

Balancing Priorities: a Primer on Education Privatization



In 2015, the global community adopted sustainable development goals (SDG) for 2030, including SDG4 on education — a commitment to inclusive, equitable learning opportunities for all.¹ Yet, in 2018, 264 million children still did not have access to education.² Obstacles to free public education include insufficient funding, lack of infrastructure, and a concern about the quality of public education institutions.

While the global community has reaffirmed the importance of high-quality, accessible education, it disagrees about who should deliver education and how. Some argue that the private sector is more efficient, while others claim that the state is the guarantor and must deliver on its responsibility for equitable delivery of free public education. This primer examines how states balance these different priorities, with a specific focus on education privatization.

In this primer, we examine the origins, spread, and outcomes of education privatization globally by:

- 1. Defining the phenomenon and its factors, including its historical roots;*
- 2. Identifying its pathways, mechanisms, and levels of saturation, globally and locally; and*
- 3. Analyzing and comparing its results for student learning and education equity.*

On one hand, the theory that free-market principles produce a modern, cost-effective method of education has led some governments to privatize portions of their education sectors over the last 30 years.³ On the other hand, evidence on the success of the market-based approach is mixed at best and often reveals educational inequities, while countries making substantial public investment have shown great progress, even under challenging conditions.⁴

Education privatization is the shifting of government responsibility for the management and provision of equitable, high quality education to the private sector, including for funding and/or ownership, thereby relegating governments to a subsidiary role of allocating funds and monitoring outcomes.

Education Privatization Defined

Definitions of education privatization differ by their focus on specific aspects of the issue. Some scholars focus on provision and funding, describing it as a set of mechanisms or policies which involve the “transfer of activities, assets and responsibilities from government/public institutions and organizations to private individuals and agencies.”⁵ This results in public funding reallocated (directly or indirectly) to the private sector with oversight shared among extra and inter-governmental bodies.