for Action.

As noted, the Education 2030 Framework for Action establishes recommended minimum thresholds for public investment in education. These levels are determined considering two indicators: they are expressed as at least 4 % of GDP or 15 % of total public expenditure.

The most updated data reveal that, of 22 countries in the region with available data, there are 9 that do not meet either of these two suggested minimum thresholds for educational financing. The vast majority are Caribbean countries. Only eight countries meet the target of allocating more than 15 % of total expenditure to education, while most are above the minimum thresholds for education expenditure in relation to GDP.[24]

The current situation is challenging in terms of resource allocation for education. The levels of investment recognized in the region are relatively low in comparison with countries with more developed economies, if we take public expenditure in relation to enrollment as a reference (ECLAC, 2023a). This scenario, aggravated by the pandemic, is compounded by the fact that the economic slowdown is expected to deepen in the coming years, with an economic growth rate of 1.7 % (ECLAC, 2023a). In this context, it is increasingly challenging to project an increase in the availability of resources to move forward with the urgent reforms that the education systems of the countries of the region need.

24 Data for Anguilla, Antigua and Barbuda, Argentina, Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Bermuda, Cayman Islands, Costa Rica, Curacao, Dominica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Grenada, Guatemala, Haiti, Jamaica, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, St. Kitts and Nevis and St. Lucia. Information obtained from the UIS database, available at https://on.unesco.org/3vnhYT5 (updated on September 2023).

Chapter 2

Educational policy trends

The period beginning in 2022, after the worst stage of the pandemic, has brought a series of new challenges for the region's education systems. New problems and the widening of educational inequalities resulting from the learning crisis caused by the suspension of in-person classes during COVID-19 were added to previous debts. Analysis of monitoring data on the evolution of SDG4 compliance clearly portrays these challenges. In this section, that quantitative perspective is complemented by a more qualitative analysis of the educational policy trends that emerged from this stage up to the present time of the Ministerial Meeting in January 2024.

Just as the statistical analysis was developed, the monitoring of education policies continues the exercise of preparing the regional monitoring report SDG4-Education 2030, *The crossroads of education in Latin America and the Caribbean*. On that occasion, a survey was prepared among education policy experts from all the countries in Latin America and a number of representatives from Caribbean countries. Part of the results of this survey were useful in positioning key policies for the 2000-2020 period. For this report on the continuity of policy monitoring through October 2023, we applied four methodological strategies for information gathering:

- A state of the art of education policy research on Latin America and the Caribbean, with analysis of key comparative reports produced in the 2021-2023 period. **Box 5** summarizes the list of studies that complement this document.
- A documentary analysis of all the information available on the official websites of all the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean in two stages: March 2023 and September 2023.
- Interviews with fifteen experts from countries in the region[1] and complementary dialogues with different educational policymakers.
- A complementary systematization of bibliography and a mapping of educational policies for Caribbean countries.

The goal of these methodological strategies was to monitor and systematize the most relevant educational policies that emerged in the region in the post-pandemic period, between 2021 and 2023. In total, more than eighty outstanding educational policies were surveyed in the countries during this period. These actions were analyzed in the specific context of the periods of government on a national level in each of the countries, with special attention to the continuity of interventions in recent years in situations of changes of government.

To systematize and analyze these trends, different types of post-pandemic education policies were considered: i) flagship policies: these were launched in recent years (2021-2023), are underway on a massive or systemic scale at the time this publication was prepared (November 2023), are relevant to the education agenda and have a potentially high impact or budget; ii) emerging policies: these have been launched or announced recently (2022-2023), have a potentially high impact but are in an embryonic stage at the time this publication was prepared, express the new educational agenda of current governments; iii) institutionalized policies with new interventions: these are flagship

1 The list of interviewees during 2023 is as follows: Juan Ponce (Ecuador), Claudia Costín (Brazil), Jorge Baxter (Colombia), Darwin Caraballo (Dominican Republic), Denise Vaillant (Uruguay), Silvia Ortega (Mexico), María Balarín (Peru), Daniel Contreras (Honduras), Marta Canese (Paraguay), Jorge Rodríguez (Guatemala), Silvia Camacho (Costa Rica), Ernesto Yañez (Bolivia), Mario Yapu (Bolivia), Jorge Vargas (Costa Rica) and Herman van de Velde (Nicaragua).

Box 5

Studies on the impact of COVID-19 on education and learning recovery in Latin America and the Caribbean

The following list is a summary of some of the most relevant publications to address the educational situation after the pandemic in Latin America and the Caribbean. These studies are direct background for this report and present different elements of the diagnosis and proposals for the recovery of learning in the region.

Abizanda, Beatriz, Gonzalo Almeyda, Elena Arias Ortiz et al. (2022). *How to reboot education post-pandemic: Delivering on the promise of a better future for youth*. IDB. DOI: 10.18235/0004241.

World Bank (2023). *Learning recovery to acceleration: A global update on country efforts to improve learning and reduce inequalities*. Available at https://on.unesco.org/3NtMmUl.

World Bank, UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund) and UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) (2022). *Two years after: Saving a generation*. Washington, DC: International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, World Bank Group. Available at https://on.unesco.org/47Qox0m.

ECLAC, Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (2022). *Social panorama of Latin America and the Caribbean 2022: Transforming education as a basis for sustainable development*. Santiago. Available at https://on.unesco.org/3u0d9Bj.

UIS, UNESCO Institute for Statistics, UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund), World Bank and OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) (2022). *From learning recovery to education transformation: Insights and reflections from the 4th Survey on National Education Responses to COVID-19 School Closures*. Available at https://on.unesco.org/48gHwBN.

Mancebo, María Ester and Denise Vaillant (2023). *Learning recovery programs: Assessing the evidence and potential for Latin America*. Washington, DC: Inter-American Dialogue. Available at https://on.unesco.org/48Khdoc.

Reimers, Fernando and Renato Opertti (2021). *Aprender a reconstruir mejores futuros para la educación: Lecciones de la innovación educativa durante la pandemia de COVID-19*. Bern: Red de Innovación para la Transformación Educativa. Available at https://on.unesco.org/3v0EYtr.

Sáinz, Jorge, Ismael Sanz and Ana Capilla (2021). *Efectos en la educación iberoamericana: Un año después de la COVID-19*. OEI. Available at https://on.unesco.org/3RlJIkO.

UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) (2021). «Evaluación formativa: Una oportunidad para transformar la educación en tiempos de pandemia». Working document Available at https://on.unesco.org/2V5twuF.

UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) and Global Education Coalition (2021). *Supporting learning recovery one year into COVID-19: The Global Education Coalition in action*. Available at https://on.unesco.org/3u2PNFn.

UNESCO OREALC (Regional Bureau for Education in Latin America and the Caribbean) and UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund) (2022). *Education in Latin America and the Caribbean in the second year of COVID-19*. Santiago. Available at https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000383468.

Vaillant, Denise (2023). «Tendencias y desafíos: Intervenciones para recuperar aprendizajes escolares». Working document Available at https://on.unesco.org/3RFptzY.

actions initiated before the pandemic, had new relevant interventions in recent years (2021-2023), show certain continuities between governments or at different stages in time; iv) key policies in the pandemic: these were specific interventions in the pandemic years (2020-2021) and some show certain continuities or derivations in the most recent period (2022-2023).

The systematization of the policies was divided into four central themes, which are presented below. The first theme refers to educational inclusion and re-engagement policies, with a focus on the most vulnerable populations. This is followed by a focus on policies aimed at quality and the recovery of learning. Thirdly, it analyzes policies related to the professional improvement of teachers. Finally, the fourth theme focuses on the governance conditions of educational policies and the construction of state capacities to ensure systemic improvement processes and the recovery of learning.

Policies for re-engagement and inclusion

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, focused on leaving no one behind, provides a unique opportunity to create fairer societies with development opportunities for all. This should start with more inclusive and equitable education systems. Educational inclusion is a process that helps overcome barriers that limit the presence, participation, and achievement of all students (UNESCO, 2017). This first section addresses policies that Latin American and Caribbean countries have implemented to guarantee this inclusive vision, focusing on school re-engagement processes after the pandemic and actions with a socioeducational focus on the most vulnerable populations.

Despite the various policies highlighted for early childhood education, pre-primary has not been a major focus of actions during the pandemic period in subsequent years.

A first group of policies is early childhood education. As noted in this report, the effects of the pandemic have been especially critical for this age group. Following the nurturing care approach proposed by UNICEF and WHO,[2] the dimensions related to health, adequate nutrition, responsive caregiving, protection and security have been negatively affected, especially among the most vulnerable populations (Castillo & Marinho, 2022). The difficulty in recovering students who have stopped attending the early childhood education is a specifically educational example of this problem.

Previous studies have systematized the immediate response actions aimed at early childhood in the pandemic (Osorio & Cárdenas, 2021). The most urgent actions in some countries have been linked to policies that continued previous institutionalized actions. For example, Jamaica has developed a comprehensive approach to early childhood protection, with a recent new regulation to develop educational quality standards in institutions serving children and a battery of actions to address the impact of the pandemic based on neuroscience.[3]

In Panama, the Law for the Comprehensive Protection of Early Childhood and Early Childhood Development was signed in 2020 and progress was made in its subsequent implementation (Asamblea Nacional de la República de Panamá, 2020). El Salvador developed the National Policy to Support Early Childhood Development, "Crecer Juntos" (Growing Together), launched in 2021 with a ten-year plan of priority actions based on the "Nacer con Cariño" (Born with Affection) Law (Gobierno de El Salvador, 2020). In 2020, Mexico also initiated an early childhood care policy with the subsequent consolidation of a Comprehensive Care Route (Gobierno de México & SIPINNA, 2019). Other countries placed special emphasis on the role of families, as in the "Educa a tu Hijo" (Educate your Child) program (Ministerio de Educación de Cuba & UNICEF, 2022) in Cuba or "Escuelas para Padres y Madres de Familia" (Schools for Parents) in Panama.[4]

However, pre-primary education has been neglected in the educational responses launched during the pandemic. Compared to the other levels, fewer assessments, fewer measures aimed at reducing learning gaps, and fewer corrective measures for those who did not access distance education were implemented in pre-primary (UNESCO OREALC & UNICEF, 2022; Abizanda et al., 2022). This is expressed in the data analyzed in the first part of the document, which revealed that this educational

2 Developed by the World Health Organization (WHO), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the World Bank, and other agencies (World Health Organization, 2018)

3 See The Early Childhood Commission website, available at https://ecc.gov.jm.

4 See «Escuela para Padres», República de Panamá, available at https://on.unesco.org/3uZyXNu.

level showed greater difficulty in recovering students after the suspension of in-person attendance during the pandemic.

Socioeducational inclusion policies have been a focus of various actions in the region to guarantee access to education for disadvantaged populations.

The second set of policies in this central theme involves the articulated actions of educational policies and social protection policies to enhance socioeducational inclusion. In the midst of the pandemic, several countries in the region promoted scholarship and material support programs for students in vulnerable conditions, from ethnic groups or migrant populations (World Bank, UNICEF & UNESCO, 2022). Many of these actions have continued in recent years. Among other examples, Brazil, Mexico and Colombia promoted their already institutionalized income transfer programs. Uruguay implemented a back-to-school campaign with direct transfers targeted at students at risk of dropping out of school. Argentina launched the "Acompañar: Puentes de Igualdad" (Accompany: Bridges of Equality) program with a similar goal and boosted the massive "Progresar" (Progress) scholarship program.[5] Jamaica implemented a program along these same lines targeting children with disabilities (UNESCO GEM, 2020).

School meal programs were also relevant in several countries, given that an estimated 85 million students were enrolled in school meal programs when the pandemic began (WFP, 2021). For example, the "Programme of Advancement through Health and Education (PATH)" in Jamaica included an important school meal component. Panama implemented a policy of "Bonos Familiares para la Compra de Alimentos" (Family Food Vouchers) combined with school attendance. The extension of the school day in several countries in the region has also made it possible to reach more students with daily meals.

Several countries addressed improvements to school infrastructure and safety. For example, Nicaragua launched the "Escuelas Bonitas, Limpias y Seguras" (Beautiful, Clean and Safe Schools) program in 2022.

Mexico launched the National Strategy for Inclusive Education in 2019 (Secretaría de Educación Pública, 2019) and enhanced it in recent years. This policy aims to reduce the various barriers to learning and participation by considering differentiated needs, recognizing local and regional contexts, and promoting an inclusive, flexible and relevant system that favors access, progress, permanence and completion of studies for all students.

Among the most recent emerging actions, Ecuador launched the "Somos Inclusión" (We Are Inclusion) National Plan in 2022, to promote the inclusion of children with special educational needs.[6] In Honduras, the National Response Plan for the Prevention of Violence against Children and Adolescents was implemented through a joint initiative with UNICEF and other institutions (Gobierno de Honduras et al., 2021). In Nicaragua, the Planning Framework for Indigenous and Afro-descendant Peoples (Marco de Planificación para los Pueblos Indígenas y Afrodescendientes, MPPIA) was promoted in 2021 in partnership with the World Bank (MINED & World Bank, 2021).

In other cases, inclusion policies are part of broader processes of change in educational legislation. One of the emerging policies in this regard is the draft statutory law «La Educación es un Derecho» (Education is a Right), presented in 2023 by the Colombian government, which proposes making three to five years of pre-primary and secondary education compulsory.[7]

The search for student re-engagement has favored the development of early warning systems, a policy highlighted in several countries.

A third set of policies focused on educational re-engagement and inclusion refers to systems for the protection of students' educational pathways.

According to a survey implemented during the first quarter of 2022[8] by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics, a number of countries have implemented flexible schooling criteria in primary and secondary

5 See «Progresar», Republic of Argentina, available at https://on.unesco.org/3RjorZ3.

6 See «Plan Nacional Somos Inclusión», El Nuevo Ecuador, available at https://on.unesco.org/3NpkPTW.

7 See «Ley Estatutaria 2023», Instituto Colombiano para la Evaluación de la Educación, available at https://on.unesco.org/48AnUsP.

8 The survey referred to here is the fourth round of the Survey on National Education Responses to COVID-19, conducted by UNESCO, UNICEF, OECD and the World Bank. For more information, see «4th Iteration of the Survey on National Education Responses to COVID-19 School Closures», UNESCO COVID-19 Education Response, available at https://on.unesco.org/41mCq4J.

education. Nearly 40 % of the countries claim to have automatically re-enrolled their students, 45 % implemented accelerated education strategies and 65 % re-adapted curricula.[9]

An example of a proposal for the protection of educational pathways is the Unit for Permanence, Reintegration and Educational Success (UPRE) in Costa Rica. Its launch in 2020 was revitalized after the pandemic with the promotion of the "Lineamientos para el abordaje de la exclusión, permanencia y reincorporación educativa" (Guidelines for addressing exclusion, permanence and educational reintegration in 2023) (UPRE, 2023). In Uruguay, the "Uruguay Estudia" (Study Uruguay) program was renewed after the pandemic with a proposal for the completion of secondary education with support for educational pathways.[10]

During and after the pandemic, early warning systems (EWS) became one of the most prominent trends in driving policies for student re-engagement and dropout prevention. These actions highlight the importance of granularity to ensure adequate information on the individual pathway of students and to simultaneously favor focused and universal approaches (Arias et al., 2021).

As previous studies indicate, several countries have recently developed Early Warning Systems (UNESCO, 2022c). In Chile, the system uses advanced analytical methodologies to identify the 10 % of students with the highest risk of dropping out. In Brazil, the "Programa Brasil na Escola" (Brazil in School Program) launched in 2021 had a central support point in the early warning system that includes data gathered in a dropout risk questionnaire and interviews to identify qualitative dropout risk factors. Peru also launched the "Alerta Escuela" (School Alert) program during the pandemic, with guidelines to promote educational continuity (Ministerio de Educación del Perú, 2020).

In Central America, Honduras, El Salvador and Belize also moved in this direction with the development of operational early warning systems. The case of Costa Rica stands out for its wide range of data that provides a more sophisticated identification of risk factors (World Bank, UNICEF & UNESCO, 2022).

This set of policies shows some of the responses that countries were able to develop during and after the pandemic to address the challenges of inequalities in education systems. The actions developed provided opportunities for the most disadvantaged sectors of the social structure. However, the gaps and problems of full inclusion continue to be the main socioeducational challenge in the region, which is why greater and better efforts are required to achieve the targets established in SDG4.

Policies for improving learning

This section analyzes the prevailing trends in educational policy related to the improvement of learning. Although the focus is on attempts to consolidate explicit processes to recover the learning lost during the pandemic years, it also analyzes other broader policies related to educational quality, curricular change processes and new technologies to enhance teaching and learning.

Although all countries developed multiple actions, only some of these launched explicit comprehensive plans for the recovery of learning.

The approach to the recovery of learning lost during the pandemic has been addressed with diverse unsystematic strategies. Most countries generated more general education policy actions in the midst of government changes and transitions.

Some countries have launched explicit comprehensive learning recovery processes. One of the most outstanding cases is Chile, with the 2022 launch of the educational reactivation plan "Seamos Comunidad" (Let's be a Community), which includes comprehensive actions divided along five central themes: i) coexistence, wellbeing and mental health; ii) strengthening and activation of learning; iii) re-engagement and guarantee of educational pathways; iv) the national digital transformation and connectivity plan; and v) the Chilean National Infrastructure Plan.[11]

One of the components of this policy is the National Tutoring Plan, which aims to help children improve their

9 Information obtained from the database of the fourth round of the Survey on National Education Responses to COVID-19, available at https://on.unesco.org/41mCFg9.

10 See «Terminar mis estudios», Programa Uruguay Estudia, available at https://on.unesco.org/3RoCY5D.

11 «Asistencia y revinculación», Ministerio de Educación de Chile, Plan de Reactivación Educativa, available at https://on.unesco.org/3RGJExf.

learning and their relationship with school. To this end, tutors are asked to set aside one hour per week for this and to meet certain basic requirements.[12]

This intervention model is part of a new generation of actions aimed at customizing teaching through tutoring programs (Almeyda et al., 2022). As a recent example, one of the emerging policies in Colombia is the "Viva la Escuela" (Long Live School) program, which provides tutoring to students by university students.

In terms of more comprehensive strategies, in 2021 Ecuador launched the "Aprender a Tiempo" (Learning in Time) National Plan, focused on the recovery of learning to reduce the gaps that widened during the pandemic.[13] In 2023, more than two thousand educational institutions are already participating in the plan with actions that include the following areas: (i) socioemotional area, with resources and tools for emotional support; (ii) reading and writing area, with actions to promote, encourage and mediate reading, complemented by writing exercises; (iii) class attendance area, with the aim of preventing students at risk from dropping out of school; iv) recovering learning area, with a process of continuous placement and recovery of learning through the application of focused pedagogical sheets; and v) flagship area, which fosters institutional leadership, high expectations, a focus on the classroom, collaborative work and a culture of error.

In Costa Rica, the "Ruta de la Educación" (Education Route) was launched in 2022 (Gobierno de Costa Rica, 2022), an action plan that began with the application of comprehensive tests for the recovery of learning. In El Salvador, the "Mi Nueva Escuela" (My New School) plan was launched that same year, with a comprehensive vision based on the results of the "Conociendo mis Logros" (Knowing my Achievements) diagnostic tests (Ministerio de Educación de El Salvador, 2023).

Some countries modified their academic regimes and the organization of students' educational pathways to address the learning gaps that widened during the pandemic. For example, Panama launched a "Plan de Aprendizaje Acelerado" (Accelerated Learning Plan) for students to complete two years in one year (Ministerio de Desarrollo Social de la República de Panamá, 2021).

Uruguay introduced a "Nuevo Régimen Académico" (New Academic Regime) in 2023, which establishes grade repetition per cycle instead of per year. This proposal is part of a recent emerging policy of the Plan for Upper Secondary Education (ANEP, 2023). In Guatemala, student pathways were also addressed with the development of the "Estrategia Nacional para la Transición Exitosa" (National Strategy for Successful Transition) (ENTRE) between primary and secondary.[14]

In Trinidad and Tobago, the "Re-Engaging for Success" program was launched in 2022 (Ministry of Education of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, 2022). It is a focused policy that involves a five-year plan in leadership, teacher development, student services, safety, curriculum, discipline and resources, and infrastructure. Participating schools were selected based on their standardized test scores in the previous two years and other educational risk indicators.

School day extension policies have become an important focus in some countries.

A central strand of post-pandemic policy is the response to deep learning gaps and debts with extended school day programs. These actions are combined with those focused on accelerating learning and reviewing educational pathways. The extension of the school day confirms a series of interventions that had already begun to take shape several years earlier in different countries. This meant an increase in educational investment to provide extended or full-day education, in most cases focusing on the most disadvantaged sectors of the population (Claus, 2020).

Some countries, such as the Dominican Republic, had a strong development of the extended school day in previous years and sustained this growth in recent years. In Argentina, the "Una Hora Más" (One More Hour) policy, which raises the primary school day from four to five hours -and in many schools to six hours- of class time was extended on a large scale in 2022 with a strong push from the national government in partnership with the provinces.[15]

Uruguay also promoted the extension of the school day in 2022 in the "Centros Educativos María Espínola" (María

12 See «Plan Nacional de Tutorías», Ministerio de Educación de Chile, Plan de Reactivación Educativa, available at https://on.unesco.org/476Q79u.
13 «Sobre el Plan», El Nuevo Ecuador, available at https://on.unesco.org/473QJMS.
14 «Estrategia Nacional para la Transición Exitosa», Ministerio de Educación de Guatemala, available at https://www.mineduc.gob.gt/entre/.
15 «Una Hora Más», República Argentina, available at https://on.unesco.org/48952Ru.

Espínola Educational Centers) program for secondary education. Brazil has launched an incipient policy in 2023, which aims to take the lessons learned from the successful case of Pernambuco (Instituto Natura, 2019) and extend this to the whole country with the "Escola em Tempo Integral" (Full-time School) program.[16]

Several countries have promoted adaptations, prioritization processes and curricular reforms in recent years.

Another key theme in recent educational policies refers to curricular changes and adaptations. Some countries such as the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, Brazil, Cuba, Honduras, Panama and Saint Lucia have developed strategies for prioritizing and updating curricula to address the situation resulting from the pandemic. In the Bahamas, National Pacing Guides were created to sequence and synthesize the curriculum.[17]

In Central America, in 2022 the Council of Ministers of Education of the Central American Educational and Cultural Coordination (CECC/SICA) promoted the "Hoja de ruta para el fortalecimiento de las habilidades de aprendizaje" (Roadmap for the strengthening of learning skills) to coordinate actions after the pandemic emergency.[18]

In other cases, curricular reforms were more ambitious and became the central theme of educational policies. Brazil was an emblematic case, with the development and implementation of the National Common Core Curriculum from 2017 onwards. This process was very important for establishing a systemic curricular base in a country with a long tradition of local autonomy and fragmented curricular governance.

Mexico and Uruguay are two more recent cases of systemic curriculum change. Since 2019, Mexico has promoted the "Nueva Escuela Mexicana (NEM)" (New Mexican School) (Secretaría de Educación Pública, 2023) as a comprehensive systemic reform with a focus on curricular change. The main characteristics of the NEM include a humanistic approach, a new pedagogical approach, community engagement and the valuation of teachers and academic pathways.

In 2022, Uruguay introduced the policy "Marco Curricular Nacional" (National Curriculum Framework), a reform based on the competency-based approach. The aim of this comprehensive curricular transformation is that those who have completed their education can, among other things, express themselves and communicate with knowledge, autonomy, respect and empathy; know, think and act with knowledge and responsibility, taking care of themselves and others; take the initiative and carry out projects, through personal development or in a collaborative and participatory manner; or develop their own wellbeing and that of others, incorporating themselves with autonomy in different fields of action (social, labor, cultural, etc.). Similarly, Ecuador proposed a new curriculum framework in 2023 (UNESCO OREALC & LLECE, 2020; Mateo et al., 2022; Ministerio de Educación del Ecuador, 2023) aimed at developing competencies.

In some of these countries, curricular reforms had their most relevant chapter in policies on textbooks. Mexico is the most emblematic case in this regard, with the launch of the new series of textbooks in 2023 as part of its historic policy of universal, free and compulsory textbooks produced by the State for all schools. In 2023, the Plurinational State of Bolivia developed the "Currículo Educativo Actualizado" (Updated Educational Curriculum) with new plans and programs and a policy of pedagogical support texts for students and teachers, a comprehensive collection of materials that serves as a central part of curriculum development.

In Argentina, the "Libros para Aprender" (Books for Learning) policy was launched in 2022 to universalize the provision of textbooks for all public school students. This was one of the country's flagship policies in the post-pandemic learning recovery period.

In other countries, the curricular focus was on initial literacy, following a diagnosis of a decisive problem for the future of students. In 2023, Brazil launched the "Compromiso Federal Criança Alfabetizada", which set the goal of promoting a partnership with all the country's municipalities to articulate actions for teaching reading and writing at the right age. This policy began with comprehensive research on the problem, developed by INEP, entitled "Alfabetiza Brasil" (Literacy for Brazil).[19]

16 «Escola em Tiempo Integral», Ministério da Educação do Brasil, available at https://on.unesco.org/3trhxc5.

17 «2023-2024 Primary Pacing Guides», Curriculum & Instruction, available at https://on.unesco.org/3TryfTy.

18 «Declaración Conjunta de los Ministerios de Educación de la Región SICA: Declaración de San Salvador», SICA, May 20, 2022, available at https://on.unesco.org/48eFBhc.

19 «Alfabetiza Brasil», Ministerio da Educação do Brasil, available at https://on.unesco.org/48ivHLv.

In other countries, the focus on literacy has been on adult education. For example, Chile launched the "Contigo Aprendo" (I Learn with You) literacy plan and Honduras the "Yo Sí Puedo" (Yes, I Can) program.

The curriculum agenda has also turned towards incorporating emerging knowledge in an era of major changes in curricular approaches in the region (Mateo et al., 2022; UNESCO OREALC & LLECE, 2020). UNESCO has been supporting countries to integrate environmental issues into education through education for sustainable development, an integral element of SDG target 4.7. Although curriculum frameworks have moved in this direction, there is still a need to gain a deeper understanding of the extent to which countries address sustainability issues in education, and more specifically with two of the greatest challenges of our times: climate change and biodiversity loss (UNESCO, 2022a).

Recent curricular momentum has also brought the teaching of digital citizenship skills to the forefront. For example, Argentina approved a programming and robotics teaching module for the entire country (Ministerio de Educación de la Nación Argentina, 2017). Uruguay made progress in the design of programs for teaching digital citizenship and in 2022, with the leadership of the Ceibal Plan, it launched a new baccalaureate in Computer Science.[20]

The appearance of this new emerging knowledge is in an embryonic stage in most of the countries in the region and shows a change of era in which constant curricular revisions are expected in light of the increasingly dynamic changes that our societies are undergoing.

In the face of the pandemic crisis, several countries initiated or strengthened policies focused on the socioemotional wellbeing of students.

One expression of the curricular changes that was magnified by the pandemic was the dramatic situation of the socioemotional health of students, teachers and families. In response, some countries have incorporated policies that address the issue with new emerging tools that combine curricular and pedagogical aspects.

For example, Colombia launched the "Plan Nacional de Orientación Escolar" (National School Guidance Plan) in 2021 to address socioemotional issues. In the midst of the pandemic, Ecuador created the "Brigada de Contención Emocional" (Emotional Support Brigade) and resources for the emotional support of families (Ministerio de Educación del Ecuador, 2020). In 2022, Panama launched the "Programa de Recuperación Integral y Socioemocional de Aprendizajes" (Comprehensive and Socioemotional Learning Recovery Program) (PRISA), an innovative policy with the support of the organization SUMMA.[21] In 2022, Uruguay implemented a "Banco de Experiencias de Educación Socioemocional" (Bank of Socioemotional Education Experiences).[22]

Digital education policies had a major boom in the pandemic, but then generally failed to sustain that centrality.

Another central chapter of the policies linked to the quality of learning involves new digital technologies. Here we highlight the policies that bridge inclusion with re-engagement, based on the efforts to expand connectivity and the provision of equipment to reduce the digital divide.

Recent studies analyze the actions of governments to respond to the COVID-19 emergency situation and then to the restrictions on in-person teaching (WFP, 2021; UNICEF, 2022; UNESCO OREALC & UNICEF, 2022; UNESCO OREALC, 2021[a]). In countries such as Argentina, Costa Rica, Chile, Colombia and Uruguay, various agreements have been reached for free access to data browsing on official educational platforms. These countries also launched targeted programs for access to free digital devices, with different magnitudes and priorities (Kelly & Soletic, 2022).

The digital platforms and resources launched during the pandemic were one of the stellar strategies of educational policies that later had different uses and reconversions when resuming in-person school attendance. The programs "Aprende en Casa" (Learn at Home) in Mexico, "Seguimos Conectados" (Let's Stay Connected) and the Juana Manso platforms in Argentina, "Aprenden en Línea" (Online Learning) in Chile, "Aprender Digital: Contenidos para Todos" (Digital

20 «Ciencias de la Computación», Ceibal, available at https://on.unesco.org/3TkwsQ1.

21 «Programa de Recuperación Integral y Socioemocional del Aprendizaje (PRISA) 1», Laboratorio de Investigación e Innovación en Educación para América Latina y el Caribe, available at https://on.unesco.org/4aipzVs.

22 «Lanzamos nuestro Observatorio Socioemocional», Instituto Nacional de Evaluación Educativa, available at https://on.unesco.org/3tlSEyz.

Learning: Content for Everyone) from Colombia or "Aprendo en Casa" (I Learn from Home) from Costa Rica and Peru -both with the same name-, and "Cada Familia una Escuela" (Every Family is a School) from the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela were some of the most outstanding initiatives during the most critical stage in 2020 and 2021.

Panama passed a Digital Equity Law in 2022, which proposes a technological transformation to accelerate student learning (Asamblea Nacional de la República de Panamá, 2022). This emerging flagship policy proposes a comprehensive vision of the use of new educational platforms, combined with teacher training and the development of a framework of digital competencies for student citizenship training.

Something similar happened in Paraguay. In 2022, it made progress on the flagship policy of the Digital Education Law, which integrates a renewed proposal to address the issue. In Paraguay, the pandemic made it possible to create the digital ecosystem "Conoce a Ester" (Meet Ester), which was renewed in 2023.

Uruguay has been the most outstanding country in this area over the last decade, with the Ceibal Plan as the flagship of an innovative and comprehensive vision of technologies for education.[23] In recent years, new initiatives under this program have provided the consolidation of online assessments, the adaptive mathematics platform (PAM) and a dynamic ecosystem of digital resources with new public and private providers.

Standardized assessments for pedagogical use in schools became one of the flagship policies in several countries in the aftermath of the pandemic.

Finally, there is a stellar chapter of the policies focused on the recovery of learning, which is linked to the emergence of new educational quality assessment policies. As discussed in the section on student learning in the previous chapter, countries had different responses to address the exceptional pandemic situation. Standardized assessments were discontinued in most countries in 2020 to resume implementation in the following years. This led to various technical adjustments in order to seek a comparability of results in such irregular situations.

However, in the midst of these adjustments, a new generation of educational assessments began to emerge in the region, which sought to provide a more direct and immediate response to the needs of schools (Herrero et al., 2022; World Bank, UNICEF & UNESCO, 2022). These are formative assessments designed centrally for use in schools. Chile implemented the "Diagnóstico Integral del Aprendizaje" (Comprehensive Learning Diagnosis) (DIA) as a flagship policy.[24] This is a test created by the Chilean Agencia de Calidad de la Educación (Education Quality Agency) to provide information for pedagogical use by schools, which participate on a voluntary basis. The DIA has three assessments throughout the school year and favors a process that monitors the individual learning pathway of students in order to make pedagogical decisions.

A similar initiative was launched in 2021 in Colombia: "Evaluar para Avanzar" (Assess to Advance). This test was designed to offer a set of tools for voluntary use to support and accompany teachers' teaching processes.[25] That same year, El Salvador initiated the "Conociendo Mis Logros" (Knowing My Achievements) diagnostic tests as a basis for designing an Educational Success Plan.[26]

Uruguay developed the assessment mechanism "Aristas en Clase" (Classroom Aspects),[27], a tool for teachers to assess their students' performance in language and mathematics. The assessment can be administered at any time of year and can be completed online by students. This policy receives feedback from a growing framework of assessments in the country, which includes the measurement of socioemotional skills and the incipient launch of a competency-based assessment from 2023.

Brazil launched a model of diagnostic and formative assessments in 2021 in partnership with the Ministry of Education and the Center for Public Policy and Educational Assessment (CAEd). In 2019, Mexico's Ministry of Public Education created the National

23 See the Ceibal website, available at https://ceibal.edu.uy.

24 Diagnóstico Integral de Aprendizajes website, available at https://diagnosticointegral.agenciaeducacion.cl/.

25 «Evaluar para Avanzar 3.º a 11.º», Instituto Colombiano para la Evaluación de la Educación, available at https://on.unesco.org/3RqSaPT.

26 «Información general», Ministerio de Educación de El Salvador, available at https://on.unesco.org/4aiNyUt.

27 «Aristas en Clase», Instituto Nacional de Evaluación Educativa, available at https://on.unesco.org/3TpLjbJ.

Commission for Continuous Improvement (Comisión Nacional para la Mejora Continua, MEJOREDU), and in 2022 it launched a Diagnostic Learning Assessment. In Belize, the "Diagnostic Assessment Test" (BDAT) was created for all primary education programmes.

These policies are part of a new vision of standardized assessments that aims to reach classrooms, seeking more interaction with teaching practices and planning measures for improvement in the hands of schools. These are diagnostic assessments that offer a tool to accompany the learning recovery processes in specific contexts.

Policies to strengthen teaching

The impact of the pandemic was felt not only on the students and their learning, but also on the faculty. In the midst of the emergency, support for teachers became a key mandate for rebuilding education systems (UNESCO, 2020b). This thematic focus of educational policies for teaching had a series of responses to the emergency pandemic situation (García & Insua, 2022). Some of these actions had continuity and generated new support for the complex teaching task. However, more comprehensive policies to enhance teaching careers have not been a central focus of development in the years following the pandemic.

Many of the actions described in other central themes had a specific chapter on strengthening the teaching profession.

One of the novel chapters of the policies associated with the pandemic response was the launching of initiatives linked to teacher wellbeing. To accompany the abrupt changes generated by the emergency situation, different countries initiated actions focused on the socioemotional wellbeing of teachers. For example, the Peruvian Ministry of Education created the "Te Escucho, Docente" (I Hear You, Teacher) platform to provide them with tools for socioemotional and physical care. Costa Rica provided similar materials. El Salvador developed a framework of socioemotional skills for primary and secondary education.[28]

Other countries placed greater focus on the provision of materials for the updated development of the teaching profession. Uruguay and the Dominican Republic achieved universal coverage in the provision of technological devices (laptops and Internet access) to teachers (García & Insua, 2022).

Many of the curriculum support tools and educational materials that were developed for students also had a chapter for teachers. The Costa Rican Ministry of Public Education developed the Toolbox portal to support teaching. In Uruguay, the CREA digital platform integrates a management system that allows teachers to work collaboratively with their students and colleagues and to manage their student groups. In Argentina, the Juana Manso platform made it possible to create virtual classes for teachers.

The emergency situation also favored specific training in digital skills for in-service teachers. In Costa Rica, the Professional Development Institute (Instituto de Desarrollo Profesional, IDP) developed teacher training actions on digital tools. Colombia launched the "Contacto Maestro" (Teacher Contact) platform, with a wide range of resources for teachers and boards. In Argentina, the National Institute for Teacher Training (Instituto Nacional de Formación Docente, INFOD) offered digital resources and a virtual campus for continuing education. In Uruguay, the Ceibal Plan included a special chapter for teacher training with the integration of teaching technologies. More recently, Uruguay included innovative technology and computational thinking guidelines in the 2030 Plan for teacher training.

The new assessments for schools mentioned in the previous section also provided more concrete support to teachers' work, providing a matrix of data on the learning levels of their students. This type of tool has the double benefit of supporting the teaching task by systematizing information that allows individual student follow-up and, at the same time, saves part of the work of correcting tests, which is usually an exhausting part of the job.

Other policies mentioned in the previous section also had an important teaching chapter. For example, the 2017 Dominican curriculum reform implemented a new competency-based teacher training model in 2022. In Brazil, the new policy of commitment to literacy has a central focus on the training of school administrators and teachers in teaching literacy skills.

During the period analyzed, in some countries, continuous teacher training strategies gained new

28 «Habilidades socioemocionales: El arte detrás del aprendizaje socioemocional», Formación HSE, available at https://on.unesco.org/3RHjJFE.

momentum after the pandemic. In El Salvador, the recent creation of the National Teacher Training Institute was the institutional vehicle for this task, with initiatives such as the training of new teachers in digital competencies. In Argentina, the National Continuous Teacher Training Plan is a training strategy in partnership with the provinces. One of Ecuador's recent flagship policies was the 2021 launch of the National Plan for Continuous Teacher Training, a strategy with five implementation phases that is still ongoing.[29]

The recent period did not have a special focus on the modification of teaching careers.

In this recent stage, most countries did not make progress in more profound processes of change in professional teaching careers or in pre-service teacher training. In some cases, new, but not necessarily structural, modifications were implemented. For example, in 2023 Colombia launched a new mechanism for filling teaching vacancies by merit, called the "Sistema Maestro" (Teacher System). The Dominican Republic created the Normative Framework for Teacher Training (Marco Normativo para la Formación Docente) and the POMA teacher induction tests.

Uruguay was the most notable exception in this particular chapter. In 2023, the new National Teaching Policy (Política Nacional Docente) was implemented, which includes a new system of professional accreditation levels in the teaching career. This system, called "Docente Acreditado" (Accredited Teacher), includes a test of university recognition of teacher training, which grants a different status to those who pass it and generates a novel salary difference. Uruguay also launched an emerging policy in 2023 that provides greater autonomy to schools and includes specialized training and a salary increase for school leadership.

Indeed, the administrative career has been an even more elusive topic than the improvement of the teaching profession. Few countries have promoted major changes in administration training, prestige or salary. In addition to the recent case of Uruguay, in 2021 Brazil prepared the Base Nacional Común de Competencias do Director Escolar (Botelho & Silva, 2022).

Looking at the actions as a whole, policies to strengthen the teaching profession have been less present in the region's agenda than other topics covered in this report. The impact of the pandemic has generated an increased workload and a multiplication of tasks that require specialized training and a professional career of excellence. Teachers' salaries have been under pressure from an unfavorable economic situation and the need to meet new demands and problems. This implies an imperative challenge to improve the prestige and quality of the teaching profession with a comprehensive policy approach that few countries have been able to guarantee. Moreover, all of this must also be foreseen for the future teachers who will be required between now and 2030, as shown in **Box 6**.

Governance and coordination of educational policies

The fourth and final central theme of analysis of educational policy trends refers to the broader context of educational governance. As analyzed in the document *Education in Latin America and the Caribbean at a crossroads*, the challenge of improving the inclusion, equity and quality of education depends on state capacities and the articulation with multiple actors to achieve solid and sustainable institutional agreements and constructions. Governance refers to a series of interactions between state and non-state actors to formulate and implement social, economic and institutional policies and reforms related to the objective of improving the governance of political systems.

The governance conditions of education systems have been affected by the economic situation, the changes and instability of governments and the difficulty in building sustainable agreements.

As a recent study (Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance & UNDP, 2022) indicates, the chronic problems of governance and the low quality of governance suffered by Latin American and Caribbean countries have become evident and exacerbated in recent years. The following dimensions have combined to place further limitations on the construction of powerful, legitimate and sustainable educational policies: i) low and erratic economic growth rates; ii) high income inequality and concentration of wealth; iii) fiscally constrained states; iv) representative and democratic disengagement; v) fragmentation and polarization of the political system; vi) delay and deterioration of the rule of law.

29 «Ministra de Educación presentó el Plan Nacional de Formación Permanente», El Nuevo Ecuador, available at https://on.unesco.org/3tlgn1V.

Box 6

Trained teachers needed in the region

Meeting the targets set for 2030 in SDG4 requires countries to ensure the availability of a sufficient pool of trained teachers with adequate working conditions. Such is its relevance that SDG4 included a specific target related to the need to substantially increase the supply of qualified teachers (Target 4.c).

The Education 2030 Framework for Action defines that, to achieve this, teachers must have acquired the necessary skills, be adequately recruited and remunerated, be well trained, professionally qualified, motivated, equitably and effectively distributed throughout the education system, and supported within well-resourced, effective and well-managed systems (UNESCO, 2016).

The region currently has about 8.3 million early childhood, primary and secondary education teachers. Of these, about 77 % have the minimum qualifications required* according to national standards. This means that approximately one out of every four teachers who teach today did not receive the minimum training expected to fulfill these functions. In the region, about 65 % of the countries define a tertiary educational programmes (ISCED 5 and 6) as a minimum requirement for teaching in secondary education, 51 % for teaching in primary education and 48 % for pre-primary education (UIS, 2023).

Recent estimates by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics reveal that in order to achieve the goal of universal primary and secondary education, the region will need 3.2 million new teachers by 2030. This number represents 45 % of the current teaching staff (**Figure 3.1**).

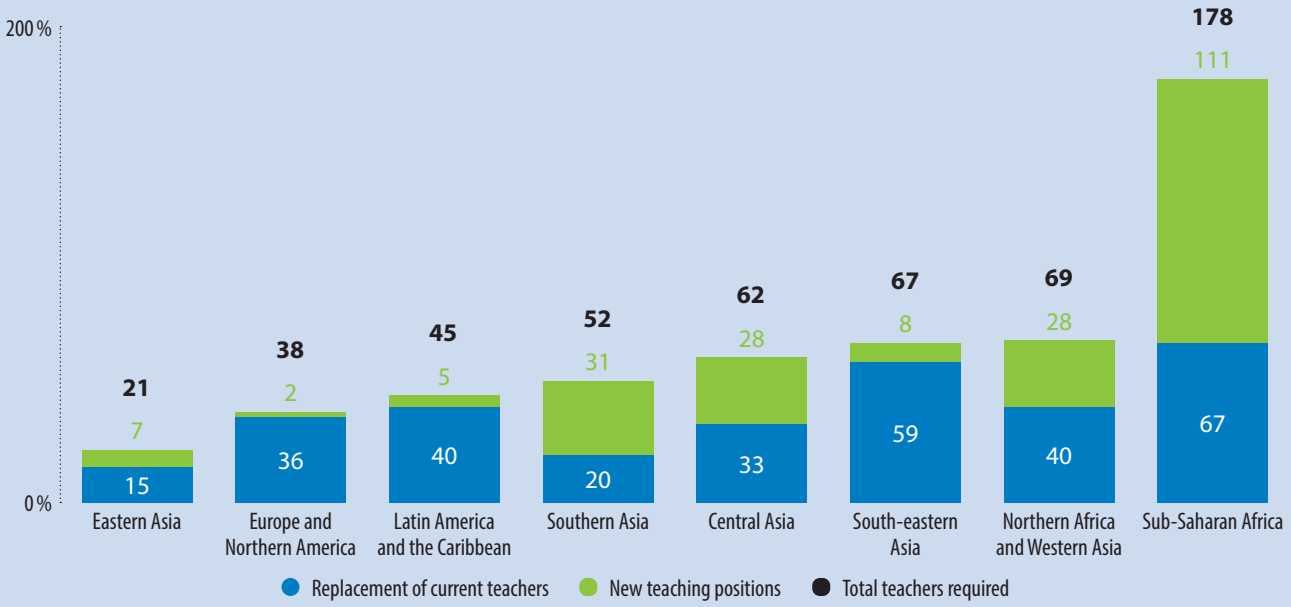
Of these 3.2 million teachers that will be needed to meet the 2030 targets for primary and secondary education, the vast majority (2.8 million) will be required to replace current teachers, while only about 360,000 additional teachers will be needed. This replacement estimate considers as a basis the attrition associated with the cessation of current jobs associated with multiple causes, such as taking another job outside of teaching, for personal reasons, health problems, family moves, and retirement.[2]

Compared to other regions, Latin America and the Caribbean has a relatively low demand for new teachers and prioritizes meeting the demand for current teachers. A central challenge in this planning must consider covering the gap of teachers who currently do not have the minimum training required, which is estimated to be around 1.6 million.

* Teachers with the minimum required qualifications are considered to be those who have "fulfilled at least the minimum organized teacher-training requirements (pre-service or in-service) to teach a specific level of education according to the relevant national policy or law. These requirements usually include pedagogical knowledge (broad principles and strategies of classroom management and organization that transcend the subject matter being taught - typically approaches, methods and techniques of teaching) and professional knowledge (knowledge of statutory instruments and other legal frameworks that govern the teaching profession). Some programmes may also cover content knowledge (knowledge of the curriculum and the subject matter to be taught and the use of relevant materials)" (UIS, 2021). «Glossary», UNESCO Institute for Statistics, available at http://uis.unesco.org/en/glossary.

2 «Teacher attrition», UNESCO International Institute for Educational Planning, available at https://on.unesco.org/3RJmSVN.

Figure 3.1. Additional primary and secondary school teachers needed by 2030, by type of need, as a percentage of total current teachers (in percentages). SDG4 monitoring regions.



Data source: UNESCO and International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030. (2023).

The change of governments in many countries has implied profound changes in education policy agendas, restructuring of technical teams, reconstruction of relations with intermediate actors -especially relevant in federal countries- and greater difficulty in establishing a fluid channel of communication with schools. In several countries, this situation was primarily marked by the political polarization between outgoing and incoming governments, which generated short circuits in the dynamics of continuity and legitimacy of educational policies.

In these conditions, some countries tried to consolidate a medium- and long-term agenda, at least in their planning and general strategic guidelines.

Continuing an institutionalized imprint, Costa Rica developed the 2019-2024 Institutional Strategic Plan (2019) (Ministerio de Educación Pública de Costa Rica, 2019) and the 2050 National Strategic Plan (Ministerio de Planificación Nacional y Política Económica de Costa Rica, 2022). In the Plurinational State of Bolivia, the 2021-2025 Economic and Social Development Plan (Estado Plurinacional de Bolivia, 2021) is an ambitious effort that covers everything from poverty and basic services to health and education, including fair trade and the environment in harmony with the land. In this context, there are specific programs that seek to account for the standards that guide the educational system (Ministerio de Educación del Estado Plurinacional de Bolivia, 2023). In a similar vein, other countries are also developing their plans: this is the case with Guatemala (Gobierno de Guatemala, 2020) and its 2020-2024 National Strategic Plan; and the case with Honduras, with the launch of Plan 365 in 2023.[30] Panama established the Permanent Multisectoral Council for the Implementation of the National Commitment to Education (Consejo Permanente Multisectorial para Implementación del Compromiso Nacional por la Educación, COPEME)[31] as an advisory and consultative body attached to the Ministry of Education. The objective of this Council is to monitor compliance with the National Commitment to Education, an initiative that involved broad multi-stakeholder participation in its development (MEDUCA & UNDP, 2017).

Belize developed the "Education Sector Plan 2021-2025: Making Education Work for Belize" in 2021, which sets out a five-year plan that defines goals with a commitment to access, equity and quality.

30 «Plan 365», Educatrachos, available at https://on.unesco.org/46XHNsn.
31 COPEME website, available at https://copeme.org.

As noted above, two countries have stood out in further advancing educational reforms in recent years: Mexico and Uruguay. In very different political contexts, the two countries have launched comprehensive strategies for educational transformation that have been the subject of great debates and spaces for social participation.
In the case of Mexico, the central focus of change has revolved around the proposals of the Nueva Escuela Mexicana (Secretaría de Educación Pública, 2023). In Uruguay, the proposal for educational transformation was condensed in the 2020-2024 Educational Development Plan (ANEP, 2020).

In turn, the governance of education systems is directly linked to another condition that is complementary to the responsibilities of educational governance: the financing of education. As analyzed in the section on educational financing in the previous chapter, this issue represents a central challenge in the region in order to ensure the material conditions necessary to achieve SDG4. Few countries have made progress in changing their financing systems or in aspects that imply a public commitment to increasing the resources allocated to education.

Chapter 3

Conclusions

Latin America and the Caribbean has been one of the regions most affected by the suspension of in-person classes during the pandemic: countries have had schools closed or partially open for 62 weeks, on average, equivalent to more than a year and a half of classes. This has implied a setback in the main educational variables, in magnitudes that are still difficult to measure.

National assessments show a particularly concerning impact on learning levels: almost all countries that administered tests after the pandemic show setbacks, in some cases of high magnitude. An increase in inequalities is also evident during the pandemic, since the impacts have been more intense in the most vulnerable population. The 2022 PISA data in the assessed countries of Latin America reveal a concentrated setback in mathematics, of a less severe magnitude compared to OECD countries. This difference must be interpreted considering that student performances in the region are, on average, much lower than those in the OECD. Furthermore, the results in the region do not show signs of improvement over the last decade, and wide disparities in performance persist within each country.

The data also reveal that during the pandemic there has been a drop in attendance rates at all levels of education, particularly in 2020, with pre-primary education the most affected.

Several of the indicators analyzed in this report reflect the most serious effects of the crisis, although the real magnitude of the setback caused by the pandemic remains unknown, especially in the dimensions not represented by the information available on a regional level, and we can anticipate that its effects will last for several years. Some of these constitute priority topics of attention, such as the socioemotional wellbeing of the educational community. Therefore, it is of vital importance to continue and strengthen the strategies, plans and programs for the emotional support and containment of the educational community.

At the same time, the data reveal the historical debts of education systems to guarantee inclusive, equitable and quality education: there are 4.3 million children of primary and lower secondary school age who remain out of school, which constitutes a hard core of exclusion that has not been included despite the efforts of the countries.

The data show that there are populations affected by historical inequalities that are also reflected in the access and quality of the education they receive (population living in poverty and extreme poverty, indigenous populations, rural population), in addition to other groups for which there are no regional estimates, such as people in situations of human mobility or people with disabilities. Therefore, educational plans and programs that make it possible to serve the region's vulnerable population are essential.

Educational recovery efforts must combine the objectives of addressing the most harmful effects of the pandemic on learning and, at the same time, addressing historical debts. We recommend prioritizing support to the population that was not in school during 2020 and 2021, and to those who experienced a low engagement with education.

It is essential that we develop an intensified monitoring of the most vulnerable populations in order to avoid the serious consequences that will continue to manifest themselves in the coming years. Of particular concern is the situation of students who enter primary education without having had experience in pre-primary education, or who have had their pre-primary education reduced or interrupted by the pandemic.

If the educational responses to the crisis context of 2020 and 2021 focused on mass outreach policies to ensure the best possible conditions for the continuity of remote

learning, the data on the impact of the pandemic are challenging countries to complement these universal strategies with policies aimed at the sectors of the population that have been most affected. The drop in the demand for education that is expected in the coming years, associated with the reduction in births, may constitute a window of opportunity to favor the implementation of policies aimed at greater equity, if adequately planned.

In the face of this diagnosis, the analysis of education policy trends in the region shows different types of responses. The pandemic redefined priorities. Progress was made in the design of early warning systems for monitoring educational pathways and in the opportunity to apply standardized assessments for pedagogical use in schools. The supply of digital educational resources was expanded and processes of curricular prioritization and extension of the school day were developed.

Despite the efforts of multiple educational public policy actions, the recovery of learning continues to be an open debt, which in most cases generally did not have a comprehensive, systemic and coordinated approach. It is for this reason that we recommend the development of policies focused on achieving this objective.

To this end, we propose the development of a framework for the recovery and acceleration of learning in Latin America and the Caribbean in the aftermath of the pandemic that includes the concepts of educational inclusion, improvement of learning, strengthening of the teaching staff and of the governance and financing capacities of the region's education systems. The recovery of learning is the main challenge facing Latin America and the Caribbean today. To this end, strengthening state capacities for systemic governance and increasing educational budgets is essential, prioritizing resources to achieve learning recovery.

However, this major challenge is not incompatible with a broader vision of improving and transforming education systems to promote a humanistic, scientific, sustainable and creative vision to face the challenges of a world in a permanent state of change. The recovery and transformation of education in the region is part of the urgent agenda to achieve the SDG4 targets by 2030. This is the path that defines the educational conditions for a more just, inclusive and developed world in the decades to come.

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4 QUALITY EDUCATION

Sustainable Development Goals