

Education in Azerbaijan

Context

Azerbaijan gained its independence from Soviet Union in 1991. The first four years of its independence were dominated by the Nagorno-Karabakh War, which was fought over territorial disputes. The subsequent volatility left little resources or political energy for education development. However, the fast economic growth and political stability that characterized post-nineties Azerbaijan made room for educational development initiatives that, while still facing many challenges, are making initial strides toward reforming the country's education system.

Azerbaijan has one of the fastest growing economies in the region of Central and Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CEE/CIS). Its annual economic growth increased dramatically over the past decade, starting at 11.1% in 2000 and rising to 34.5% in 2006.¹ Its per capita GNP (PPP) in 2005 was \$4,380 USD, which is the third highest in the Caucasus and Central Asia sub-regions. Yet it lags considerably behind its neighbors in Central and Southeastern Europe, which have per capita GNPs ranging from \$5,000 USD in Albania to almost \$20,000 USD in the Czech Republic.²

Despite its rising wealth Azerbaijan spent only 2.8% of its GNP on education in 2005, which is the second lowest expenditure rate in the region after Kazakh-



stan.³ The national unemployment rate is 11%, with 21% of youth being out of work.⁴ National income inequality is the lowest in the CEE/CIS region, with a gini coefficient of .19, but about 15.8% of the country lives below the national poverty line.⁵ Total government expenditure as a per cent of GDP is 24.1, which is also one of the lowest rates in the region.

With 800,000 refugees and IDPs, Azerbaijan has the largest internally displaced population in the region, and, as of 2006, had the highest per capita IDP population in the world. The majority are ethnic Azeris who were displaced from their homes during the Nagorno-Karabakh war. The Government is trying to alleviate the situation. The population of the last tent camps were moved to new settlements and housing at the end of 2007, but many children still suffer from hindered access to quality education.

Youth unemployment, social inequities, poverty and a large displaced population pose formidable challenges to the national education system of Azerbaijan.

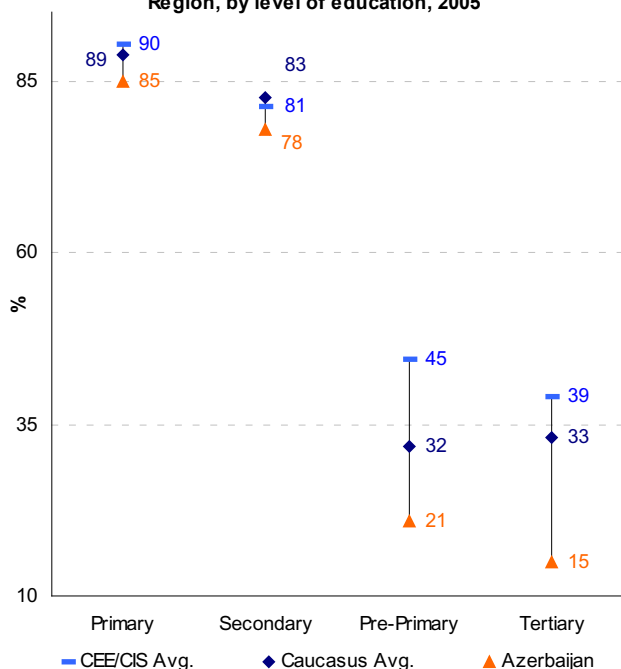
Education Reforms

The government has embarked on reforms to improve the country's education sector.

- The government increased the Ministry of Education's budget by 57% in 2007.⁶
- In 2007, the government endorsed and adopted Active Learning into the new national curriculum and teacher training programs.
- The World Bank has approved a 2nd loan to continue education reform in the areas of teacher professional development, support for the new curriculum, preschool education and higher education.
- The government, in partnership with UNICEF, is moving toward establishing child friendly standards for its schools.

Despite these positive developments, serious challenges remain in areas of education quality and financing.

Figure 1: Comparing Education Net Enrolment Rates in Azerbaijan, the Caucasus and the CEE/CIS Region, by level of education, 2005



Source: UNESCO. EFA Global Monitoring Report 2008.

Box 1. Quick Facts about Education in Azerbaijan and the Caucasus

	Azerbaijan	Armenia	Georgia	Caucasus
Total Population	8,699,000	3.01 m.	4.5	15.91 m.
Youth Unemployment Rate	21%	59%	28%	36%
Percentage of GDP spent on Education 2007	2.9	2.5	2.8	2.7 avg.
Net Pre-Primary School Enrolment, 2005 (<i>Gender Parity Index (GPI) (Girls/Boys)</i>)	21 (1.04)	33, 1.16	43, 1.13	32 avg.
Net Enrolment in Primary School, 2006 Government Statistics	97% (.98)	79, 1.04	93, .99	89 avg.
Net Enrolment in Secondary School, 2006 Government Statistics	73 (.97)	84, 1.03	81, 1.0	81 avg.
Gross Enrolment in Tertiary Enrolment, 2005 (<i>GPI</i>)	15 (.90)	28%, 1.22	46, 1.04	33 avg.
Primary Student/Teacher Ratio, 2005	13	21	14	16 avg.
Out of School Children of Primary School Age (% girls)	91,000 (50)	18,000, (40)	26,000 (50)	135,000
Percentage of children involved in child labour boys, girls (Government Statistics and ILO)	4.5%	x	x	x
Number of refugees and internally displaced persons	1 million	219,620	500,000	1.4 m.
PISA Score (mathematics ((regional rank/15), reading (""), science (""))	476 (9), 353 (14), 382 (14)	x	x	x
TIMSS Score (mathematics (regional rank/14), Science(regional rank/14))	x	478 (8), 461(13)	x	x
Transition rate to Secondary	99%	98.8	98.3	x
Percentage of Dropouts in Primary School (% girls), 2003	2	7.6	x	x

Source: UNESCO EFA Global Monitoring Report

Access

Azerbaijan's primary school enrolment lags behind that of its neighbors in the Caucasus and the CEE/CIS region. Its primary school net enrolment ratio (NER) is 85%, which is on par with Croatia as the lowest in the region.⁷ There remain about 90,000 children that are out of school and have never enrolled;⁸ 41% of children that are the right age to enroll in the first year of primary school are not enrolled.⁹

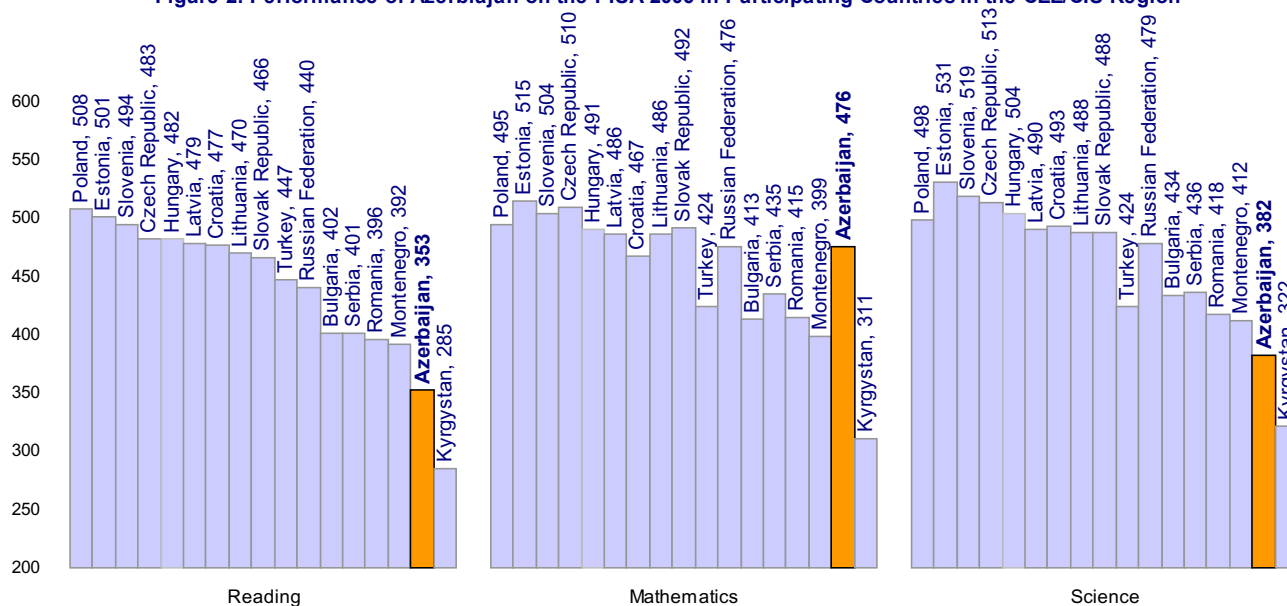
The real challenges in access lie in early childhood and upper secondary education. Pre-primary school NERs remain the third lowest in the region after Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, at 21%; only 7% of entrants into the first grade of primary school have had an early childhood education experience.¹⁰ While the transition rate from primary to lower secondary is at 99%, in upper secondary school,

the NER is 78% and the net attendance rate is 85%. Low secondary NERs are indicative of the poor quality and poor labor market returns of secondary schooling. This is made more obvious in tertiary education, where the gross enrolment ratio is only 15%, which is less than half of the sub-regional and regional average, which are 33% and 29% respectively. See Figure 1.

Equity

Azerbaijan has a strong tradition of equity in school enrolment and attendance rates, with the gender parity index (GPI) over 97% in pre-primary, primary and secondary enrolment. With regard to the urban-rural divide, there is less than 3% difference in enrolment and completion rates at all levels of education. Equity gaps also exist between refugee and non-refugee populations (See Box 2).

Figure 2: Performance of Azerbaijan on the PISA 2006 in Participating Countries in the CEE/CIS Region



The most significant equity gap lies between the richest and the poorest income quintiles. The wealthiest children in the country are about six percentage points more likely to enroll and attend primary school and about one percent age point more likely to complete primary school. The gap is slightly larger in secondary school where about ten percent more of the richest students attend secondary school than the poorest students.

Quality and Learning Outcomes

A look inside Azerbaijan's schools show that the quality of the system's teaching and learning processes lag behind those of its neighbors in the CEE/CIS region. Results from national and international assessments show that the schools are producing mediocre learning outcomes. Out of 104,000 participants in the national university entrance exam in 2006, 55% of students that took the test in 2007 failed to make the absolute minimum score of 200 points out of 700.¹¹

On the OECD's Program for International Assessment (PISA) 2006, Azerbaijan score 3rd to last in both reading and science out of 57 countries, beating only Qatar and Kyrgyzstan (See Figure 2).¹² On the mathematics section of PISA, Azerbaijan scored much higher but remained below the OECD average, ranking eighth to last out of the 17 participating countries in the region.

As might be expected with low learning outcomes, internal school-based processes lack efficiency and are of low quality. The school system has a low total percentage of repeaters (0.3%) and a high primary school completion rate (97%).¹³ With high comple-

tion rates and low performance on measures of learning outcomes, these figures indicate that schools lack minimum standards of learning. Children are being passed from grade to grade whether they have learned the required material or not.

Azerbaijan has made progress in reducing its teacher/pupil ratio, which is among the lowest in the region. The predominant pedagogy in schools is rote learning, although the government is attempting to introduce child-friendly teaching methods. In addition to out-dated teaching methods, schools in Azerbaijan do not have policies and referral systems to address issues of violence against children. Such an environment clearly reduces the quality of instruction and the opportunities children have to learn. In response, the government is driving a reform toward active learning, which is now being piloted in 15% of the country's schools.



Box 1. IDP/Refugee Education in Azerbaijan

Azerbaijan is home to the largest population of displaced persons in the region. According to the UNHCR, almost 800,000 persons of concern remain in the country, which is 60% of the displaced persons in the CEE/CIS region. Refugees, mostly internally displaced persons, appeared during the early nineties when people began to flee the conflict in the Nagorno-Karabakh region. Over half a million Azeris continue to live in settlements with little access to public services. Recently, more refugees have fled to Azerbaijan from Chechnya and other regions in the North Caucasus.

This poses a major challenge for education equity and access in the country. Many refugee children remain without access to primary education. A report on Chechen refugees in Azerbaijan found that about 20% of Chechen children are not attending school, about 24% are attending Chechen schools and about 57% are attending Azerbaijani public school, where they do not receive instruction in their language. Many refugees currently receive education in the camps from NGOs and international organizations, but this is not a long-term solution because many of the non-formal education programs are not recognized by the government.

The displaced population poses a challenge to education quality in Azerbaijan. Many refugee children enter school late and with less prior training than Azerbaijani children. Many refugee children have special linguistic needs, seeing as many do not speak the national language, which poses a challenge to the curriculum and teachers. Additionally, many of the displaced children and youth have experienced extreme violence and hardship as a result of the conflict and thus have special psycho-social learning needs.

Source: Norwegian Refugee Council.2006. Chechen Refugees in Baku, Azerbaijan.; UNHCR profile of Azerbaijan.

Education Financing

Azerbaijan has enjoyed stable economic growth since the late nineties, partially due to its oil industry. However, its expenditure on education has not reflected that growth. Azerbaijan spends about 2.9% of its GDP on education, which is the second lowest in the region (See Figure 4¹⁴). This rate has declined since 2000, at which time spending was about 4.5% of GDP (2006).¹⁵ This is half of the regional average for education spending at 4.4% and less than half of the average for Western Europe and the OECD countries, which is around 6%.

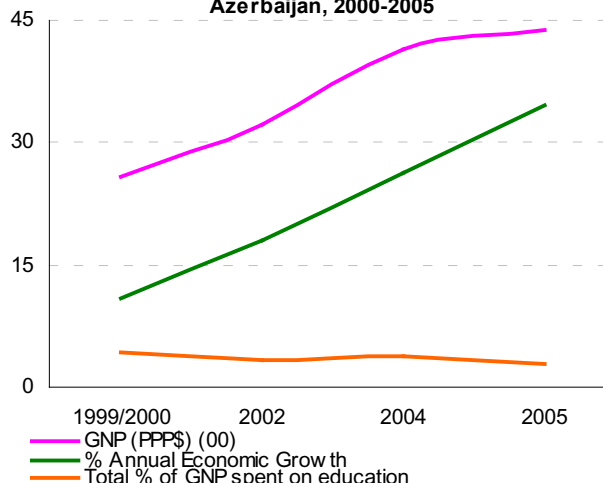
Priority Challenges in Education

Azerbaijan's challenges in education are similar to those in the rest of the region. UNICEF's priorities in the country are to:

- Improve school quality, especially with regard to teaching methods, teacher working conditions, school resources and the need for child-centered classrooms;
- Increase spending on education as percent of GNP;
- Increase access to Early Childhood Education;
- Increase participation in primary school;
- Improve education for refugees; and to
- Reduce school violence.

- 1 World Bank Data & Statistics web site. 2008.
- 2 EFA Global Monitoring Report 2008.
- 3 EFA Global Monitoring Report 2008.
- 4 UNDP Human Development Index Web Site 2008.
- 5 UNDP Human Development Index Web Site 2008.
- 6 Azerbaijan State Statistics
- 7 EFA Global Monitoring Report 2008.
- 8 EFA Global Monitoring Report 2008.
- 9 Children Out of School: Measuring Exclusion from Primary School. UNESCO UIS. 2008.
- 10 EFA Global Monitoring Report 2008
- 11 UNICEF Azerbaijan Annual Report. 2007.
- 12 OECD. PISA Executive Summary 2006.
- 13 EAF Global Monitoring Report 2008.
- 14 UNESCO EFA Global Monitoring Report; World Bank Online Statistics
- 15 UNESCO EFA Global Monitoring Report; UNDP Human Development Report Online.

Figure 4: Comparing Economic Growth to Expenditure on Education Overtime in Azerbaijan, 2000-2005



Active Learning

Azerbaijan has been a leader in the region in incorporating Active Learning approaches, which are child-centered, interactive and activity-based, into national reform. In 1998, the government launched a reform of curriculum and teaching approaches in an attempt to improve school quality. The government adopted and scaled up the UNICEF Active Learning model that had been piloted in a series of Azerbaijan's schools. The project was strongly supported by all education stakeholders, who recognized the weaknesses of the Soviet style teaching methods.

The Active Learning approach had many successes; enrolments in active learning schools increased, teachers trained in active methods spent longer on lesson preparation and they expected and encouraged all children to participate. That said there remain substantial setbacks. The ultimate success of the active learning approach is largely dependent on the success of other arms of the reform, like curriculum reform and resource allocation, which has not yet been as successful. Over time, teachers' motivation declined because of a lack of support, acknowledgment and on-going monitoring. Furthermore, teachers' pay and working conditions did not improve with their extra effort and remain low, even for the region.

In today's context of educational reform in CEE/CIS, where all governments are looking for ways to improve school quality, this initiative identifies important successes and failures that may be turned into best practices for future reference in the region and outside.

Source: UNICEF