

**EVIDENCE FOR SYSTEM TRANSFORMATION**  
**IMPROVING EDUCATION ACCESS AND COMPLETION FOR MARGINALIZED  
LEARNERS**

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## 1. Introduction

In pursuit of achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4 which emphasizes ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education for all, it is imperative to underscore the significance of ensuring education systems leave no child or adolescent behind. Education stands as a fundamental human right, enshrined in various international declarations and conventions. Nearly all Global Partnership for Education (GPE) partner countries have ratified or acceded to the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (GPE 2023e) and the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and many are signatories of the Global Compact on Refugees (UN General Assembly 2018) as well as the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (UN General Assembly 1966), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN General Assembly 1989), and the Convention against Discrimination in Education (UNESCO 1960), all of which stipulate the provision of free primary education for all children, and the availability and accessibility of secondary education. As such, it is the responsibility of country governments, as the primary duty-bearers of these rights, to ensure every young person has access to quality education without discrimination or exclusion.

GPE remains steadfast in its commitment to this principle as articulated in its 2025 strategic plan (GPE 2022) and the 2023 working paper “Leaving No One Behind: Transforming Education Systems, Equitably and Inclusively” (GPE 2023e). GPE’s strategic plan focuses on improving learning, gender equality and inclusion for the most marginalized children, including children affected by crises or displacement and children with disabilities (GPE 2022). The “Leaving No One Behind” paper advises how countries can navigate the complex terrain of education reform, with a keen focus on enhancing both access to education and the quality of teaching and learning. A focus on both access and quality ensures all young people not only enter the education system but also transition and ultimately complete their schooling. This necessitates a dual strategy of implementing systemwide policy reforms alongside targeted interventions, with a particular emphasis on addressing the needs of the most marginalized or vulnerable populations. By placing gender equality and inclusion at the heart of policy planning efforts, GPE endeavors to transform education systems worldwide, striving toward a future where every child and adolescent can fulfill their potential through education.

Building on the “Leaving No One Behind” paper, this background research paper synthesizes some of the existing evidence on *what works*—and where possible, cost-effective approaches—to improve access and completion for marginalized children

and youth. The paper accompanies other background research in GPE's Evidence for System Transformation series. This includes, for example, more in-depth papers on learners with disabilities (GPE, forthcoming), teaching for gender equality (GPE 2023c) and the inclusion of refugees in national education systems (GPE 2024b). This background research uses an intersectional approach to address marginalization, recognizing that those learners most at risk of exclusion in education are the ones with multiple overlapping vulnerabilities. Drawing on GPE's (2023d) framework for system transformation to address gender equality in access *to*, *within* and *through* education, this paper expands upon this framework to indicate, where relevant, how education systems can be transformative for young people with characteristics that crosscut with gender to create further marginalization in certain settings. The GPE approach to gender equality is an intentionally intersectional approach that recognizes varied educational experiences children and young people face in different contexts. The note is aligned with GPE's 2025 strategy and mission to transform education systems so that all young people receive at least one year of quality pre-primary education and 12 years of basic education. As such, it includes policies and interventions that target children and adolescents at the pre-primary to secondary levels. Drawing on academic and gray literature published over the past 10 years (2014–24), it is not a comprehensive evidence review; rather, it prioritizes systematic literature reviews, meta-analyses, rapid evidence reviews and mappings while filling evidence gaps with the wider literature (see appendix 1 for a more detailed methodology).

The note presents the evidence as a high-level summary, with examples from GPE partner countries throughout. First, it explores the enabling factors for improving access and inclusion, particularly in relation to data, policy and planning, coordination across actors and educational financing. The next two sections then synthesize the available evidence on interventions that improve access and completion, respectively. Although the evidence is arranged as such, these sections are not mutually exclusive; the note highlights where some interventions have increased both access and completion. Finally, the last section identifies evidence gaps and concludes with ways forward.

## 2. Enabling Factors for Improving Access and Completion

**Comprehensive and up-to-date data**, integrated into robust education management information systems (EMIS), play a pivotal role in identifying and understanding the dynamics of out-of-school children and adolescents within a country. Access to disaggregated data allows policy makers to discern the specific needs of marginalized groups, enabling targeted interventions and resource allocation to effectively support these individuals (UNESCO 2020). UNICEF's (2021)

education pathway analysis, for example, provides data to help government officials, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), policy makers and other education stakeholders compare access, transition and completion rates for different groups of students (for example, based on gender or poverty) so they can determine where best to prioritize and direct resources. Reliable and up-to-date data are particularly important to track children on the move, including refugees or displaced learners (see, for example, Marcus, León-Himmelstine et al. 2023; Marcus, Nicolai et al. 2023). Data can also be used to create early warning systems to identify students at risk of dropping out of school and to design tailored strategies to combat school desertion (see, for example, Cameron, Horst, and D’Angelo 2023; Cameron et al. 2024).

For learners with disabilities, UNICEF and the Washington Group’s Child Functioning Module can help collect age-specific data that focus on child functioning and report on a continuum of difficulties, making visible a fuller spectrum of young people with disabilities and increasing the accuracy of data collection efforts (UNICEF 2020). There is a need, however, to harmonize data across sectors (for example, education and social protection) so governments can develop comprehensive, evidence-based policies and programs (Mont et al. 2022). In countries where government capacity may be limited, or in remote, rural or fragile areas that are challenging to reach, civil society organizations (CSOs) and citizen-led approaches to data collection have proven useful (Wilson 2018). The involvement of these actors also fosters community engagement and ownership of education initiatives.

**Educational planning** is an essential link between the right to education principles that states have committed to, and their fulfillment (IIEP-UNESCO 2022). Educational planning ensures the alignment of current policies with a government’s obligations and commitments, as well as the development, monitoring and review of norms and standards (UNESCO 2021). Equity and inclusion should thus be reflected in all educational planning documents, including education sector plans and policies, transitional education plans and programming documents. Through gender-responsive education planning, for example, governments can conduct a gender analysis to identify gendered barriers within education systems and then ensure policies and strategies are designed to address them (GPE and UNGEI 2019) (see [box 1](#)).

The lack of documentation is often a barrier for refugees or displaced persons to register or enroll in school; therefore, policies that remove these barriers can be effective at improving access (Marcus, León-Himmelstine et al. 2023; Marcus, Nicolai et al. 2023). Double shifts to expand access to school has also been a common strategy to enhance refugees’ access to education; however, there exists limited

### **Box 1. Gender-responsive education planning: Sierra Leone**

Sierra Leone's (2020) *Education Sector Analysis: Assessing the Enabling Environment for Gender Equality* presents an in-depth analysis of the education sector over the past decade, focusing on key aspects such as financing, internal and external efficiency, and efforts to integrate gender considerations within education systems. Drawing on gender-disaggregated data, the analysis found that girls' participation in education has improved over the years, but there remains marked gender disparities at the subnational level, with gross enrollment rates revealing girls being disadvantaged in certain districts, and boys in others.

Differences were also found in the reasons why boys and girls do not access school: boys tend to drop out or never attend school for economic reasons, whereas girls tend to drop out for social reasons, such as adolescent pregnancy or child, early and forced marriage. Furthermore, the intersection of gender, poverty, disability status and location significantly exacerbates inequalities for both girls and boys. Nevertheless, the analysis found a strong political commitment to addressing gender issues and inequalities across all sectors of the government, particularly through the establishment of the Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs.

This commitment to gender equality continued from this analysis to planning phases for education priority reforms. For example, GPE grant applications included gender-responsive system-level initiatives such as training education ministry staff to have in-house gender expertise in curriculum, planning and data use. Gender and inclusion have also been incorporated across all other teaching and learning components, including curriculum and teaching material revision to challenge gender stereotypes and be more disability inclusive, as well as in pre- and in-service training to identify and support students with special education needs.

evidence on their effectiveness in improving access (Burde et al. 2015). Inclusion of refugees in national education systems, rather than parallel schooling provisions, is a current policy priority as it offers a sustainable form of education where investments benefit both host community and refugee children alike.<sup>1</sup> However, transitioning from parallel to inclusive systems is oftentimes a long process and, as such, data are limited on outcomes for children living as refugees. Furthermore, without wider improvements to the system or the quality of teaching and learning environments in schools serving refugees, the inclusion of children living as refugees does not always equate to

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, the [multistakeholder pledge](#) from the 2023 Global Refugee Forum on including children living as refugees within national education systems.

improved learning outcomes (Carvalho and Dryden–Peterson 2024; Marcus, Nicolai et al. 2023). Thus, while both inclusive systems and community-based education programs may potentially benefit refugees, it is difficult to compare which approaches work best in different contexts (Burde et al. 2015, 2023).

Prolonged school closures caused by the COVID-19 pandemic made it abundantly clear that governments must **build resilient education systems**, in part by ensuring that comprehensive emergency and disaster risk reduction plans are in place (Shah 2019), and that these plans explicitly address the needs of learners who are vulnerable, including younger children who often have less access to remote education (Tammi, Atis, and Vivekanandan 2024). While there is a growing evidence base on how to protect education from attack in education in emergencies (EiE) settings, less is known about how to support children most effectively following climate-related crises (Burde, Lahmann, and Thompson 2019). Another paper in this series of background research on evidence for system transformation provides more detailed guidance on educational resilience (GPE 2024a). In addition, INEE's (2024) *Minimum Standards for Education* can serve as a guiding framework to develop policies and programs that support the education of children in fragility, conflict and violence (FCV) contexts. The standards include a cross-cutting focus on equity, gender and disability. The Global Alliance for Disaster Risk Reduction and Resilience in the Education Sector's *Comprehensive School Safety Framework 2022–2030 for Child Rights and Resilience in the Education Sector* also includes gender equity, disability and social inclusion at its core (GADRRRES 2022).

**Multisectoral collaboration and coordination** involving stakeholders from education, health, finance and other relevant sectors are critical for the effective implementation of policies that support the most marginalized. Inclusive education requires both horizontal collaboration—to share information, set standards and sequence support services—as well as vertical collaboration across all levels of governance to ensure local and national authorities can fulfill their mandates (UNESCO 2020). To identify and fulfill the support needs of male and female learners with disabilities, early identification and intervention mechanisms must be established as early as possible, requiring collaboration across line ministries and building transdisciplinary teams of support specialists (Hunt 2021). Delineating clear roles and responsibilities for governmental bodies, alongside fostering collaboration and participation from teachers, school leaders, communities and CSOs, enhances accountability and strengthens collective efforts toward inclusive education. Equity and inclusion can also be strengthened through engagement with communities and by fostering partnerships between key stakeholders, including national and local governments,

teachers, families and civil society, to ensure policies, interventions and their indicators for success are contextually relevant and aligned to local contexts (Mendoza and Heymann 2022; World Bank 2023a). CSOs such as those who defend the rights of women and girls, Indigenous groups or persons with disabilities can contribute local knowledge and rights-based language to the design of policies and legislation as well as hold governments accountable for international treaty commitments (see, for example, Johnstone, Sefuthi, and Hayes 2022 and [box 2](#)).

### **Box 2. Engaging civil society organizations and local actors in the design of policy**

Through [Education Out Loud](#), GPE works to enhance the capacities of civil society to engage in education sector planning, policy dialogue and monitoring, and to promote transparency and accountability. Education Out Loud provides grants to organizations under three different operational components (OCs): national education coalitions (OC1), CSOs working at the national level (OC2) and transnational alliances (OC3). As part of OC1, out of 60 established national education coalitions, 57 have the participation of organizations that represent people living with disabilities ([Education Out Loud 2022](#)). In Madagascar, through the OC2-grantee SCORE, there has been significant involvement and participation of CSOs working for women's rights and persons with disability as well as youth-led CSOs because the project focuses on gender equality and broader inclusion.

**Equitable domestic financing mechanisms** are critical to ensuring all learners have access to quality education. Decentralization to allocate financial or material resources to regions or schools that is coupled with enhanced monitoring helps ensure local governments or school leaders can make decisions to meet service delivery commitments for all of their students (UNESCO 2020; Jenkins 2023). Pro-equity approaches to financing also require targeting resources to vulnerable students and their families (for example, through the removal of school fees or the provision of school meals and scholarships, as addressed further below). A one percentage point increase in the allocation of public education resources to the poorest 20 percent may help 35 million primary-school-age children out of learning poverty globally (UNICEF 2023c). Earmarking funds for learners with disabilities can help address both supply- and demand-side costs, including accessible teaching and learning materials or other accommodations such as health and specialized support services or assistive technologies (Kerr and Kurzawa 2023; World Bank 2023a). Indeed, a Girls' Education Challenge (GEC) policy brief focused specifically on girls with disabilities argues that a twin-track approach or combining higher-cost interventions with low-intensity inclusive interventions at the school level delivers value for money (Shah and Sandall

2022). Innovative financing mechanisms such as equity formulas or public–private partnerships showcase the diverse yet underused strategies available to bolster education financing and to prioritize the needs of young people who are marginalized (Kerr and Kurzawa 2023).

The international community, especially donors, plays a crucial role in supplementing domestic resources by providing essential financial support to bridge funding gaps and sustain education initiatives aimed at leaving no child behind (see, for example, Zubairi and Rose 2024; Marcus, Nicolai et al. 2023). Yet often the countries that need the most support have the greatest difficulty accessing external support (financial or technical) because of their fragile political environments (UNESCO Institute for Statistics and UNICEF 2015). When countries hosting refugees are not given official recognition as a refugee host country (for example, South Sudan), their access to international support—including financial aid, capacity building and assistance in policy development—may be hampered (Acuil and Grob–Zakhary 2024). Yet capacity building for implementers, from the national to subnational levels, is critical to ensure policy translates into practice (see, for example, World Bank 2023a; UNESCO 2020).

### 3. Access to Education: Getting Marginalized Learners into School

#### 3.1. Addressing Demand–Side Barriers: Attitudes and Financial Barriers

Social and gender norms are deeply entrenched within cultures. Discriminatory attitudes held by parents, families or the wider community are often also held by teachers (see section 4.1) and policy makers, hampering political will or intended efforts to support marginalized groups. As such, efforts to address attitudinal barriers must take place at all levels of the system to fully support the inclusion of all marginalized groups. Indeed, gender norms are cross-cutting and play an important role in shaping gender equality in access to, within and through education (GPE 2023d). Likewise, social norms shape discriminatory attitudes and stigma toward other marginalized communities, including learners with disabilities, refugees or migrants, and ethnic or linguistic minorities. Efforts to address attitudinal barriers are among the most effective to improve education access and learning for marginalized learners.

**Communication campaigns** are a key cost-effective strategy to address both attitudinal and financial barriers that hinder young people’s access to schools (see [box 3](#) for an example). The Global Education Evidence Advisory Panel’s (GEEAP) “Smart Buys” flagship report identifies communication campaigns as well as other strategies for providing families with information on the benefits, costs and quality of education

that are considered “great buys” given the significant evidence available pointing to their cost-effectiveness in improving school attendance and learning (Akyeampong et al. 2023). More research is needed however to understand the effects of these campaigns on different subgroups of marginalized learners. Some research has shown that campaigns alone may not be enough to improve education access for girls (Evans, Acosta, and Yuan 2021) or refugees (Burde et al. 2015), suggesting more comprehensive approaches are likely necessary. Nevertheless, research from GEC found that campaigns to address stigma toward girls with disabilities were cost-effective (Shah and Sandall 2022), and as Evans, Acosta and Yuan (2021, 16) point out, “reducing sexism is a valuable objective in its own right.”

Addressing financial barriers is critical to ensuring education access for children and adolescents from low-income households. Students who are socioeconomically disadvantaged face a myriad of barriers to education, such as health and nutrition risks or increased risks of engaging in child labor. One common policy approach for addressing financial barriers to education is through **cash transfers**. Since the 1990s, conditional cash transfer programs in Latin America have increased education attainment by 0.5 to 1.5 years (UNESCO 2020). Snilstveit et al.’s (2015) review found that cash transfers had the largest and most consistent positive effects on increasing school enrollment, reducing school dropout and improving education completion. More recently, however, the Smart Buys report notes that although cash transfers are effective at increasing enrollment, they are relatively expensive (Akyeampong et al. 2023).<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Unterhalter et al. (2014) note that these sorts of resource interventions can be ineffective and, at the same time, unnecessarily expensive if not targeted to the populations most in need. Still, **merit-based scholarships** for children and youth who are disadvantaged can be a cost-effective approach to improve their education access and learning outcomes (Akyeampong et al. 2023; Snilstveit et al. 2015). Though relatively expensive, **school feeding programs** are also identified by the Smart Buys report as effective for improving enrollment and attendance rates and learning outcomes, especially in contexts with high rates of malnutrition. School feeding programs can be paired with **school-based mass deworming** where worm load is high; not only is there substantial evidence that these interventions work for improving school attendance, but they are also relatively cost-effective (Akyeampong et al. 2023).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The report also notes cash transfers are *not* effective for improving learning outcomes.

<sup>3</sup> The Smart Buys report also identifies mass school-based treatment of specific health conditions as promising, but with limited evidence as to its effectiveness (Akyeampong et al. 2023).

### **Box 3. Communication campaigns as part of a comprehensive package in Ethiopia**

Ethiopia's partnership compact addresses both education access and learning to support the inclusion of internally displaced persons, refugees, and girls and boys in pastoralist and remote rural areas, among other vulnerable children and youth. It uses a comprehensive approach consisting of: (1) back-to-school and learning campaigns, community dialogue and social mobilization; (2) school feeding programs for children in communities affected by food insecurity; (3) accelerated learning programs for over-age children who are out of school, as well as remedial and catch-up programs for school-age children who have dropped out due to living in contexts affected by conflict, drought or other emergencies; and (4) promoting gender equality by reducing school-related gender-based violence, early marriage, female genital mutilation and other harmful traditional practices, notably through community awareness programs involving parents, community elders, religious, political and education leaders, teachers and employers.

Evidence suggests the removal of financial barriers can have positive impacts on certain subgroups of students facing intersecting vulnerabilities, including girls living in poverty and students with disabilities. For example, school feeding programs have increased enrollment at scale for marginalized girls (Evans, Acosta, and Yuan 2021). Public-private partnerships that involve per-student subsidies to cover tuition for attending low-cost private schools have substantially improved school enrollment rates in low-income settings across diverse contexts (for example, Haiti, Pakistan and Uganda), and the effects have been particularly large for girls in those settings (Snilstveit et al. 2015). Social protection and access to assistive technologies help to ensure learners with disabilities get the accommodations they need to access education (Cote 2021). Likewise, social protection schemes can address the gender-based barriers to education that girls face across all stages of their life, such as adolescent pregnancy or early and child marriage (Camilletti et al. 2021).

Addressing financial barriers can be achieved through innovative mechanisms, including cost-sharing arrangements with donors and the private sector, incentives for communities to improve school infrastructure or affirmative action (Kerr and Diaw, forthcoming). While important for enhancing education access for marginalized learners, addressing financial barriers is also critical to ensuring young people stay in school. Economic precarity and the need to address immediate needs, such as food insecurity, can lead families to pull their children out of school (see, for example, Education Above All [2023]). This affects both boys and girls due to gendered social

and economic structures—boys may be expected to engage in paid labor and income-generating activities, whereas girls may be expected to engage in unpaid labor to free up time for their parents to work. As discussed earlier, various approaches including cash transfers, school feeding programs and efforts to remove the invisible costs of education (such as school uniforms and more) have proven effective to reduce school dropout and increase education completion rates for both girls (Evans, Acosta, and Yuan 2021) and boys who are living in poverty (World Bank 2023b) as well as for students who are out of school and transition from accelerated education programs to formal education systems (Kerr and Diaw, forthcoming) (see also [section 4.2](#)).

### **3.3. Addressing Supply-Side Barriers: School Environments**

A major barrier to education access in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) continues to be limited infrastructure, including the lack of schools and the need for students to travel long distances to reach the nearest school. This barrier is particularly pronounced in rural and remote areas, and it especially affects girls and all learners with disabilities who are more at risk of facing violence or abuse while traveling to and from schools. GEEAP's Smart Buys report found that interventions that **reduce travel times to schools** improve education access and can be cost-effective (for example, setting up community schools or providing transportation, but not necessarily constructing new schools which can be costly) (Akyeampong et al. 2023). Girls may benefit especially from living closer to schools, with evidence supporting positive impacts including increased school enrollment and completion rates, reduced school absenteeism and improved learning outcomes (Evans, Acosta, and Yuan 2021; Psaki et al. 2022; Sperling and Winthrop 2016). Over 30 years of evidence suggests that **improving school water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) facilities** can enhance school participation outcomes for children and youth who are vulnerable (Snilstveit et al. 2015), especially sex-specific latrines are available and menstrual health hygiene products are provided (Evan, Acosta, and Yuan 2021; Sperling and Winthrop 2016). The construction of **girls-only latrines** has been found to have a positive effect on girls' school enrollment and attendance, though this construction is often part of a wider intervention which makes it difficult to isolate specific impacts (Psaki et al. 2022). Importantly, although there is a lack of evidence on the impacts of such WASH-focused interventions on students with disabilities, **accessibility** of school infrastructure and facilities in general is essential to support their education access (Mendoza and Heymann 2022).

Increasing the supply of **all-girls' schools and female teachers** is critical to improving girls' access to education, especially in countries or conservative communities

affected by fragility or conflict. This was found, for example, in both Afghanistan and Pakistan (Burde et al. 2017). It is also at the core of GPE's (2023d) gender approach for education system transformation as gender equality *within* education points to the transformational power of schools that model environments where people are given opportunities regardless of their gender. The same can be said for learners with disabilities, refugees and ethnic or racial minorities. Marginalized learners also benefit from having and seeing teachers or other education personnel that resemble them. These adults often serve as mentors and allies and help foster a sense of belonging for the young learners, leading to a feeling of safety and inclusion in turn (Sperling and Winthrop 2016; Mendenhall, Gomez, and Varni 2018; Singal, Kwok, and Wijesinghe 2024; Rawal and Kingdon 2010; Freire, Schwartz, and Carbonari 2022).

Creating **safe schools** is also of paramount importance as many children miss out on school for fear of violence, bullying or discrimination. Children and youth from marginalized groups, including girls or young women, LGBTQI+ students, refugees, ethnic minorities and students with disabilities are often targets of physical, sexual or psychological violence and abuse. Limited evidence exists on the impact or cost-effectiveness of policies and programs addressing school violence (Akyeampong et al. 2023; Parkes et al. 2016). However, Parkes et al.'s (2016) rigorous review identifies several important features of programs that specifically address gender-based violence (GBV) in schools, namely: (a) working directly with students to address gender norms and inequalities through critical reflection; (b) working with teachers through training and curricula development so that they are confident in mitigating and responding to GBV; (c) engaging with communities, including caregivers, families and religious leaders; (d) adopting whole-school approaches or holistic community-based work that includes psychosocial support alongside socioeconomic support and/or training, especially in communities affected by urban or gang violence; and (e) developing comprehensive policies, intersectoral planning that cuts across government departments, and tools as well as capacity building for national and local policy actors. The various school-based approaches that seek to mitigate and respond to different forms of school violence or GBV help foster gender equality *within* education (GPE 2023d). Safe and inclusive schools also contribute to education systems that are transformative and promote broader social inclusion as well as more peaceful communities and societies. Safe schools are key to improving education access for young people who are marginalized and can contribute to improved learning outcomes. Various studies document that when students feel unsafe, they score lower on exams in both reading and mathematics (see, for example, Zuilkowski and Marty [2021], and Kibriya and Jones [2020]).

**Inclusive teaching and learning materials and curricula** that have positive representations of the diverse student population can contribute to cultivating a sense of belonging among minority groups. Various studies have explored the importance of combatting gender norms or discriminatory gender roles through gender-transformative content in school textbooks and curricula, positive representations of learners with disabilities (UNESCO 2020) and anti-racist educational content (Freire et al. 2022). Learners with disabilities are also more likely to access and participate in education when provided accessible teaching and learning materials (Mendoza and Heymann 2022), including technology that is low cost, available locally and culturally relevant (Lynch, Singal, and Francis 2022). Assistive technology has many benefits for learners with disabilities, including increased education access, communication, independence, mobility and learning opportunities (Lynch, Singal, and Francis 2022).

**Technology** continues to emerge as an important tool for enhancing education access and learning for young people who are marginalized. One key learning from the COVID-19 pandemic points to the need to improve schools' and students' access to information and communications technology (ICT), reliable internet connectivity and diverse modalities for remote learning (Tammi, Atis, and Vivekanandan 2024). This includes considering paper-based options or drawing on low-tech devices such as broadcast media (television and radio) to reach young people in poor or remote areas (Tammi, Atis, and Vivekanandan 2024), or mobile phones that are becoming more ubiquitous among marginalized communities including refugees or learners who are displaced (Bergin 2017). Intersecting barriers to education access must also be addressed such as the gender digital divide and unequal access for racial minorities, Indigenous communities and young people with disabilities (Jones et al. 2021; Freire, Schwartz, and Carbonari 2022). To maximize the potential impact of technologies (assistive or otherwise), governments should consider both recurring and nonrecurring costs (for example, for maintenance and repair) as well as pair inputs in materials with training and raising awareness for teachers, caregivers and other stakeholders (Akyeampong et al. 2023; Lynch, Singal, and Francis 2022).

## **4. Completion: Ensuring Marginalized Learners Finish Their Schooling**

### **4.1. Improving Education Quality to Keep Learners Motivated and Engaged**

Improving the quality of teaching and learning can help keep children and youth in school. A key factor leading to school abandonment is the poor quality of teaching. Young people who do not see the value in education or who feel they are not learning and developing key skills are more likely to drop out of school (Cameron et al. 2024; Education Above All 2023; Kaffenberger, Sobol, and Spindelman 2023). This section

addresses the importance of improving the quality of education, especially by improving teaching, creating supportive classroom and school environments, enhancing the role of communities and providing mental health and psychosocial support to students.

It is well documented that **teachers** are the most important school-level factor impacting student learning. Various evidence reviews and impact evaluations note that interventions focused on developing teachers' pedagogical skills—when carefully designed—can improve school completion rates for marginalized learners, including girls and young people with disabilities (Evans, Acosta, and Yuan 2021; Mendoza and Heymann 2022). Effective teacher education and training programs align with teacher needs, promote teacher reflection and collaboration, and provide opportunities for teachers to see and practice model teaching (D'Angelo, Cameron, Assane Igodoe et al. 2023; Hennessy et al. 2022). Substantial evidence indicates that one-off workshops or short-term courses are less effective than sustained ongoing school-based support, including coaching and mentorship. Moreover, teachers should be involved in the design of training interventions and teacher trainers should be supported to ensure training quality (Burns and Buse 2024). Although examining the evidence on teacher education and training is outside the scope of this paper, two papers in this series on evidence for system transformation examine more closely the topics of pre-service and in-service teacher education (GPE 2023a, 2023b).

GEEAP's Smart Buys report notes that although there is an expansive evidence base on how to train, select and allocate teachers, the available evidence is largely inconclusive, and there is an urgent need for more research and careful evaluation in these areas, especially to find the most cost-effective approaches (Akyeampong et al. 2023). However, two of the three great buys flagged by the report are interventions supporting teachers or teaching. The first is **structured pedagogy**, defined as interventions “with a coherent package of investments that include lesson plans, learning materials, skills-based ongoing teacher training, and teacher mentoring that are carefully coordinated to reinforce each other” (Akyeampong et al. 2023, 16). Indeed, nearly 10 years ago, Snilstveit et al.'s (2015) systematic literature review identified structured pedagogy programs as having the largest and most consistent positive effects on improving learning outcomes. More recently, Chakera, Haffner and Harrop (2020, 8) note that “structured pedagogy is key for realizing equity and inclusion in education.” Yet still, these interventions have the most impact when designed to integrate considerations for gender, disability and broader inclusion (Chakera et al. 2020).

The second great buy identified is **targeting instruction by learning level** including, for example, through interactive pedagogies or tracking students (that is, grouping them by their initial level of learning). The Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) model has become increasingly popular because of its proven impacts on various educational outcomes. TaRL interventions are diverse and can take place during the formal school day, as part of after-school programs or as extracurricular activities overseen by government teachers, volunteers or teaching assistants (Akyeampong et al. 2023). This flexibility lends itself well to a range of contexts. The TaRL approach is critical for inclusion as it ensures all students receive appropriate support to master foundational skills, ultimately helping bridge learning gaps and preventing students from falling further behind.

A focus on **foundational skills** sets a strong base for student success in school. Students who have access to quality pre-primary education are more likely to develop key skills, while those who lack access experience achievement gaps and high school dropout rates (Jenkins 2023; Kaffenberger, Sobol, and Spindelman 2023; UNICEF 2019). As such, investments in early childhood education are one of the most cost-effective ways to achieve more sustainable growth; for governments, the economic return is as high as US\$13 for every \$1 spent (WHO 2018). Yet pre-primary education continues to be underfunded by national governments and international donors (Zubairi and Rose 2017, 2024).<sup>4</sup> In addition to enhancing access to formal early childhood care and education, engaging families, training caregivers in positive parenting and nurturing care, and creating stimulating home environments can help young children to develop key skills for school readiness (D'Angelo, Cameron, Sheria Nfundiko et al. 2023). The Smart Buys report notes two interventions as cost-effective for improving learning: providing parent-directed early childhood stimulation programs (for ages 0–36 months) and providing quality pre-primary education (ages 3–5) (Akyeampong et al. 2023). For students who lack foundational skills, **remedial support** to help them catch up and stay integrated in teaching and learning processes is essential. Catch-up and remedial support are identified as effective in various evidence reviews, including those targeting girls (Snilstveit et al. 2015; Psaki et al. 2022). Remedial instruction is also an integral part of building resilient education systems. Kaffenberger (2021) found that combining short-term remedial education with long-term teaching strategies tailored to children's actual learning levels can not only completely recover learning loss caused from disruptions (such as the COVID-19 pandemic), but also help

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<sup>4</sup> Pre-primary education is discussed more in relation to foundational skills in section 3 (school completion).

students achieve more than they would have without any disruptions, gaining over a full year's worth of learning.

**Gender-responsive pedagogy** seeks to address gender stereotypes in teaching and learning and as such, contributes to the participation and learning of girls and boys alike. Gender-responsive pedagogy incorporates teaching strategies such as using gender-neutral language, creating inclusive classroom environments and ensuring positive representations of all genders in teaching and learning materials (FAWE 2020). The Forum for African Women Educationalists' (FAWE) gender-responsive pedagogy model extends beyond the classroom to include gender-responsive school management, menstrual health hygiene and sexual and reproductive health, and community engagement. It has been used across numerous African countries, leading to positive changes in teachers' attitudes and practices; improved relationships between teachers and students, and among peers; and enhanced school retention rates for girls (Nabbuye 2018).

Reforms or interventions that equip teachers with **disability-inclusive instructional strategies** have led to improved learning outcomes for students with disabilities (Mendoza and Heymann 2022; Kuper, Saran, and White 2018). Universal design for learning (UDL)—including when offered through low-tech and age-appropriate technology—can support learners with disabilities and other marginalized learners (Banes et al. 2020). UDL works best when it is contextualized, draws on local teaching practices, and when local actors have ownership and agency in its implementation (McKenzie et al. 2021). However, more evidence is still needed to better understand what works to support learning and completion for students with disabilities (World Bank 2023a).

Inclusive teaching and learning require ensuring **curriculum and assessment strategies** are relevant, flexible and aligned to promote equity and inclusion (UNESCO 2020). The proliferation of competency-based curricula in many parts of the world shows an increased recognition of the need to develop young people's skills in critical thinking, problem solving, conflict resolution and other life skills that will prepare them for the world of work and to become responsible members of society. Indeed, these skills contribute to the transformative power of education and help learners develop more equitable attitudes and behaviors (see, for example, GPE [2023d] and Burde et al. [2017]). Specific subjects that go beyond a traditional academic focus such as comprehensive sexuality education are particularly important for gender equality as they address power dynamics and equip young people with the knowledge and skills needed to make safe and healthy decisions related to their sexual and reproductive health (UNESCO et al. 2021). However, a key challenge continues to be the lack of

alignment between these important subjects and national exams which tend to prioritize only core subjects and the memorization of information. When aligned with learning objectives, assessment tools can help generate better data for the diagnosis and remediation of learning gaps (see [section 2](#) on data).

A wealth of evidence points to the importance of the **language of instruction** for learning outcomes and education access. The use of learners' mother tongue in the classroom enhances classroom participation, decreases attrition and increases the likelihood of family and community engagement in students' learning, ultimately promoting equity and inclusion in schools and improving the cost-effectiveness of education (World Bank 2021; Trudell 2016). Language of instruction is a policy issue affecting all learners, especially those living in communities with diverse Indigenous languages (Trudell 2016) and as refugees (Burde, Lahmann, and Thompson 2019). Developing language skills is vital to enhancing communication skill and access to information, making it a critical stepping stone for both academic success and social inclusion (Beißert et al. 2022).

Creating a **supportive classroom and school environment** is vital to ensure all students can learn. In addition to addressing the environmental barriers outlined in section 3.3, school leaders, school management committees and parent-teacher associations all play a critical role in fostering inclusion. After teachers, **effective school leadership** is the second most important factor influencing pupils' learning; school leaders play an important role in supporting education quality, equity and inclusion when provided autonomy or the resources to make key decisions (UNESCO 2018). Emerging evidence suggests that **female school leaders** adopt certain effective practices more often than their male counterparts, such as creating positive teaching and learning environments, providing instructional leadership, supporting teachers to collaborate, motivating teachers to improve their skills, encouraging teacher attendance or making teachers feel responsible for students' learning (Bergmann, Alban Conto, and Brossard 2022). These factors positively impact learning outcomes. Results from comparative international exams in French-speaking African countries reveal a statistically significant and positive association between student performance in reading and mathematics and the gender of a school principal in Benin, Madagascar, Senegal and Togo, indicating better learning outcomes in female-led schools (UNESCO 2023).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Results suggest that both girls and boys perform better with a female principal in Benin and Senegal, whereas only boys do in Madagascar and only girls do in Togo.

Several evidence reviews focused on marginalized learners in general and on girls, refugees or learners with disabilities in particular suggest that **community involvement**, especially engaging caregivers and families, can promote inclusion in education (Mendoza and Heymann 2022; Sperling and Winthrop 2016). Whole-school and community approaches have proven useful in addressing norms and negative attitudes that affect marginalized learners. After-school and extracurricular programs that create child- or youth-friendly spaces help keep girls, boys and especially over-age students in schools as they can enhance their engagement and sense of belonging (Marcus et al. 2017; World Bank 2023b; Kerr and Diaw, forthcoming). Involving communities in school management can also be highly effective for improving educational outcomes for these learners, though there is a lack of evidence around the cost-effectiveness or scalability of these approaches (Akyeampong et al. 2023). Box 4 illustrates how Liberia's GPE partnership compact plans to integrate various strategies to support access and learning for children in and out of school, through work at the school and community levels.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been growing recognition of the need to support the **social and emotional well-being** of students, including through interventions in mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS). Although these interventions benefit all students, they are particularly effective for vulnerable and marginalized students who often face more pressing social and emotional needs, and are thus more likely to benefit (Cefai 2022). This includes, for example, students living in contexts affected by fragility or conflict, as refugees and who are victims of abuse. UNICEF (2023a) conducted a cost-benefit analysis of MHPSS interventions serving children and adolescents (ages 10–17) living in 52 countries affected by humanitarian emergencies. The results indicate that every \$1 invested in implementing school-based socio-emotional learning (SEL) education results in an estimated \$225 in benefits. School-based cognitive-behavioral therapy interventions also have high returns, with \$57 in benefits for every dollar spent. These benefits are due to the potential of MHPSS and SEL programs to effectively improve student well-being, increase school completion rates and ultimately increase young people's employment rates and earnings. Impacts on students' well-being and educational outcomes may be enhanced by engaging caregivers or the broader community (Burde et al. 2017).

#### **Box 4. Liberia supports both access and learning for in-school and out-of-school students**

To improve disadvantaged students' access to quality learning, the partnership compact in Liberia proposes various actions for students in and out of school, including incentives and support to schools to improve at-age enrollment and grade progression. Those in school will benefit from: (a) school health and nutrition packages (such as school feeding, deworming, vaccination, bed nets and screening); (b) infrastructural refurbishments, including the construction and repair of accessible classrooms and water and sanitation facilities; and (c) reducing sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) and gender inequality by training principals, teachers and parent-teacher associations on the Safe School Protocol, positive discipline practices, Code of Conduct, and Guidelines for the Prevention and Response to Sexual Exploitation and Abuse in Grade Schools in Liberia. Children out of school will have access to accelerated learning program (ALP) provision to receive teaching at the right level.

#### **4.2. Supporting Transitions to Formal Schooling and Across Grade Levels**

The availability of **flexible pathways** for students to reenter and transition throughout formal education systems is critical to ensure vulnerable young people can complete their schooling. This may mean ensuring that policies allow specific groups of learners, such as pregnant girls, to reenroll in school or designing flexible curricula such as vocational and entrepreneurship programs that help youth see the value in education to prepare them for the workforce (Baxter, Novy-Marx, and D'Angelo 2022).

**Accelerated education programs** (AEPs) help children who are out of school to catch up on learning so that they can transition into a formal education system. However, because many AEPs are donor-funded or implemented by local or international NGOs, government regulation and the certification of these programs is needed to ensure learners can make the transition back into formal schooling (Grant Lewis et al. 2022; Shah and Choo 2020). AEPs can serve a wide range of marginalized groups, including learners living as refugees, in poverty or who are displaced, child soldiers, affected by child labor, pregnant girls or young women, young parents, have disabilities or from nomadic communities (Menendez et al. 2016; Shah and Choo 2020). However, research in EiE settings suggests these programs largely focus on the primary school level, leaving out adolescents and youth, and often fail to meet the needs of local communities (Sommers et al. 2024).

Building off of INEE's Accelerated Education Working Group's (AEWG) 10 principles for effective AEPs (Myers et al. 2017), Grant Lewis et al. (2022) describe nine characteristics for policy makers to consider when designing effective AEPs: (1) clear goals to ensure learners develop certified competencies for basic education; (2) a focus on equity and removing barriers to access for the most marginalized; (3) alignment with the national curriculum and schedules that are responsive to local needs; (4) assessments that promote flexibility of learner progression; (5) effective use of data in EMIS, monitoring and evaluation; (6) careful consideration for teacher sourcing and development; (7) student-centered pedagogy targeting learners' levels; (8) timely and fair teacher compensation; and (9) funding that is in line with country priorities and plans. While there is limited evidence on how to scale AEPs, a GPE Knowledge and Information (KIX) report (Kerr and Diaw, forthcoming) drawing on evidence from AEPs in 14 countries in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia finds that challenges to scaling up can be addressed by engaging communities, working with governments and generating more and better data and evidence, including on the cost-effectiveness of AEPs.

There is limited evidence on the effectiveness of AEPs in supporting young people's transitions into formal education systems. EMIS rarely distinguish between those students who have graduated from AEPs and those who have remained in the formal education system, making it difficult to assess AEPs' effectiveness on education access and completion rates (Menendez et al. 2016). An evidence synthesis found only 10 out of 26 programs reported on transition rates from AEPs to formal education systems (Shah and Choo 2020). The existing evidence has shown that supporting students' transition from AEPs into the formal system requires improving supply-side issues of formal education systems (for example, the environmental barriers addressed in section 3.3), improving the pedagogy offered in schools (section 4.1) as well as continuing to address the financial barriers faced by children who are vulnerable (section 3.2)—for example, through school feeding programs or stipends to girls (Kerr and Diaw, forthcoming).

**Community-based education** (CBE) programs, which are often absorbed into national public education systems (as is the case in Afghanistan, Mali and Central America), are effective at increasing education access and learning for children and adolescents, including girls and those living in crisis-affected contexts (Burde et al. 2015, 2017). CBE schools increase access by decreasing the distance to schools and encouraging the participation of local communities (Burde et al. 2017). Some evidence (for example, from Afghanistan) suggests that these schools can improve access for girls in particular; they can also help create safe environments for students as they are more easily monitored by members of the community (Burde et al. 2017). For girls'

education, Psaki et al. (2022) suggest that community engagement alone may not suffice, but when paired with other efforts such as school construction or the removal of financial barriers, girls' educational outcomes also increase.

**Accreditation or recognition of prior qualifications** is especially important for refugees and displaced young people who migrate from one formal education system to another (Sommers et al. 2024; Marcus, Nicolai et al. 2023; Purkey and Irving 2019; UNESCO, UNHCR, and Education Above All 2018). Accreditation is also an important consideration for migrants hoping to return to their country of origin. If parents perceive that their children's educational attainments will not translate to certified and transferable skills when returning to their country of origin, they may not send their children to school in the host country (UNHCR 2016, cited in Salem 2018).

Lastly, the **transition of students with disabilities from segregated or special schools to mainstream schools** is critical to inclusion, but little research has been done in this area. Some studies reiterate the importance of addressing infrastructural and attitudinal barriers, especially those of teachers, school administrators and families, to ensure that there is a general acceptance of change, that the school community welcomes students with disabilities, and that these students can navigate the academic and emotional changes of transitioning (Rafique 2019; Rens and Louw 2021). Additionally, curricular revisions as well as adaptations to teaching and learning materials and pedagogy are necessary (Rafique 2019; Rens and Louw 2021). Several UNICEF mappings of inclusive education in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa have shown that special schools continue to play an important role in the transition to inclusive education systems as these schools can be transformed into inclusive education resource centers or hubs that provide mainstream schools with important resources and training, especially for teachers and other support staff (UNICEF 2023b; UNICEF ROSA 2021). However, despite increasing research exploring the diverse approaches used to foster inclusion in mainstream schools (for example, resource centers, resource units or community-based networks), few studies capture the effectiveness or impact of these models on students with disabilities (World Bank 2023a).

## **5. Evidence Gaps and Ways Forward**

This paper synthesizes some of the existing evidence on *what works*—and where possible, cost-effective approaches—to improve access and completion for children and youth who are marginalized. However, various evidence gaps continue to hamper our understanding of what works to improve access and learning for marginalized students. While the available evidence seems to be largely concentrated on project-

based or programmatic approaches to equity and inclusion in education, there remains a lacuna of evidence for successful system approaches. Although clear and comprehensive policies, robust data systems, inclusive and gender-responsive planning and multistakeholder engagement are key enabling factors to remove barriers for the most marginalized children and youth, these system-level efforts are rarely evaluated, resulting in limited robust evidence of their impact or effectiveness. Moreover, little is known about how to shift norms within institutions, such as national or local governments, to lead to system transformation.

Evidence gaps also exist in relation to certain marginalized groups and the barriers they face. While substantial evidence exists on how to improve girls' access to education, more research needs to explore the complexity of addressing certain gender-related barriers such as child marriage, adolescent pregnancy or school-related gender-based violence (Psaki et al. 2022). There is also limited evidence on how to make education inclusive for students with disabilities because too little evaluation has been done (Akyeampong et al. 2023) and existing studies are generally sparse in number, of poor quality (Kuper, Saran, and White 2018; Mendoza and Heymann 2022), do not measure impacts on learning (World Bank 2023a; Lynch, Singal, and Francis 2022), or consider young people with disabilities as a homogeneous group rather than recognizing the varying types and levels of severity that exist (Lynch, Singal, and Francis 2022).<sup>6</sup> While there has been an increase in EiE programs over the years, most remain unevaluated (Burde et al. 2015). Given these evidence gaps, researchers tend to converge around the fact that the dearth of evidence is greater for those learners facing intersecting vulnerabilities, such as girls with disabilities or children with disabilities living in rural/urban areas (Lynch et al. 2022), or in settings affected by fragility and conflict (Burde et al. 2015; Burde, Lahmann, and Thompson 2019; INEE 2023). However, emerging trends do suggest an increase in research on refugees and girls living in EiE settings (Burde, Lahmann, and Thompson 2019). Lastly, the limited number of longitudinal studies or cost analyses makes it difficult to know which interventions supporting these young people are sustainable or cost-effective (Parkes et al. 2016; Burde et al. 2015; Lynch, Singal, and Francis 2022; Akyeampong et al. 2023).

This background research paper employed an intersectional approach to marginalization, recognizing that those learners most at risk of exclusion in education

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<sup>6</sup> Lynch, Singal, and Francis' (2022) synthesis of education technology interventions for learners with disabilities also finds that over two-thirds of the studies focused on sensory impairments which explains why most studies were located in special schools (for example, those for students with hearing or visual disabilities).

are the ones with multiple overlapping vulnerabilities. The paper expands upon GPE's framework to address gender equality *to, within* and *through* education to indicate, where relevant, how education systems can be transformative for young people with characteristics that cross-cut with gender to create further marginalization in certain settings. Going forward, GPE will increasingly use an approach that comprises both gender equality and inclusion to identify and address the intersecting vulnerabilities that are currently leaving millions of children without an education.

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## Appendix I: Methodology

This paper draws on academic and gray literature published in the past 10 years (2014–24), with key publications listed in the below table. It prioritizes systematic literature reviews, meta-analyses, rapid evidence reviews and mappings as well as seminal reports, such as GEEAP’s Smart Buys report, which synthesize cost-effective interventions to improve learning (Akyeampong et al. 2023).

Reference (specific topic)	Number of studies (methodology)	Dates of publication	Geography and/or population
Akyeampong et al. 2023	235 total, 91 with cost-effectiveness analysis	2013–23	LMICs
Snilstveit et al. 2015	238 (impact evaluations) 121 (qualitative studies)	1990–2015	LMIC (all regions; only 2 in MENA)
Parkes et al. 2016	49 (evaluations)	2000–2015	LMICs and HICs (school violence)
Unterhalter et al. 2014	177 (quantitative, qualitative, mixed methods, including 40 impact evaluations)	1991–2014	LMICs, girls
Sperling and Winthrop 2016	138 studies investigating the effects of interventions	unclear	LMICs, girls
Evans, Acosta, and Yuan 2021	Unclear (evaluations implemented at large scale—10,000+ beneficiaries)	unclear	LMICs, girls
Psaki et al. 2022	82 (experimental and quasi-experimental)	2000–2020	LMICs, girls
Burde et al. 2015	184 studies (quantitative, qualitative, mixed methods)	-	EiE settings
Burde et al. 2017	121 studies (impact evaluations, quasi-experimental, observational)	1995–2015	EiE settings
Burde, Lahmann, and Thompson 2019	76 studies (quantitative, qualitative, mixed methods)	2015–18	EiE settings
Kuper, Saran, and White 2018	35 (impact evaluations and systematic reviews)	2000+	LMICs, learners with disabilities
McKenzie et al. 2021	21 (quantitative, qualitative, mixed methods)	2012–20	9 LMICs, learners with disabilities

Mendoza and Heymann 2022	31 (quantitative, qualitative, mixed methods)	2000-2019	19 LMICs, children and adults with disabilities
Lynch, Singal, and Francis 2022 (EdTech)	51 (quantitative, qualitative, mixed methods, including randomized controlled trials, quasi-experimental, case studies, etc.)	2007-20	27 LMICs, learners with disabilities (ages 6-12)
World Bank 2023a	51 (quantitative, qualitative, mixed methods)	2011-22	3 LMICs in South Asia and 13 LMICs in sub-Saharan Africa, primary students with disabilities

Note: EdTech = education technology; EiE = education in emergencies; HICs = high-income countries; LMICs = low- and middle-income countries; MENA = Middle East and North Africa.