



# Preventing and reducing school dropout in Latin America and the Caribbean

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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

■ Despite considerable strides in education in recent decades, in 2019, Latin America and the Caribbean was a long way from achieving the targets of Sustainable Development Goal 4 on ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all (UNESCO/UNICEF/ECLAC, 2022, p. 2). The path towards their achievement is fraught with greater challenges than ever owing to the protracted social crisis brought on by the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. Between 2020 and 2022, schools remained closed in Latin America and the Caribbean for an average of 70 weeks, longer than in any other region. Thus, children and adolescents either benefitted from the advantages afforded by their households or were at the mercy of their disadvantages (ECLAC, 2022a), which included increased exposure to violence (ECLAC/UNICEF/OSRSG-VAC, 2020) and child labour (ILO/UNICEF, 2020), interruptions to education, and negative impacts on learning and progress in school (ECLAC, 2022a; UNICEF, 2020 and 2021; World Bank, 2021).

<sup>1</sup> The data used to prepare this report are those available up to November 2023, unless otherwise indicated.

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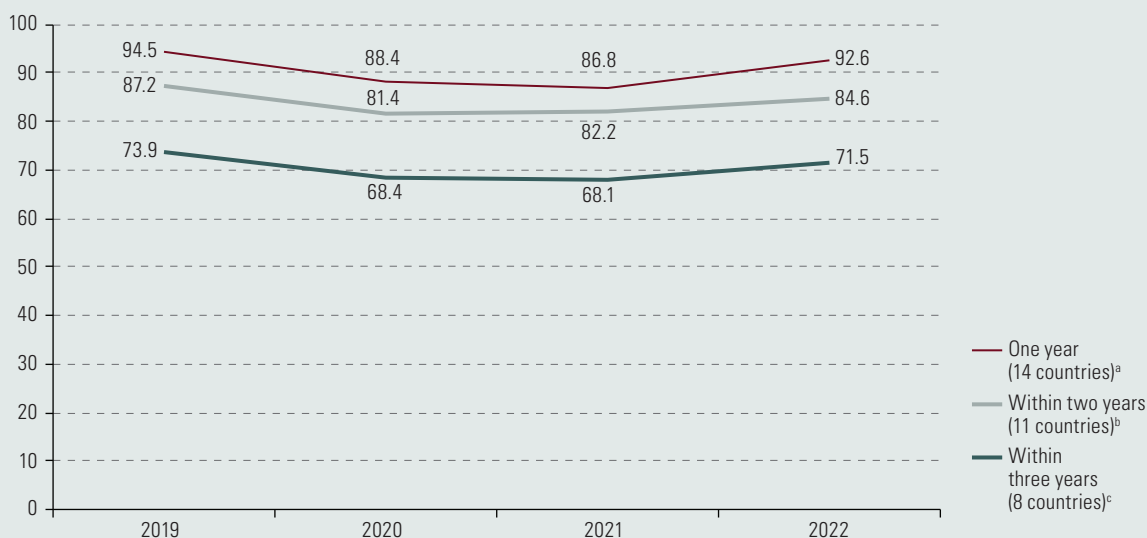
- As stated in the *Social Panorama of Latin America and the Caribbean, 2022* (ECLAC, 2022a), the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of in-person learning for the comprehensive development and protection of children and adolescents. The variety of distance learning techniques that were implemented provided crucial solutions to the sudden closure of schools, but they also posed a set of challenges that in many cases obstructed or diminished teaching and learning continuity, thereby deepening preexisting learning gaps among students. One of the most critical developments of the most acute periods of the pandemic was the decline in school attendance rates. A concerning increase was recorded in school dropout rates, which were already high prior to the pandemic, in particular in secondary education.
- Three decades into the twenty-first century, school dropout remains one of the major challenges facing the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean, and the region now finds itself at a crossroads. Since the early 2000s, efforts have been under way to broaden education coverage, in particular at the pre-primary and secondary levels. These efforts have been supported by various strategies aimed at ensuring the completion of compulsory schooling (Acosta, 2022), and have included extending compulsory schooling to include lower- or upper-secondary education (Ruiz, 2020), increasing investment in education as a share of public spending in the early 2000s (ECLAC, 2022a), and diversifying the education supply to address the varied realities in which children live in Latin America and the Caribbean (Acosta, 2022). Consequently, in the 2000s and 2010s, there were high rates of education coverage, reaching 93.2% at the lower-secondary and 78.7% at the upper-secondary levels in 2020, alongside declining school dropout rates (UNESCO/UNICEF/ECLAC, 2022).
- However, as underscored in *Education in Latin America at a crossroads: regional monitoring report SDG4 – Education 2030*, these positive trends were showing signs of deceleration by 2020, and the pandemic exacerbated the slowdown (UNESCO/UNICEF/ECLAC, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic has put previous advances at risk of reversal, which would potentially have a disproportionate impact on the more marginalized and vulnerable students and households, including those from Afrodescendent or Indigenous communities, lower-income groups and rural populations, as well as pregnant students, young mothers and fathers, migrants and persons with disabilities (ECLAC, 2022b).
- School dropout is closely tied to child labour and informal labour, both of which pose significant challenges for the region. Young people who do not complete secondary education are more vulnerable when they enter the labour market and seek decent work, not only because they do not meet the minimum requirement of a secondary school diploma but also because their right to a quality education that enables the full exercise of citizenship has been undermined (ILO, 2022; Ruiz, 2020). Before the pandemic, child labour was estimated to affect 8.2 million children and adolescents in Latin America and the Caribbean (ILO/UNICEF, 2021).
- According to the most recent statistics available for 14 countries of Latin America, 41.4% of the labour force aged 15 and over has not completed secondary education.<sup>2</sup> Belonging to households in which the main breadwinner and their spouse or partner have not completed primary education significantly increases the likelihood of poverty and extreme poverty. Among such households, in 2021, the poverty rate was 46.8% and the extreme poverty rate was 20.4%. That same year, among households in which the breadwinner or their spouse or partner have completed tertiary education, poverty and extreme poverty rates were 9.0% and 4.9%, respectively (ECLAC, 2022a). Achieving inclusive social development—a strategic dimension of sustainable development—requires continued efforts and advances to ensure that children, adolescents and young people can access and complete a quality education. Even as the region makes progress towards expanding education coverage and reducing dropout, the difficulty of reaching the more marginalized and vulnerable children and adolescents is increasing. Preventing school dropout and ensuring that young people can complete their education are key objectives. The first section of this report presents an analysis of the current state of affairs in the region. The second section is focused on action, highlighting the main measures that States can take to prevent and reduce school dropout.

<sup>2</sup> Information compiled on the basis of Household Survey Data Bank (BADEHOG); for 11 of the countries, data refer to 2021, while for 3 of the countries, data refer to 2020.

## I. School dropout by the numbers: attendance in the wake of school closures

- The region's education sector is currently grappling with the severe consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. As documented in other studies, Latin America and the Caribbean experienced the longest school closures in 2020 and 2021 relative to other regions (Huepe, Palma and Trucco, 2022; ECLAC, 2022a). The effects of those closures include potential learning losses, increased inequality and more students out of school (UNESCO/UNICEF/ECLAC, 2022; ECLAC, 2022a).
- School dropout was one of the greatest challenges facing the region's educational systems even before the pandemic. One of the main difficulties in addressing the problem is the need for accurate and timely information, including data on students who have already dropped out but also on risk factors for school dropout (Arias and others, 2022). With such information, targeted measures can be taken to assist the most at-risk population. Countries have made progress in recent years in the broad implementation of a single student registry in their education management and information systems, many of which include criteria that allow for integration with other data sources. This has improved processes aimed at producing more accurate and timely information. The majority of countries now have centralized education indicator databases. Despite progress, however, the majority of education management and information systems have not been fully integrated with management processes. Statistical production remains the primary aim of most such systems. Some countries or subnational states have automated certain management processes, but much remains to be done in the area of data interoperability. In many cases, systems remain siloed, with their various components operating in isolation.
- In 2022 and 2023, at least 26 of the 33 countries of Latin America and the Caribbean published official national reports on the impact of the pandemic on school dropout, based on administrative records. Because countries use different indicators and time frames, comparability is a challenge, but the national reports generally indicated a sharp rise in school dropout in 2020 and 2021. From 2022 on, however, enrolment rates varied significantly from country to country. For example, rates recovered in Argentina, Chile and the Dominican Republic but continued to trend downward in Colombia, Ecuador and Paraguay.
- Given the difficulty of obtaining estimates that are comparable across countries and that facilitate regular monitoring of school dropout, the present special report uses as a proxy the school dropout indicator compiled on the basis of the Household Survey Data Bank (BADEHOG) of ECLAC. The indicator is limited, however, and does not necessarily provide information on regular school attendance or absenteeism. An analysis of the indicator covering the period 2019–2022 shows a decline in attendance in the worst years of the pandemic (2020 and 2021), generally followed by a full recovery in 2022 (i.e. a return to 2019 levels). Pre-primary education was the level worst affected by the pandemic and has yet to regain its pre-pandemic attendance figures. At that stage of the life cycle, this indicator shows, more than an increase in dropout rates, a delayed integration of children into the education system, or increased exclusion from the pre-primary education system.
- Pre-primary attendance rates increase with student age. Among children around 5 years of age who are one year short of the official age of entry into primary education, the attendance rate is more than 90%. Among children aged around 4 or 5 who are within one or two years of entering primary school, the attendance rate is above 80%. Among children aged 3–5 who are three, two or one year below the official age, the rate drops to 70%. Attendance in this 3–5 age group fell more than 5 percentage points in 2020 during the peak lockdown period and continued to fall in 2021 (see figure 1). Although attendance rates began to recover in 2022, none of the above-mentioned age groups had returned to pre-pandemic attendance rates by the end of that year. Moreover, there are indications, in particular at public institutions, that even among children who are enrolled, attendance for many is irregular or sporadic (ECLAC/UNICEF, 2023).

**Figure 1** Latin America (14 countries): pre-primary attendance rate among children reaching the official age of entry into primary education within one, two or three years, 2019–2022 (Percentages)



Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), on the basis of Household Survey Data Bank (BADEHOG).

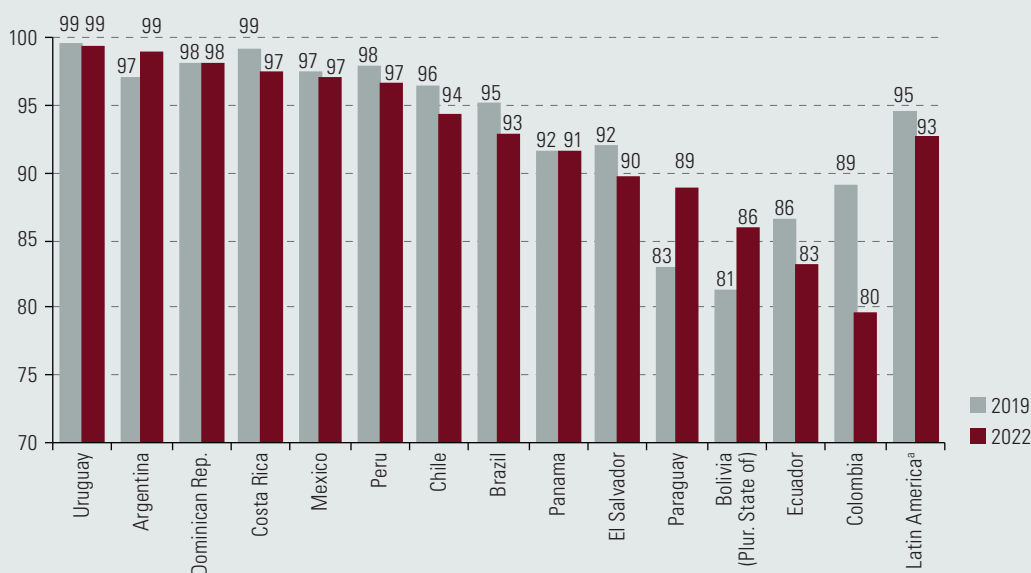
<sup>a</sup> Weighted averages estimated on the basis of data from the following countries: Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Plurinational State of Bolivia and Uruguay.

<sup>b</sup> Weighted averages estimated on the basis of data from the following countries: Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Mexico, Panama, Peru, Plurinational State of Bolivia and Uruguay.

<sup>c</sup> Weighted averages estimated on the basis of data from the following countries: Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Mexico, Peru and Uruguay.

■ Figure 2 shows that the recovery in attendance rates varied considerably among the countries of the region. In 2022, in 3 of the 14 countries for which data are available, pre-primary attendance among children within one year of the official age of entry into primary education had not only recovered but had increased relative to pre-pandemic rates. Those countries were Paraguay, the Plurinational State of Bolivia and Argentina. Meanwhile, that age group had not yet returned to pre-pandemic pre-primary attendance rates in 8 of the 14 countries (including Colombia, for which data refer to 2021), but had done so in the remaining 3 countries. For information on the Caribbean countries, see box 1.

**Figure 2** Latin America (14 countries): pre-primary attendance rate among children reaching the official age of entry into primary education within one year, around 2019 and 2022 (Percentages)



Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), on the basis of Household Survey Data Bank (BADEHOG).

Note: "Around 2019" refers to 2017 data for Chile and 2018 data for Mexico and Colombia. "Around 2022" refers to 2021 data for the Plurinational State of Bolivia and Colombia. The order in which countries appear is determined by 2022 attendance rates.

<sup>a</sup> Weighted average.

**Box 1** Coverage of pre-primary education in Latin America and the Caribbean

■ Despite the lack of comparable and available school attendance indicators in the Caribbean countries, administrative records show that the COVID-19 pandemic had a considerable impact on pre-primary attendance. According to available data, there was a significant drop in the adjusted net enrolment rate in pre-primary education among children within one year of the age of entry into primary education: from around 2019 to around 2022, the rate fell by nearly 17 percentage points (see table). This is much greater than the decline recorded in the 13 Latin American countries for which data are available (1.3 percentage points) and in the world (2.9 percentage points).

Latin America and the Caribbean (23 countries) and the world: adjusted net enrolment rate in pre-primary education among children reaching the age of entry into primary education within one year, by region, around 2019 and 2022

Region	2019	2022	Percentage point decrease	Number of countries
Latin America <sup>a</sup>	89.7	88.4	1.3	13
The Caribbean <sup>b</sup>	83.8	67.0	16.8	10
Latin America and the Caribbean	87.1	79.1	8.1	23
World	78.2	75.4	2.9	135

Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), on the basis of Household Survey Data Bank (BADEHOG).

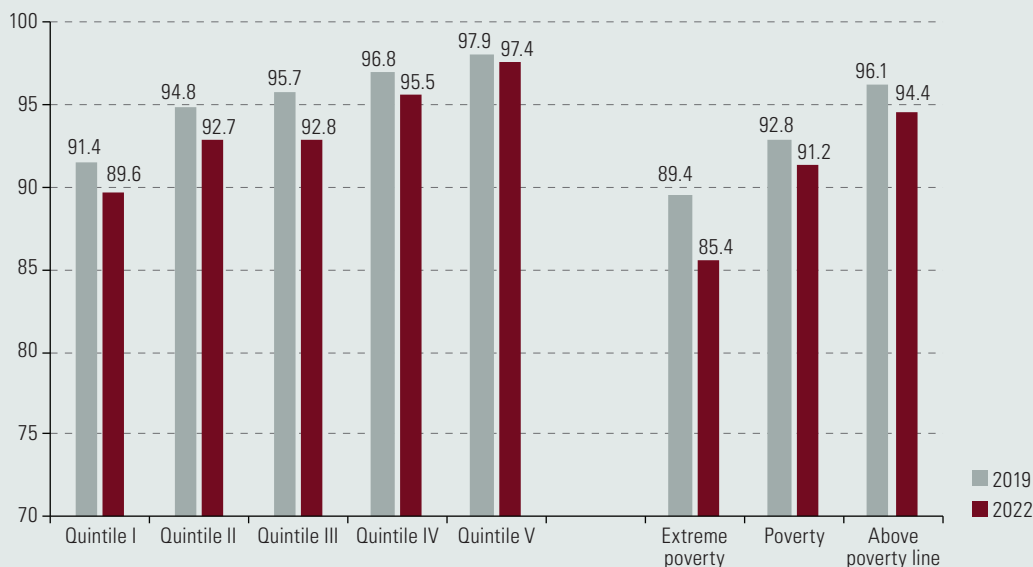
<sup>a</sup> Simple averages estimated on the basis of data from the following countries: Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Peru and Uruguay.

<sup>b</sup> Simple averages estimated on the basis of data from the following countries and territories: Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Cayman Islands, Dominica, Grenada, Saint Lucia, Suriname, Trinidad and Tobago, and Turks and Caicos Islands.

Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC).

■ Pandemic-era school closures had an uneven impact, widening existing gaps and leading to a slower recovery for some. In pre-primary education, for example, unlike children in the richest quintile, those in the lower income quintiles (quintiles I–IV) and children in poor—and, in particular, in extremely poor—households have further to go to return to pre-pandemic attendance levels (see figure 3).

**Figure 3** Latin America (14 countries): pre-primary attendance rate among children reaching the official age of entry into primary education within one year, by income quintile and poverty status, around 2019 and 2022 (Percentages)

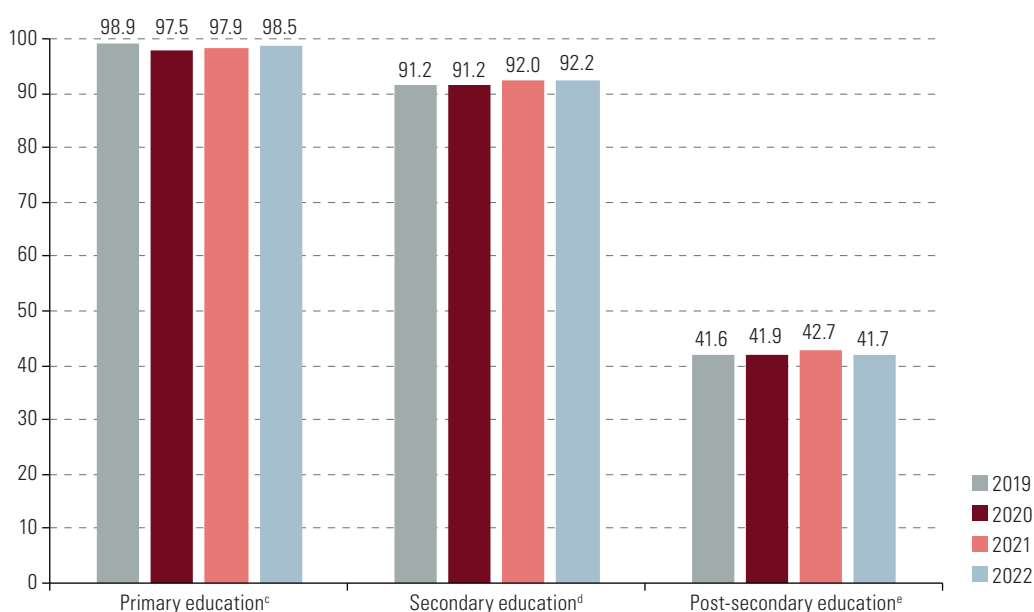


Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), on the basis of Household Survey Data Bank (BADEHOG).

<sup>a</sup> Weighted averages estimated on the basis of data from the following countries: Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Plurinational State of Bolivia and Uruguay.

- The disruption of in-person classes had a lesser impact on school attendance among older children than among younger children. In a distance learning environment, children aged 3–5 have a harder time maintaining a level of educational continuity and connection to school, owing to the skills and independence that such an environment requires (ECLAC/UNICEF, 2023). The attendance indicator reflects the number of students in attendance at a given level of education, starting at primary school, and at the official age for attending each level (including those who are behind) as a proportion of the total number of children and adolescents in the official age group for that level. This indicator had fully recovered at the primary level by the end of 2022 and even increased at the secondary level (see figure 4). The increase may be attributable to the automatic promotion policies implemented in most countries during the pandemic. Admittedly, the school attendance indicator does not capture other highly relevant effects that school closures may have had on students, such as effects related to social and emotional well-being and learning (ECLAC, 2022a).

**Figure 4** Latin America (14 countries):<sup>a</sup> total net attendance rate for primary, secondary and post-secondary education among children, adolescents and young people at the official age for attending each level,<sup>b</sup> 2019–2022 (Percentages)



Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), on the basis of Household Survey Data Bank (BADEHOG).

<sup>a</sup> Weighted averages for the following countries: Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Plurinational State of Bolivia and Uruguay.

<sup>b</sup> The total net attendance rate at each level of education refers to the weighted average estimated on the basis of the total number of students in the age group for a given level of education who are attending school, regardless of level, as a percentage of the total number of children, adolescents and young people in the age group for the given level.

<sup>c</sup> Depends on the official age of entry into primary education and the length of the primary cycle in each country; generally refers to children aged 6–11.

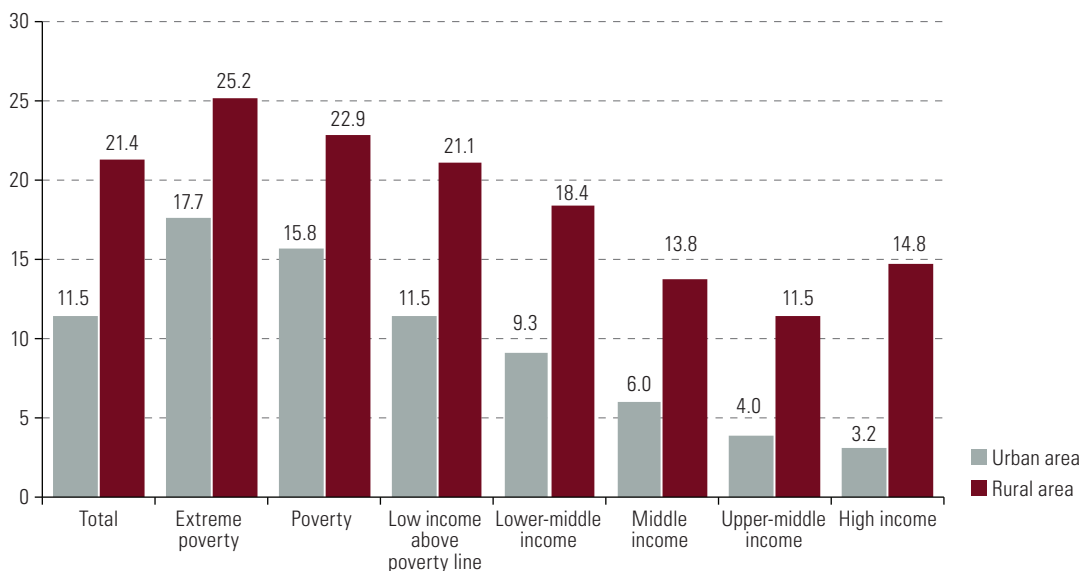
<sup>d</sup> Depends on the official age of entry into secondary education and the duration of the secondary cycle in each country; generally refers to children and young people aged 12–17.

<sup>e</sup> Generally refers to young people aged 18–22.

- This analysis is limited in its scope, and can be viewed as a proxy for a more complex phenomenon that cannot be fully described because the necessary regional data are not available. The indicator used in this analysis fails to capture student engagement during the period of distance learning, which refers to the level and frequency of contact between student and school. According to qualitative studies, this is the area in which the greatest inequality has emerged: students may be formally enrolled yet not meaningfully engage in learning activities (or may engage in an intermittent, passive or incomplete fashion). In addition, at the pre-primary level, it is possible that the indicator does not reflect an increase in the school dropout rate so much as a delay in school enrolment among younger children; in other words, children could be starting school later.

- Some national studies have shown a reduction in regular attendance or an increase in absenteeism, though neither phenomenon is reflected in the attendance indicator. While the return to pre-pandemic levels of attendance in primary and secondary education is certainly positive, the pre-pandemic levels of school dropout and academic exclusion were already high (in particular in secondary and higher education), not to mention uneven (ECLAC, 2022a). Education indicators, including school attendance, are shaped by the axes of the social inequality matrix in the countries of the region (ECLAC, 2017), including socioeconomic status, gender, ethnicity and race, geography, stage of life cycle, and disability and migratory status. These axes are determinants of education access, school attendance, and academic progression and completion, as well as the learning that takes place along the way. Thus, school attendance and dropout, which are uneven and have multidimensional causes, reproduce patterns of social inequality.
- At the secondary and higher levels of education, school dropout rates in the region increase, and the multiple axes of inequality, as well as their many intersections and combinations, become more evident. For example, students from lower-income households experience academic exclusion at higher rates than students from higher-income households. Students in rural areas face greater barriers to accessing secondary education than those in urban areas, because there are fewer schools in rural areas. At the intersection of these two axes, lower-income students in rural areas are more excluded: one in four young people of upper-secondary-school age and living in poverty or extreme poverty in rural areas is not in school (see figure 5). Out-of-school rates are far lower among young people in the same age group who live in poverty or extreme poverty in urban areas, hewing closer to those among higher-income young people in rural areas (approximately 15%).

**Figure 5** Latin America (13 countries):<sup>a</sup> proportion of young people of upper-secondary school age not attending school, by area of residence and socioeconomic stratum, around 2022 (Percentages)

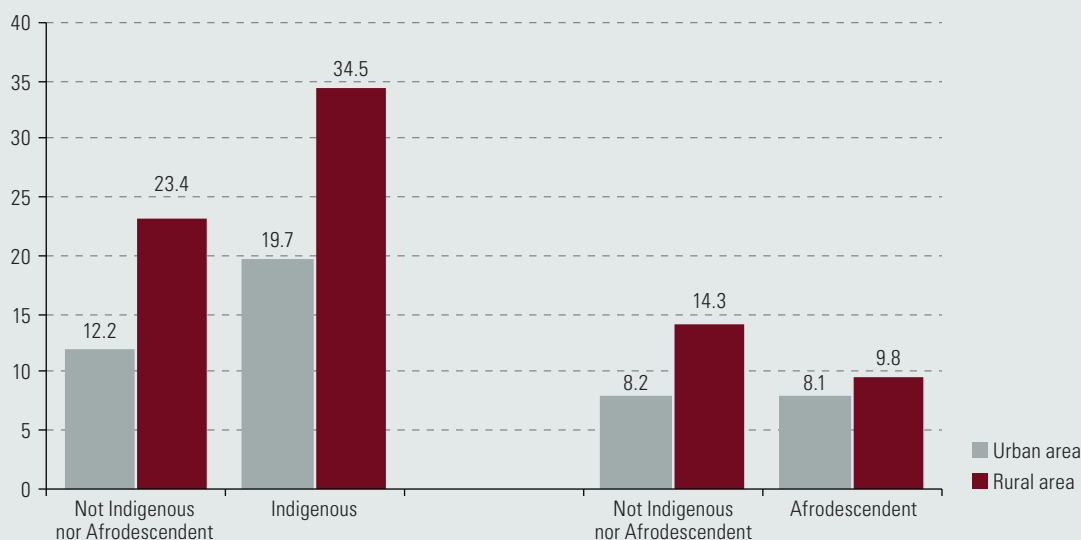


Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), on the basis of Household Survey Data Bank (BADEHOG).

<sup>a</sup> Weighted averages estimated on the basis of data from the following countries: Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Plurinational State of Bolivia and Uruguay. Data for Colombia and the Plurinational State of Bolivia refer to 2021. For information on the operative definition of socioeconomic strata, see Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), *Social Panorama of Latin America and the Caribbean, 2019* (LC/PUB.2019/22-P/Rev.1), Santiago, 2019, p. 55.

- Ethnic and racial inequality in education is also more acute in rural areas than in urban areas. Indigenous and Afrodescendent young people of upper-secondary school age attend school at lower rates than their non-Indigenous, non-Afrodescendent counterparts, and the gap is wider still in rural areas (see figure 6). It is important to draw attention to these and other gaps in order to design and implement dropout reduction and prevention policies that are more supportive and responsive to the needs of the excluded population.

**Figure 6** Latin America (8 countries):<sup>a</sup> proportion of young people of upper-secondary school age not attending school, by area of residence and ethnic origin or race, around 2022 (Percentages)

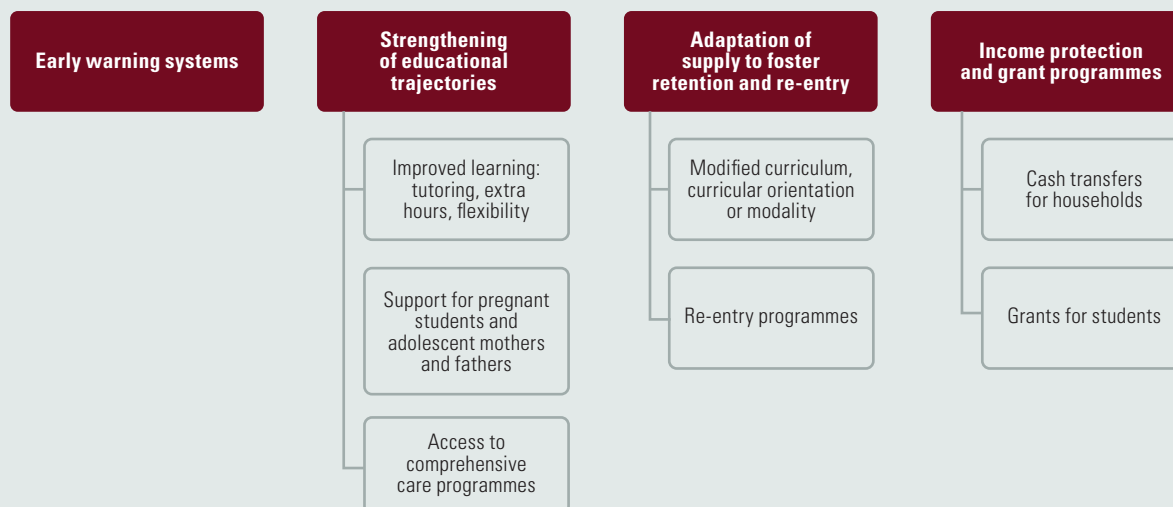


Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), on the basis of Household Survey Data Bank (BADEHOG).

<sup>a</sup> Data on the Indigenous population and the non-Indigenous (nor Afrodescendent) population refer to the weighted average of the following countries: Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, Panama, Plurinational State of Bolivia and Uruguay. Data on the Afrodescendent population and the non-Afrodescendent (nor Indigenous) population refer to the weighted average of the following countries: Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Panama and Uruguay. Data for Colombia and the Plurinational State of Bolivia refer to 2021.

## II. Policy measures to reduce and prevent school dropout

- Efforts to address school dropout target the factors that increase a student's risk of dropping out of school, which are manifold. In a systematic review of the literature on the subject, Rumberger (2011) divided the risk factors into two categories: individual and institutional.
- Individual factors are those directly related to the student. They include background, attitude, behaviour and academic performance (Rumberger, 2011). This category can also include factors that, while not directly causative, are strongly correlated with school dropout. Risk factors associated with school dropout in rural areas tend to relate to child labour and the distance between home and school, while risk factors affecting students in marginalized urban communities might include violence or other problems in addition to child labour. In other words, school dropout is not caused by the rural or urban environment per se; rather, students in specific geographical areas may be more frequently exposed to certain situations that increase the risk of school dropout. Likewise, prevailing stereotypical gender roles in the countries of the region mean that the causes of school dropout among women differ from those among men. The causes affecting women include adolescent pregnancy, early marriage or other forms of union, and the unequal burden of care placed on women. Among men, school dropout is more commonly caused by their premature entry into the informal labour market to contribute to household income.
- Institutional factors are those related to the institutions or settings that most affect students: family, school and community (Rumberger, 2011). The identification of risk factors is a fundamental step in designing appropriate strategies to achieve proposed objectives (Jara, Ochoa and Sorio, 2017; Landau, 2016; Perusia and Cardini, 2021).
- A review of the main measures that the countries of the region have implemented to combat school dropout in recent years—with a particular focus on the secondary level, where dropout rates are highest—identified four overarching groups: (i) early warning systems that leverage education management and information systems and are aimed at preventing school dropout; (ii) programmes to strengthen educational trajectories; (iii) adapting education supply to foster retention and re-entry; and (iv) income protection and education grant programmes. The four categories are described below, together with example measures recently implemented by countries in Latin America and the Caribbean (see diagram 1).

**Diagram 1** Latin America and the Caribbean: top measures to address school dropout, 2014–2023

Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC).

## A. Early warning systems that leverage education management and information systems and are aimed at preventing school dropout

- Education management information systems are one of the strategic tools that international organizations have prioritized in response to the COVID-19 crisis (Vera, Scasso and Tham, 2022). Given the multiple functions that these systems perform at various levels, they do not have a generally agreed definition (Vera, Scasso and Tham, 2022). However, an education management and information system can be defined narrowly as a comprehensive system that encompasses the full range of education management processes and gathers data at all levels of the education system (e.g. central, regional and individual school) (Arias and others, 2019). UNESCO (2007) proposed a broader definition of the education management and information system as a system for the collection, integration, processing, maintenance and dissemination of data and information to support decision-making, policy analysis, formulation, planning, monitoring and management at all levels of an education system (p. 101). In that regard, these systems perform a broad range of functions, which include gathering school dropout data but also span multiple areas of education management, including personnel and planning matters (Vera, Scasso and Tham, 2022). Education management and information systems seek to provide a unified platform for information in the many areas and at the many levels of the education system on which data are collected in information systems, including school censuses, human resources, infrastructure, qualifications and student aid (Arias and others, 2022).
- In the context of education management and information systems, the primary aim of early warning systems is to collect information on the various school dropout risk indicators with a view to facilitating decision-making and preventing dropout (Perusia and Cardini, 2021). In that regard, early warning systems are highly recommended by international organizations, such as the World Bank (2021) and UNESCO (2021a), as key mechanisms for preventing school dropout. The COVID-19 crisis further highlighted the importance of such systems. During that period, there was an urgent need for data, including on absenteeism, digital infrastructure and the availability of digital equipment and Internet connectivity in the household—in other words, indicators that were not regularly measured by education management and information systems (UNESCO, 2021b) or for which there was a more immediate need than usual (UNESCO, 2022). Early warning systems comprise indicators related to the individual student and the student's family, institution and environment. Their efficacy depends on the continuous recording of such information (UNESCO, 2022). Before the pandemic, early warning systems in the region were in the nascent stage of development, despite their effectiveness in preventing school dropout (Perusia and Cardini, 2021). During the crisis, the critical need for the data that such systems collect gave renewed impetus to their development.

- The UNESCO Office in Santiago held several meetings on the development of early warning systems in the region during the pandemic, bringing together civil servants from different countries to share experiences and discuss related challenges and opportunities in preventing school dropout. Some challenges were technical, such as scattered or inconsistent data across multiple information systems, the lack of relevant variables and the need to establish protocols to analyse the data collected (UNESCO, 2022, p. 12). However, there were (and still are) political challenges as well, such as coordination among stakeholders at different levels of a highly centralized education system, achieving stakeholder agreement on management priorities, and translating intention into action (UNESCO, 2022). Further challenges included creating a data and information culture in education management and securing the financial resources for implementation (UNESCO, 2022), but there is consensus on the important role of education management and information systems and early warning systems in education management and, in particular, preventing school dropout.
- The region's early warning systems are lagging behind those in the United States and Europe, where such systems have been pioneered (UNESCO, 2020). However, there are exceptions in the subregion of Mexico and Central America, namely Costa Rica, El Salvador and Mexico (Perusia and Cardini, 2021). Costa Rica's Retention, Reintegration and Educational Success Unit launched the country's early warning system in 2020, while Mexico's system was launched in 2016 under the auspices of the Secretariat of Public Education (UNESCO, 2020). El Salvador developed its early warning system in 2020 as part of its education management and information system, in partnership with the University of Chicago (Rodríguez, 2020). The latter early warning system was one of El Salvador's responses to the pandemic, implemented with a view to addressing school dropout and strengthening education information systems.
- Costa Rica's early warning system is noteworthy for its methodology used to identify students at risk of dropping out (UNESCO, 2020). The system was designed by the Ministry of Public Education of Costa Rica (2021 and 2019) to pursue a 100% graduation rate. It uses various algorithms to gather data and predict the factors that increase student vulnerability and the risk of dropout, then prioritizes those high-risk cases. It also engages a range of stakeholders from the education system, with school principals, teaching assistants and regional directors receiving training prior to implementation (Pizarro, 2020). The system relies on a digital platform that centralizes information, offers online enrolment and tracks students through the education system, updating their records with each change in school.
- A number of countries in South America have also implemented early warning systems. In Argentina, the provinces of Mendoza and Entre Ríos established early warning systems in 2021 in response to the pandemic. As such systems are new to Argentina, the Center for the Implementation of Public Policies Promoting Equality and Growth and the Development Bank of Latin America and the Caribbean (CAF) have provided design and implementation support (Perusia and Cardini, 2021). The early warning system in Mendoza is aimed at secondary-level students. It was piloted in late 2022 and fully implemented as of the 2023 school year (DGE, 2023). The early warning system in Entre Ríos began the pilot testing phase in 2023 at approximately 80 secondary schools. In addition, the provincial Ministry of Education will provide scholarships to prevent dropout among students identified by the system (CGE, 2023). In both provinces, the early warning systems not only issue an alert when a student is at risk but also offer intervention guidance, helping schools to implement a series of measures targeting such students. Although the provincial systems are in their infancy, they demonstrate the potential for intersectoral coordination in policymaking (between the State and non-State sectors) to prevent school dropout in the wake of the pandemic.
- Chile's early warning system was launched in 2019 with a view to addressing school dropout. It was initially focused on a limited number of schools with high levels of socioeconomic vulnerability. The first phase was implemented in multiple regions in the local school systems of Barrancas, Huasco, Puerto Cordillera and Costa Araucanía, covering 294 schools (MINEDUC, 2019). In 2020, in response to the pandemic, the Government of Chile proposed expanding the early warning system to the entire country (MINEDUC, 2020b). The objective of the system is to prevent school dropout among students between seventh year and the final year of secondary school, by providing school officials with information on students most exposed to dropout risk factors. The system brings together administrative records from distinct entities, including the education system, the social registry of households, the national census and the health system, to provide data at four levels: individual, family, school and community (Larraín, 2021). It then analyses these data and generates a report

that identifies “high alert” students and includes a set of suggested measures, which schools can access on an online platform (Larraín, 2021). System implementation challenges include ensuring that school personnel are familiar with the tool, and coordinating among the various stakeholders involved in social and education policy (Larraín, 2021).

- The Active School Search system in Brazil is a joint initiative of UNICEF and the National Union of Municipal Education Secretaries (UNDIME). In the past six years, the system identified more than 200,000 children and adolescents who had dropped out of school, determined the causes of dropout and facilitated their reenrolment. The initiative is anchored by a highly developed digital information and monitoring system that integrates government data (from school censuses) to improve outcomes. A strategic assessment of the initiative showed that school dropout had decreased significantly in the municipalities that used the system.

## B. Programmes to strengthen educational trajectories

- The path that a student takes through the education system, or their educational trajectory, is the main focus of measures aimed at reducing dropout and ensuring the completion of secondary education. The central goal of programmes to strengthen educational trajectories is to provide students with the tools, resources and supportive environments that they need in order to overcome individual and institutional challenges and successfully complete the school cycle (Valenzuela and Yáñez, 2022). Initiatives in this category can be classified in two main groups: those aimed at keeping students with learning difficulties in school, and those targeting students at risk of school dropout owing to early pregnancy, motherhood or fatherhood.
- The first group of initiatives is focused on providing more learning opportunities or strengthening academic content, and can include tutoring programmes, extra time for students in need of additional academic support, and flexible course selection (Acosta, 2022). These initiatives have a long history in the region. For example, the secondary school tutoring programme in Mexico has been under way since 2011 (De Ibarrola, Remedi and Weiss, 2014), and a similar programme was launched in Argentina in 2013 (Dirié, Fernández and Landau, 2015; Landau, 2016). The Argentine programme, relaunched under the name *A Estudiar* in 2023, is a key mechanism for supporting students to complete the secondary level (Ministry of Education of Argentina, 2023a).
- During the pandemic, the shift to online classes forced countries to adapt the format in which support services had traditionally been delivered. For example, an online tutoring programme in the Dominican Republic assigned students a tutor who would provide three additional study hours per week to focus on challenge areas (Díaz, 2022). The aim of the programme was to support secondary-level students who were at risk of school dropout owing to the pandemic.<sup>3</sup> The pilot programme was launched in 2020 and served roughly 200 students, with positive results. It was expanded to the national level in 2021, reaching more than 800 public school students (Carlana and La Ferrara, 2021).
- Another programme launched during the pandemic, *Tutores para Chile*, offered online support to more than 70,000 students (MINEDUC, 2020a). Universities that offered teaching degrees agreed to participate in the tutoring initiative, which would serve as a practicum for students in the degree programmes (MINEDUC, 2020a). A review of this tutoring programme indicates positive outcomes, including reduced risk of dropout and improved academic performance (Cabezas, Cuesta and Gallego, 2021). The results of the midterm assessment of *Tutores para Chile* were promising (Cabezas, Cuesta and Gallego, 2021), and the Ministry of Education of Chile has designed an evaluation programme, together with the Pontifical Catholic University of Chile and the Centre for Research at the Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab. In 2023, as part of a comprehensive policy to revitalize education, *Tutores para Chile* expanded to an additional 28 universities offering teaching degrees, with degree students again participating in the programme as tutors (MINEDUC, 2022). The 2023 budget allocation for the programme was 250 billion Chilean pesos (approximately US\$ 316 million) (MINEDUC, 2022).
- Early unions, together with adolescent pregnancy, motherhood and fatherhood, have a direct and considerable impact on educational trajectories and the likelihood of dropout. The adolescent fertility rate in Latin America has fallen but remains among the highest in the world, at nearly 53 births per

<sup>3</sup> See Tutoring Online Program (TOP) [online] <https://proyectotop.github.io/#>.

1,000 adolescents (ECLAC, 2022a). The problem of early and forced marriage or other forms of union, worsened by the pandemic (ECLAC and others, 2022), is a significant factor in predicting adolescent motherhood, gender inequality and school dropout among women. According to recent studies, one in five girls in the region enter into marriage or another form of union before the age of 18 (ECLAC and others, 2022). Although this practice does not exclusively affect women, research indicates that its negative consequences, such as early pregnancy, are worse for girls and women (UN-Women/UNFPA/UNICEF, 2020). Meanwhile, given that higher levels of education are directly associated with reducing the number of early unions, school is one of the best prevention strategies (UN-Women/UNFPA/UNICEF, 2020).

- In light of the above, support programmes have a strategic role in reducing and preventing school dropout due to adolescent pregnancy or early motherhood or fatherhood. They make schools an inclusive space for pregnant students, for example by providing health check-ups, information and resources for mothers (UNFPA/DANE, 2022), as well as childcare in the first few months to enable new mothers to continue their studies (CONEVAL, 2020).
- Colombia has one of the highest pregnancy rates among adolescents (aged 15–19) in the region (Daniels, 2015), and nearly 40% of those pregnancies are unwanted (UNFPA/DANE, 2022). According to research conducted by UNFPA/DANE (2022), comprehensive sexuality education is one of the keys to preventing adolescent pregnancy. Thus, many of the country's initiatives are focused on raising awareness among adolescents and providing them with information about sexual reproductive health. Such initiatives include the “I decide when” campaign and Andean Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Week (UNFPA/DANE, 2022).
- In Mexico, PROMAJOVEN, a grant programme to support basic education for young and expectant mothers provided financial assistance to prevent school dropout. The main objective of the programme, launched in 2004, was to prevent school dropout and support women to finish secondary school.<sup>4</sup> In 2020, the National Council for the Evaluation of Social Development Policy conducted a study on the impact of PROMAJOVEN, highlighting its strengths and weaknesses. The programme's reach was one notable strength: in 2018, it supported 11,884 young women, comprising 1,137 in formal education and 10,747 in non-traditional education programmes. One of the programme's weaknesses was a lack of precision in calculating grant amounts, which were not commensurate with the opportunity cost of education for women. The programme also lacked an institutional application procedure for independent members of the public (CONEVAL, 2020).

### C. Adapting education supply to foster retention and re-entry

- The traditional structure of secondary school has long been the subject of debate and of calls for reforms to make the education system more adaptable to the variety of student needs in the region (Acosta, 2022). The aim is to make secondary school more inclusive and thereby reduce school dropout, which increases significantly at the secondary level. In its original conception, secondary school was organized by discipline, with a curriculum focused on the humanities and an overarching aim of preparing the elite for university (Acosta, 2011). With its deep European roots, this model is associated with the formation of modern States, not only in Europe but also Latin America, and its basic structure survives to this day (Acosta, 2011). Reforming the traditional secondary school structure has two central objectives.
- The first objective is to modify a particular aspect or dimension of the secondary school model, such as the curriculum, the way the content is presented (e.g. project-based learning) or the underlying orientation. Such changes often manifest themselves in the school's focus, as is the case in technical-vocational institutions and Montessori schools. The second objective, which also entails changing the way the curriculum is presented, as well as evaluation methods, promotion policies or institutional structure, is to provide learning environments that are adapted directly to the characteristics of the student population. These could include, for example, distance learning, education for young people and adults, and compressed, intensive course schedules. Tele-secondary schools in Mexico and re-entry schools in Argentina fall into this second category.

<sup>4</sup> In 2020, the programme was renamed “the Elisa Acuña Grant Programme” (Government of Mexico, 2023). The new programme provides broader coverage, offers more types of grants and applies new criteria to include women and men from Indigenous communities, the Afro-Mexican population, disabled persons and communities with high levels of economic vulnerability as measured by the family income system.

- The Plurinational State of Bolivia reformed its curriculum following the pandemic. In 2022, the country modified traditional academic tracks to be more attractive to students, who would be more likely to complete secondary school as a result (Ministry of Education of the Plurinational State of Bolivia, 2022). The new curriculum affects all three main components of the country's education system: regular education, alternative and special education, and higher education/vocational training. The changes include expanding the curriculum to incorporate content on a variety of subjects, including the use of social media, the development of quantitative and qualitative research skills, sexual reproductive health and feminism. The reforms also addressed the link between the labour market and school: the redesigned curriculum is centred on strengthening a community-oriented productive economy with a focus on social issues (Ministry of Education of the Plurinational State of Bolivia, 2022).
- In the Caribbean, Jamaica has an alternative education initiative under way to help students to finish secondary school and advance to higher education. The Alternative Pathways to Secondary Education initiative, launched in 2016 (Ministry of Education and Youth of Jamaica, 2016), allows students to choose from three possible tracks during their seven years of secondary school to better meet their learning needs and ensure their access to higher education (Barret and Hayle, 2021). In 2021, the University Council of Jamaica, in collaboration with the International Institute for Educational Planning, assessed the initiative in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). According to the assessment report, Alternative Pathways to Secondary Education increased the number of students in secondary education, thanks in part to coordination with existing support programmes, such as the Programme of Advancement through Health and Education and the Career Advancement Programme. The report also highlights the valued role of technical-vocational schools in providing quality training to Jamaican students (Barret and Hayle, 2021).
- In Mexico, tele-secondary schools were established years ago to offer distance learning for upper-secondary students in rural areas (Castro, González and Vergara, 2021). This became a key strategy for ensuring the continuity of education during the pandemic. In Argentina, the Plan for Finishing Primary and Secondary Education (FinES) offers a flexible alternative for students who wish to work (Esper, 2017). The first FinES plan, launched in 2008, targeted young people, including those who had reached the age of 18, who had not completed all coursework required to graduate by the end of their final year of secondary school. The second FinES plan was launched the following year, with a broader scope and pathways for students who had reached the age of 18 and had either not started or not completed primary or secondary education (Esper, 2017). The second plan offered students a flexible abbreviated schedule that would allow them to attend classes two or three days per week, and the State signed agreements whereby various civil society institutions would host the programme.
- Meanwhile, some countries are implementing initiatives to identify students who have dropped out and bring them back into the academic fold. For example, Chile implemented a return-to-school programme between 2004 and 2019, with two main pillars. The first was focused on providing funding for learning institutions to design strategies to prevent school dropout by strengthening educational trajectories, as described in other examples. The second was focused on providing funding for specific initiatives targeting students who had dropped out to encourage their reenrolment. According to a final assessment, in 2016, the Government of Chile allocated 1.667 billion Chilean pesos (approximately US\$ 2 million) to the programme, although part of that budget was shared with the Second-Chance Schools programme (MINEDUC, 2016). However, despite the existence of defined objectives, there was no updated information system to enable follow-up on midterm and final results or a complete evaluation to explain any potential shortfalls in achieving those objectives (MINEDUC, 2016).
- Two re-entry programmes are being implemented in Argentina: *Volvé a la Escuela* and *Volvé a Estudiar*. In 2021, the country's Ministry of Education created the *Volvé a la Escuela* programme in coordination with the 24 school districts governed by the national education authorities. The programme was designed to bring the various initiatives in the districts together to identify students who had dropped out of school during the pandemic and bring them back into the education system. As in the case of Chile, the programme focused on identifying students at the subnational level and coordinating the various socioeducational programmes in place in the districts (Ministry of Education of Argentina, 2023c). The *Volvé a Estudiar* programme targets adults who are participating in the national *Potenciar Trabajo* labour programme; the aim of *Volvé a Estudiar* is for

participants to complete compulsory primary or secondary education, taking school attendance as an equivalent of a contribution of labour (Ministry of Education of Argentina, 2021). In other words, *Volvé a Estudiar* could be considered a conditional cash transfer programme in which school attendance is the requirement.

- In Paraguay, the Ministry of Education and Science, in partnership with UNICEF and the Education Above All (EAA) Foundation of Qatar, is implementing the Quality Education for Out-of-School Children in Paraguay programme. The goal of the programme for the period from 2022 to 2025 is to identify 30,000 children, enrol them in the school system, and ensure they stay in school and learn. The proposed strategies address factors related to demand, supply and quality, and prioritize girls and boys aged 6–14. Under the programme, six departments of Paraguay have been prioritized, with community mobilization and awareness-raising forums, active identification and back-to-school campaigns and, in coordination with other State institutions, referrals to health and social protection services and prevention of and responses to rights violations. This is intended to address, with an intersectoral approach, the critical barriers that hamper access to education, and prevent students from staying in school and learning.
- At the heart of the teaching offered to students who return to school or enter Paraguay's education system for the first time is a strategy of spaces for remedial learning. The purpose of these spaces is to foster development of key skills linked to mathematics and communication (reading and writing in Spanish and Guarani, the country's official languages). The strategy is based on the universal design for learning (UDL) and is built around the Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) methodology, which enables students to access teaching and learning techniques and methods appropriate to their level of knowledge, in order to improve motivation, self-esteem and participation. All the teaching content is organized into student booklets and teaching guides developed for this purpose based on curated educational resources and materials in analogue and digital formats to support teachers and students. The content reflects the curricular priorities identified by the Ministry of Education and Science in 2022 in response to the urgent need to foster development of core skills that were lost or not acquired during the COVID-19 pandemic school closures. In regulatory and legal terms, the strategy is supported by the Inclusive Education Act (Law No. 5136 of 2013), which has been in force in the country for over 10 years.

#### D. Income protection programmes and education grants

- In the region, cash transfer programmes often have educational components, and are one of the few tools that reflect comprehensive and sustained efforts to provide social protection for adolescents, youth and their families (Rossel and others, 2022). Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, non-contributory cash transfers have been key instruments for combating poverty, reducing inequality and promoting human capacity development, and have been implemented in many countries in the region (Abramo, Cecchini and Morales, 2019; Morais de Sá e Silva, 2017; Santos, Farías and Robles, 2023).<sup>5</sup> Findings vary on the impact of non-contributory social protection on school attendance, continuity of education and dropout prevention, but they do point to a trend of improvement (García and Saavedra, 2017; Mata and Hernández, 2015; Seilema and Ramírez, 2016).
- During the COVID-19 pandemic, cash transfers were particularly important to mitigate the impact of the crisis, especially on lower-income and more vulnerable households. In some cases, in existing conditional cash transfer programmes, requirements were paused, sufficiency was increased or coverage was expanded, and alternative transfer delivery channels were used, to ensure that households continued to receive resources. In response to the crisis, new emergency social protection programmes were also created in many countries of the region, to complement existing ones (Atuesta and Van Hemelryck, 2022).
- Brazil's *Bolsa Família* programme, established in 2003, is one of the most representative cases of cash transfers worldwide. *Bolsa Família* consists of a cash transfer that the national government gives as a priority to female heads of household who are below the poverty line, defined as an income of less than 218 reais (approximately US\$ 40) per person in the family unit (Government of

<sup>5</sup> For more information, see Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), Non-contributory Social Protection Programmes Database in Latin America and the Caribbean [online] <https://dds.cepal.org/bpsnc/home>. The database contains information on the conditional transfer programme, non-contributory pension systems and labour inclusion programmes implemented in the countries of the region.

Brazil, 2023). The programme requirements include school attendance for children and adolescents in the family unit, and antenatal health check-ups. In 2023, a new version of the programme was implemented, providing additional amounts per child, adolescent or pregnant woman in a household, and 21 million families received an average of 670 reais (US\$ 135) per month, double the number of families that have historically benefited from the programme (Government of Brazil, 2023). Studies of the *Bolsa Família* programme have found it to be beneficial, particularly in terms of education, and that it encourages students to attend and remain in school, especially in the cases of girls and young women (Barrientos, Debowicz and Woolard, 2016; De Brauw and others, 2015). More recent studies have found that among the lower-income population there has been some upward social mobility, and that there has been an improvement in the socioeconomic status of many of those covered by the programme during their childhood and adolescence (IMDS, 2023).

- Other examples of income protection policies that have educational components include Costa Rica's *Avancemos* programme, in place since 2006, Argentina's Universal Child Allowance (AUH), in operation since 2009, Ecuador's Human Development Grant, which was created in 2003, and Mexico's National Coordination Committee for Benito Juárez Education Grants. However, all cash transfer or income protection programmes must be accompanied by a comprehensive strategy that addresses the other individual and institutional aspects of educational pathways that are behind school dropout (Rossel and others, 2022). In addition, most social protection programmes have educational components aimed at age groups below secondary education; therefore, a key prerequisite for the desired result is broadening the target group and improving links with social protection systems and dropout prevention strategies (Rossel and others, 2022; IMDS, 2023).
- Another related type of initiative is the education grant to promote completion of secondary schooling. Such programmes tend to be targeted or subnational, as they complement broader income protection measures and are generally aimed at supporting students remaining in school at higher levels. Examples include the *Ser Pilo Paga* programme in Colombia or *Beca 18* in Peru. Two noteworthy programmes have been implemented in the region. Firstly, the Support for Argentine Students Programme (PROGRESAR), which aims to encourage completion of secondary schooling among young people and adults aged 16–24 whose household income does not exceed three minimum wages (Ministry of Education of Argentina, 2023b). PROGRESAR, which was initially overseen by the National Social Security Administration (ANSES) and is now managed by the Ministry of Education, aims to encourage completion of secondary schooling or for people to re-enter education in adult or alternative formats, as well as providing economic support to young people pursuing tertiary education (Ministry of Education of Argentina, 2023b). In other words, the purpose of PROGRESAR is to follow on from the Universal Child Allowance programme once recipients reach legal age, but with specific educational aims. PROGRESAR has approximately 700,000 recipients and in 2022 entailed an outlay of around 120 billion Argentine pesos (US\$ 1 billion) (Ministry of Education of Argentina, 2021). There have not been many assessments of the programme's results, but the most recent one, conducted by the World Bank, concluded that a positive impact had been achieved in both encouraging students to re-enter the education system and in students completing secondary and higher levels of education (World Bank, 2019).
- Another education grant programme aimed at secondary school students is that of Chile's National School Support and Scholarships Board (JUNAEB). Through JUNAEB, grants are given to students in all three educational levels in the country. To obtain a grant, students must apply individually, and are given the grant only if they meet certain socioeconomic requirements (JUNAEB, 2023). Rather than examining the differences between PROGRESAR and the JUNAEB programme, it would be more beneficial to review their shared strengths and challenges. As previously explained, transfers of resources to people who are vulnerable in socioeconomic terms are correlated with improved continuity of schooling and even with students re-entering the education system. Girls and young women, in particular, benefit from such initiatives (Cecchini and Madariaga, 2011). However, such measures should be accompanied by more comprehensive monitoring of students' educational pathways, as not only do they face economic difficulties but also often other factors that add to the risk of exclusion, such as food insecurity, violence, learning difficulties or a lack of family support. In short, non-contributory social protection programmes with educational components or education grants alone are not enough to guarantee continuity and completion of schooling for their target population, but must go hand in hand with the support outlined above.

### III. An urgent call to action to transform education

- Education is a cornerstone of inclusive social development, a strategic dimension of sustainable development. Progress on the targets of Goal 4 of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development will determine progress on other Goals, in the social and economic dimensions, and in relation to environmental protection. In view of the educational crisis caused by protracted disruptions of face-to-face education during the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a risk that progress could stall or even for there to be setbacks. The United Nations has therefore sought to stress the pressing need for investment in education and renewed efforts with respect to the policy agenda aimed at transforming education. At the Transforming Education Summit held during the seventy-seventh session of the General Assembly in 2022,<sup>6</sup> a series of pathways were agreed to accelerate progress towards the education-related targets.
- Although school attendance levels have gradually recovered, it is important to look at the uneven impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the educational experiences of the generation of students who faced the crisis. The loss of years of schooling at the pre-primary level not only affects effective exclusion during the years in question, but also entails a risk of less stable schooling and less learning at the primary level, increasing the probability of dropping out in the future. These data draw attention to the need to protect the future educational pathways of girls and boys whose opportunities to enter pre-primary education have been curtailed.
- Although comparable indicators of school attendance at the primary, secondary and post-secondary levels show only a slight harmful impact, this document warns that available statistics can provide only a limited picture of problems of irregular attendance or absenteeism from school, or of effects related to students' socioemotional well-being and learning gaps. This report also emphasizes the lack of progress on school dropout and out-of-school rates in the region prior to the pandemic, particularly for adolescents and young people of secondary school age. It outlines the inequality gaps and the need to address this excluded population with comprehensive and intersectoral responses to problems that are of a more structural nature.
- The measures most frequently adopted in the countries of the region in recent years have aimed, above all, to prevent school dropout, using early warning systems. The challenge lies in linking those systems and their outcomes with other types of strategies used to reduce dropout, supporting educational trajectories with programmes to boost learning through tutoring, extra classes or flexibility. It is also important to help pregnant students and adolescent mothers and fathers to complete their studies. Moreover, it is vital that work to transform the education offered at secondary level, with a view to promoting continued study and encouraging students to re-enter school, be linked to the needs of the different populations that face the greatest difficulties in obtaining or continuing education. These difficulties often relate to the inflexibility of schedules, distance from establishments and the relevance of content. Lastly, this report stresses the importance of linking educational initiatives with social programmes to protect income, since the latter target one of the main causes of school dropout: the financial needs of households.
- All of this calls for redoubled efforts to ensure that all students begin their educational pathways in early childhood, particularly in the case of those who face larger obstacles in that period. For such efforts to succeed, there must be greater coordination of educational policies with other social policies, such as those concerning health and social protection, and strengthening of the staff of educational institutions (Huepe, Palma and Trucco, 2022). This document presents a range of measures and actions implemented in the countries of the region to improve prevention and reduction of school dropout, and which could form a basis for potential new measures, to turn commitments into action. For such measures to gain traction and be priorities in public agendas, they must be accompanied by more investment in education, while maintaining the financial sustainability of that investment.

<sup>6</sup> See [online] <https://www.un.org/en/transforming-education-summit>.

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