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No. 176, 2003

Lloyd, Cynthia B. and Paul C. Hewett. "Primary schooling in sub-Saharan Africa: Recent trends and current challenges," *Policy Research Division Working Paper* no. 176. New York: Population Council. ([PDF](#))

Abstract

At the dawn of the twenty-first century we estimate that more than 37 million young adolescents aged 10–14 in sub-Saharan Africa will not complete primary school. Our estimates are based on data from nationally representative Demographic and Health Surveys from 26 countries, collectively representing 83 percent of the sub-Saharan youth population. This number is nearly twice the entire population of children aged 10–14 in the United States, virtually all of whom will complete primary school. Reducing the number of uneducated African youth is a primary objective of the United Nations as laid out in the Millennium Development Goal for education, which sets 2015 as the target year for all children to have completed primary school and for boys and girls to have equal access to education at all levels. Achieving this goal will require a level of international resources and commitment not yet seen; it will also require better tools for monitoring educational progress at the country level. UNESCO draws on enrollment data derived from national management information systems to create two complementary indicators for assessing progress toward universal education: the net primary enrollment ratio and the grade four completion rate. Evaluation of these indicators suggests that they provide, at best, an incomplete and, at worst, a biased picture of levels, trends, and gender differences in school participation and grade attainment. Data from the DHS present a different and, arguably, more realistic picture of trends in schooling and current attendance among sub-Saharan African youth. Whereas steady growth has occurred in attendance and attainment for girls in the last 20 years, educational progress for boys has been stagnant. With the decline in educational disparities between boys and girls, the gap in schooling that remains is between the poorest and the richest households. The gap in schooling delineated by household wealth cannot be monitored even with the best management information systems. It can, however, be captured using household survey data that allow the linking of educational attainment to household economic circumstances. We conclude that current monitoring requirements cannot be fulfilled without substantial new investments in data collection and evaluation.

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This page updated
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