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SAHEL EDUCATION WHITE PAPER

# The Wealth of Today and Tomorrow

OVERVIEW REPORT

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# Acknowledgments

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***Nous savons ce que nous souhaitons : que tous les enfants aillent à l'école, que tous terminent leur éducation de base avec un socle commun, que leur éducation apporte des bénéfices individuels et collectifs, que l'apprentissage contribue à une masse critique capable de transformer l'économie... Toutes les mêmes questions se sont posées depuis l'Indépendance : accès, qualité, dualité du système - défis persistants - comment aller vers le changement en identifiant des points d'ancrage ?***

**– Expert Panel Member, 2021**

**Good education for all is the key to a better long-term future for the Sahel region.** It can improve employability and incomes, narrow gender gaps, lift families out of poverty, strengthen institutions, and yield benefits that echo to the next generation. And by enrolling millions more children in school over the past two decades, the region has taken a first step toward this future. But the potential is still largely unfulfilled, because many children in the region remain out of school, even at the primary level, and learning outcomes are poor for the great majority of those who are enrolled. Conditions outside the education sector are barriers to improvement, because the Sahel region faces a unique constellation of challenges caused by widespread extreme poverty, population growth, conflict, and climate change. The COVID-19 crisis has exacerbated the problem of poor education outcomes by closing schools and worsening families' financial circumstances.

**This Overview of the new White Paper on Sahel education offers a concise diagnosis of those challenges, together with strategies for overcoming them and unleashing the region's potential.** It focuses primarily on basic education, from preschool to lower secondary, because progress there is a necessary foundation for a thriving education system and society. It documents the problems at school, system, and societal levels that prevent many children from being in school and learning. But it argues that there are short-term responses and medium-term game-changers that could lead to substantial progress in the next 3 to 5 years—policies that can begin to reduce learning poverty, expand girls' access to secondary schooling, and improve young adult literacy. For the longer term, it also lays out the many dimensions of system strengthening that are needed to sustain these medium-term gains. If the Sahel countries can use the fall-out from the COVID-driven school closures to focus attention on the great needs in education, and thereby summon the societal commitment to make change happen, it will unlock new social and economic possibilities for the region.

**Who is this report for, and why is it needed?** The White Paper is, first, for policymakers, stakeholders, civil society, and development partners in the region: it offers them a clear understanding of challenges and possibilities, together with

a vision of change that is feasible in the next 3 to 5 years. To ensure its relevance to this audience, the White Paper benefited from the guidance of an External Expert Advisory Panel consisting of policymakers and other leaders in the field of education and skills, as well as from numerous other consultations. Within the World Bank, the paper aims to provide guidance to education staff and inform Country Management Units on the main education priorities in the region. While drawing on a lot of good analysis from the region, the White Paper adds value to that past work by combining breadth with focus. The breadth comes both in the system-wide diagnostic, which scans throughout the system, and in the regional focus, which identifies challenges common to the five Sahel countries. Breadth is necessary to avoid adopting partial solutions that could fail for lack of complementary reforms. But focus is necessary too, especially given the scarce implementation capacity in the region. By identifying a limited set of targets and game-changers, the White Paper helps countries to prioritize in a way that will allow progress in the short to medium term.

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## **The Sahel region's future depends on improving education outcomes**

**Building the Sahel region's human capital is fundamental to its development.** Education empowers people economically in the region, as it does globally: each additional year of schooling is associated with increases in earnings that range from a low of 7 percent in Chad to a high of 15 percent in Burkina Faso and Niger. These returns accrue despite the low quality of education, because workers with more than a few years of education are in such short supply. For this reason, education offers the surest route out of poverty for individuals and their households.<sup>1</sup>

**Expanding education can also narrow gender gaps in earnings.** For the same amount of education, women have a higher rate of return than men across the Sahel region. Education matters especially for girls because of the link for

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<sup>1</sup> For sources and references, please see the full report.

girls between dropping out of school and marrying or having children early. Each additional year of secondary education is associated with lower risks of marrying as a child and having a child before age 18 by about 7 percentage points on average.

**The economic benefits of basic education and learning accrue to countries too, not just individuals.** Over the past 60 years, the countries that have made the most dramatic, sustained escapes from low-income status fueled their launch with better schooling and learning outcomes—not for the elite attending the best schools, but for all children. This is the pattern seen most notably in East Asia, from Japan in the early modern era to Vietnam in recent decades, but education is paying off in increased growth and productivity in other regions too. And within education, statistical analysis shows that what matters most for economic growth is not the number of years that students spend in school, but the skills they acquire—learning, not just schooling.

**Education strengthens societies in many other ways.** It improves the human capital of the next generation: better-educated mothers have healthier, better-educated children. It improves the quality of government: better-educated teachers and health-care workers provide higher-quality services, and service delivery is better in better-educated communities. And it can contribute to social cohesion and peace: wealth built on human capital is less likely to spark conflict than natural-resource-based wealth, and more educated people have more trust, tolerance, and civic engagement.

**For all these reasons, the future of the Sahel region depends on better education outcomes and greater human capital.** In the short run, many other tools can improve the lives of the people of the region—improvements in governance, an end to conflict, increased agricultural productivity. But unless the region's countries manage to nurture the curiosity, creativity, and skills of their children and youth, none of this is likely to be sustainable.

**Today's education systems, despite the efforts of many educators, are not yet achieving the outcomes the Sahel needs.** As the next section describes, the region has made real strides in improving access. Yet rapid population growth makes that progress much harder, and the quality of education is too low to give children and youth the start they deserve in life.

**Governments in the region have launched numerous initiatives and announced high-level commitments that indicate a desire to take on this challenge; now, these need to**

**be translated into more action and better outcomes.** Too often, high-minded policies fail to overcome the barriers that block change—especially change to improve quality—throughout the system, so it is crucial to identify and lower those barriers. The rest of this White Paper first describes the outcomes that the region has achieved, and those it has failed to achieve, in improving access and quality. It diagnoses the barriers to better outcomes and then discusses how the region can build on its high-level commitment to make real progress at ground level and thus claim the future. It proposes a set of focused and ambitious goals—in learning poverty, girls' secondary education, and young adult literacy—combined with game-changer policies to achieve them over the next few years. It closes by describing the long-term system strengthening that will be necessary to sustain progress in these areas.

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## Where the region stands: Despite progress on enrollment, many children are out of school and learning levels in school are low

**Sahelian countries have nearly doubled enrollment in primary education and tripled secondary education enrollments over the past 15 years.** At the primary level, the number of students enrolled increased from 5.9 million to 10.8 million between 2005 and 2018; at the secondary level, enrollment rose from 1.4 million to 4.6 million. And as a result of the rapid growth in access, gross enrollment rates (GERs) increased across all levels of education in each of the five countries (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger) between 2005 and 2018, with the exception of pre-primary education in Burkina Faso and Chad.

**This increase in access to education represents tremendous progress, and it will make a major difference in the lives of these millions of children.** Children who enroll in and remain in school have far better employment prospects and better outcomes in many dimensions of their lives, as described below.

**But universal access even to basic education remains a challenge: rapid population growth has constrained the improvements in enrollment rates, and more than 40 percent of the region's primary-school-age children remain out of school** (due to lack of enrollment, late enrollment, and dropout). Even with the surge in numbers of students enrolled, the gross enrollment rate at the primary level of education increased by only 10 percentage points on average,



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from 69 percent to 79 percent, from 2005 and 2018. At that pace of improvement, the region will not attain even the goal of universal primary enrollment until at least 2045. And the average primary completion rate is only 61 percent, meaning that nearly 2 of every 5 children fail to finish primary. Enrollment rates at other levels of education remain much lower.

**And those children who do attend school learn far too little, whether compared with global standards or with the expectations embodied in the curriculum.** The average rate of learning poverty in the region is 88 percent; this means that only 12 percent of children are in school and able to read and comprehend an age-appropriate passage by late primary age. This learning poverty rate is high in all five countries, ranging from 75 percent in Burkina Faso to 95 percent in Mauritania. While the results on the 2019 PASEC international assessment suggest there has been some improvement over the past few years, learning indicators remain very low by international standards, and the progress will need to be confirmed and sustained for many years to reach the basic quality that all children should be guaranteed.

**The access and learning problems are magnified at other levels of education.** Even in lower secondary, enrollment rates do not exceed 56 percent anywhere in the region, and the rate is just 33-34 percent in Chad and Niger. Rates of enrollment in pre-primary and tertiary are much lower, ranging

from 2 to 10 percent. And although we lack comparable measures of learning at other levels of education, the shortage of skills of new labor-force entrants indicates that learning is not happening at the rate it should be.

**Unless the Sahel region can rapidly improve both access and quality, it will continue to suffer from low human capital for the next generation or longer.** Between 56 percent (Mauritania) and 72 percent (Niger) of current working-age adults have no education at all. The situation has improved with the gains in enrollment, but the need to improve quality and quantity is still urgent.

**Children living in the Sahel countries complete far fewer years of education than their peers in other regions in the world; when we take quality into account, the discrepancy is even starker.** On average, children in the Sahel countries attend just 6.1 years of school, compared to a global average of more than 11 years. However, when adjusted for learning, these 6.1 years are reduced to the equivalent of 3.4 years of high-quality schooling, compared to a global average of 7.8 years. A starker way of expressing this: it is as if the average child in the Sahel region received 3 years of Singaporean-quality education but then dropped out of school forever.

**The long-term result is lower productivity and slower development, because working-age adults, particularly**



**women, lack basic literacy and numeracy skills.** Despite improvements among the younger cohorts, levels of education in the labor force remain extremely low by global standards. In every Sahel country, fewer than 50 percent of adult females are literate, compared to 59 percent on average across Sub-Saharan Africa, and 80 percent across low- and middle-income countries globally. Because they lack foundational skills, including literacy and numeracy, young adults find it harder to acquire other job-relevant and higher-order skills that they need for the labor market. Across the five Sahel countries, an average of 31 percent of firms report that an inadequately educated workforce is a major constraint to their business, compared to 16 percent on average across Sub-Saharan Africa. At the same time, about 44 percent of youth across the five countries are neither in school nor working. Of these inactive youth, between 60 and 80 percent have had no formal schooling. Two-thirds are female and, except in the case of Mauritania, about 80 percent live in rural areas.

**All these problems are most severe for the poorest children and youth—which is to say, those who most need a good education to have a chance in life.** Children from economically disadvantaged groups and rural areas are enrolled at much lower rates than other children, at all levels of education. The primary GER is only 54 (58) percent for rural

girls (boys) from the bottom wealth quintile of households, compared to well over 100 percent for both boys and girls from top quintile, urban households. This disparity is even more extreme at higher levels of education: the upper secondary GER is only 5 percent for the poorest rural girls, compared to 100 percent for top quintile, urban boys. Even when enrolled, they suffer from the worst learning conditions and outcomes. For example, only about 20 percent of public primary schools in Niger had minimal infrastructure, compared to 80 percent of private schools, in the 2015 Service Delivery Indicators sample.

**Finally, the COVID19 pandemic has exacerbated all these challenges.** School closures have been shorter than in some other regions, but the damage in terms of learning and access could still be substantial. Students lost between  $\frac{1}{4}$  (in Burkina Faso and Mali) and  $\frac{1}{2}$  (in Chad, Mauritania, and Niger) of the school year, and only a small share of students likely benefited from remote learning during closures. Estimates show that without effective dropout prevention and learning remediation following students' return to school, the learning-adjusted years of schooling (LAYS) in the Sahel countries could drop by 5 to 15 percent across the region. This is just a summary indicator, behind which lie many impacts of the disruption on the learning and socioemotional wellbeing of children and youth. Beyond losing months of learning opportu-



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nities during the closures, children and youth (especially girls and women) who have experienced these disruptions face a greater risk of dropout. The Sahel needs better monitoring of actual learning losses and dropout to quantify these impacts, but studies emerging from other parts of Africa confirm that the pandemic has widened learning gaps for disadvantaged students, such as those in rural areas.

**Society-wide conditions of fragility and conflict in the Sahel make these challenges harder to solve—but also raise the stakes for solving them.** As discussed below, the Sahel region stands out for high rates of poverty and population growth, even compared with other parts of Sub-Saharan Africa. Conflict and climate change also weigh heavily on the region. These conditions worsen access and learning. At the same time, education is the most effective remedy for these societal problems, so it is crucial to make progress on it.

## So why aren't more children in school and learning?

To map out the most effective strategies for improving access with learning, it's crucial to understand what's holding education back. Within the education system, the best way to do this is to start by focusing in on the learning

experience of the typical student, and then look outwards in concentric circles at what the drivers of that learning experience are, out to the system level. This perspective makes it clear where barriers to good education must be lowered so that all children and youth can learn. Even before that, it is important to consider the challenging regional and societal context in which all of this takes place.

### *Barriers outside education: poverty, demographics, conflict, and climate shocks*

**Outside the education sector, the many dimensions of fragility and conflict exacerbate the education challenges, in ways that are uniquely challenging in the Sahel region.**

They increase the strains on households and educators, reduce the resources available for education, and reduce the efficiency of spending by creating more obstacles to schooling and learning that the education system must overcome.

- **Extreme poverty limits public and private resources to invest:** Four of the five Sahel countries are in the bottom quintile of countries globally in terms of GDP per capita, and in the top quintile in terms of population share living in extreme poverty. Parents have limited human capital themselves and struggle with live-

lihoods, yet they shoulder the burden of about 1/3 of education spending—far more than in rich countries, where the share is around 10 percent.

- **Rapid population growth forces systems to sprint just to stay in place:** The region has the highest fertility rates in the world. Sahel countries are adding nearly 1 million school-age children per year. Even well-managed, well-resourced systems would struggle to absorb such rapid growth smoothly, but in the Sahel, the systems are failing to provide adequate education to more than a small share of today's much smaller cohorts. The rapid population growth puts even more strain on quality, because it requires systems to hire large numbers of teachers, many of them without the necessary qualifications or skills.
- **Conflict disrupts and directly attacks education:** All of the Sahel countries except Mauritania suffer from elevated levels of conflict. Continued attacks by violent extremist groups cause trauma, forced displacement, and food insecurity. Schools, teachers, and students are sometimes directly targeted. Between April 2017 and December 2019, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger witnessed a six-fold increase in school closures due to violence.
- **Climate shocks worsen all these problems:** The increased frequency and severity of climactic shocks threaten livelihoods, force households into human-capital-reducing coping strategies, and exacerbate conflict.

**All of this has increased demands on the education system, and those demands have increased further with COVID-19.** Society-wide problems have led to high levels of migration and forcibly displaced peoples, together with massive urban-rural disparities and constant exposure to shocks. The latest of these major shocks is the pandemic. Beyond the direct impacts of the school closures, COVID-19 has led to the first Sub-Saharan African recession in 25 years, which will increase budget pressures and could push millions of people in the Sahel into extreme poverty.

**Other West and Central African countries face these challenges too, but the problems are especially acute in the Sahel.** Four of the subregion's five countries (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, and Niger) are among the 10 poorest and least urbanized countries in West and Central Africa, with undiversified economies reliant on agriculture and commodity exports. They also account for four of the seven countries in the region that are classified as having relatively high levels of conflict. And all five countries are among the 10 countries in the region whose populations are growing most rapidly,

meaning that they are not yet realizing the demographic dividend. Finally, temperatures in the Sahel are expected to rise 1.5 times faster than the global average, posing even greater challenges for the semi-arid subregion.

**These societal problems should not induce fatalism, but they do accentuate the need for a whole-of-society commitment to education.** Even with these broader problems, there is much that could be done to improve education (and thereby help address the societal problems) by strengthening systems and focusing on key proximate drivers of access and learning. At the same time, education will be better able to thrive when society is thriving—when children, families, and educators can live without the constant threat of extreme poverty, armed conflict, and extreme climate events.

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## Proximate causes: Gaps in all the school-level drivers of learning

**With this societal perspective as context, it is important to focus in on the proximate causes of poor learning and access—the barriers in schools and communities that directly constrain children's education outcomes:**

- **Learners:** Poverty, a lack of early childhood development, and social norms leave many children unprepared for learning or out of school, trapping them in an intergenerational cycle of low human capital. Education starts with the learner, yet too many children in the Sahel lack the nutrition, health care, early stimulation, and support necessary for them to benefit fully from schooling. Stunting rates for children under the age of five reach 48 percent in Niger and 40 percent in Chad, and they are quite high in the other countries, at around 25 percent. Children are not getting the cognitive and socioemotional stimulation they need in preschool years either; even with recent growth, enrollment rates for pre-primary are just 2 to 10 percent around the region. Social norms are another barrier: Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, and Niger are all among the 10 countries globally with the highest rates of child marriage, and many girls are forced to drop out of secondary school. Surveys show that pregnancy and marriage are cited as the top reasons for female dropout. And conditions in school, such as violence or a lack of bathrooms for girls, can cause children to drop out even before they reach that point. For all these reasons, lowering the barriers to schooling and learning will require con-



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certed action outside the education system as well as within it.

- **Teaching:** Shortages in both quantity and quality of teaching make time in school less productive for children. The Sahel countries face a shortage of teachers, with among the highest student-teacher ratios in the world, ranging from 34 in Mauritania to 57 in Chad. High rates of teacher absence compound the problem, with about 27 percent of teachers absent from their classrooms during unannounced visits by Service Delivery Indicator (SDI) survey teams in two of the countries. Lack of availability of teachers is especially high in rural areas. Even when teachers are available, lack of preparation reduces teaching quality. Rapid expansion of education systems has led to the hiring of contract teachers, who are typically less qualified and typically have less content and pedagogical knowledge. But the problem of inadequate teacher skills extends to civil-servant teachers as well. In both Mauritania and Niger, none of the thousands of teachers tested reached the minimum benchmark for competency in both French and mathematics, as the SDI showed. These deficiencies can be explained by structural factors that are hard to change quickly—
- small pools of educated adults to draw on, pre-service and in-service teacher education that is not practical, and lack of supervision, evaluation, and feedback for teachers.
- **Learning resources:** Inadequate learning resources, including curricula, hold back both teachers and students. In many cases, students lack access even to textbooks. Visits to representative samples of classrooms in Mauritania found that only 1 in 6 primary students had a textbook for the class observed; the situation in Niger was even worse, at 1 in 11 students. Another barrier is the language of instruction: in most of the Sahel countries, most students enter school with little to no knowledge of French or Arabic, yet their progress in school depends on familiarity with the language of instruction. Inappropriate curricula are also a major barrier. Curricula typically have too many different objectives, distracting educators from the core responsibility of ensuring that all children master foundational skills. Curricula are often also outdated, especially in STEM subjects, and they fail to give students skills that employers are looking for.
- **School:** School infrastructure is inaccessible and inadequate. There are too few schools, especially in rural

areas and at a secondary level. The most acute challenge is in Chad, where lack of an accessible primary or lower secondary school is the top reason for 35–45 percent of girls and boys not being enrolled. Throughout the Sahel, rapid population growth will increase the strains on school availability. And schools already struggle with widespread infrastructure shortages: for example, 80 percent of public schools in Niger and 95 percent in Mauritania lack even the minimal infrastructure of having both clean, functional toilets and classrooms with enough light to read by. Beyond physical infrastructure, schools are in many cases not providing safe and supportive environments for learning; for example, a large share of primary teachers (ranging from 25 percent in Burkina Faso to 72 percent in Chad) self-report using corporal punishment on students.

### System-level barriers: low capacity, incoherence, and inadequate financing

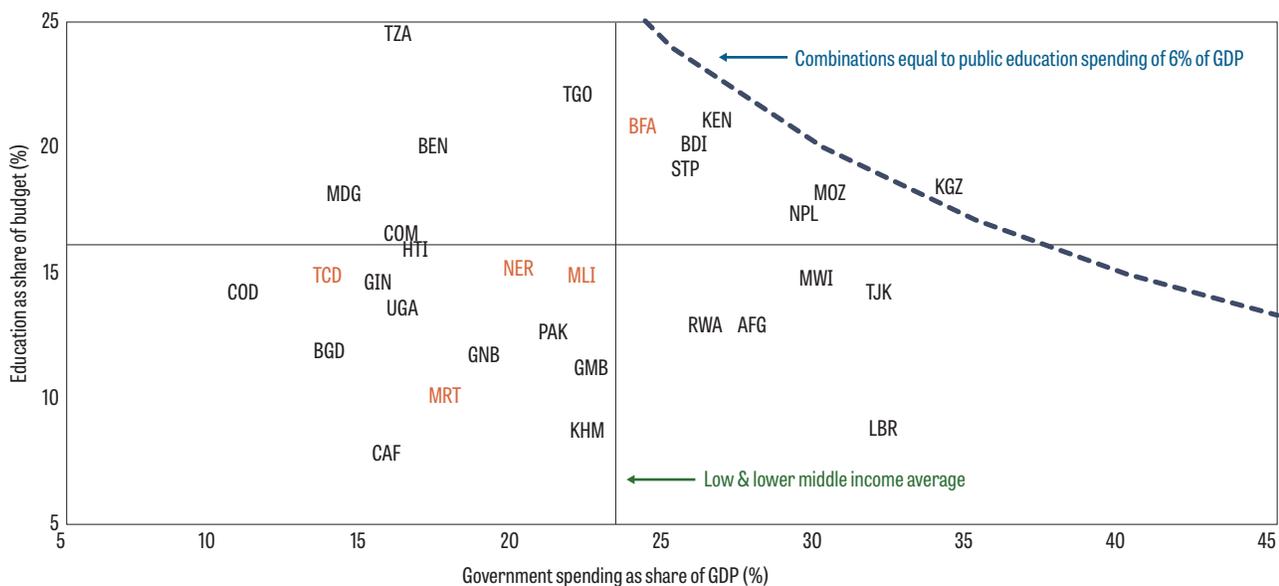
But these proximate causes of poor outcomes don't exist in a vacuum. Access and learning fall short in schools and classrooms largely because education systems function poorly, and also because broader societal problems exacerbate the weaknesses within education. To ensure that all children are in school and learning, countries will need to tackle these broader problems.

**Education systems do not provide the assessment, curricula, and other support that schools need to ensure that all children are learning.** On student assessment, while some countries have participated in international assessments, they lack the national and classroom assessments necessary to highlight learning gaps and inform support to students. Curricula are outdated, poorly connected across levels, and overly ambitious, and the difficulties are compounded by language-of-instruction policies that force children to try to learn to read in a language they do not understand. Human resource management systems fail to get teachers—and especially stronger teachers—posted to the rural communities where they are most needed.

**What exacerbates many of these challenges is the low level of financing going to education, including primary education, in most of the Sahel countries.** By global standards, most countries in the region spend little on education—not just in absolute terms, but even relative to their low incomes. Despite some increase over the past decade, public expenditures on education are only about 3 percent of GDP in the region, well below the Sub-Saharan Africa average of 4 percent and the international aspirational benchmark of 6 percent of GDP (Figure 1). Most countries spend less than 50 percent of the total on primary education, which is likely a problem, given that learning at all higher levels of education depends on foundations that students acquire in primary school. Only Burkina Faso is close to the benchmarks, with

**Figure 1: Revenue mobilization and share of budget devoted to education are low in 4 of 5 Sahel countries**

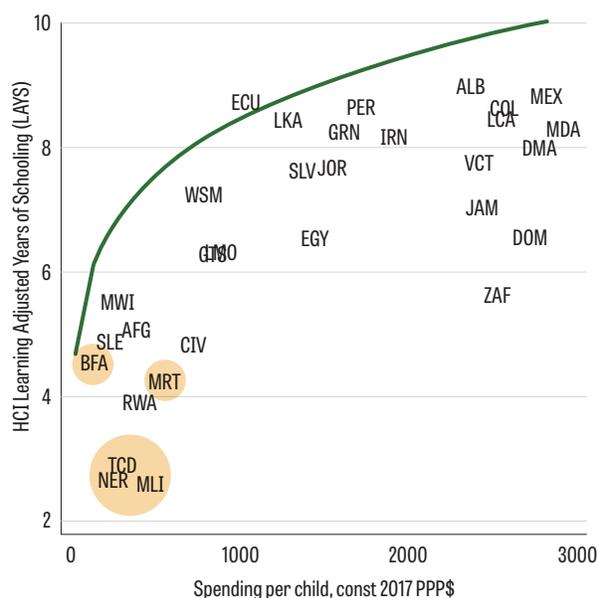
(Education as a share of total government budget and government spending as a share of GDP in low and lower middle-income countries (%), 2017-19)



Source: World Bank calculations based on World Development Indicators, UIS and IMF  
 Note: BFA=Burkina Faso; MLI=Mali; MRT=Mauritania; NER=Niger; TCD=Chad.

## Figure 2: The Sahel countries get fewer learning-adjusted years of schooling than expected for their spending

(Learning-adjusted years of schooling compared with spending per child, 2019)



Source: Authors' calculations; data from World Bank Education Finance Watch database

education spending at over 4 percent of GDP and 60 percent of the total going to primary education. The rest of the region likely needs to invest much more. Financing alone will not solve these problems, but especially with rapidly growing populations, money will be needed to support the reforms that could address the schooling and learning crisis in the region.

**Moreover, this limited budget is spent inefficiently, so that its impact is much less than it could be.** The many problems described above mean that what is spent on schools, materials, technology, and teachers does not translate efficiently into better education outcomes. Lack of resources does not fully explain the litany of problems listed above. True, it is hard to guarantee a first-rate education on a shoestring. But at any given level of income and financing for education, different countries attain very different outcomes in terms of schooling and learning. One way to see this is to compare the learning-adjusted years of schooling (LAYS) achieved by each country with its per-child public spending on education (Figure 2). In all the Sahel countries, with the possible exception of Burkina Faso, the LAYS are lower than expected for the countries' levels of education spending, as illustrated by the fact that they lie well below other countries in the figure.

**A final exacerbating factor is a lack of real political commitment—expressed in actions throughout the system—to ensuring that all children and youth learn.** One reason for the low levels of expenditure and inefficiency is likely that political attention in the region focuses more on strengthening elite education than ensuring that all children are in school and learning, and the political economy reinforces a sub-par quality of schooling. Another likely factor is the rapid turnover of education ministers and other senior staff at the ministries, which makes sustained commitment to equity- and quality-focused reforms almost impossible. Beyond that, even where there are signals from the top that learning for all children and youth is a top priority, this rhetorical commitment is often not internalized by education ministry staff, and so is not reflected in their day-to-day decisions.

## This situation must improve—and it can

**The problems laid out here will not be fully resolved easily or quickly.** They are the product of many years of poverty, conflict, poor management, and a lack of political will. Reversing them will take a similarly long-term sustained approach, with domestic leadership and commitment accompanied by international support.

**Despite these challenges, there are many reasons for hope.** First, there have been positive developments in the region that lay the foundation for rapid action and sustained progress. The progress in improving enrollment has been encouraging, and there are other examples of how the Sahel countries are working around limitations posed by inadequate national education systems:

- Communities are playing a key role in creating and improving schools. Communities across Sahel countries have a history of organizing and opening schools where government services do not exist. In Chad, 39 percent of primary schools (accounting for 27 percent of the system's students and teachers) are community schools. Community management of school construction is the most cost-effective and efficient approach to expand or upgrade school infrastructure, with successes in Mauritania (Ministry of Education to parents' associations), Mali (community-driven development projects through social fund), and across Sub-Saharan Africa. Community involvement can also strengthen the quality of services and improve learning: School Management Committees in Niger were supported to organize simple learning assessments and remedial extracurricular activities, which significantly improved student math skills.



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- Public-private partnerships can extend the reach of the state. Religious and secular private providers are expanding quickly in certain contexts: in Mali, where the secondary GER has grown by 2.5 times since 2000, 80 percent of general secondary schools are private, and private schools also growing quickly in Mauritania, reaching 50 percent of enrollments in the capital. But well-targeted financing and performance management are needed to ensure that this growth contributes to real opportunity and equity. Islamic schools have a long tradition in the Sahel, and formally recognized ones have grown in recent years. Many out-of-school children and youth (23 percent in Mali, 26 percent in Niger, and 41 percent in Chad) also participate in informal Koranic schools. In such cases, experiences in Senegal and Niger suggest a path for incorporating academic subjects and giving formal recognition to schools.
- Regional cooperation can support countries on common problems. One example is the Alliance Sahel, which coordinates development partners' efforts around six priority areas, including education and training. There are also successful World Bank Sahel regional projects under implementation that tackle shared human capital challenges, including the Sahel Women's Empowerment and Demographic Dividend (SWEDD) and Sahel Adaptive Social Protection Pro-

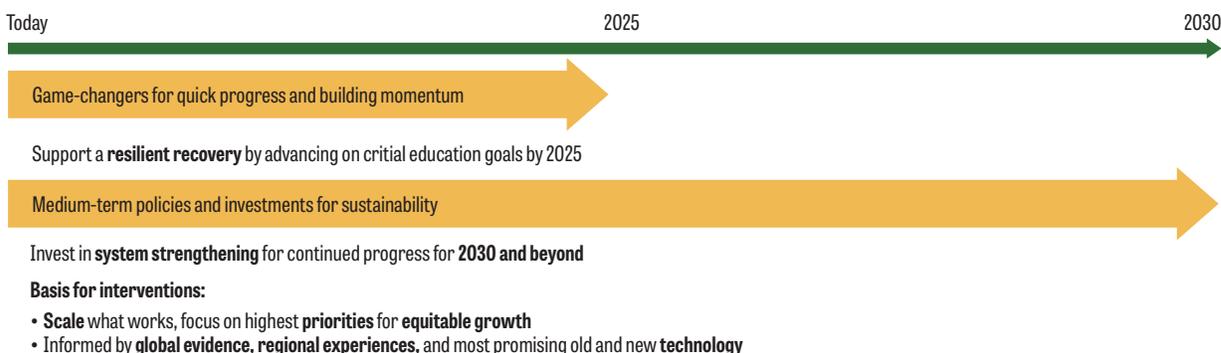
gram (SASPP). And at the tertiary level, the World Bank Africa Higher Education Centers of Excellence (ACE) program was implemented successfully, with a very positive experience in Burkina Faso that also benefited trainees and students from Mali and Niger.

**Moreover, the current moment offers real opportunity to make change happen.** Although the pandemic has exacerbated the education challenges, the Sahel countries can also use it as a chance to accelerate progress. With the school closures, the immediate threats to access and learning will have become salient to everyone, not just to education experts. This awareness could increase societal willingness to do what it takes to invest in this generation of children. And because some of the best interventions for learning recovery are also those that will strengthen education over the longer term, the Sahel countries could ride the momentum from better policies today to stronger systems tomorrow.

**Most importantly, there are policies and programs that could be game-changers for schooling and learning in the short to medium term.** If implemented quickly, these interventions could make a substantial difference in the next 3 to 5 years and could sow the seeds for a longer-term flourishing of the education system. They are not miracle cures; they will require true political commitment and good technical

## Strategic approach to education in the Sahel

### STRATEGIC APPROACH TO EDUCATION IN THE SAHEL



design, as well as increased financing in some cases. But they can yield noticeable improvements in outcomes.

**These game-changers need to be combined with policies for long-term system strengthening.** Such policies will take longer to bear fruit, which is why it is crucial to put them in place now. But paired with the game-changers, they can lead to sustained improvements in education outcomes, both in the next few years and in the decades to come.

## Targets to focus these efforts

**To keep its efforts focused on the most pressing challenges, the Bank's strategy in the Sahel will be guided by three targets.** There are many needs throughout the education systems of these five countries, and the Bank will continue to provide support where they request it. But to have an impact will require greater focus on the most fundamental need: ensuring that children, youth, and young adults—especially women and girls—develop the foundational skills they need for life and work. Setting these targets will sharpen that focus operationally. Accordingly, the three targets proposed for the Sahel region are:

**1. Cut learning poverty**, as a necessary condition for sustainable growth and development

- *2025 target: Reduce learning poverty rate by 9 percentage points, from 88 percent to 79 percent*
- *2030 target: Reduce learning poverty rate to 67 percent*
- *Impact by 2030: Total of 13.8 million children in school and able to read, or an additional 10.2 million children*

**2. Increase girls' education**, to break the intergenerational cycle of low human capital

- *2025 target: Increase girls' secondary gross enrollment rate (GER) by 12 percentage points, from 31 percent to 43 percent*
- *2030 target: Increase girls' secondary GER to 52 percent*
- *Impact by 2030: Total of 3.3 million girls in secondary school, or an additional 2.0 million girls*

**3. Raise the young adult literacy rate**, with a focus on young women, to improve labor force productivity and foster empowerment by complementing job-focused skills training

- *2025 target: Raise the young adult literacy rate by 9 percentage points, from 51 percent to 60 percent*
- *2030 target: Raise the young adult literacy rate to 68 percent*
- *Impact by 2030: Total of 26.5 million literate young adults, of which 11.8 million are female; this will be an additional 13.4 million young adults, of which 6.5 million are female*

**These targets aim to be ambitious stretch targets, but grounded in the region's experience.** They are based on recent trends in the subregion, with some adjustment for the expected worsening of outcomes in 2020-21 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The growth rate underlying each target is the average performance of the better performers in the Sahel region on that target over the previous 5 years. In essence, each target asks what can be achieved if the region as a whole can progress as rapidly as the top regional performers have.

## Short-term: Building commitment and implementing game-changers that can make a difference in the next 3 to 5 years

**The first step toward achieving these ambitious goals is to build political commitment.** Commitment should start from the top, with clear signals from senior political leaders that real education for all—meaning schooling with learning—is a top priority. After that, the challenge is converting rhetorical commitment into the kind of commitment that shows up in decisions and actions throughout the system. To make it actionable, experience suggests the commitment needs to be concrete, not general, for example by focusing attention on the goal of all children in safe schools and reading by grade 4. Societal commitment requires that stakeholders be able to understand the objective. These signals will be most powerful if they come not just from the minister of education, but from the president or prime minister as well, with clear support from the ministry of finance..

**At the same time, this top-down commitment should be accompanied by bottom-up support from communities.** Catalyzing this requires engaging communities with messages about how the government is improving education and holding itself accountable for all children learning. Involving communities in the management of schools can also help, by giving parents and other community members a greater stake in the success of the reforms. This is a longer-term objective (see below), but it can start during the initial campaign to signal commitment. Such measures are mutually reinforcing with the game-changers described in the next section: to inspire community involvement, governments need also to show that they can deliver results quickly in priority areas.

**This combination of top-down and bottom-up political commitment can begin to build accountability for results.** It has the best chance of shifting the political economy calculations of key actors and orienting the system toward better education and learning. This can support the longer-term goal of improving the professionalism of teachers and principals, but it also increases the accountability of political leaders and of society in general, which is crucial.

**Then, in the short term—especially over the next year—it is critical to use this political commitment to reverse the impacts of the COVID-19 school closures.** Learning losses and increased dropout risk reversing years of progress. Unless the Sahel countries focus on minimizing those costs

over the next year or two, then when they set out to tackle the problems that already existed before COVID-19, they will find themselves having to climb out of a much deeper hole. Key policies for doing this are:

- Tracking which students have not returned to school and devising outreach measures targeted at groups that are at greatest risk
- Equipping teachers to do basic assessments of students' learning levels, to shine a light on learning losses
- Giving teachers the pedagogical tools and learning materials needed to recover foundational skills

Speed is essential for these measures, to prevent longer-term scarring. Evidence from past school closures, notably from Pakistan, shows that learning gaps can continue to grow after school reopening if they are not remediated quickly.

**This approach can turn the “building back better” slogan into reality.** There has been a lot of talk since the pandemic hit about “building back better” or “rebuilding better.” This can be more than a slogan: many of these policies designed to reverse learning losses are also those that can strengthen student outcomes over the longer term, if they are sustained. Recovery and system strengthening are not two separate activities to be implemented in sequence; they are intimately related, and the former, if well designed, can contribute to the latter.

**Building on these immediate measures, a set of game-changers can deliver substantial progress over the short term—that is, the next 3 to 5 years.** Once leadership has signaled its commitment in the short term, both rhetorically and with immediate post-COVID response, that signal can create a climate for medium-term policies to deliver results over the next 3 to 5 years. These game-changers include interventions aimed at each of the three targets, as well as an overall game-changer that is essential to support all the others.

## Game-changers for reducing learning poverty

**Reducing learning poverty in the next 3-5 years will require immediate and concerted action on 3 major fronts**—improving early childhood development, efficiently expanding access to decent primary school, and improving the effectiveness of early grade teaching. To make a difference quickly in each of these areas, it will be important to track progress against measurable goals in such areas as children's cognitive and physical development and teach-

### Improve Early Childhood Development

<p style="text-align: center; color: white;"><b>What</b></p> <p>Provide more extreme poor parents with support and resources for care, nutrition, &amp; stimulation</p> <p>Widely disseminate information on effective parenting practices</p> <p>Prioritize maternal &amp; child health as critical investments for future human capital</p>	<p style="text-align: center; color: white;"><b>Why</b></p> <p>Caregiver practices critical to young children's development; combining knowledge + funds + materials may be especially effective</p> <p>Knowledge as an important factor that can be addressed at scale at relatively low cost</p> <p>Removal of supply-side constraints to child development—e.g., through access to water and sanitation, and health services</p>	<p style="text-align: center; color: white;"><b>How</b></p> <p>Coordinate with Sahel Adaptive Social Protection Program to provide training &amp; storybooks (Read@Home)</p> <p>Radio programming to directly engage parents in local languages</p> <p>Financial commitments &amp; strategies to eliminate malnutrition, drastically reduce mortality</p>	<p style="text-align: center; color: #2e7d32;"><b>Goals</b></p> <div style="text-align: center;">  </div> <p style="text-align: center; color: #2e7d32;"><b>Young children with measurably better physical and cognitive development...</b></p> <p style="text-align: center; color: #2e7d32;"><b>...Who are ready to enter primary school on time (at age 6) and learn</b></p>
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ing practices in classrooms. The figures below summarize concisely the rationales for and elements of each of these game-changers:

- Improve early childhood development by supporting families through safety net programs and parenting interventions:** Improved ECD support for households can translate quickly into a better start in primary school for children, one that could show up quickly in better acquisition of foundational cognitive and socioemotional skills. Interventions to support early stimulation through parenting education and provision of appropriate learning materials are a key element of this approach. In addition, to improve the health and nutritional status of young children, governments can support parents through programs like the Sahel Adaptive Social Protection Program. Developing the whole child will require coordinated efforts with other sectors, for example with ministries of water and health, but it is essential for improving outcomes, especially for the most vulnerable children.

- Efficiently expand access to decent primary school by funding communities and integrating informal schools:** Children cannot learn if they are not in school, so a top priority must be to get all children in school, while at the same time improving quality to give their families a better reason to keep them in school. One promising mechanism for increasing access quickly is to rely more heavily on community-managed schools; community management can increase accountability for results in the system while expanding access. A second is to integrate informal Koranic schools into the system in a way that ensures quality. Governments can do this by recognizing Koranic schools and bringing them under a formal regulatory umbrella, and they can consider supporting such schools via performance-based contracting, sequencing these policy changes in a way that ensures a solid foundation of mutual trust.
- Improve effectiveness of early-grade teaching by providing structured support to teachers, paired with better learning materials, curriculum, and technology:** Improving foundational teaching and learning

### Efficiently Expand Access to Decent Primary School

<p style="text-align: center; color: white;"><b>What</b></p> <p>Expand public primary school access through communities</p> <p>Integrate informal Koranic schools into the system through performance-based contracting</p>	<p style="text-align: center; color: white;"><b>Why</b></p> <p>Evidence from across low-income countries that community-managed construction and community-run schools are cost-effective way to expand rural access</p> <p>Global experiences (Bangladesh, Indonesia) show that religious schools can be successfully integrated and newer programs (Senegal, Niger) provide relevant context</p>	<p style="text-align: center; color: white;"><b>How</b></p> <p>Start/expand financing through social funds, parent associations, and other mechanisms for local communities to manage construction &amp; operations of schools</p> <p>First, recognize schools &amp; build shared vision; gather data, develop requirements, and rigorously pilot programs</p>	<p style="text-align: center; color: #2e7d32;"><b>Goals</b></p> <div style="text-align: center;">  </div> <p style="text-align: center; color: #2e7d32;"><b>Increased primary school participation rates in rural areas</b></p> <p style="text-align: center; color: #2e7d32;"><b>More schools meeting minimum standards (infrastructure, student-teacher ratios)</b></p>
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**Efficiently Expand Access to Decent Primary School**

<p style="text-align: center; color: white;"><b>What</b></p> <p style="text-align: center; color: white;">Focus on early grade teaching of literacy, with adaptations for rural and urban realities</p>	<p style="text-align: center; color: white;"><b>Why</b></p> <p style="text-align: center; color: white;">Global evidence shows that literacy is foundational for all other skills—not learning to read is a recipe for failure</p>	<p style="text-align: center; color: white;"><b>How</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Scripted lessons and guidance for teaching large, multigrade classes</li> <li>-Practical, regular coaching through technology—partner w/ Digital Development</li> <li>-Quality textbooks and reading materials</li> <li>-Increased class time for learning to read</li> </ul>	<p style="text-align: center; color: white;"><b>Goals</b></p> <div style="text-align: center;">  </div> <p style="text-align: center; color: white;">Grades 1-3: teachers utilizing more effective practices, students with relevant materials, more time in class</p> <p style="text-align: center; color: white;">By end of grade 3: more students learning how to read</p>
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in the early grades is essential, both to improve overall outcomes and to give the most disadvantaged children a chance in life. There are proven approaches for building foundational skills quickly, even in low-capacity systems, such as providing scripted lessons and practical guidance for teachers and streamlining the curriculum to devote more time to foundational literacy. Technological interventions—for example, delivering coaching to teachers via mobile phones—can support these evidence-based interventions. Finally, because these programs will be effective only if teachers are in the classroom teaching, policymakers will need to take steps immediately to support the professionalism of current teachers, through both providing better support and requiring more accountability, even as they start the longer-term task of making teaching a more merit-based, skilled, and valued profession.

**In each of these areas—and the ones that follow—game-changers need to fit the region’s fragile and conflict-affected context.** For example, the reliance on communities and informal schools for school management and supply is a response to fragility, aiming to compensate for weak state capacity that prevents the government from reaching all children. At the same time, in areas characterized by higher insecurity, community cohesion and capacity can be especially low, limiting the effectiveness of this approach and requiring more direct support from the state or other actors.

## Game-changers for increasing girls’ secondary education

**Another urgent priority is increasing rates of secondary education for girls, which is key to breaking the intergenerational cycle of low human capital and thereby increas-**

**ing equity.** Reducing learning poverty will have ripple effects in secondary schooling and beyond, as girls (and boys) progress through the levels of education with better skills and more confidence in their abilities. But there is also much that can be done in the short term to lower other barriers to the secondary schooling of girls.

**On the demand side, game-changer interventions for achieving this goal include:**

- Scholarships to pay for direct and indirect school costs as well as incentivize participation
- Empowerment training in safe spaces to help girls develop key life skills
- Behavior-change campaigns for parents, teachers, and community leaders
- Reforms to support delaying marriage and providing access to schooling for married girls

**On the supply side, interventions include:**

- Public-private partnerships (PPPs) with performance-based financing to expand supply of secondary schools that meet needs of girls (e.g., with appropriate sanitary facilities)
- Innovations to improve schooling quality and thereby keep girls in school, such as pedagogical improvements and adaptive learning software to effectively meet students where they are and allow them to make rapid learning gains

**How can these interventions be put in place quickly? By combining proven approaches with new initiatives:**

- Continue scaling up the most effective activities in SWEDD

**What and How: Large-scale adult literacy programs that...**

- Target young adults, especially young women
- Are appropriately tailored: lift young adults from illiteracy to emerging literacy to functional literacy
- Leverage mobile phones as motivation for learning and to complement instructors
- Coordinate closely with safety nets as productive inclusion platforms and other sectors offering training programs (e.g., agriculture, entrepreneurship)

**Why**

- Under 50% of female adults are literate (as low as 13% in Chad) -limits life outcomes, undermines skills training, constrains growth
- Small but promising body of evidence on how to effectively teach adults to read, including from Niger and Burkina Faso.

**Goals**

Increase functional literacy rates among young adults (age 15-34), especially young women

- Develop public-private partnerships to incentivize creation of new secondary schools where they are most needed, coupled with scholarship programs and ongoing financing flows to families
- Equip lower secondary classes with tested software for rapid remediation and learning acceleration

**These first two sets of game-changers are particularly crucial for recovery from COVID-19 closures.** Over 500,000 children and youth across the Sahel are estimated to have dropped out due to COVID-19 school closures, and uncertainty remains over evolution of the pandemic as well as its economic impacts. Focusing on expanding access in primary, improving teaching quality, and supporting girls will mitigate these negative impacts and help the sector to rebound quickly.

## Game-changers for increasing young adult literacy

**A third set of game-changers targets improvements in adult literacy where they can have the most impact.** This means starting with young adults, and especially young women—those who can benefit the most over the course of their working lives and who will most need to help children in their

households learn to read. Success in adult literacy programs will depend on learning from the small but promising body of evidence in this area, including innovative programs that leverage technology to reinforce literacy instruction. One tool for doing this is to coordinate with safety net programs, catering to the needs of adult learners by coordinating with platforms and training programs in other fields like entrepreneurship.

## M&E: A game-changer to support all the others

**In addition, there is a meta-game-changer that will make it possible for these others to succeed: better monitoring and evaluation.** This is necessary both to implement the game-changers and to learn what is working. For example, structured support to teachers relies on frequent feedback on student learning from well-designed learning assessments. And while we know the basics of how to teach early literacy, good evaluation can help in adapting those approaches to make them as effective as possible in the Sahel context. Similarly, keeping girls in secondary school requires systems for tracking attendance and learning systematically, given that frequent absence and low marks are early-warning signals for dropout. Indeed, a review of all the game-changers

What	Why	How
Monitor dropout risk	To prevent increased dropout as a result of the pandemic	New early-warning systems using simple predictors (like attendance and grades) to flag students most at risk of dropout for targeted support
Regularly assess student learning	To identify learning losses during pandemic and prevent gaps from widening	Simple assessment tools for teachers to use in formative classroom assessments, plus sample-based systemwide assessments to guide policy
Evaluate impacts of major game-changer initiatives	To allow course correction where interventions aren't working (especially necessary in adult literacy programs, where less is known)	Rapid evaluation of program impacts on key pathways, plus longer-term evaluation on outcomes

above will show that each one depends on good data and the ability to interpret it. The key is to build feedback loops into the most important game-changer interventions, so that adaptation and improvement is possible.

**Here too, starting out right over the next year would make a difference.** As governments work to bounce back from COVID-19 in the immediate future, the patterns they set can either help or hinder the medium- and long-term responses. If they track the participation and learning of each child to guide learning recovery effectively, that will create a jumping-off point for a deeper integration of M&E into the other game-changers and the long-term system strengthening.

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## Providing foundational skills for youth who have been left behind

**In addition to implementing these game-changers, it is crucial to support youth who are slipping away from the education system and equip them with foundational skills.** Because of past weaknesses in education systems, a very large share of youth have left schooling, or are about to drop out of school, without even the most basic skills, including literacy and numeracy. This problem can be attacked through both retention and remediation policies. Retention targets youth in school and aims to reduce the likelihood of drop-out; these programs should begin before secondary school, as this is the level at which students commonly drop out. Remediation targets youth who are already out of school, with second-chance education programs to bring school-age children back to school and equip youth with the basic literacy and numeracy skills necessary for employment. Programs with flexible entry and exit and close links to the formal education system have demonstrated success. In the Sahel region, a number of programs are attempting to do this, including the Stratégie de Scolarisation Accélérée avec la Passerelle (SSA/P), which has been implemented in Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali.

**Youth who are unlikely to return to formal education require practical skills training for integration with the labor market—but also foundational skills.** Interventions that provide targeted financial incentives to increase participation in training have been shown to help. Providing information on employment and training opportunities may be a cost-effective way of boosting participation in training. But even this job-focused skills training is likely to be less effective without attention to building up foundational skills, so they should be combined with remediation. The primary focus should be on youth and young adults through their mid-30s, who will have

more years to benefit from the foundational and job-focused skills they acquire and may also find it easier to learn.

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## Changing the game beyond basic education: Technical/vocational skills and tertiary

**Beyond basic education, technical/vocational and tertiary education require attention too.** While the current generation of youth have benefited from the expansion schooling in recent years, most of them have emerged from basic education without the foundational skills that they need for further education and training, or for rewarding employment. Equipping them better can both boost their productivity and prevent the social instability that can result from large cohorts of unemployed and underemployed youth.

**The forthcoming World Bank West and Central Africa Education Strategy will provide directions on strengthening education at these levels.** For technical/vocational education, strategic investments that are closely linked to sectoral demands will be needed from key development partners, building for example on the EU's commitments under the Alliance Sahel. At the tertiary level, given the current capacity of the Sahel's systems and size of their economies, strong regional cooperation will be required to strengthen quality and access. The forthcoming strategy will discuss how these objectives can be achieved.

**Progress requires focus, however, and this White Paper focuses on basic education because of the unique needs of the Sahel region.** As discussed above, the unique set of regional stressors and history has led to some of the lowest levels of learning-adjusted years of schooling in the world. History suggests that to power development and shared growth, the Sahel countries will have to change this and provide education of reasonable quality for all their children. With too small a share of the limited education resources currently going to basic, this means that TVET and tertiary will likely have to become much more efficient rather than relying on an infusion of new financing.

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## Medium- to longer-term: System strengthening to deepen the impact of the game-changers

**Implementing these game-changers would be a major step forward, but sustaining the gains and building high-quality education systems will require much more.**



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The serious work of system strengthening should begin now, because building up the pillars of an education system takes time. Action is needed on each of the 4 proximate drivers of a strong education system:

- Put learners on high-development trajectories and keep them in school: It is possible to provide early nutrition, care, and high-quality pre-school education even in low-capacity settings. Nutrition and care will require high-level political leadership and concerted action of other ministries beyond education, because it depends on support—including financial assistance and advice—to households with infants and young children well before they enter formal schooling. Finding cost-effective ways to expand preschool education is also important, because otherwise disadvantaged children find themselves well behind by the time they arrive at primary school. Finally, getting children into school is not enough; it is crucial to adopt measures to keep all of them, especially girls, in school through basic education and beyond. This all requires building on the game-changer policies for ECD and girls' education described in the previous
- section, by institutionalizing the reforms and steadily increasing quality.
- Strengthen teaching through better attraction and selection policies for new teachers, and through practical training and support for existing teachers. As noted above, it is important to support teachers while focusing on improving the quality of teaching as the goal. Part of this will come from making teaching a more attractive profession for potential teachers, especially for high performers, and from selecting them based on merit. But given that many of those who will be teachers a decade from now are already in the teaching force, helping them teach more effectively is paramount. This means shifting to more practical, classroom-based in-service training, with more coaching and mentoring—while at the same time making pre-service education more practical, so that new teachers don't start out with so little classroom experience. These efforts have to start now as part of the game-changers discussed above, for example through the use of structured pedagogy that incorporates practical training, but reforming the teacher education system is a longer-term effort. In addition,



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systems can strengthen teachers' motivation by improving their career and salary frameworks. Examples include ensuring that teachers can get their paychecks more easily—for example, through mandatory use of mobile money—and appointing principals who can provide useful pedagogical guidance to teachers.

- Improve the classroom experience by strengthening learning resources—most notably through reimagining the curriculum and providing mother-tongue instruction where feasible. On curricula, the “quick win” described earlier would streamline the curriculum on an emergency basis to focus on foundational learning recovery after school reopening. But more thorough reform of curricula is also needed, and that is a longer-term process. Curricula should be refocused to ensure that they provide enough time for all children to learn foundational skills; they should also be re-oriented to ensure that what children and youth are learning is relevant for their lives and their livelihoods. One important element of curricular reform is to make

mother-tongue instruction in the early grades more common, wherever that is politically and technically feasible, because it has been shown to improve literacy in both the mother tongue and (eventually) the national language. And good learning materials—at the right level and in the right languages—are an essential companion to well-designed curricula. Technology can support this improvement in the classroom experience, but only if systems focus on lower-cost evidence-backed technologies and help teachers integrate those tools into their pedagogy.

- Make schools safe, inclusive, and well-managed learning spaces. The game-changers will start the process of making schools more welcoming, better-supported spaces, by increasing community involvement. But much more needs to be done to build professionalized school management that can provide the pedagogic and administrative leadership necessary to run schools in challenging circumstances. This requires reform of the system for selecting, training, and mentoring school principals, combined with greater

autonomy for well-prepared principals to make decisions about their schools. In parallel with this process of professionalizing school leadership, systems could integrate more community involvement in advising the school leaders, through school management committees that are given training and communication channels to local public officials.

**To support these school- and community-level changes, it is crucial to improve system coherence, management, and governance:** Systems that succeed in improving learning for all children are those in which policies are coherent and aligned toward that goal; it does not happen by accident.

- One key element of this is well-designed curricula, as discussed above—curricula that are more focused on the core learning needs.
- A second is assessment systems that are stronger at all levels. This means teachers who can carry out classroom assessments, so that they can know what their students are learning and adapt instruction accordingly; national and regional assessments to show levels and patterns of learning, so that policymakers are not “flying blind”; examinations that test relevant skills and are not used just to select an elite cadre; and international assessments to benchmark levels of learning. Alignment with international assessments such as PASEC should be strengthened to provide an external benchmark of quality.
- Third, greater coherence is necessary; for example, teacher training, curricula, textbooks, and exams all need to be consistent in the material they cover. The structured pedagogy programs listed under Game-Changers will help establish the pattern for this, but need to be built on with a systemwide realignment.
- Finally, because commitment and technical skill are necessary to implement these reforms, depoliticizing the system is crucial: teachers, principals, inspectors, and other public officials should be selected based on merit and supported as professionals. Establishing clear political commitment to foundational learning for all children, and tracking progress toward that goal, can clarify the costs of a politicized system and make these technical reforms possible. A key step toward depoliticizing the system is professionalizing school management. Principals selected on merit need to be given the training in pedagogical leadership and operational management that they need to deal with the many challenges facing schools in the region.



## Political commitment and financing to support these reforms

**All these reforms will require sustained political will and commitment that prioritizes children's learning and welfare.** At each of these levels, there are forces pushing strongly for the status quo. The needs of young children and their families, especially in rural areas, are ignored by political processes because of their lack of access to power. Teaching improvements are held back by hidebound teacher-training institutions that do not focus on giving teachers the skills that make them more effective in the classroom. Learning materials are provided by uncompetitive, high-cost producers, with the process of procurement sometimes undermined by corruption. School functioning is compromised by a lack of

professionalized management and community involvement, as well as lack of resources.

**The commitment must extend from the top throughout the bureaucracy.** System coherence is undermined by bureaucracies that do lack either the inclination or the ability to ensure alignment of policies and processes toward learning for all. Numerous systems around the world have shown that such forces can be overcome, with sufficient political leadership and societal support. What is needed is a very strong signal from the top that the status quo is unacceptable—that countries owe the next generation a much better start in life—combined with widespread public understanding of the challenges and how to overcome them. This understanding needs to be internalized by all officials working on education, and they need to be equipped with the skills and support to act on it.

**One major manifestation of commitment should be an increase in public financing for education in the Sahel, especially for basic education.** Even adjusted for income, spending on primary education is quite low in some countries in the region, such as Chad. Additional resources do not guarantee better outcomes, but some of the reforms described here will not be possible without new investments. Some of that increase can come from reallocations, but especially as student populations continue to surge, the countries will need to find much more funding for education, primarily from domestic sources.

**If governments really want “game-changing” improvements for all children, they will need to devote a large share of this financing increase in the short term to basic education, and specifically primary.** The most successful education systems globally have taken an approach of “progressive universalism,” meaning that they expanded access to high-quality education for everyone, starting with basic education, while prioritizing the greater needs of disadvantaged children. In fragile states, with their very limited institutional capacity and resources, it is impossible to do everything at once. For both equity and system quality, the focus right now should be on getting primary education right.

**Political commitment also needs to show up in greater efficiency of spending.** Weak governance and inadequate strategies have further reduced the impact of the region’s already-low levels of spending. As a result, outcomes have been poor, and households have had to spend even more on education to try to fill the gaps. True political commitment throughout the bureaucracy will result in governments mak-

ing all decisions—for example, decisions about textbooks or teacher recruitment or technology—based on whether they improve the learning of all children. If they do, outcomes will improve, making spending more efficient.

**With real commitment from leadership and the society as a whole, dramatic progress is possible.** It is not easy, but experience from around the world shows the fruits of persistence. In the early 1950s, the Republic of Korea was a war-torn society held back by very low literacy levels; by the 1990s, it had achieved universal enrollment in high-quality education through secondary school, and today its youth perform at the highest levels on international learning assessments. More recently, Vietnam surprised the world in 2012 when the new PISA results showed that its 15-year-olds were performing at nearly the same level as those in Germany—even though Vietnam was a lower-middle-income country that had suffered a devastating war just a few decades before. And a decade of learning- and equity-focused reforms was enough to lift lower-income states like Ceará (Brazil) and Puebla (Mexico) to the top rank of their countries in terms of ensuring that all children and youth develop foundational skills.

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## How the World Bank can help

**With committed country leadership, the World Bank can help make the game changers and system strengthening possible.** First, it can use analysis like this White Paper to help catalyze dialogue between governments and other stakeholders, helping them to coalesce around action to promote learning and skills for all children and youth. Second, it can help to strengthen government capacity to implement the game changers by sharing knowledge about what works. Even the limited set of game-changers proposed here will be very challenging given low government capacity, and the World Bank can help each country sequence a set of actions that will be feasible to implement. Third, it can provide financing for new investments—for example, in targeted teacher training or better monitoring systems—that can improve the effectiveness of the resources that the country is already spending. Fourth, it can help governments work across sectors to achieve education goals, for example in cross-cutting areas like early childhood development or skills development.

**The strategy proposed in this White Paper reflects lessons learned from the Bank’s experience with helping countries design and implement education reforms, especially in contexts with low capacity.** The Bank has learned



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from both successes and failures—its own and those of the governments it works with. Some of the important lessons applicable to the Sahel include the following. First, focus is necessary. Where capacity of governments is very limited, trying to tackle too many challenges at once can lead to failure across the board, so prioritization is necessary. This is why the White Paper focuses on game-changers, while not neglecting the importance of longer-term system strengthening. Second, evidence matters: when policy changes and projects are based on good evidence and analytical work, this increases the probability of success. For this reason, the Bank has devoted substantial effort to preparing this White Paper and the forthcoming West and Central Africa education strategy, as well as all the country-specific an-

alytical work it carries out in the Sahel. An important part of this effort is learning from the rich experience of other partners in the region and beyond—whether they are bilaterals like AFD and JICA, multilaterals like the UN agencies and the regional development banks, NGOs, or academics. Concerted action by these partners is crucial to supplement government capacity, and having a shared diagnosis and a focused set of priorities can help with that. A third point, very salient in the Sahel, is that the scarcity of government capacity makes it especially important to draw on the strengths of communities and non-governmental actors. The actions proposed in this White Paper draw on those strengths, rather than requiring governments to bear too much of a load in the short term.

## The choice facing the Sahel

**Strengthening education and human capital is the region's only real choice—and that's a good thing.** The region's population continues to surge, with the number of children and youth growing faster than in any other region. The countries of the Sahel therefore face a choice that is not really a choice: Do they want their communities and workplaces in a decade or two to be filled with a huge cohort of young people who either haven't gotten an education or who have discovered their credentials do not translate into actual skills, productivity, or employment? Especially given the higher aspirations of today's youth, which are fueled by an awareness of what is happening elsewhere in the world, this is a recipe for disillusionment and strife. Or will the Sahel countries commit themselves—at a societal level, not just within the ministries of education—to nurturing the human mind, which is the most powerful driver of prosperity, poverty reduction, and human flourishing?



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