Addressing late school entry and other demand-side barriers to primary schooling

Jose Ramon G. Albert, Clarissa C. David, Sheryl C. Monterola, and Lucita S. Lazo

In 2010, the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) launched a Global Initiative on Out-of-School Children (OOSC) aimed at working with more than twenty countries, including the Philippines, to study the plight of OOSC. Last year, the Philippine Institute for Development Studies (PIDS) was engaged with the Department of Education (DepED) and UNICEF in drafting the Philippine Country Report (PCR) on OOSC which provides a comprehensive country outlook on children out of school as well as on children at risk of dropping out. According to the PCR, household surveys of the National Statistics Office (NSO) suggest that a considerable magnitude of children who should be availing of basic education are not in school. In particular, the 2008 Annual Poverty Indicator Survey (APIS) suggests that around 2.9 million children aged 5–15 years did not go to school:

- 800,000 of these are five-year-old children,
- 1.27 million children are of primary age (i.e., from 6 to 11 years old), and
- nearly 1 million are of secondary-school age (between 12 and 15 years old).

Combined data from the DepED’s Basic Education Information System (BEIS) as well as the administrative reporting system on day care centers (DCCs) established by the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DWSD) yield a slightly higher figure of 3.3 million OOSC aged 5–15 in 2008–09. The latter is obtained as a residual from the projected population of school-aged children, and the number of children in the school system (which comprises five-year-old children in at least the preprimary level of education, and children aged 6–15 who are in at least the primary level). Trends suggest
that the number of OOSC have been reduced across the years, but not by a very comfortable margin. For 2010–11, the BEIS and DSWD data put the number of OOSC aged 5–15 at 2.8 million children (down by half a million from the 2008–09 figure) while the 2010 APIS puts the count at 2.6 million.

Throughout the years, DepED and DSWD data suggest that children’s participation in school varies across area of residence, sex, and age groups. The APIS also points to disparities in school participation across the regions, between urban and rural areas, between poor and nonpoor, between boys and girls, between children engaged and not engaged in work, as well as between those with parents of low and high educational attainment. Administrative data systems, national surveys, as well as some field work undertaken last year all indicate a number of interlocking demand side as well as supply-side barriers and bottlenecks to primary schooling (David and Albert 2012). In addition, the PCR on OOSC (2012) also describes students at risk of dropping out. Calculations from the APIS suggest that in 2008, aside from the 2.9 million five- to fifteen-year-old children not in school, there were about 660,000 primary and secondary students who are at high risk of becoming school leavers (Table 1). About 5.3 million students in primary and secondary school are also found to be overaged by at least two years for their grade or year level, and these students may also be at risk of leaving school. The profile of these children hardly differs from those of the not-in-school population (Albert et al. 2012). Poverty, sex of the child, age, and factors such as local residence and mother’s education characterize both the the OOSC and at-risk children.

Cognizant of the country’s commitment to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), particularly regarding universal primary education (UPE), to give all children, whether boys or girls, a full course of primary schooling, this Policy Notes hereby discusses various demand-side barriers and bottlenecks to primary schooling. It shows that aside from UPE, it is important to attain other Education for All (EFA) objectives, i.e., keeping children in school, having them maximize their learning, and ensuring that they complete their schooling.

### Demand-side barriers to schooling

Examining APIS data, Albert et al. (2012) suggest that the proportion of primary school-aged children who are likely to never enter school is small (0.2 percent). David and Albert (2012) also point out that of an estimated 1.3 million primary school-aged children not attending elementary school in 2008, 61.7 percent were six-year-old children not in school and a little over 13 percent were seven-year-old children not in school. Had all six- and seven-year-old children in 2008 entered the primary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension of Exclusion</th>
<th>Number of Children</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Preprimary school-aged children out of school</td>
<td>692</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Primary school-aged children out of school</td>
<td>1,265</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Primary school students at risk of dropping out</td>
<td>317</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Secondary school-aged children out of school</td>
<td>870</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Secondary school students at risk of dropping out</td>
<td>341</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All dimensions</td>
<td>3,484</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Annual Poverty Indicator Survey (APIS) 2008
school system, attendance in primary school would then have increased from 90.8 percent to 97.9 percent, moving the country closer to attaining UPE. Thus, the major issue that DepED needs to confront to improve the country’s standing on UPE is late school entry.

David and Albert (2012) suggest that the most critical of the demand-side barriers and bottlenecks to schooling and late school entry as well as completion are: (a) parental perceptions on school readiness, (b) poverty, (c) differences in expectations between boys and girls, and (d) education of mothers. These economic and sociocultural factors often overlap.

**Perceptions on school readiness**
As much as 85 percent of children between the ages of 5 and 11 who are not in school are at most 7 years old. When asked to reveal why children in their household are not in school, APIS respondents said that about three-fifths of six-year-old children and about 10 percent of seven-year-old children are “too young to go to school.” Among three- and four-year-old children, practically all were also reported to be too young for schooling. Data from the field suggest that the notion of being “too young” for schooling is the perception of parents (and teachers) about the lack of school readiness of children. All the 24 parents of six-year-old children who were not in school interviewed for the PCR on OOSC (2012) felt that their children were not emotionally ready to be in school without their parents. Teachers believe that children aged 6 or below without kindergarten or day care experience do not possess the fine motor skills necessary to complete tasks in first grade (aside from not being potty trained and not being able to identify letters and numbers) and that they were not mature enough to socialize with other children in class. In addition, these children presented disruptions in class, which led teachers to recommend that their school entry be delayed another year. Such children are viewed by teachers as the students who usually end up dropping out within the first month of the school year. Note that school leaver rates and repetition rates in primary school have been highest at the Grade 1 level.

Are teachers’ expectations of school readiness at first grade unreasonably high? Perhaps. Critics have commented that the expectations of fine motor skills at six years old is developmentally inappropriate, one of only several criticisms levied against teachers in lower grades. The problem with incorrect perceptions of school readiness levels at Grade 1 is that teachers tailor their lessons according to the learning strategies they believe to be appropriate at the level they are teaching. Continued mismatched expectations of children among teachers may pose a serious barrier to effective learning. The literature on early learning suggests adopting playful interaction with objects and people, social play, and other similar strategies. While teachers may be trained to conduct classes in this manner, the DepED and outside observers must also take into account the context within these teachers do their work. While individualized tracking of development can be effectively adopted in a reasonable-sized class, to what extent is it possible in a class of 35–40 Grade 1 students? Ethnographic research in public schools may be necessary to assess how developmentally appropriate teaching styles can be conducted in crowded classrooms.
Poverty

The lack of children’s participation in school is largely an economic issue. The bottom 20 percent of the per capita income distribution has a much smaller elementary school participation rate (87 percent) than other per capita income groups, including the richest 20 percent (94 percent). This disparity in school participation is even more pronounced across per capita income groups among secondary school-aged children. There is a 16.5 percentage point difference in the ratio of children aged 12–15 years old who are in school between the poorest income group (81 percent) and the richest income group (98 percent). Interviews with parents of children who are not in school and who are at risk of dropping out (that were conducted for the PCR on OOSC) revealed that poverty is the major reason for lack of school participation.

Aside from having to provide allowance, uniforms, and school supplies for their children if they go to school, parents have to deal with the hidden costs of education (e.g., school projects). Most parents value their children’s education and will even prioritize expenses in education over other expenditures, save for the most basic ones such as food and shelter. When they pull children out of school, it is typically due to either financial difficulties or their children refusing to attend because of motivational or school readiness issues. A study of panel data from APIS and other NSO surveys also suggests that when household income drops, the family copes by not sending their children to school (Albert 2011). Households also occasionally suffer from natural disasters, especially with the Philippines being a hot spot for disasters, and such suffering can severely cripple the living standards of a family. Practically all studies, whether quantitative or qualitative, find evidence that economic pressures on household resources weigh significantly on the decision to either drop out of school or delay entering. Poverty has direct effects on schooling because families do not have money to pay for transportation or to buy school supplies for children, or children have to help out in farming in rural areas when they are of age.

Even more sinister are the indirect effects of poverty in terms of overall pressures on the resources and time of parents who are poor. When parents cannot afford to send all their children to school, then they have to consider potential returns on investments of one child over another. Typically, they consider school performance, the child’s strong desire to attend, and the proximity to completing an education cycle in making a decision over who to send to school. In addition, they, of course, have to consider which child can contribute to household income and resources more effectively and in the immediate future. Thus, parents will prefer to send a girl rather than a boy to school, and they prefer to send a younger child over an older one to school.

Differing expectations for boys and girls

Aside from having lower school participation rates, boys are more likely to drop out, be absent often, have disciplinary problems, have low grades, repeat grades, and be overaged for their grade level (than girls). Completion rates for boys are also lower than those for girls. Among children in school, boys have lower
learning outcomes and lower simple and functional literacy rates. Evidence from the National Achievement Test (NAT) indicates that girls outperform boys in school not only in communication subjects where girls have traditionally done well but also in other subject areas (such as science and math) where boys used to do better than girls. Two contributing factors are mostly consequential. Firstly, teachers (as well as parents) expect less in academic performance from boys than from girls. Boys are often viewed as not being able to adjust well in a routinized school environment, from day care onwards. Teachers also say that boys are difficult to discipline, have a hard time sitting still, do not participate in class, and are unable to focus on written tasks such as assignments and exams. Secondly, boys are expected to contribute to livelihood, especially among the poor. In rural communities, from the age of 10, boys are expected to help out in farming, which results in excessive absences, sometimes leading them to drop out of school.

Education of the mother
The relationship between parental educational attainment and a child’s likelihood of success in the educational system is one of the most frequently cited causal relationships in the local literature. When parents, particularly mothers, have less than an elementary education, they cannot afford to provide the basic needs of the family, and they neither have the luxury of time nor the capacity to support their children’s education, especially through lessons at home. David and Albert (2012) discuss the results of an econometric analysis which reveals that the education of the mother explains “lack of interest” among children not in school. This is not unexpected since a child’s mother is the child’s first teacher. The extent of a mother’s involvement in her child’s education, including demand for mother’s time to guide children through homework, getting them ready for school every morning, taking them to school everyday, attending parent-teacher association (PTA) meetings, and even purchasing the school supplies needed throughout the school year, also depends on her educational attainment. This becomes even more crucial when such mother has to work. The apparent inability of fathers to fulfill many of these duties when it is the mother who is working exacerbates the problem. While many studies which have pointed out this relationship suggest interventions that involve improving the education of mothers or assisting mothers in teaching children, practically none of them makes any effort in involving the fathers. It is critical that fathers are treated as equal to mothers in their responsibilities for child care. When parental support is shown to be lacking in children who have left school, the solution to be provided should not only be demanded from mothers but also from fathers.

Policy and program interventions
Kindergarten attendance should better prepare six-year-old children for the first grade. Many teachers interviewed for the PCR on OOSC (2012) were of the view that if all six-year-old children have some form of early childhood education, they will be fully prepared to be in Grade I. The specific effects of universal kindergarten (on five-year-old children) will, however, have to be assessed by the DepED. The adoption of universal kindergarten in school year 2011–12 (which brought in more five-year-old children
into kindergarten) is expected to significantly increase the primary net enrollment ratio in school year 2012–13. There are also other actions, however, that are immediately required to further address late entry in school and the related issue of overaged children.

The DepED has sought to address school readiness issues by also addressing shortages in schools and teachers, implementing the Student Readiness Assessment (SReA), and conducting the Kindergarten Summer Program (KSP) and the Eight-Week Early Childhood Education (ECE) for Grade I entrants. Clearly, it is important to use the results of the SReA as a means of diagnosing problems on school readiness, particularly in customizing kindergarten instruction and in enhancing the KSP and the Eight-Week ECE curriculum. The KSP and Eight-Week ECE, while deemed promising interventions, would require rigorous monitoring and impact evaluation.

The DepED however needs to work more aggressively on demand-side barriers and bottlenecks to schooling. Efforts need to be intensified as regards the campaign for on-time school entry and availment of ECE with the DSWD through the help of local government units (LGUs) and nongovernment organizations (NGOs). LGUs have a wide scope for assisting DepED in minimizing OOSC since they are the chief agents of local service delivery. With the aid of LGUs and NGOs, advocacy materials can be developed and disseminated to parents through community organizations to enroll their preprimary-aged children in Early Childhood Care for Development (ECCD) centers, and their primary-aged children on time, particularly in areas with low primary school attendance rates. Where parents, especially mothers, have low education, they may not be aware of ECCD centers and the services offered. There is also wide scope for DepED partnership with LGUs, especially as the LGUs are in a capacity to enforce the child truancy law. When students refuse to attend school, it is the parents’ responsibility to find ways to get them there on a daily basis. This may not be clear to parents and can be communicated to them through teacher interactions and by implementing antichild truancy laws by the LGUs. Local chief executives, being the face of government in a community, would need to show their leadership in local service delivery, addressing supply-side issues with the national government as well as intervening in protecting the child’s right to basic education when parents are not fulfilling their tasks.

The campaign for early childhood education as well as on-time school entry, with the aid of local school boards (LSBs), LGUs, community organizations, and other stakeholders such as the DSWD, has to be vigorously intensified so that parents can understand the importance of ECCD and of enrolling their children on time, particularly in light of low net enrollment rate (NER)/attendance rates in the preprimary school level. The LGUs need to be mobilized more effectively so that they can serve to regularly monitor the delivery of ECCD services and to champion local service delivery.

Programs such as the Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program (4Ps) that assist families in sending their children to school as well as other LGU programs that provide cash or noncash assistance to children hold much promise in improving school participation among poor
families by lowering the opportunity cost of sending children to school. Critics of the 4Ps view the program as a dole out. Actually, the 4Ps is a social protection program that invests on the country’s human resources as well as addresses education inequities between poor and nonpoor families. While there are targeting errors in the 4Ps, it is important to recognize that there is no perfect targeting system. Moreover, the DSWD is attempting to address these targeting errors, both inclusion errors (i.e., including families that are not poor) and exclusion errors (excluding poor families from the program).

The DSWD may have to look into further redesigning the 4Ps to account for other inequities in education opportunities. For instance, the nexus between basic education and poverty also has gender issues intertwined, with boys less likely to stay in school than girls especially among poor families. It would thus be important for the DSWD to follow the example of Mexico’s conditional cash transfer (CCT), which provides extra cash incentives for subgroups with lower participation rates (e.g., five-year-old boys nationally except in the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao [ARMM] where five-year-old girls are more disadvantaged) and some groups that are likely to be more disadvantaged in education opportunities than the general population (e.g., persons with disabilities and indigenous peoples). It may also be important to increase cash incentives for older children to encourage school completion.

This strategy may also work well for urban areas in the Philippines given the results of field interviews for the PCR on OOSC (2012) which suggested that in urban zones, older children can sometimes be the first to be pulled out of school since they are the ones who can watch over younger siblings or generate income. Teachers interviewed in Metro Manila and other urban areas talk about students as young as 10 years old not being able to go to school because they have to care for a two-year-old sibling at home alone while the mother leaves to vend or do other economic activities. Since the 4Ps has a well-targeted mechanism to assist poor families in investing in their children’s education, there may be room for further improving the design and implementation of the 4Ps to accelerate the pace of providing a full course of primary schooling to all children regardless of sex and keeping these children in school. The DepED has a critical role to play in advocacy with the DSWD for this change in the design of the 4Ps as well as in working with DSWD for its sustained implementation beyond the current government’s lifetime.

In many parts of the world, interventions on gender disparities are equated to female empowerment, but in the Philippine basic education system, it is the boys who are more disadvantaged. The PCR on OOSC illustrated the results of a simulation exercise that provided interventions at the regions for disadvantaged sexes (whether boys or girls) in order to yield perfect gender parity. The results showed that such a scenario could have brought down the number of OOSC by around 400,000 and raised school attendance rates, especially among preprimary school- and secondary school-aged children, by about 2.5 percentage points and by about 2 percentage points among primary school-aged children (Table 2).
The current gender disparities in education outcomes may in part be due to the “boys will be boys” attitudes in both the school and home. Lower expectations of boys’ performance in academics function as self-fulfilling prophecies when parents and teachers encourage schooling more among girls than boys. In addition, there is plenty of research into the learning styles that are more appropriate for the developmental progression and temperament of primary-aged school boys. Outcome measures can be significantly improved by paying special attention to the needs of boys, as they are more likely to drop out at least once during their elementary cycle. The government will need to develop gender-sensitivity seminars for parents and for teachers as well. Gender and Development Exemplars have already been developed by the DepED but they need to be systematically disseminated. The family development sessions of beneficiaries of the 4Ps may also be a venue for gender parity advocacy. School principals and DepED officials at the division level must also consciously observe and analyze trends in school participation, dropout, and completion to have a better handle on the

low performers and disadvantaged groups, i.e., boys (versus girls); children in rural (versus urban) areas, indigenous peoples, and religious minorities. Actions can be crafted at the school level to address education inequities. For example, gender-based disparities in education can be promptly addressed at the community and school levels, even in the absence of a DepED-wide gender policy.

Another issue on the lack of participation in primary school is children dropping out. While this is secondary to the issue of delayed school entry, this also deserves some policy attention. Of the nearly 1.3 million primary school-aged children in 2008 who were not in school, about 13 percent were children who were previously in school but have dropped out either temporarily or permanently. About two out of every five of these children who have dropped out were reportedly not in school because of lack of interest while 20 percent claimed they dropped out due to the high cost of education. While lack of interest was suspected as signifying parental lack of interest in sending children to school, findings from field interviews suggest that parents undervaluing education ranks low among the most common reasons for students’ dropping out. The vast majority of dropouts leave school due to economic or family disruption issues. Aside from poverty, other common reasons for dropout incidence are child motivation and ability issues. Thus, lack of interest largely means difficulties of children, especially boys, in learning. That parents in poor households do not involve themselves in the education

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Age Groups</th>
<th>School Attendance Rates (%)</th>
<th>Actual Number of Children Not in School</th>
<th>Simulated School Attendance Rates (%)</th>
<th>Simulated Number of Children Not in School</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preprimary school age</td>
<td>65.8</td>
<td>691,524</td>
<td>68.3</td>
<td>641,208</td>
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<td>Primary school age</td>
<td>90.8</td>
<td>1,265,069</td>
<td>91.6</td>
<td>1,151,657</td>
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<td>Secondary school age</td>
<td>89.6</td>
<td>979,763</td>
<td>92.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>All children</td>
<td>88.3</td>
<td>2,936,355</td>
<td>89.9</td>
<td>2,537,843</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

of their elementary school-aged children is very possibly caused by parents not having the time needed to provide care because they are engaged in economic activities. Teachers appear to have very little expectation from boys, which also contributes to their lack of interest. These social and cultural problems, if addressed systematically, have the potential to significantly improve classroom learning, reduce dropout incidence, and improve school participation rates. Teaching and learning ought to be more inclusive and more aligned with child development theories and gender sensitivity. Preprimary teachers and elementary teachers in the early grades will need to shore up their capacities to make use of inclusive, experiential, and kinesthetic learning methods to help young children learn by doing. Literacy skills of children may be enhanced by spatial-visual representation while writing tasks could be taught by way of visual stimuli such as comic strips. Primary school teachers will need to learn how to integrate the personal interests of children in the classroom environment. Moreover, teachers and school managers should also learn how to communicate high academic expectations for all children, including boys, and to raise their self-esteem by reminding them of their successes and giving them particular responsibilities that they will be good at. It may be important to identify teachers, especially in the early grades, who have been given teaching awards and to provide these teachers opportunities for sharing their experiences in various forums with other teachers.

Finally, while there may be some parents who do not support their children’s schooling, most parents actually do. Mothers, in particular, spend time with children who are in the younger grades, helping them with assignments and projects, and accompanying them to school everyday, even if the mother has limited formal schooling herself. In any case, for most couples, it is the mother who has higher educational attainment and therefore the capability to guide children through school assignments, at least until the middle of primary school. Special school-based interventions like remedial classes are sometimes conducted for children who are behind in reading or math skills. These classes can augment shortcomings in home-based support. In the higher grades, parents with little education need to provide at least emotional and resource support. The 4Ps currently provides family development sessions to beneficiaries. However, the quality of these sessions may deserve more attention from the DSWD and the DepED so that parents may be trained to communicate high expectations of their children and to be more affirming of their children’s successes. The DepED will need to systematically establish a parental education program, initially through parent-teacher-community association (PTCA) efforts and/or parent-teacher conference, especially as parental education is a correlate of participation and completion in school.

The DepED’s Alternative Delivery Modes (ADMs), including the use of multishift and multigrade
classes; distance education schemes implemented in the Modified In-School, Off-School Approach (MISOSA); the e-IMPACT project; home schooling; and Dropout Reduction Program (DORP) all promise to help students at risk of dropping out (SARDOs) complete their education, but the actual impact of these programs deserves rigorous study. If children leave, it may be difficult to bring them back into the formal school system. The Alternative Learning System (ALS) provides a mechanism for early leavers and other out-of-school youth to complete their education through informal means. Clearly, there is a need to provide more resources to the ALS but it is also important to have sufficient monitoring and evaluation of ALS participants in order to fully assist them in gaining competencies for passing equivalency examinations.

Ultimately, if the country aims to have all children finish a course of primary schooling, it is important to examine the information on OOSC sourced from BEIS and NSO surveys, and maximize the use of such information, from the DepED Central Office, to the field offices, all the way to the schools. Toward improving equity in education, report cards for schools, divisions, and regional offices will need to be made, and these databases should be available in a time series in order to determine the progress (or lack thereof) in improving access, completion, and learning outcomes of all children. Currently, the various education databases from household surveys, administrative reporting systems of DepED, and National Educational Testing and Research Center (NETRC) assessments are not linked. Making these data linked will help examine what works and what does not, explain why some interventions do not work, and identify what may be done to accelerate progress. The DepED and its stakeholders will have to develop a sense of urgency as they chart strategies and actions to address demand-side barriers to school participation, completion, and learning outcomes in basic education.

References