

Advocacy Brief

Providing Education to Girls from Remote and Rural Areas

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Providing Education to Girls from Remote and Rural Areas

The Dakar Framework for Action calls on the world community to find appropriate strategies for educating underserved groups and those children who live under difficult circumstances. To achieve this EFA goal, one approach that countries might consider is the use of boarding schools. This policy brief documents how boarding schools have been used in order to ensure access to education for children who might otherwise be deprived of it. The brief discusses both advantages and disadvantages of this educational strategy. Finally, it provides useful hints for maximizing the effectiveness of the boarding school approach.

Concept of Boarding Schools

Boarding schools, also referred to as residential schools or feeder hostels, are educational institutions with dormitory facilities where students may live or board during the school year. The dormitories have sleeping, lavatory, eating, study and recreational areas. There is often accommodation for teaching and support staff. Schools can be integrated or segregated. They can be for a particular ethnic or minority group, open to students in a specified area, or for those with unique qualifications and characteristics. Dormitory facilities may be separated by sex, age, or even familial relationship when families send more than one child. Dormitories most often are located on the school campus.

A distinction should be made here between privately established, financed and managed boarding schools that cater to the children of more affluent families and those that are established, financed and managed through public means to serve underserved groups and children living under difficult circumstances. In many parts of the world, the term “*boarding school*” refers to private schools that collect fees from parents and are independently governed and managed, offer a curriculum that is different from the national curriculum, provide residential facilities to children and are not subject to government rules and standards. Boarding schools in this policy brief, however, are defined to include institutions supported by the state

- that are created specifically for the purpose of
- providing both academic programmes and housing for
- children. Particular attention under such a scheme is
- often given to those groups who otherwise may not
- have access to school at all: girls, those coming from
- rural and remote areas, and those living in difficult
- circumstances.

Experiences and Practices

- Children of remote and rural – usually minority –
- populations in Nepal, China and Viet Nam, as well as
- nomadic children in Mongolia and Central Asia, have
- benefited from education in boarding schools. Some
- boarding schools, such as those for the Khmer in Viet
- Nam, have been initiated by leaders of ethnic
- minorities in order to enhance their children’s
- educational foundation through schools that both
- strengthen ties with the majority culture and maintain
- their own. Some countries in Central Asia, during their
- socialist years, were able to achieve near universal
- basic education due, in part, to boarding schools.
- Remote rural populations in those countries not only
- accept, but expect, boarding facilities to support
- basic education.

- Many African countries have a long boarding school
- tradition, particularly at the secondary level. This
- practice dates back to the colonial period. Today,
- there are still boarding schools in parts of English-
- speaking Africa that are modeled on the British
- experience. Indeed, in many ways, little has changed
- since those days: The distance from village
- communities to secondary schools continues to
- make secondary education inaccessible to many
- children. As a result, many children drop out of school
- after the primary level. In this context, boarding
- schools play a key role in providing secondary
- education. Furthermore, in a number of African
- countries, student meals are government subsidized
- so that it may cost less for parents to have their
- children fed a comparable diet in boarding schools
- than at home. In Ghana, boarding schools comprise
- some 80 percent of all schools. In fact, some parents
- believe that schools do a better job of bringing up

children than they can. However, in recent years, there has been a tendency in Africa to discontinue boarding schools due to governmental fiscal “belt-tightening.” Nonetheless, many educators advocate them as a necessary investment for EFA.

Advantages

When managed and operated properly, boarding schools can yield benefits for students, parents and educators. Some of these are discussed below:

Promote access to schooling. The primary goal of state boarding schools is to increase access to learning opportunities of children from underserved and disadvantaged communities. Boarding facilities, for example, make schooling for many rural children possible.

Attain gender equality in enrollment, retention and achievement. A study in Nepal showed that feeder hostels for girls promoted girls’ enrolment, retention and achievement in education. Feeder hostels bring girls from remote and rural areas of the country, where opportunity for obtaining secondary education does not exist. These hostels provide food and accommodation and, most importantly, an opportunity to attend a secondary school. Upon completion of their schooling, the girls are encouraged to take up teaching, thereby becoming important role models for the girls who follow. Tamil Nadu in India and the Central Highland provinces of Viet Nam are advocating more hostel facilities for girls to increase enrolment and retention in secondary school. In 2000, a regional consultation for Ministers of Education in Nairobi agreed that boarding schools for girls were important in achieving EFA goals.

In some cultures, parents are reluctant to send their children, especially girls, to school. In many countries, parents of poor and large families require children’s labour for food production and for care of younger siblings. Despite state subsidies, there are generally costs attached to sending children to school that parents often cannot meet. In such cases, boarding schools may provide a reasonable transitional arrangement. For example, in Sa Pa, Viet Nam, scholarships for girls enable them to attend boarding schools.

Provide improved learning environments to children. Boarding schools can be a choice for many families that cannot offer adequate facilities for study. Where homes are overcrowded and do not have electricity, boarding schools can offer a better study environment.

Enhance academic performance of children, especially girls. Boarding schools are believed to help enhance academic performance of children. Malawi research claims that boarding schools enhance girls’ academic performance since they do not have to spend time going long distances to schools and are not burdened by domestic chores at home. Boarding schools in eastern and southern Africa are generally same-sex schools, and it has been shown that academic performance among girls is higher than in co-educational schools.

Give security and protection to girls. In societies where girls’ movement outside home is not permitted, boarding schools can give security and protection. In Mongolia, for instance, rural parents are more likely to encourage girls than boys to continue schooling because they perceive that boarding schools offer personal protection and education that ensures their daughters of future jobs; conversely, boys are perceived to be better able to fend for themselves. Malawi research also tends to confirm that boarding schools provide security and protection to girls.

Protect children in emergency situations. Boarding schools have been an important protection for children at risk of emergencies, such as from natural disasters or civil wars. At times, schools can continue their operations. Students from flood-, winter disaster- and other calamity-prone areas have been ensured shelter, food, education and recreation during the disaster. In Nepal, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are operating hostels to offer shelter and education to street children and those displaced by ongoing conflict.

Meet nutritional needs of children. Experience from Mongolia and Viet Nam shows that well-managed boarding schools provide good nutrition, hygiene, and sanitation; a balanced daily routine of personal care; education; assistance for the boarding school community; sports and recreation; and study habits that children introduce to their own homes and families and to their lives as adults. One study conducted in Mexico reported that children attending boarding schools were better off in terms of their nutritional status compared to those who were not in boarding schools.

Promote socialization and mainstreaming of poor and minority children. Boarding schools can be a means of socializing and mainstreaming children coming from rural and remote areas and those belonging to ethnic and linguistic minorities. Children are introduced to new ways of living; new routines and responsibilities; new technologies; and new teachers and fellow students from outside their

community. In Viet Nam, China and Nepal, boarding schools provide an environment where poor and minority children learn to socialize with others beyond their own community or culture and, thus, acquire skills that serve them in later life, in the broader community, or as a link to the dominant culture and national language. Malawi research claims that boarding schools strengthen national unity by housing children of different ethnicities together.

Provide effective links between the community and the larger society. Boarding schools provide a centralized location for learning and living that can be an effective link between the remote communities of origin and the larger society. Children from remote communities increase their options for the future by learning skills that will assist them in contributing to their own communities, in adapting to the larger community, or in bridging the two.

Reduce the cost of educating children. Where settlements are highly scattered and populations are sparse, it can be extremely costly to establish and operate full-fledged schools. Studies done in Nepal have shown that it is very costly to run schools in the high mountains, where the average number of students per school is less than 25. Small schools are generally not cost effective in a centralized bureaucracy. Boarding or residential schools can, therefore, be established where it is not feasible to establish and operate a small community school. The Government of Nepal is considering establishing residential schools in the mountain districts by merging very small schools. Analysis shows that providing education through boarding schools would be much cheaper than the existing system, where education is provided through very small schools scattered throughout the districts. While the start-up cost of a boarding school is relatively high, maintenance costs can be kept in check by using environmentally friendly technologies and supervised boarding houses in the community.

Disadvantages

Boarding schools are not without problems and disadvantages. Critics charge:

Boarding schools contribute to cultural extinction. Boarding schools are viewed as a threat to the child's culture. In the last part of the 19th and the first half of the 20th Centuries in North America and Australia, boarding schools were a key aspect of policies focused at assimilating indigenous children into a dominant European-oriented society through language, lifestyle, education and religion. Compulsory education enforced a culture and

- curriculum alien to the indigenous population.
- Boarding schools played a major role in the extinction
- of indigenous native cultures, languages and religions.

• **Boarding schools cause cultural illiteracy.** Some believe that children attending boarding schools can become culturally illiterate. Being away from home at an early age means being unable to learn many cultural values, beliefs, practices, and customs that are needed to function effectively in the community. Once these children return to their communities, a profound loss of identity may result.

• **Boarding schools cause a sense of alienation.** Boarding schools are physically and emotionally isolating from families and communities. Children staying in boarding schools can develop feelings of not being loved, wanted or cared for. It can have negative effects on children's learning achievement and growth.

• Boarding schools may increase the risk of physical and sexual abuse. Some studies¹ have reported that children are at higher risk of abuse in boarding schools. Such incidents of physical and sexual abuse may never get reported, and children live with the pain of abuse throughout their lifetimes.

• **Girls are at risk of pregnancy and dropping out.** Zimbabwean and Nigerian research indicates that girls in boarding schools are at risk² of becoming pregnant and then dropping out of schools. The risk of pregnancy prevents parents from sending adolescent girls to boarding schools.

• **Children's growth and learning may be harmed.** Where sufficient state and/or local budgets are not available to meet the costs of running boarding schools, the health of children is at risk. Under-funded boarding schools that are not maintained and repaired can compromise health as children suffer from cold, dampness or coal smoke fumes; insufficient or inadequate food; poor attendance of teachers; and low quality teaching/a poor social environment that leads to a poor education.

¹ A 1999 DANIDA study looking at 25 Distant Education Centres in Malawi that provide education for up to 70% of secondary students reported that the biggest problems cited by all girls interviewed were sexual abuse and pregnancies. Institute of Development Studies researchers report on joint studies with Ministry of Education officials in Ethiopia, Guinea and Tanzania, *"Home Factors: Wary parental views on schooling of girls, risk of early pregnancy"* and *"Distance to School: Parents fear additionally for the safety of girls while traveling."*

² The use of the word "risk" indicates here perception based on widely known experience.

Eventually parents lose their confidence in the school system. If boarding schools are not properly staffed and resourced, they can ruin the health, as well as the schooling, of children.

Girls may be discriminated against. Where dormitories are unsupervised and under-funded, such as those built by communities and not attached to the school, girls can be overly burdened by domestic chores. Where girls have to find their own accommodation, they risk becoming housemaids to male students or host families. In these situations, the girls' education is compromised.

Useful Hints for Using Boarding Schools as an Educational Strategy

Educational planners and policy makers must be fully aware of the many advantages and disadvantages of using boarding schools as an educational strategy. Some useful hints for using boarding schools as an educational strategy are:

Ensure that the school is able to meet the total development needs of children. If boarding schools are to be used as a strategy for educating children, they should be able to function as extended families where students and teachers live and learn together, and where opportunities are created for children to develop every aspect of academic, cultural, athletic, and social life. The school should offer an environment for students that is safe, academically challenging, diverse, active and fun. Boarding schools should not just be a collection of children coming from poor households or underserved groups. Where possible, they should bring together children from different communities.

Ensure that the school is well-managed. The atmosphere within the boarding school, both the classroom and the dormitory, is critical for the physical and mental health/development of the child. Only well-managed boarding schools can provide a positive experience for children. School management must ensure that there exists a peer or buddy support system, and that there is good rapport between teachers and students, as well as between parents and teachers. Boarding schools for minorities are generally placed a long distance from town centres and, therefore, the staff have considerably more autonomy than do their town-based peers. If the staff are not disciplined, themselves, the student body can suffer without the remedial action that might be taken if the school were in a more central location. Misdoings may not be reported to families,

communities or authorities in a timely fashion due to distance and communication difficulties. Children of minority families may be reluctant to report difficulties occurring in the school, and so problems may not receive prompt action, or any action at all. The need for good management can not be sufficiently underscored.

Use boarding schools as community centres.

Boarding schools can be used for the development of the local community. The school should be open as a community centre for meetings, adult education in the evenings and children's school holidays. Such a school is a useful focal point for knowledge- and skill-building for the community at large, and for the integration of school life into community life.

Gain parental confidence. The success of boarding schools depends upon the trust and confidence they inspire among parents who decide whether the children will attend school, which children will go, and for how long. This will require that the school be perceived as an institution that addresses parental concerns, recognizes the language and culture of the students, and guarantees adequate information, frequent visits and good medical attention.

Ensure frequent contacts between children and family members. There is no substitute for the family in matters of giving care, love, affection, early education and socialization to young children. Children grow mentally, intellectually and socially through adult contacts in the family and community. Children should not be removed from families for excessively long periods of time. Schools must ensure that there is frequent contact between children, families and their relatives. Children should be able to go back to families at regular intervals, and family members should be allowed to visit their children in school.

Ensure that the curriculum includes local and cultural studies. Centrally prepared and implemented curricula are notorious for ignoring local cultures, languages, and realities. Rigidity, irrelevance and impracticality of centrally prepared curricula and teaching-learning processes can hinder local and cultural learning. Curriculum planners must ensure that children's right to learn their language and culture is preserved.

Conclusion

The world community has pledged to achieve Education for All goals by 2015. Past experience has demonstrated that one single set of educational strategies is not enough to achieve these goals. It calls for adoption of multiple, context-specific educational strategies that cater to the needs of those who cannot be served through conventional educational methods and strategies. In this regard, experience shows that boarding schools can play an instrumental role in promoting access to education for children from remote or rural areas, particularly girls. Available research also seems to suggest that apart from promoting children's access to schooling, the boarding school approach can be used to achieve gender equality in enrolment, retention and achievement; enhance the academic performance of children, especially girls; give security and protection to girls; protect children who are at the risk of emergencies; meet the nutritional needs of children; promote the socialization and mainstreaming of children; reduce the cost of schooling; and provide an improved learning environment to children. It should be noted, however, that this strategy is not without problems. Experience has also proven that boarding schools can pose a threat to local cultures, render children culturally illiterate, and promote a sense of alienation amongst children. Educational planners must take these problems into account. In sum, boarding schools must be well-managed and sufficiently funded to be considered a viable approach to EFA.

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