



# Opportunities for Enhancing Equitable Education: Learnings from Argentina, Brazil and India

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Solidarity for the  
Achievement  
of the SDGs



# Abstract

Persistent educational inequalities are obstacles to social cohesion, wellbeing and inclusive economic growth in the Global South. Ensuring access to education from an early age and promoting the completion of secondary school with quality learning is an obligation on states and key to our collective futures. Using data from Argentina, Brazil and India, this policy brief presents key strategies to overcome the prevailing inequalities, with examples from initiatives implemented in country-specific contexts. These examples offer lessons to scale up targeted interventions and support programmes for continued participation of at-risk children. These recommendations are aimed at leveraging initiatives and reducing equity gaps within, and beyond, G20 countries. The G20 provides a valuable platform for advocating effective policy interventions and advancing multilateral commitments to eliminate educational inequities.

**Keywords:** Educational Inequalities, School Meals, School Dropout, Early Warning Systems, India, Brazil, Argentina

# Diagnosis

## Inequitable Access to Education in the Global South

Intersections between inequitable access to education, economic mobility and social cohesion remain an obstacle for sustainable development in the Global South. UNESCO data (2024) shows that the global number of out-of-school children has risen by 6 million since 2021 and now totals 251 million, most of them in countries of the Global South. Since 2015, the out-of-school population has stagnated. The secondary completion rate has increased from 53% in 2015 to 59% in 2023.

However, 650 million children leave school without a secondary school certificate. While unequal access to education has been a long-lasting challenge for national states and the international community, the COVID-19 pandemic has accentuated barriers to education access and equity within and across countries, and across social groups (Srivastava et al., 2021; 2022). These challenges persist in the form of mid- and long-term impacts of the pandemic crisis and as a result of more recent geopolitical conflict (GCPEA, 2024; UNICEF, 2025a) and a reduction in humanitarian aid in the international community (UNICEF, 2025b). Urgent action is needed to accelerate equitable and inclusive access for primary and secondary education.

## Recommendations

Education is a key driver of the South Africa G20 Presidency's theme "Solidarity, Equality, Sustainability", as well as the core of the original G20 mandate of promoting Strong, Sustainable, Balanced and Inclusive Growth, since it has the strongest links with economic development, poverty reduction, health, social cohesion and equity. Educational policies are drivers for achieving the

sustainable development goals and reducing inequalities while they contribute to wellbeing and life quality. This policy brief offers a set of policy recommendations based on Argentina, India and Brazil case studies and offers a number of cross-cutting recommendations.

**1) To promote policies aimed at implementing Early Warning Systems for the prevention of school dropout by identifying vulnerable students and applying targeted responses.**

**Box 1. Case study: The implementation of Early Warning Systems in Argentina**

Completing secondary school is not a reality for all young people in Argentina. Currently, 34% of the population between 20 and 24 years do not have a secondary diploma. This is a reality crossed by important inequalities. In the highest income decile of the population, 87% of the population over 25 years complete high school (similar to the European Union average), while in the lowest decile, 32% do so (Templado, 2021). Also, in a diverse territory such as Argentina, there are differences according to place of birth. Preventing school dropout is an urgent challenge.

Studies carried out in the provinces of Mendoza, Entre Ríos and Salta (Delprato et al., 2023a, 2023b, 2025c) allowed us to characterise the problem. Over-age, attendance, socio-economic level, and grades are presented as precursors of dropout. This was the first step in the development of Early Warning Systems (EWS). EWS is a tool that enables the powerful use of information to prevent school dropout. By monitoring the variables defined as precursors, the EWS, in some cases through artificial intelligence, identifies students at risk of dropping out of school. Ministries can use these data to recognise trends and patterns in different regions, facilitating informed decision making on the allocation of resources or implementation of specific programmes. In turn, with this information, schools can intervene in a timely and individualised manner to

support students at risk. Mendoza and Entre Ríos were the pioneer provinces implementing EWS with auspicious results. In Mendoza, its implementation favoured a drop in the dropout rate from 7.1% to 6.4% in one year. In Entre Ríos, 650 students from 80 schools who were at high risk of dropping out continued their studies (Paparella et al., 2025). By the end of 2025, eight provinces out of 24 are expected to have an EWS in operation to identify vulnerable students and implement targeted responses.

## **2) To reduce high school abandonment and dropout by means of financial incentives and multilevel governance of data about beneficiaries**

### **Box 2. Case study: The implementation of Pé de Meia in Brazil**

High school abandonment (interruption of attendance along the school year) and dropout (not enrolling in the next school year) have dropped in Brazil. In state-level schools (which comprise nearly 85% of high school slots), abandonment dropped from 16% to 7% between 2007 and 2019 and dropout declined from 16% to 11% in the same period. However, these promising figures hide socio-economic inequalities: while 95% of the children of fathers with complete higher education conclude high school, this percentage is 25.9% for the children of fathers without schooling (Ferreira et al., 2022). Besides, in 2023, only 75% of students at the age of being in high school were indeed at school (IBGE, 2023). As a result, while about 94% of young people in the highest income quintile obtain a high school diploma, this is true only for 46% of young people in the poorest quintile (Pereira, 2022). State-level supply displays territorial inequality: while 62.5% of students in the state of Pernambuco have full-time classes, this rate is only 4.4% in the state of Parana (IBGE, 2023). Among other reasons, the need to work is an important driver of inequality in high school conclusion.

The Pé de Meia (a Brazilian slang meaning saving) is a federal-led programme launched in 2023 aimed at students enrolled in public high school and in the Unified Registry for Social Programs (CadÚnico). The programme works as a savings account through which poor students receive a monthly payment of BRL 200 (\$ 40), which can be withdrawn at any time. Withdrawing from the programme can occur upon request from the beneficiary or legal guardian; after dropping out of school for more than two years, failing twice in a row, or on a proven situation of fraud or death. Pé de Meia beneficiaries also receive BRL 1,000 (\$ 200) at the end of each completed year, which can only be withdrawn from savings after graduation. Today, 4 900 000 students are beneficiaries of the programme.

A key instrument for the programme to be effective is centralised reliable information about beneficiaries. Schools at all government levels (federal, state, district or municipal) are responsible for capturing and reporting student data to the Ministry of Education (MEC) through a computerised system. States and municipalities provide information about poor households that is managed by the federal CadÚnico.

### **3) To support policies advancing attendance and equity in schooling through school meal programmes:**

School meal programmes have become important policy instruments with multiple goals of improving children's health and nutrition, increasing school enrolment, attendance and retention, addressing socio-economic disparities and providing social protection.

### **Box 3. Case study: The Implementation of Midday Meal Schemes in India**

India has achieved significant progress in elementary education, with net enrolment rates (class 1–8) at 96.5% and annual dropout rates (class 9–10) at 12.6%, although there are variations at sub-national levels (Gol, 2024). In rural areas too, school enrolments have been high for almost two decades, with improvements observed in learning outcomes (ASER, 2025). Reducing dropout rates at higher ages, increasing enrolment of girls and improving learning outcomes continue to be focused upon.

Given the intersections between children's health, nutrition, increasing school enrolment, attendance and retention in school, a key policy intervention has been India's Midday Meal scheme, now renamed PM-POSHAN (Pradhan Mantri Poshan Shakti Nirman). Supported by successive governments, endorsed by the Supreme Court as a basic entitlement, and facilitated through decentralised models that embrace partnerships with voluntary, charitable and non-governmental sectors, it provides free, cooked meals based on nutritional norms, reaching over 112 million children (Gol, 2025).

Significant impacts are attributed to the scheme for increasing equitable access in education and societal wellbeing. Examples include, increased net enrolment for the first grade (Kaur, 2021), gender equity through benefitting girls and reducing child labour (Dhatchayani et al., 2024; Gundersen et al., 2012), reduced household education costs and enhanced student concentration (Drèze & Khera, 2017), reduced absenteeism (Singh & Gupta, 2015), and higher retention with increased income potential (Drake et al., 2017). Enhanced learning outcomes such as reading and math scores are realisable in conjunction with other crucial schooling inputs, such as trained teachers and infrastructure (Chakraborty & Jayaraman, 2019).

PM-POSHAN effectively leverages existing school infrastructure and local institutions to ensure logistical efficiency and accountability (GOI, 2022). Frontline challenges include ensuring diversity in the menu, food adequacy and quality, coping with cultural and traditional norms (Assan et al., 2020; Nanjappan et al., 2020), and adequate outlays that are lower than global averages (MoE 2024). The scheme has potential for successful transformation with demonstrated replicability, scope to accommodate context-specific factors, engage multiple actors, promote gender equity and decentralise models of practice.

The G20 and, more generally, the international community can contribute to supporting these recommendations by promoting governance schemes that enable a more effective approach to the recommended policies. In this regard, we also propose the following cross-cutting considerations for G20 country leaders and international organisations:

- Promote robust use of information and artificial intelligence-based tools in decision-making processes to identify student and vulnerable needs and implement targeted responses.
- Promote intersectoral collaboration to address issues such as nutrition, education, and public health for holistic child development.
- Protect and increase education sector financing and prioritise vulnerable areas and groups.
- Develop education officials' capacity to serve as system leaders.
- Empower local communities, schools and traditional leaders to strengthen ownership and accountability of welfare programmes.

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