

# Education in Kyrgyzstan

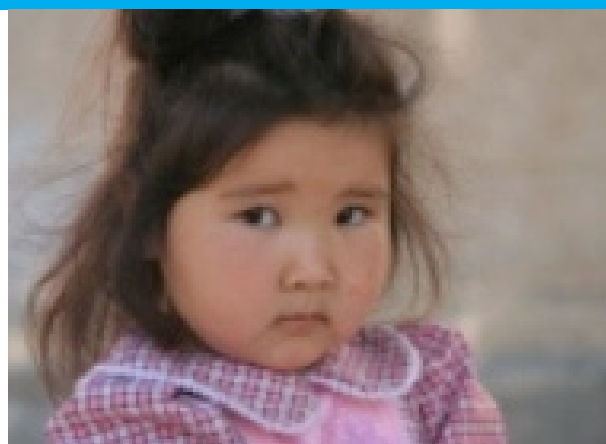
## Context

Like other countries in Central Asia, the remnants of the Soviet education system and the processes of transition continue to pose challenges for the country and its schools. While progress has been made toward educational improvement, obstacles remain to ensuring that all children have access to free compulsory education of good quality.

'The dissolution of the Soviet Union and the expanded role of competition led to pervasive changes in structure and performance of the Kyrgyz economy.'<sup>1</sup>

During Soviet times, its industry was strictly regulated and dependent on Moscow. Transition toward a free market economy brought with it a severe reduction in production output and thus a devastating economic decline throughout the nineties.<sup>2</sup> Today the GNP in the Kyrgyz Republic remains precarious. The per capita GNP of Kyrgyzstan is the second lowest in the region, after Tajikistan, at \$1,860 USD (PPP).<sup>3</sup> Its annual percentage growth is 2.7% per annum, which is half of its rate of 5.4% in 2000 but up from the decline of -0.2% in 2005.<sup>4</sup>

Unstable economic growth has led to a high poverty rate; 41% of the population lives below the national poverty line and 22% lives below \$2.00 USD a day.<sup>5</sup> Income inequality in the country has risen, with an increase in the gini coefficient from .31 in 1990 to .47 in 1999. Youth unemployment remains high at 15% and total unemployment is about 10%. Additionally, the 100,000 displaced persons living in the country and the people living in isolated mountainous villages remain cut off from many government services. The country is ranked 116<sup>th</sup> out of 177 countries on the Human Development Index, which is toward the bottom for the region and situated between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan in the sub-region.



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## Education Reform

'Transition led to fundamental changes in the education system. Many families questioned the utility of education when graduation no longer led to assured employment and when many families needed the contribution of all household members in order to sustain themselves. Lacking resources to maintain the education system as it had been, the government reduced the duration of compulsory education to nine years, shifted much of the responsibility for financing public primary, secondary, and higher education to local governments and parents, and authorized schools to raise money from the rental of facilities and other activities. Students were required to purchase or rent textbooks that formerly had been provided free.'<sup>6</sup>

Today the government guarantees free compulsory education for all children and made significant efforts to enforce this policy against the backdrop of transition.

## Box 1. Quick Facts about Education in Kyrgyzstan

	Kyrgyzstan	Kazakhstan	Tajikistan	Turkmenistan	Uzbekistan	Central Asia
Total Population	5.3 m	14.8 m	6.5 m	4.8 m	26.5 m	57.9
Youth Unemployment Rate as a % of Total Unemployment	155	153	136.1	150.2	x	
Percentage of GDP spent on Education	3.7	4	2.2	x	x	
Net Pre-Primary School Enrolment, 2005 (Gender Parity Index (GPI) (Girls/Boys))	10, (1.0)	33, (.97)	7, (.93)	x	21	17.8
Net Enrolment in Primary School, 2005 (GPI)	87, (.99)	91, (.98)	97, x	x	x	91.67
Net Enrolment in Secondary School, 2005 (GPI)	80, (1.01)	92, (.99)	80, (.85)	x	x	84
Gross Enrolment in Tertiary Enrolment, 2005 (GPI)	43, (1.62)	41, (1.25)	17, (.35)		15, (.80)	34
Primary Student/Teacher Ratio, 2005	24	x	22	x	x	
Out of School Children of Primary School Age (% girls)	39,000 (38.5%)	9,000 (59%)	18, 000 (86%)	x	x	51,000
Ranking on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (out of 179 countries)	150	150	150	162	175	x

Source: UNESCO EFA Global Monitoring Report 2008; Transmonee database 2008

- The government has made education improvement a budgetary priority, investing a \$9 million FTI installment to infrastructure provision.
- The government launched the Community Management Project, in cooperation with UNICEF, to bring greater community participation to schools.
- The government launched a project to increase access to early childhood education.<sup>7</sup>

While these initiatives have begun to revive the country's education system, more challenges remain if the EFA goals and MDG2 are to be realized.

### Access

The Kyrgyz Republic has made some progress in increasing access to education, yet remains behind its regional and sub-regional neighbors. Its primary school net enrolment ratio (NER) is at 87%, which is below the average NER in the sub-region - 90% - and the regional average - 92%; its NER is the fourth lowest in the region, after Azerbaijan, Ukraine and Moldova. 24,000 children of primary-school age remain out of school.<sup>8</sup> In secondary school, 80% of children of the relevant age group are enrolled, which is also below the regional average - 84% - and the sub-regional average - 83%. The country has the most progress to make in pre-primary education, where only 10% of children are enrolled, which is extremely low compared to the regional average of 45% and the sub-regional average of 17%. Tertiary enrolments are also below regional and sub-regional averages at 37%.

According to UNICEF, enrolment figures in the Kyrgyz republic have actually consistently decreased during the past five years, although figures vary.<sup>9</sup> Reasons for this decline could be rising formal and informal costs of schooling, poor educational



Source: UNICEF Kyrgyzstan

quality and reduced private returns of school completion. Additionally, the disintegration of school infrastructure and the poor conditions in schools may act as a deterrent.

The government created new obstacles to educational access in 2007. The government decreed that a school uniform is compulsory for all primary school students beginning in the 2008-2009 school year. The uniforms must be purchased by the parents. This contradicts the government's policy of free education and creates a barrier of access to education for all children, especially the poorest children who cannot afford the uniform.

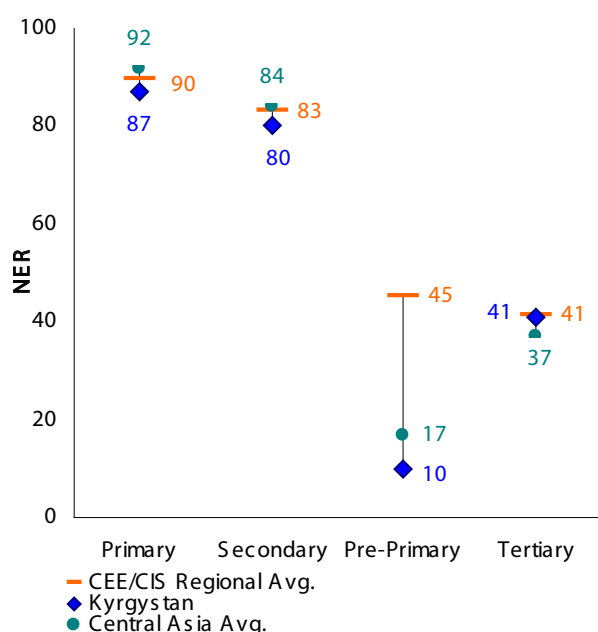
### Equity

Despite national figures on educational enrolment and attendance, disparities in attendance rates show that access to education at all levels differs for sub-groups within the population. With a gender parity index of 0.99, the gender gap is not a significant issue when it comes to educational attendance at any level, especially compared to Kyrgyzstan's neighbor Tajikistan, which has the largest gender gap in the region. Although, there exists a slight difference in the net attendance rates of girls and boys in primary and pre-primary school that should be monitored. Additionally, of the out-of-school population, just about half are girls.

The rural-urban divide is of much greater concern in Kyrgyzstan. Although access to primary school is comparable in rural and urban areas, in secondary school the number of rural children attending is six percentage points fewer than in urban areas. In pre-primary school, this gap is intensified. The percentage of children attending pre-school in urban areas is more than three times that of children in rural areas, where only 10% are enrolled compared to 33% in urban areas. Rural children are the most difficult to reach in Kyrgyzstan because they largely inhabit remote mountainous villages that are difficult to access.

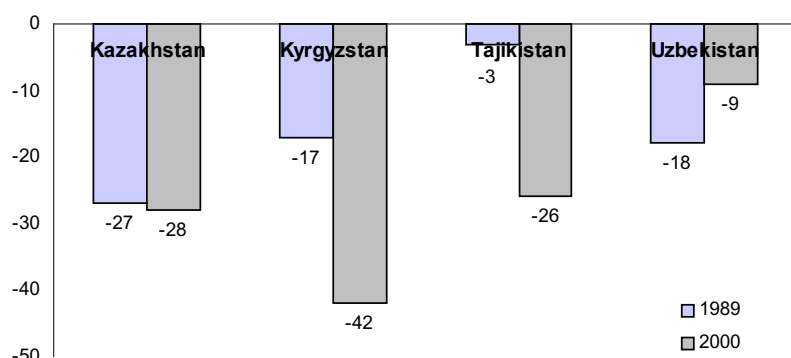
As in other countries in the region, the richest children enjoy better access to education at all levels. This gap is most pronounced in secondary education and pre-primary education, where only 7% of

**Figure 1. Comparing Education Net Enrolment Rates in Kyrgyzstan to CEE/CIS Regional Average, 2005**



Source: UNESCO EFA Global Monitoring Report 2008

**Figure 2. Teachers Earnings in Central Asia in Relation to Average Earnings, 1989 and 2000**



the country's poorest children attend school as compared to the 47% of the country's richest children. This gap partially reflects the rural/urban gap because rural children tend to be poorer than urban children, showing that pre-primary school and secondary school are accessed mainly by wealthy urban children.

### Learning Outcomes and Quality

Learning outcomes in Kyrgyzstan are poor, which is not surprising considering poor quality and efficiency of the system. Kyrgyzstan participated in PISA 2006 and scored last out of the 57 participating countries, 17 of which were from the CEE/CIS region, in reading, mathematics and science. It performed particularly poorly in reading, where it scored more than 100 points behind Montenegro, which was ranked third to last, and almost 200 points behind the regional average (See Figure 3).

Inefficient school-based processes lead to poor learning outcomes. The average pupil-teacher ratio is 1:24, which is the highest in the region. Teachers earn less than 40% of the average national earnings, making them underpaid, under-trained and over burdened. Teachers' earnings have actu-

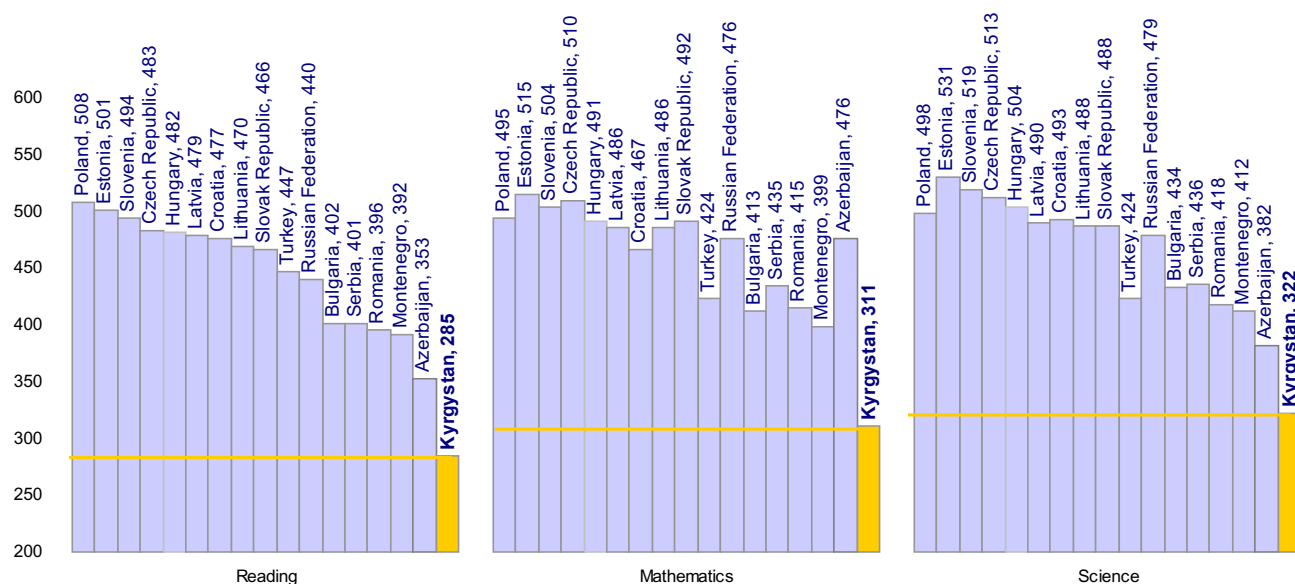
ally decreased in comparison to average national earnings since 1989, making them of the least value out of all the Central Asian States. See Figure 2.

In addition, schools and teachers are vastly under-resourced in terms of materials and working conditions. In 2001, 'the Monitoring Learning Achievements survey<sup>10</sup> found, for example, that 80 percent of primary schools lacked a complete supply of textbooks for students, 70% lacked teachers' guides, 20% lacked desks and chairs for students, 70% needed repairs to school furniture, 23% of schools lacked water supply, and 39% lacked telephones.<sup>11</sup>

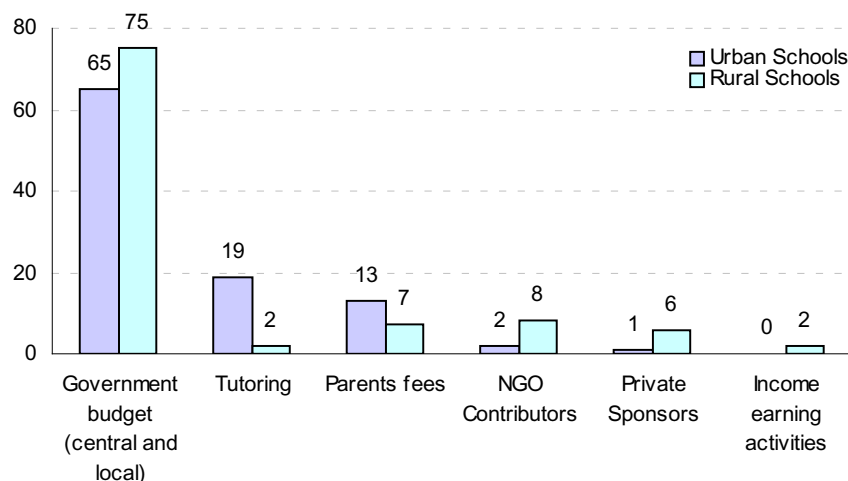
On the National Assessment of Students' Learning Achievements (NASLA) in 2007, students' achievement was divided into four levels: below basic, basic, above basic and high. More than 60% of all students in grade four demonstrated below basic achievement in all three subjects - reading and understanding, math, and civic education - meaning that the majority of students did not have the basic knowledge, skills and attitudes needed for academic success. Eighth grade students' performance lagged behind the fourth graders; 84.3% of students scored at the "below basic" level in math, 81.8% in sciences and 73.5% in reading and understanding.

Five per cent of students dropout before the end of primary school and only 89% complete primary school, which is the lowest in the region (among countries for which data is available). Only 0.1 percent of students repeat a grade, showing that although students are not mastering basic skills they are being passed to the next grade and ushered through the system. Education quality also varies by geographic region.

**Figure 3: Performance of Kyrgyzstan on the PISA 2006 and Participating Countries in the CEE/CIS Region**



**Figure 4. Sources of Financing for Primary School Expenditures in Kyrgyzstan**



### Education Financing

Education financing is a priority issue in the Kyrgyzstan. Currently, Kyrgyzstan spends 4.6% of its GDP on education which is the highest in the Central Asia and Caucasus sub-regions and on par with the average total expenditures in Central and Eastern Europe. This equates to about 22% of its national budget, which is also above average for the sub-region.

Yet, 'on average, 35% of the reported expenditures of primary schools in urban areas and 25% of reported expenditures of rural schools come from non-budget sources (See Figure 4).' This is in spite of the fact that compulsory education is declared to be free for all children. The increasing reliance on these non-budgetary sources is a source of increased inequality because poor children cannot afford to pay the informal fees, which are often inflated to compensate for teachers' low salaries.<sup>12</sup>

As discussed above, teachers' salaries are continually deflating against salaries in other fields. With their salaries unchanged and the cost of living

continually rising, teachers often have to work two jobs to make ends meet. While the country's prioritization of infrastructure improvement is important to raising teaching and learning conditions, it is essential that teachers earn a fair wage if school quality is to be supported.

### Education Priorities in Kyrgyzstan

Although numerous challenges remain in education in Kyrgyzstan, the priorities are to:

- Update and improve the national curriculum through comprehensive reform ;
- Introduce and support a new child-friendly teaching paradigm;
- Introduce per capita funding on a national level;
- Monitor informal school fees and costs for families;
- Introduce compulsory school preparedness;
- Increase coverage of ECD services; and
- Enhance teachers' incentives for good performance.

- 1 Mertaugh, Michael. 2004. Education in Central Asia, with Particular Reference to the Kyrgyz Republic.
- 2 Mertaugh, Michael. 2004. Education in Central Asia, with Particular Reference to the Kyrgyz Republic.
- 3 UNESCO. 2008. EFA Global Monitoring Report.
- 4 World Bank Statistics Online. 2008.
- 5 UNDP. 2008. Human Development Report online.
- 6 Mertaugh, Michael. 2004. Education in Central Asia, with Particular Reference to the Kyrgyz Republic.
- 7 UNICEF Kyrgyzstan. 2007. Annual Report.
- 8 UNESCO. 2008. EFA Global Monitoring Report.
- 9 UNICEF Kyrgyzstan. 2007. Annual Report.
- 10 The MLA assessment is of dubious methodological quality, however, its results are still likely indicative of overall trends.
- 11 Mertaugh, Michael. 2004. Education in Central Asia, with Particular Reference to the Kyrgyz
- 12 Mertaugh, Michael. 2004. Education in Central Asia, with Particular Reference to the Kyrgyz

### Box 1. Early Childhood Education in Kyrgyzstan

Access to pre-school education in Kyrgyzstan is severely limited. The pre-school NER is only 10%, which is the second lowest in the CEE/CIS region. The local government is making initial attempts to bring ECD to the policymaking table. 'The *"Early childhood counts rights from the start"* project was launched in Leylek and Batken districts of Batken province, with support from UNICEF. In total 15 preschool classes and 15 community-based kindergartens and child development centers have been established and thus, 765 children under age seven have attended pre-school activities.

The MoE initiated the development of the Pre-school Law. The law provides for compulsory school preparedness (at least one year) and community-based kindergartens as an alternative to state structures. The law should be approved by the government and adopted by the parliament in November 2008. This is a welcome achievement; however, legislative and policy changes without enforcement mechanisms are useless. The government also launched a series of ECD talk shows, which have been broadcast on National TV, which has a 98.5% coverage rate in the country; one of the main priorities of this programme is to facilitate children's transition from the home environment into the primary school system. Despite these important steps, much more attention is needed in the area of ECCE. *Source: UNICEF.*