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Educational Quality Improvement Program
Policy ▪ Systems ▪ Management

Is EMIS Enough to Measure Primary Completion?

Indicators of education quality help determine the success or failure of education programs. These indicators play an increasingly important role in decisions about the strategies and resources needed to realize universal primary education by allowing donors and policymakers to compare national education systems, measure the impact of policy changes over time, and identify areas where the need for policy reform is most pressing.

Recent improvements in Education Management Information Systems (EMIS) have allowed countries and organizations to obtain and organize national education information quickly and easily. The most common education quality indicators—the primary completion rate and the cohort survival rate—are easily calculated using EMIS information. However, failure to account for additional indicators such as high repetition and late entry rates can skew estimates of education quality in developing countries. Therefore, additional indicators, primarily obtained through household surveys, are necessary for cross-country or time-series analyses to be effective.

The primary completion rate is calculated as the total number of students successfully completing the last year of primary school in a given year, divided by the total number of children of official graduation age in the population. The primary completion rate measures both system coverage and student attainment but does not measure learning or efficiency. Additionally, the two populations this indictor compares may not be related in developing countries where there is likely to be a significant age range in a graduating class. Because it does not differentiate students still in the system from those who never entered the system, the primary completion rate does not provide adequate information about dropout rates or populations without access to the system.

The cohort survival rate measures an education system's ability to retain students from one grade to the next—the percentage of students of a first grade class who complete the final grade of primary school without taking time off, dropping out, or repeating. However, because cohort survival is measured against an entering group of students rather than the total eligible population, the indicator fails to capture the sometimes large population of children without access to primary education.

Because neither the primary completion rate nor the cohort survival rate alone provides sufficient information about populations that have no access to primary school, additional indicators are necessary. Measurements such as the dropout rate, repetition rate, gross enrollment rate, and percentage of out-of-school children fill in some of the holes. However, few countries currently conduct the household surveys required to attain these indicators, and only on an irregular basis.

EMIS data are important and necessary for measuring and tracking education systems. However, additional indicators collected through regular household surveys are imperative for policymakers and donors to fully understand and effectively compare education systems in developing countries, particularly where access remains an issue.

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Acknowledgements

EQUIP2: Educational Policy, Systems Development, and Management is one of three USAID-funded Leader with Associates Cooperative Agreements under the umbrella heading Educational Quality Improvement Program (EQUIP). As a Leader with Associates mechanism, EQUIP2 accommodates buy-in awards from USAID bureaus and missions to support the goal of building education quality at the national, sub-national, and cross-community levels.

FHI 360 is the lead organization for the global EQUIP2 partnership of education and development organizations, universities, and research institutions. The partnership includes fifteen major organizations and an expanding network of regional and national associates throughout the world: Aga Khan Foundation, American Institutes for Research, CARE, Center for Collaboration and the Future of Schooling, East-West Center, Education Development Center, International Rescue Committee, Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr. Foundation, Michigan State University, Mississippi Consortium for International Development, ORC Macro, Research Triangle Institute, University of Minnesota, University of Pittsburgh Institute of International Studies in Education, Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children.

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