

## ABOUT ECLAC and the CDCC

The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) is one of five regional commissions of the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). It was established in 1948 to support Latin American governments in the economic and social development of that region. Subsequently, in 1966, the Commission (ECLA, at that time) established the subregional headquarters for the Caribbean in Port of Spain to serve all countries of the insular Caribbean, as well as Belize, Guyana and Suriname, making it the largest United Nations body in the subregion.

At its sixteenth session in 1975, the Commission agreed to create the Caribbean Development and Cooperation Committee (CDCC) as a permanent subsidiary body, which would function within the ECLA structure to promote development cooperation among Caribbean countries. Secretariat services to the CDCC would be provided by the subregional headquarters for the Caribbean. Nine years later, the Commission's widened role was officially acknowledged when the Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLA) modified its title to the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC).

### Key Areas of Activity

The ECLAC subregional headquarters for the Caribbean (ECLAC/CDCC secretariat) functions as a subregional think-tank and facilitates increased contact and cooperation among its membership. Complementing the ECLAC/CDCC work programme framework, are the broader directives issued by the United Nations General Assembly when in session, which constitute the Organisation's mandate. At present, the overarching articulation of this mandate is the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

Towards meeting these objectives, the Secretariat conducts research; provides technical advice to governments upon request; organizes intergovernmental and expert group meetings; helps to formulate and articulate a regional perspective within global forums; and introduces global concerns at the regional and subregional levels.

Areas of specialization include trade, statistics, social development, science and technology, and sustainable development, while actual operational activities extend to economic and development planning, demography, economic surveys, assessment of the socio-economic impacts of natural disasters, climate change, data collection and analysis, training, and assistance with the management of national economies.

The ECLAC subregional headquarters for the Caribbean also functions as the Secretariat for coordinating the implementation of the Programme of Action for the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States. The scope of ECLAC/CDCC activities is documented in the wide range of publications produced by the subregional headquarters in Port of Spain.

### MEMBER COUNTRIES

Antigua and Barbuda	Haiti
The Bahamas	Jamaica
Barbados	Saint Kitts and Nevis
Belize	Saint Lucia
Cuba	Saint Vincent and the Grenadines
Dominica	Suriname
Dominican Republic	Trinidad and Tobago
Grenada	
Guyana	

### ASSOCIATE MEMBERS

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Puerto Rico
Sint Maarten
Turks and Caicos Islands
United States Virgin Islands

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### EDITORIAL TEAM:

Director	Diane Quarless, ECLAC
Editor	Jabari Fraser, ECLAC
Coordinator	Abdullahi Abdulkadri, ECLAC
Proof Reader	Veera Deokiesingh-Fraser, ECLAC
Design and Layout	Liseanne Martin-Subero, ECLAC

### Produced by ECLAC

### CONTACT INFORMATION

ECLAC Subregional Headquarters for the Caribbean  
PO Box 1113, Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago  
Tel: (868) 224-8000  
E-mail: [spou-pos@eclac.org](mailto:spou-pos@eclac.org) Website: [www.eclac.org/portofspain](http://www.eclac.org/portofspain)



## ASSESSING THE MAIN BARRIERS TO STUDENT SUCCESS IN THE CARIBBEAN

Nicholas A. Wright\*

**E**ducation plays an important role in facilitating economic development, social mobility, and individual empowerment. In the Caribbean, providing high-quality education for all students remains a top priority for policymakers and educators. However, despite efforts to improve educational outcomes at the secondary level, students continue to face numerous challenges that impact their academic performance and hinder their ability to reach their full potential.

These factors can be broadly grouped into three categories: (i) a shortage of qualified teachers, (ii) underinvestment in education, and (iii) cultural norms that create barriers to student learning. Together, these persistent challenges lower the quality of education and pose a serious threat to student success and outcomes later in life. They also constitute barriers to the achievement of Goal 4 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which is to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.

The shortage of qualified teachers, particularly in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) subjects, is a significant impediment to students' academic success in the Caribbean (Christopher, 2024; Francis, 2024). These shortages are primarily due to a steady migratory flow of educators from the Caribbean to developed countries pursuing higher wages, better working conditions, more institutional support, and greater access to career growth opportunities.<sup>1</sup> In this respect, the Caribbean has long been perceived as one of the preferred suppliers of teachers to the international market (Romero & Cegarra, 2023; IOM, 2023; UNESCO, 2024). An immediate implication of this brain drain is that many schools in the Caribbean struggle to hire enough trained teachers to satisfy their staffing needs adequately. As such, some schools are forced to adapt by hiring untrained teacher substitutes, pre-trained graduate

teachers, merging classes, using pre-recorded lessons, or removing some subjects from their Caribbean Secondary Education Certificate (CSEC) curriculum (UNESCO, 2024). The result is larger class sizes, less-than-ideal teacher-student ratios, and reduced individualized attention for each student. The COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated the teacher shortage in the subregion, pushing teacher attrition rates to an all-time high. The mass exodus of talented teachers not only exacerbates existing educational disparities but also undermines an ongoing effort by policymakers to foster a skilled workforce capable of driving economic growth and innovation in the subregion.

Another key challenge facing students in the Caribbean is the limited availability of educational resources. Many schools in the subregion grapple with inadequate funding, infrastructural deficiencies, outdated textbooks, and the lack of essential equipment. Students attending schools with limited resources may lack access to modern technology, science laboratories, field trips, and extra lessons. This hampers their ability to engage in experiential learning and hands-on activities that foster critical thinking and problem-solving skills. In addition, the disparity in resource allocation between urban and rural schools exacerbates inequalities in educational opportunities. The Education 2030 Framework for Action, adopted by 184 UNESCO member states in 2015, establishes that the ideal benchmark

for education spending is about 4 to 6 percent of GDP or 15 to 20 percent of total public expenditure (UNESCO, 2024). However, World Bank data show that in the Caribbean, education spending is at the lower end or below these ideal benchmarks, with average education spending of about 4.1% of GDP and 8.6% of total public expenditure. In addition, over 60% of Caribbean countries missed at least one of these spending benchmarks. This inadequate government investment in education creates a vacuum and students are the ones who ultimately bear this burden.

However, considering the significant presence of low-income households across the Caribbean and insufficient private investment in education, public investment plays a crucial role in assisting individuals to attain the socially optimal level of education.

Lastly, cultural norms and societal expectations can create barriers that influence students' educational aspirations and opportunities (Wright, 2024). For instance, gender norms may shape students' perceptions of their capabilities and career options, leading to disparities in educational attainment. Boys, for example, may be discouraged from pursuing careers in fields that are traditionally associated with women, which limits their academic and professional options. In addition, since boys who achieve academic success are perceived as less masculine in some Caribbean

\* Nicholas A. Wright is an Assistant Professor of Economics at Florida International University.

<sup>1</sup> High attrition rates are concerning because it is the most experienced and highly trained teachers who are most likely to secure opportunities abroad.



countries, this may pressure young men to devote less time to their academic pursuits to avoid the negative stereotypes associated with academic success (Cobbett & Younger, 2012). Similarly, girls may face barriers to pursuing certain STEM subjects or non-traditional career paths due to cultural stereotypes and biases. Using data on Jamaican students who sat CSEC exams between 2009-16, Wright (2024) documents the gaps in student performance across gender. This information is summarized by subject type in Table 3 below. The table shows that (i) female test-takers outperformed their male counterparts across all subject

categories, except for mathematics, where there was gender parity in exam performance, and (ii) female students were more likely to write the examination for each subject type by about a two to one margin, except for engineering and technology where male students held the advantage. Wright (2024) shows that these trends significantly impact students' later life outcomes, such as the likelihood of enrolling in college. As such, addressing these cultural barriers and promoting inclusivity in education is essential for ensuring equitable opportunities for all students in the Caribbean.

## IMPACT ON STUDENT PERFORMANCE

**The challenges outlined above have significantly diminished the quality of education in the Caribbean, directly impacting student performance.**

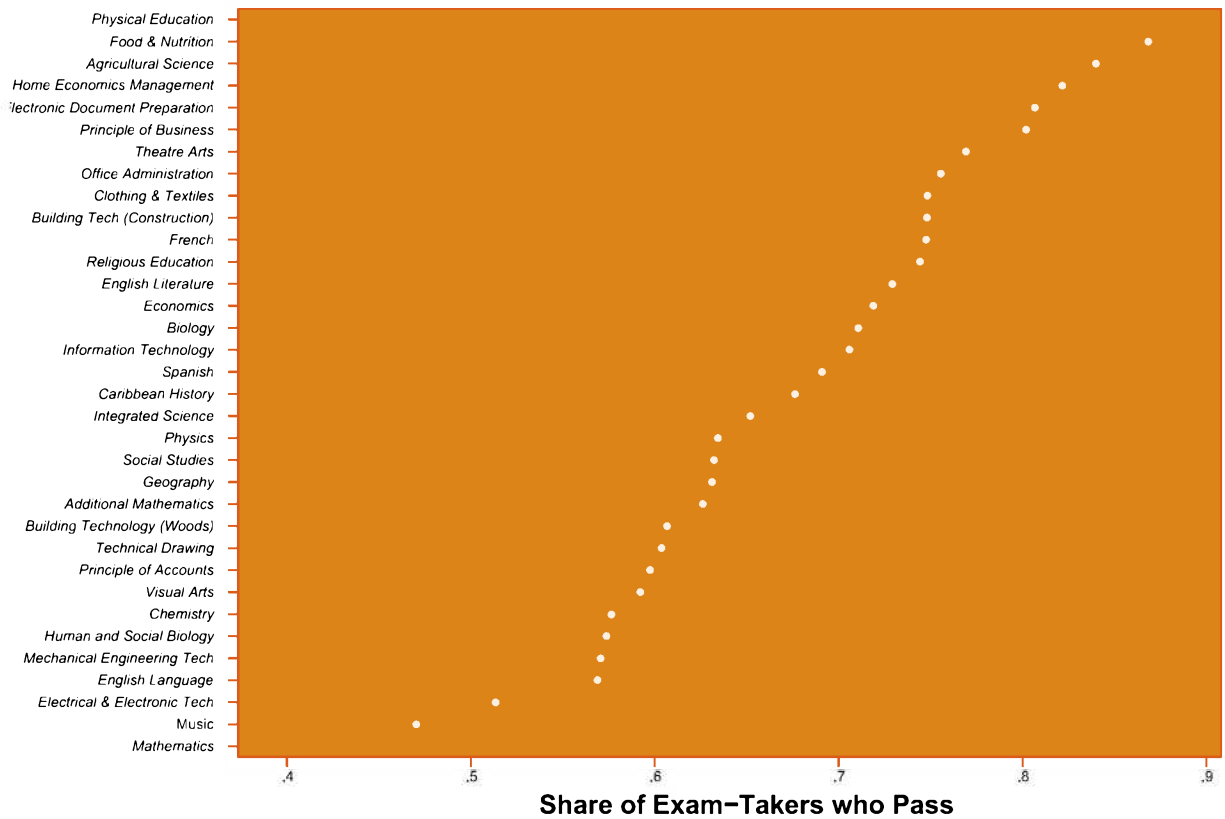
The underinvestment in education, compounded by teacher shortages, cultural gender norms, and large class sizes, have resulted in students falling short of their true academic potential. This stark reality is evidenced by Figure 1, which illustrates that in about one-half of the CSEC subjects for

**Table 3**  
Gender Gap in CSEC Performance among Jamaican Students (2009-2016)

CSEC Subjects	Examination Pass Rate			Female Share of Exam Takers
	Male	Female	Female Advantage	
Science	59.2%	63.7%	+4.5%	60.1%
Math	38.74%	38.3%	-0.4%	80.1%
Engineering and Technology	62.2%	72.7%	+10.5%	36.8%
Nutrition and Sports	75.2%	83.6%	+8.4%	89.1%
Business	69.8%	75.3%	+5.5%	65.9%
Arts	59.5%	70.7%	+11.2%	64.3%
Languages	49.9%	63.9%	+14%	60.4%

Source:Wright (2024).

**Figure 1**  
Pass Rate by CSEC Subject for Jamaican Exam-Takers (2009-2016)



Source:Wright (2024).

<sup>2</sup> This could include student loan forgiveness, like the incentives offered to some public sector workers in the US.

which data were available, less than two-thirds of exam takers passed the exam. Moreover, core subjects such as Mathematics and English Language had pass rates of approximately 38.2% and 56.9%, respectively. These statistics underscore the urgent need for a concerted effort to address the systemic issues plaguing education in the subregion.

## FINDING A SOLUTION

**A comprehensive approach that includes more empirical research, policy interventions, and targeted investments is needed to improve education in the Caribbean.**

Firstly, addressing teacher shortages entails implementing strategies to improve teacher retention through competitive salaries, supportive working environments, and professional development opportunities. Governments should also implement measures to stem the outflow of talent, such as offering incentives for teachers to remain in the subregion.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, to improve educational resources, it is essential for policymakers to allocate adequate funding while emphasizing the modernization of school infrastructure and technology, updating textbooks, and supplying essential materials to all schools, regardless of their geographical location. A great starting point is for each Caribbean country to meet or

exceed UNESCO's recommended spending benchmarks for education to ensure sufficient resources are available for schools. Lastly, tackling cultural barriers requires promoting inclusivity and diversity in education, challenging gender stereotypes, and fostering an environment where all students feel empowered to pursue their academic and career aspirations through their life cycle without facing discrimination. A collaborative approach is needed between policymakers, educational institutions, civil society organizations, and international partners to implement these recommendations effectively. ■

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