

Assessment and recommendations

Context

The economy has grown strongly but there are increasing fiscal constraints, and social and economic disparities between rural and urban areas remain high

Colombia has witnessed strong and sustained economic growth since overcoming a deep recession in the late 1990s. In recent years, weaker trade and a fall in commodity prices have affected the Colombian economy, but the country has weathered these challenges better than other countries in the region. Nevertheless, slower growth and the country's fiscal rule adopted in 2012 have narrowed the space for public expenditure.

Economic development and social policies targeting the most vulnerable have improved the socio-economic conditions of many Colombians. More Colombians have moved up into the middle class and poverty rates have declined markedly, although poverty is still higher than in any OECD country, and particularly pronounced among children and the elderly. As in various other countries in Latin America, inequality has decreased, but remains stubbornly high. This is also of concern in light of low social mobility across generations. Individual circumstances beyond one's control and in particular one's parents' level of education play a significant role for later outcomes in life in Colombia.

Poverty has not only declined on a national level but also in rural areas which account for at least a quarter of Colombia's population. Gaps in social development between rural and urban areas, however, remain substantial despite rural development initiatives that have promoted equitable access to credit and land as well as housing, education and health. In 2017, the share of rural Colombians living in multidimensional poverty was still more than twice as high as for urban dwellers and even more so in remote areas. Social and economic inequalities based on geography particularly affect Colombia's ethnic minorities. Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities have lower levels of well-being overall and have suffered disproportionately from the country's conflict.

School education is provided through certified territorial entities, organised in school clusters and counts with a sizeable private sector

Compulsory education in Colombia lasts 12 years, from a compulsory year of pre-school education to the end of upper secondary education in Year 11. Compulsory upper secondary education is a recent development – only primary and lower secondary education, referred to in Colombia as basic education, used to be compulsory. However, compulsory upper secondary education is currently being introduced gradually until 2030.

Education is provided by public and private schools. Public provision is the responsibility of certified territorial entities – decentralisation in education has been managed through a process of certification of departments, districts and municipalities. While all departments and most districts are certified, only a small share of municipalities has achieved certified status. In non-certified municipalities, the respective department is responsible for

educational provision. The Ministry of National Education maintains responsibility for regulation, policy and planning, and monitoring as head of the sector.

The Secretaries of Education of the certified territorial entities must guarantee access to free compulsory education for their students – since 2012, co-payments by families have been prohibited in public schools, a significant milestone toward ensuring the right to education. When a certified territorial entity has difficulties to provide education, it can contract a private provider. In 2017, 5.3% of the country's more than 9.3 million students in pre-school, primary and secondary education attended such a government-dependent private form of provision. Parents can choose an independent private school, which was the case for 18.7% of students. Private provision thus represents 24% of all enrolment.

Public schools are organised in school clusters with the main school site typically offering all levels of education, including secondary education, and a number of smaller school sites offering only some levels of education. Traditionally, schools have operated in multiple shifts to expand enrolment, but in recent years, the country has made efforts to move to full-day schooling in public education to expand opportunities for children.

The country has advanced considerably in coverage but trends in performance are mixed and large inequities remain, also between rural and urban students

In the past decades, Colombia has considerably expanded access to education. Enrolment rates have increased in both lower and upper secondary education, and Colombia has also progressed in widening access to early childhood education and care as well as tertiary education. Nevertheless, the country still needs to increase coverage, keep students in school and smooth transitions. Gaps in enrolment rates also persist between urban and rural areas, and disadvantaged and advantaged students, particularly in pre-primary and upper secondary education.

There are also some improvements in learning outcomes but results are mixed and education quality as measured by standardised assessments remains low overall. A significant share of students does not reach satisfactory levels of achievement from early on in their school education. As is the case in other countries, students' socio-economic background has a considerable influence on learning outcomes. Colombia has made some progress in creating better educational opportunities for rural students but still more needs to be done to ensure rural students enjoy the same opportunities as their urban peers. Rural students not only suffer in particular from greater poverty but face additional barriers. In particular, rural youth tend to have lower aspirations for their educational future. Rural education provides opportunities, for instance through smaller classes. At the same time, geographical distance and low population density pose particular challenges, also for the cost of providing a good education.

Strengths and challenges

Education has been a priority in recent years but public funding is insufficient to achieve set objectives for early childhood and school education

Colombia's National Development Plan for 2014-18, *Todos por un Nuevo País*, for the first time identified education - alongside peace and equity - as one of its three main pillars. The plan recognised education as a powerful basis for improving democratic participation, social justice and economic development. Within the framework of the plan, the ministry of education has set ambitious and important goals to: increase access

to early childhood and secondary education; extend the length of the school day; improve the country's educational infrastructure; and promote the inclusion of children with special needs and the rights of youth in conflict with the law.

The signing of the Agreement to End Conflict and Build a Stable and Lasting Peace in 2016 represents Colombia's most important achievement during the period of the National Development Plan 2014-18. The peace agreement commits the country to a comprehensive rural reform which not only promotes rural economic recovery but also social development through sector-specific national plans. In education, this entails the implementation of a Special Rural Education Plan to close educational gaps between rural and urban areas. The rural reform thus recognises that it is essential to take advantage of synergies between different strategies - such as the creation of economic opportunities and improvements in education - to reduce the enormous rural-urban gaps.

However, the amount of public resources the central government has allocated to early childhood and school education in the last decade is not consistent with these ambitious and multiple commitments. Although public resources have increased slightly in real terms, they have actually been reduced with respect to total public spending and also relative to the size of the economy. The multiple goals for school and early childhood education compete for resources with goals set for increasing access to tertiary education. This is reflected in the asymmetric increase in allocated resources between sectors as well as a tax reform in 2016 which redirected contributions from school to tertiary education. At the same time, the government has negotiated agreements with the largest teacher union to improve teachers' working conditions, without providing additional resources.

Colombia thus faces a challenging fiscal situation and it will be difficult to meet the objectives set out without increasing the financial resources available for education. The complex financial situation is only exacerbated by changes to the definition of resources allocated to school education through the General System of Transfers – the main source of public funding for school education – and public spending restrictions as a result of slowing economic development and efforts to reduce the country's structural deficit.

While education policy making theoretically supports a long-term shared vision, the institutional framework to ensure continuity in education policy is weak

Colombia holds national elections every four years and the new government transforms its programme into concrete actions through a National Development Plan. National Development Plans steer the allocation of financial resources, thereby linking spending decisions with political priorities, and facilitate the political and technical monitoring of progress towards set goals, a key element of effective governance. Departments and municipalities also develop territorial plans for the medium term that should be aligned with the national plan. In education, specifically, the central government develops National 10-year Plans for Education which should guide the main national policies beyond the term of a single government. National plans and policy frameworks furthermore involve a high degree of social dialogue, providing democratic legitimacy for sectoral priorities. A growing focus on using information on the outcomes of programmes from evaluations constitutes a further important strength.

Despite these valuable frameworks and processes, education policy in Colombia requires greater continuity and sustainability in practice – educational reforms take time before having an impact on teaching and learning in classrooms. National Development Plans are linked to the political approval from successive governments, meaning their continuity is not necessarily assured and programmes often lack stability over time. Many

policies that should have a permanent status lack a specialised institution or dedicated responsibility as well as a regular budgetary framework. Rural education policy is a case in point. Despite its important achievements, the Rural Education Programme was discontinued, and the Special Rural Education Plan requires the approval of future governments to ensure its financing and implementation going forward. Furthermore, the experience of the Rural Education Programme highlights challenges in integrating and articulating initiatives that are funded through international and other sources with national or local policies.

The funding system contributes to multiple public finance objectives but does not adequately consider inequalities between territories, schools and students

Since its creation in 2001, the General System of Transfers has been the main source of public funding for school education in Colombia. The system contributes to multiple public finance objectives. On the one hand, it was one of the main mechanisms that helped Colombia emerge from its fiscal crisis of the late 1990s, contributing to the fiscal sustainability of territorial entities at an aggregate level, although there is great variation across departments and municipalities. On the other hand, the system aims to solve part of the vertical fiscal imbalance in a country where most taxes are collected at the central level. In addition, it represents a tool for territorial and social compensation. Resources are distributed among departments, districts and municipalities according to their level of disadvantage, and fiscal transfers do not require co financing by the territorial entities. Financing, therefore, does not depend on subnational capacities to generate own resources, which tend to be highly concentrated in a few departments and municipalities.

The General System of Transfers represents a stable source of revenue for territorial entities to finance the provision of school education as the system's composition is highly regulated, dedicating specific resources to the funding of education, and is annually readjusted. The design of the system's specific resource allocation for education explicitly recognises that teachers represent a permanent and inflexible cost in the provision of education. Moreover, the revenue sharing system allocates additional funding to finance the provision of education for certain groups of students, implying additional responsibilities and costs for certified territorial entities, such as rural students.

However, despite its objectives, the General System of Transfers (as most other of the country's financing mechanisms) does not reach its objective of compensating territories for social disadvantage and differences in the capacity to generate own resources. While the system's allocation for education effectively delivers more resources per student to the most vulnerable territories, the difference is so small that they have not contributed to reducing territorial gaps and to compensating for inequities in the contributions of territorial entities from their own resource base. As a result, there has been no convergence in student performance across municipalities over time and closing only half of the existing gap in access to upper secondary education would take more than 30 years.

The current design of the General System of Transfers faces a number of further shortcomings. Recent central initiatives such as the inclusion of children with special needs and the provision of education to adolescents in the criminal justice system have not been accompanied with an increase in available resources for the system's allocation for education, but have been financed with existing resources. This reflects a growing centralisation of education policies, results in less flexibility for Secretaries of Education in the use of their resources, and poses a greater risk for future deficits. Resources for the provision of complementary services, such as educational materials, infrastructure

maintenance, student transport and school meals are limited. And the current system provides few incentives for improving the quality of provision while existing ones linked to specific indicators favour urban and advantaged Secretaries of Education.

Furthermore, the current system creates disincentives for the efficient management of resources as well as inequities in resource allocations. The system compensates certified territorial entities for increases in payroll funding throughout the year and funds differentiated payroll expenses specific for each certified territorial entity. This facilitates rapid improvements in educational coverage and the recruitment of qualified teachers, but also generates incentives to maintain a permanent number of teaching staff, effectively reducing incentives to maintain a balanced fiscal situation. It also provides more resources to those Secretaries of Education able to attract teachers with higher qualifications. Lastly, regular modifications to the funding system make available resources less predictable, and efficiency indicators encourage end-of-year spending.

An institutional and legal framework is in place for monitoring resource use in education but there are difficulties in solving problems identified in evaluations

The Colombian government has assigned responsibilities to various institutions and developed legal and regulatory instruments for the production and collection of information to improve the transparency, effectiveness and efficiency of education – one of the main weaknesses of public education in Latin America. A range of databases support the work of schools, Secretaries of Education and the ministry with critical information on management processes, enrolment, infrastructure and education quality. Standardised assessments of student performance and research carried out by Colombia's educational evaluation institute provide information to guide and evaluate public policies.

Multiple mechanisms are in place at different levels to prevent corruption and waste in the use and management of school funding. A Single Territorial Format centralises financial, economic and social information on all territorial entities to facilitate these monitoring and control efforts. These financial data also allow the ministry to evaluate how the sector is financed and the composition and efficiency of public spending. The ministry of education and the ministry of finance collaborate in monitoring the use of central resources transferred to the certified territorial entities through the General System of Transfers. For their part, the Secretaries of Education compile accounting and budgetary reports on schools and, in the case of departments, non-certified municipalities.

The Comptroller General exercises administrative control of financial resources and carries out performance audits at a national level. At the level of departments and municipalities, dedicated entities are responsible for financial auditing and control, and *veedurías*, local oversight committees, also monitor the use of public resources. The Ombudsman and Prosecutor General monitor the proper functioning of the education system to protect the rights of citizens, while the State Attorney investigates possible crimes in educational management and prosecutes these before the courts, if necessary.

These monitoring, auditing and control processes regularly provide an exhaustive evaluation of the administrative, legal and financing processes of public education. However, in many cases, there is difficulty in resolving the identified structural problems, as has been observed in the School Meal Programme. Moreover, the legislative branch, the executive and the territorial authorities do not always have access to timely and sufficient information to evaluate the long-term financial impact of new policies and programmes that would ensure their sustainability and implementation. There is still room for improving and integrating information systems in education to support decision-

making and increase transparency. Information systems are not easily accessible to the public, and the amount of resources finally reaching each school is difficult to assess.

The organisation of the school network facilitates access to education in rural areas but creates challenges for school management and potential inequities

The organisation of Colombia's school network into school clusters gives students, especially those in remote rural areas, access to all years of compulsory education within a single school, potentially promoting smoother transitions and reducing dropout rates. School clusters may help balance the advantages and disadvantages of small and large schools. While smaller sites and classes in earlier years provide more personalised learning environments for younger children, larger sites at higher levels can offer a broader and more specialised course offer thanks to sufficient numbers of students and teachers. Also, the joint management of multiple sites within a cluster can help enhance the efficiency of school networks while avoiding the closure of small rural schools.

However, the way school networks are planned and school clusters are managed in practice in Colombia raises concerns for quality and equity in education, particularly for students in rural and remote areas. Looking at data on the number of schools and school sites suggests an ongoing adjustment of provision, both in terms of clustering and closure of sites. But it is largely unclear how individual Secretaries of Education make decisions about the location and size of schools and their sites. It is also unclear how they work with local communities and, in the case of departments, with their non-certified municipalities, and to what extent the quality of education is considered in their planning.

The current clustering of school sites does not in all cases provide the necessary conditions for effective leadership and management of teaching and learning. The number of sites within a cluster varies greatly, with some schools having more than 20 sites, others only 1 or 2. There is no upper limit to the number of sites a school may have nor is there a clear definition of geographical proximity between sites – there is evidence that some rural sites are very far from the main school. The allocation of resources to schools also does not take the number of sites or the distance between sites into account.

School network planning needs to go alongside adequate arrangements for transport and boarding. These complementary services are particularly important in rural and remote areas to guarantee access to school and transitions between sites and levels. Resources for these services are, however, limited and technical criteria fail to provide effective guidance. This can make it challenging to assess the costs and feasibility to restructure the school network, e.g. in terms of student travel time. Boarding schools have not been sufficiently regulated and often lack adequate infrastructure, staff and other services.

The funding of private providers gives flexibility for public provision, also in rural areas, but there are concerns about sufficient quality assurance

The contracting of private providers has been a very important solution to respond to an increasing demand for school places in urban areas given internal migration and forced displacement, but also to ensure access to school in rural and remote areas affected by the conflict. Agreements with private providers have furthermore taken on an increasing role in the provision of education for special groups of students, such as indigenous students, children with special needs and youth in the Adolescent Criminal Responsibility System. At the same time, Secretaries of Education have become less reliant on private providers thanks to greater coverage of the public school network and a reduction of the school-age population – something which has also been promoted by the ministry of education.

Colombia has a relatively strong regulatory framework in place for all private schools, including those without public funding. Nevertheless, it is unclear how supervision works in practice. New regulations for contracts with private providers have been put in place in 2015, but it is too early to judge their impact on the quality of education. The professional capacity of Secretaries of Education varies widely and those with fewer resources serving rural and disadvantaged students will face greater difficulties in managing contracted providers and in replicating best practices. Further concerns relate to difficulties in monitoring enrolment in publicly-funded private provision, student assignment practices, and a lack of transparency about costs. Many contracts only last one year, which makes it difficult for providers to improve educational quality.

On the other hand, advantaged students are highly concentrated in the private school sector – particularly in independent private schools – while students of lower socio-economic background are over-represented in both public and government-dependent private schools. While the general composition of schools is relatively diverse, private schools are highly homogeneous with respect to more advantaged students. Accumulated evidence at international level shows that this socio-economic segregation leads to an important gap in educational opportunities between schools and students since the socio-economic and cultural capital of families is a major factor in explaining school performance. For Colombia, most of the performance gap between public and private schools disappears when controlling for socio-economic differences at the student- and school-level. The remaining private-school advantage only holds for schools that charge high monthly fees to families and is reversed once tuition fees are taken into account.

School education follows a comprehensive approach with potential benefits for equity but challenges remain in developing a pertinent and articulated offer

Early childhood education and care is fundamental to a strong start in life. School education in Colombia entails one compulsory year of pre-school education which is provided in schools within the framework established by the ministry of education and under the administration of the Secretaries of Education. The mandatory transition year is provided on the same premises as primary education which can soften children's transition into school. Moreover, the employment framework for teachers is the same regardless of the level of education taught, which can help attract high-quality staff, also for earlier years, and create a sense of professional community among all teachers.

The Colombian school system also avoids early tracking and selection into different pathways. Early selection can have negative effects on those in lower tracks without raising overall performance and on disadvantaged students who are more likely to be placed in lower-level tracks. In Colombia, 15-year-olds choose between a general and a vocational option, but the distinction is more one of emphasis than of independent tracks and all upper secondary students gain the right to access tertiary education. Unlike in various other countries, students in the two programmes do not differ in their social background or their academic performance, although vocational options have a lower social status as in several other contexts.

Nevertheless, expanding coverage and improving the quality of provision at both lower and later stages, including in rural areas, are crucial tasks for the years to come. Colombia promotes an integrated approach to early childhood development, which includes pre-primary education, through its *De Cero a Siempre* strategy. But the educational component of early childhood education remains underdeveloped. Provision through two separate systems for early childhood education – through the Secretaries of

Education on the one hand and the Colombian Institute of Family Welfare on the other – seems to require greater articulation. Further challenges for the provision of pre-primary education include levels of funding and the quality of data and information systems.

Also, transitions into secondary education and provision at the secondary level need to be further strengthened, and even more so in rural and remote areas which have particularly low enrolment rates at these levels. Transition into lower secondary education is particularly challenging for students. Promising national initiatives have been put in place to strengthen demand for upper secondary education and to articulate provision with tertiary education and other short vocational programmes offered by the National Learning Service, among others. Noteworthy experiences include *Ser Pilo Paga*, a scholarship programme to enable the best students from the most disadvantaged households to access tertiary education, and *Más Jóvenes en Acción*, a training programme for vulnerable youth. Furthermore, Secretaries of Education and schools are free to establish partnerships with tertiary institutions and the National Learning Service, which can provide orientation to students and enrich their education.

But upper secondary programmes are not always pertinent to the needs of students and the competency standards that should be acquired are not clearly defined. A lack of interest in education is one of the main reasons for 14-18 year-olds not to attend school. Educational aspirations are lower among rural than urban youth. Secondary education has failed to adapt to the current rurality and offers rural students a limited option of programmes. Rural schools offer largely general programmes and rarely both, a general and a vocational option. On the other hand, another school with a different upper secondary specialisation may be too far for rural students to access. There is also a lack of qualified guidance counsellors which is especially acute in rural areas. The limited presence of higher education institutions in rural areas is likely a further explanation for low aspirations, and limits potential collaboration between schools and other institutions. Pedagogical productive projects can offer rural students opportunities to develop relevant skills, including in entrepreneurship, but are not always meaningful to students.

Schools have platforms for community participation but there are concerns about the organisation of teaching and learning and weak school leadership

The whole school community is expected to participate in the design and implementation of the school educational project to establish a shared pedagogical vision. Each school must have a directive council which includes representatives of the school community and holds a large range of responsibilities for school management. Several other bodies within the school give students, parents and teachers further opportunities to participate directly in school management. Such links between the school and the community can also help sustain vibrant schools and communities in rural areas.

School communities have considerable freedom to define their own curriculum as part of their educational project and teachers are typically very autonomous in pedagogical decisions within their classrooms, which can allow them to respond to the complexity of teaching. While there is no nationally defined curriculum, school-level autonomy in pedagogical matters has been balanced with central curricular guidelines and learning standards to guarantee that students develop the required core competencies.

However, the number of currently valid guidelines is very large, which makes it challenging for schools to develop their own curricula in line with these standards. Guidelines are frequently updated and not always clear to teachers who also do not seem to receive sufficient training to familiarise themselves with new materials. More

generally, Colombia's school-based approach to curriculum development has to be set within the context of concerns about teachers' competencies, school leadership, and support from Secretaries of Education, all of which tend to be weakest in disadvantaged and rural schools. The devolution of curricular and other responsibilities to schools has not been matched with sufficient efforts to develop school leadership capacity and the extent of technical-pedagogical support by Secretaries of Education varies widely.

If schools do not have the capacity, leadership and support to bring the curriculum to life in ways that engage their students, the potential for curricular autonomy to balance national consistency with local diversity is not realised and can result in inequities in student learning. To assess the actual extent of curriculum autonomy, it is important to look at other elements, such as evaluation and available materials which shape curriculum autonomy in practice. In Colombia, such other elements seem to have turned into a "de facto" curriculum, guiding the work of schools and teachers within classrooms.

Standardised student assessments are the cornerstone of Colombia's approach to school evaluation. They have played a key role in shifting the focus towards students' learning outcomes and are linked to strategies to promote the use of results in schools, such as the *Día E* initiative. Schools are also expected to evaluate themselves annually, identifying strengths and weaknesses. But in the absence of sufficient school leadership and pedagogical support, standardised assessments have taken on a defining role in schools focusing efforts on a narrow set of learning outcomes. Such a focus on cognitive skills – which has recently been reinforced through specific school improvement goals and a school performance index – may also detract attention from broader student development in other competencies which contribute to productive, equitable and cohesive societies.

The school system provides room for pedagogical approaches to meet diverse student needs but more needs to be done to help vulnerable students succeed

The General Education Law recognises the rights of vulnerable students within the framework of the Constitution which defines Colombia as a social state that must ensure equity and freedom from discrimination for any marginalised or vulnerable population. The ministry provides guidelines for the education of vulnerable groups, promotes policies and programmes, and implements strategies with the Secretaries of Education.

Among educational strategies, flexible school models constitute a fundamental and long-standing element to engage students with their local context. Flexible models have played an important role in expanding access to education, especially for students in rural and remote areas. *Escuela Nueva*, the most well-known model, for example provides basic education to rural and remote populations through multi-grade teaching. But flexible models have also helped address consequences of Colombia's conflict, notably through educational programmes for displaced students and ex-combatants and their families.

The government has also been sensitive to the needs of ethnic minorities through a specific policy of ethnic education and consultation processes. Ethnic communities have considerable autonomy to organise their own schools and educational projects, while the ministry maintains an advisory and supporting role. In recent years, the government has further responded to ethnic communities' demands for greater autonomy through a commitment to creating ethnic groups' own intercultural education systems. Considering the concentration of indigenous peoples in rural areas, these ethnic education policies are also important to provide quality education in rural areas.

However, there is considerable scope to improve the use of flexible school models, develop complementary strategies to address educational disadvantage and reflect about ethnic and intercultural education. Not all flexible models have been equally successful and the results the different models achieve vary greatly. Other strategies that should complement the use of flexible models seem to be underdeveloped. The ministry of education and Secretaries of Education, for example, seem to place limited attention on monitoring the outcomes of student groups at risk of low performance. In schools, there are often limited resources and strategies to identify students at risk and there is no clear protocol on what to do for these students. This is likely a particular challenge for rural schools which may lack additional resources both in the school and the community. A shortage of support staff, such as counsellors, psychologists and social workers, which are even greater in disadvantaged schools, hinders comprehensive support to students.

The ministry of education has recently promoted the inclusion of students with special needs in line with a growing body of research suggesting that special needs students could be better served in mainstream schools and that inclusion benefits all students. Nevertheless, a detailed plan for implementation has not yet been developed; many schools lack the infrastructure, trained teachers and specialists to create inclusive learning environments; and it is unclear how rural schools will be supported in inclusion.

Full-day schooling is an opportunity to upgrade infrastructure and advance in quality and equity but implementation challenges need to be addressed

The initiative to establish full-day schooling in all schools by 2030 entails a series of potential advantages. While it involves a significant investment to provide the required facilities and staff, it presents an opportunity to improve the quality of teaching and learning. Attendance of a full school day, which has been highly correlated with students' socio-economic background and enrolment in independent private schools, is also a step to create better opportunities for disadvantaged students. A longer school day reduces exposure to out-of-school risks and may be beneficial for students with single parents.

The introduction of full-day schooling is furthermore an important opportunity to improve school infrastructure with a historical deficit, complementary services such as school meals, and collaboration between institutions and levels of government. As part of the *Jornada Única* programme to implement full-day schooling, the ministry of education developed a National Infrastructure Plan for 2015-18 in co-ordination with the territorial entities. An Educational Infrastructure Fund seeks to secure the required resources by consolidating different sources of funding. The infrastructure part of the programme can furthermore have a greater impact on rural schools which suffer from poorer conditions, but which present more favourable conditions for a rapid roll-out.

Despite these potential benefits, there are important caveats that require more careful consideration. Unless the additional time in school is used effectively for student learning and development, the significant investments in full-day schooling will not translate into better outcomes for students. Research, however, suggests that currently many teachers fall far short of effective instructional time in their classrooms. It also does not seem clear to schools how the extra time should be used. Investments in full-day schooling may furthermore crowd out spending on other important initiatives to improve the quality of education, such as teacher education, and take time away from other activities, such as peer-learning, if teachers and their time in school is not used and managed effectively.

There are also challenges in ensuring the financial and political sustainability of the initiative. The *Jornada Única* programme must be ratified by future governments in the

context of increasing fiscal restrictions. Plans for the expansion of existing school places require monitoring and adjustment since initial analyses were based on existing provision. Increases in coverage in secondary education as well as a projected fall in the total school-age population in the coming decade will also need to be taken into account.

Importantly, the regular financing of infrastructure investments and maintenance is not adequately considered in the current system of school funding. Departments and municipalities have contributed the largest share of funding for education infrastructure, in particular from their own resources and loans, but these are highly concentrated in a few territorial entities. There are also problems in the funding of complementary services, such as school meals, and operating costs which need to be resolved. An additional 20% is provided per student to certified territorial entities as part of the General System of Transfers but these are considered to be lower than the actual costs.

Rural areas face particular challenges: the full-day schooling programme has set less ambitious goals for rural areas; co-funding of central infrastructure investments is more challenging for Secretaries of Education with fewer resources; and property rights on the land where schools are to be repaired or built are often unclear.

Colombia has taken considerable steps towards the professionalisation of teaching but further efforts are needed to build a new vision for the profession

Colombia has taken considerable steps to professionalise teaching over the last two decades, notably with a reform of its teacher employment framework in 2002. The new teacher statute has introduced a fair and transparent teacher selection process, raised entrance requirements, made the salary structure more attractive, made entry into subject teaching more open and introduced teacher evaluations. Recent governments have made particular efforts to foster teacher learning. However, changes that have been initiated still need to be implemented successfully and difficult relations between the government and the largest teacher union have complicated the implementation of past reforms.

The introduction of a new employment framework has also created some long-term challenges. The new salary structure represents a skills- and competency-based approach. The evidence base on such types of compensation is still inconclusive but highlights the role of context, design and implementation. Successful reforms of teacher pay require political will, fiscal capacity and teacher support. In this respect, the new compensation system is unlikely to have the intended effects as it has not been fully accepted by teachers and promotion has been difficult to obtain. Substantial salary premiums for postgraduate qualifications may help raise the social status of teaching but risk having large costs without sufficient evidence that would support these large salary differentials.

While introducing a new employment framework for teachers, the old teacher statute has been left in place, creating different employment frameworks for teachers performing the same responsibilities and tasks – with potential negative effect on schools' working climates and collegiality. Teachers of the new and old statutes differ in two important aspects. First, teachers of the old statute are not evaluated regularly on a mandatory basis and second, they benefit from a single salary scale which provides a predictable career progression. While teachers of the old statute have mostly reached the highest salary steps in their scale, teachers of the new statute are concentrated in the first step of their respective scales. This also leads to inequities in the distribution of resources across the country as teachers of the new statute make up the largest share of rural teachers.

Lastly, there is significant scope to reflect about and develop other aspects of professionalism. Overall, past reforms have mainly focused on the individual teacher and paid less attention to the organisational and institutional conditions required for effective teaching and learning. Sustainable school improvement is a complex and multidimensional process that needs time, pedagogical leadership and professional cultures built around a sense of collective responsibility. School leaders are, however, not fulfilling their role as pedagogical leaders, creating challenges for effective teacher management and development in schools. Many school leaders are not equipped to develop collaborative practices and to provide useful formative feedback to their teachers – challenges that are even more pronounced in schools with many remote rural sites.

Central initiatives have supported teacher learning but overall teacher education and development does not sufficiently support and prepare teachers

Professional learning for teachers throughout their career is essential to create a highly skilled profession that effectively promotes student learning and development. Data from international surveys show that teachers in Colombia are relatively highly qualified, which is confirmed when looking at national data. Nevertheless, there are concerns that teacher education does not adequately prepare and support teachers in their work.

The quality of initial teacher education offered by faculties of education is considered to vary considerably. Tertiary education institutions have considerable autonomy to define their teacher education programmes but undergo a basic registration process to be able to offer their programme. This registration process, however, is generally considered to lack sufficient rigour. A distinct accreditation process to certify a programme's high level of quality is considered to follow clear and well-defined standards. But this process is voluntary and only a few faculties of education and education programmes have sought or achieved this certification. While a career in teaching represents possibilities for social mobility, education programmes are among those with the lowest numbers of applicants, attracting students with weaker performance in the school-leaving examination.

The government's National Development Plan for 2014-18 explicitly recognised the importance of high-quality teaching within the plan's education strategy. To foster teaching excellence, the ministry of education pursued reforms of the quality assurance processes in place for faculties of education. The changes that have been introduced hold the promise of addressing some of the known weaknesses in initial teacher education, such as better links between theory and practice. Changes were, however, not without controversy, highlighting the key role for implementation, monitoring and follow-up.

The Secretaries of Education of the certified territorial entities hold primary responsibility for teacher professional development. However, resources available for professional development through the country's General System of Transfers are limited and few Secretaries of Education can provide resources of their own. Secretaries of Education, and particularly those providing education to the most disadvantaged and rural students, may also lack the capacity to select adequate providers and monitor the quality of provision. There is also considerable scope to foster school-based teacher development and peer learning, which have proven to be very effective ways for teacher learning.

Teachers require particular pedagogical knowledge and strategies to work with a wide range of learners. To only mention a few examples, teaching in small rural schools requires an ability to teach children of different ages in the same classroom through multi-grade strategies. Teachers also require adequate strategies to support students' social and emotional learning, particularly in post-conflict settings. Initial teacher

education in Colombia, however, is not sufficiently diverse and contextualised for different cycles and disciplinary areas, groups of students and regions of the country. Similarly, there are concerns about the offer and quality of professional development.

Given difficulties in reforming initial teacher education, different levels of capacity and resources to manage teachers' professional development, and limited forms of school-based teacher learning, the ministry of education has developed targeted national initiatives that meet an important need in the system. Most notably, the ministry has implemented an impactful cascade teacher development model through its *Programa Todos a Aprender*. This initiative has contributed to closing achievement gaps between rural and urban areas and to building new professional cultures in schools.

There are inefficiencies and inequities in teacher recruitment and allocation, and greater flexibility is required for the management of teaching staff

In Colombia, a relatively large share of teachers is employed as provisional teachers, which seems to be related to more than the necessary flexibility to respond to changes in student enrolment. It is also related to the central recruitment process of permanent teachers which can be very long and organised only on an intermittent basis in practice. Rigidities in the teacher labour market further contribute to the proliferation of provisional teaching positions. The reassignment of permanent teachers within territorial entities is often difficult and the teacher labour market seems to be segmented between different territorial entities, something that affects departments, in particular.

While the use of provisional teachers can help advance access to education, strengthen accountability and save costs in the short term, it may have a negative impact on teacher morale and the professional status of teaching in the long run. Provisional teachers are moreover concentrated in rural and disadvantaged contexts. Anecdotal evidence also suggests that teachers in rural areas are often hired late in the school year, only teach for a reduced schedule or leave before the end of the school year resulting in lost learning time. Particular recruitment processes are being organised for municipalities most affected by the conflict, but they do not offer a structural solution to inequities in teacher distribution.

Teacher recruitment in Colombia is essentially based on teachers' rights rather than student needs. While teachers recognise the benefits of working in a rural school, such as possibly closer ties with families and the community, they generally prefer teaching in more advantaged contexts. The salary structure provides insufficient incentives for teachers to choose challenging schools. While teachers in remote areas receive some financial and fringe benefits, these are not sufficient. Given the organisation of schools into clusters, there may also be inequities in teacher allocation within individual schools.

Greater flexibility in the management of teaching staff is also required in the context of overall school funding and Colombia's demographic transition. Spending on teachers concentrates a high share of total as well as current expenditure in Colombia. This imposes considerable pressure for new resources and reduces the possibility for other spending, e.g. to hire other pedagogical support staff. It also limits discretion in spending by Secretaries of Education. A future reduction in the school-age population risks deficit situations in certified territorial entities under a model of per capita funding as teachers cannot easily be distributed between classes and schools. A reduction in enrolment may, therefore, imply an asymmetric reduction in class sizes and schools without a major reduction in costs or a more equitable distribution of teachers.

Recommendations

Reconcile the allocation of sufficient resources for school education with set policy priorities, ensure greater continuity in policy, and build local capacity

Colombia needs to reconcile the allocation of sufficient resources with efforts to move towards closing persisting gaps in educational coverage and quality – efforts that will need to be implemented gradually. This should entail the identification of long-term goals and priorities that are feasible to achieve in a restrictive fiscal scenario and that are based on adequate costing and evidence. Given simultaneous demands for increases in funding for tertiary education, authorities should furthermore explore alternative options for the funding of this level, and prioritise gradual investments in early years given the higher returns and potential for equalising opportunities for disadvantaged children.

Colombia must also strengthen the institutional and budgetary frameworks at the level of the ministry of education as well as the Secretaries of Education to ensure greater continuity in education policy. Change in education takes time. For instance, the ministry should establish a unit dedicated to rural education. This unit should lead efforts in closing rural-urban gaps in education, such as the implementation of the Special Rural Education Plan. Existing planning mechanisms, such as the ten-year plans for education should be used to work towards a more sustainable policy. To promote social participation and co-ordination across levels of governance, the national education board with its technical secretariat as well as subnational boards should be re-established.

Since it will be financially difficult to meet the objectives set out in recent years without sufficient financial resources, Colombia should increase total public resources available for school education, while drawing on a range of funding mechanisms. Given that financing efforts should be permanent, consideration should be given to a tax reform that facilitates the collection of greater resources both at the national and subnational levels, including specific revenues for departments. In addition, Colombia should discuss horizontal equalisation mechanisms in education to address the high level of fiscal asymmetries between departments and municipalities and within them.

Greater financial resources, however, do not necessarily ensure an improvement in quality and equity of children's opportunities, also due to mismanagement, corruption and a lack of capacity. The ministry of education and the ministry of finance should, therefore, move towards better quality assurance processes, which should consider a regular recertification system for the municipalities and incentives for improving management. Building the capacity of education authorities at territorial level should be a key priority. The number of Secretaries of Education is small and sufficiently-funded strategies could significantly strengthen their technical capacities, which are highly asymmetrical. A number of Secretaries of Education have strong capacity and a history of innovation. Networks between territorial networks could help spread such good practices.

Colombia must also introduce a legal guarantee that policies approved by the central government must be properly financed with additional resources from the central level. This should help resolve the asymmetry between central policy making and the lack of resources for local implementation. It would also help in the identification of priorities on the basis of available resources. Moreover, some national policies such as the School Meal Programme, transport, boarding schools and educational materials should be gradually expanded throughout the country, giving a high priority to fairness and equity.

Authorities also need to ensure adequate resources for the *Jornada Única* programme, while prioritising disadvantaged rural areas for the further implementation of the initiative. This will require a study of the actual costs of implementation beyond investment and equipment and especially linked to the greater allocation of teaching hours and other staff. Overall, the country should be conservative in the process of implementing full-day schooling beyond initial commitments and monitor costs and impact, also on equity outcomes. In order to make good use of the longer classroom time, the ministry of education, Secretaries of Education and teacher education institutions need to develop further strategies to improve pedagogical processes in schools.

Moreover, the experience of the full-day schooling programme has shown the enormous historical deficit of infrastructure and materials in public education in Colombia. Thus, there should be regular resources to fund school infrastructure. These resources should respond to an annual investment programme outside of the General System of Transfers, within the budget of the ministry of education and each of the Secretaries of Education, which can also provide resources beyond those defined by the ministry.

Move towards a reform of the General System of Transfers

There is a fairly broad agreement that the General System of Transfers should be modified considerably, in order to make it more equitable and improve incentives for efficiency and quality. Colombia should have a national debate regarding a reform of the revenue sharing system. The review provides some elements that could be valuable in this discussion. First, the review recommends rethinking the permanent fiscal adjustment system, which currently seems inappropriate as it entails a dynamic mismatch between income and expenditure in education. Second, Colombia should rethink the system's main components for the financing of education, which should involve a reflection about the role of non-certified municipalities. The review provides technical details on these proposals. The basis for resource allocations in education should be reviewed periodically to ensure that they are in line with political needs (which may change) and to reflect evolutions in data systems. An additional proposed change worth highlighting here is related to financial allocations to rural schools, especially smaller and more remote schools or school clusters with a large number of rural school sites. These schools should receive fixed funds in such a way that they can count on a minimum level of resources to provide education. This additional resource would recognise that not all costs are linear.

Provide additional educational resources at the level of each school and develop an information system that provides transparency about the available resources

Education authorities should facilitate the identification of the final distribution of financial resources to each school to create more transparency about the progress made towards greater equity and to provide a basis for evaluating the effects of different initiatives. This should entail a consolidation of available data in a simple public information system that is regularly updated. This information system should be the cornerstone of better overall reporting on the resource efforts for school education and evidence about educational quality and equity in relation to established policy objectives.

Authorities should also generate more resources at the school level for management and improvement processes beyond their day-to-day operation. In many cases, resources currently available to schools are often too small and only enough to cover the operation of the school itself. Additional resources would facilitate timely improvement strategies and support the participation of school communities in their educational project.

Encourage the review of school networks, improve the regulation and quality assurance of contracted private schools, and address the risk of segregation

School clusters entail a series of potential benefits, in particular for students in rural areas, but also risk inequities in provision if not carefully planned and implemented. The central level should, therefore, encourage Secretaries of Education to play a more effective role in managing their school networks together with school communities and in collaboration with other certified territorial entities. Restructuring should not, in principle, entail closing sites with a very low number of students but mostly aim to increase the number of main schools. The goal should be to establish school clusters with an adequate number of sites that provide high-quality conditions for learning.

Reorganisation efforts should, in general, consider the geographical distance as well as the ease of transport between sites and the main school. Some of the potential benefits of having school clusters are only realised as long as students (and teachers) from remote sites are able to reach the main school. The number of sites per cluster and the distance between sites must also be taken into account for the appointment of co-ordinators, whereas only the number of students is currently considered. Steps to improve school leadership will be essential to take advantage of the benefits of school clusters. Furthermore, the design of school networks needs to carefully consider the planning of transport and boarding for students but also teachers, which are essential in remote rural areas. This includes i) adequate funding; ii) adequate standards and guidelines for the provision of these services; and iii) improved data systems.

Public-private partnerships will continue to be a strategic component for the provision of school education in Colombia but it is necessary to ensure that these alternatives are of quality. The ministry should strengthen regulations, for example on student assignment and monitoring of process quality, while maintaining others in place, such as the prohibition of tuition fees in contracted schools. Improving contract arrangements for private providers so they can plan in the medium term should be a further priority.

Lastly, Colombia should consider developing a multi-sector approach to address segregation between public and private schools, particularly those without public funding charging high fees. Together with other relevant ministries, the ministry of education should investigate the reasons for segregation before piloting and rolling out a combination of measures across domains including education, transport and housing.

Professionalise school leadership and strengthen technical pedagogical support for rural schools leveraging the potential of networks

School leadership, which constitutes the basis for sustainable school improvement and underlies many other proposals of the review, should be a policy priority in the years to come. The age profile of current school leaders provides an opportunity to improve school leadership with new principals that may enter the profession with different preparation, training and support. The review makes a number of recommendations to improve school leadership: i) promoting a shared vision of educational leadership; ii) developing a distinct career structure and reflecting about contract conditions; iii) providing more opportunities to develop pedagogical leadership skills; iv) strengthening regular performance evaluations; and v) building on distributed and teacher leadership.

The ministry of education as well as Secretaries of Education should also encourage more systematic networks for schools, and small rural schools in particular, to overcome

capacity and resource constraints resulting from their location and size. This should involve a deep understanding and reflection on the differences between rural schools and the particular needs of remote sites in contrast to rural sites located in the urban periphery. Moreover, the ministry and Secretaries of Education need to pay attention to what many stakeholders interviewed during the review visit referred to as “the new rurality” in the context of the transition to a post-conflict society. Higher teaching schools providing initial teacher education for pre-primary and primary levels could take on a key role in building the capacity of other schools and in leading larger rural school networks.

Initiate a long-term participatory process to develop a national curriculum framework and develop a more comprehensive approach to school evaluation

Efforts to establish common learning goals over the last three decades have resulted in a vast number of standards and guidelines that are not always clear to teachers. The ministry of education should maintain and strengthen its efforts to establish a more concise and clear version of learning standards. At the same time, Colombia should consider the possibility of starting a longer process of developing a more comprehensive national curriculum framework based on extensive social participation.

The question of curriculum autonomy is not a normative but a contextual one. As such, other elements, including a country’s accountability framework, students’ achievement in terms of quality and equity, and the capacity of schools should be considered. Countries must find their own balance between local autonomy and central direction. In Colombia, arguably, more weight should be given to greater prescription given strong accountability in the form of standardised assessments, low levels of student achievement, considerable inequities between students, and weak local capacity.

Developing a common curriculum framework would provide an important opportunity to engage society to reflect more broadly and create a shared vision of education that meets Colombia’s post-conflict transition and the rural realities of the country. At the same time, a national curriculum framework would not mean that there would not be room for local adaptations. Sufficient room for local adaptation will remain essential for making the curricular framework more relevant for school communities. Regardless of the extent of curriculum autonomy, schools and teachers require greater support to contextualise central standards and to design content and lesson plans, as well as sufficient and up-to-date pedagogical materials. In rural and remote areas, digital resources could be used to facilitate the coverage of the curriculum and a broad curricular offer, based on adequate training and evidence on cost-effectiveness.

Establishing a more concise set of learning goals and standards and building teachers’ understanding of them would also help reduce the potential undesired effects of standardised assessment. The ministry of education, Secretaries of Education and schools generally need to embrace a more comprehensive vision of school evaluation. This should include i) further support by Secretaries of Education and leadership in schools to implement self-evaluations as an opportunity to improve; and ii) the development of whole school evaluation processes (e.g. through the creation of a national quality agency).

Improve the provision of education to meet students’ needs and interests, and provide them all with equal learning opportunities irrespective of background

Colombia has made tremendous improvements in expanding the coverage of compulsory education. Nevertheless, further work is needed to ensure access to school and continuity for vulnerable students. Both, the management of the school system (e.g. through the

development of early-warning indicators for students at risk) and individual schools (e.g. through parental engagement) have a role to play in overcoming disadvantage.

Flexible school models provide an important pedagogical strategy to address different learning needs but the ministry and Secretaries of Education need to maintain more regular oversight to ensure and improve their quality. This could involve reducing the number of models currently recognised by the ministry to those that have proven to be effective, and improving those that continue to exist. There are also flexible models in use that are not regulated or recognised by the ministry. Secretaries of Education need to play a stronger role in the regular review and quality assurance of these models and support schools and teachers in implementing all models irrespective of their owner.

Taking steps to improve the offer of upper secondary education and facilitating students' transitions to tertiary education or the labour market should be a priority in the coming years for the ministry and Secretaries of Education (in collaboration with other actors like the National Learning Service, employers and universities). In rural areas, in particular, education may not always be pertinent to students. Addressing the needs of young people in rural areas goes beyond education alone and also requires the creation of opportunities in rural areas, e.g. through access to markets, credit and technology. Education, however, needs to be connected with rural life and the productive realities, such as the emergence of new sectors, if it is to motivate young people to remain in or move to rural areas. At the same time, schools can play a role in maintaining and revitalising rural communities.

The learning and development of children and young people from ethnic communities also requires further attention: i) the ministry and ethnic groups need to reflect about the processes for developing ethnic communities' own education systems as well as future financing, oversight and relations to regular education; and ii) the ministry should consider developing intercultural education for all students regardless of background.

Finally, resources and support for students with special educational needs should be improved. An implementation plan for inclusion is required, which needs to include adequate standards and protocols for identifying students with special needs, to avoid labelling students, to ensure students receive the support they require and to avoid an increase in costs. Moreover, the plan must provide guidelines to support inclusive education in small rural schools where this is likely to be more challenging and costly.

Further promote the development of a new vision of teacher professionalism built on effective engagement and consensus with stakeholders

Colombia should make strides towards a more comprehensive model of professionalism that considers the ways in which teaching and learning are embedded in complex systems and community contexts. A new vision of teacher professionalism should promote collaboration between teachers to support student learning and development. The quality of individual teachers is critical, but so is the environment in which teachers work.

To put the necessary conditions in place for creating a strong profession, the review has developed options that should be considered for discussion: i) promoting a common and evidence-based understanding of effective teaching practice; ii) improving formative school-based teacher evaluations; iii) creating opportunities for teachers to take on other tasks and leadership roles in line with a new organisation of schools; iv) using resources for teacher remuneration to equalise working conditions for teachers of the new statute and to improve the current system of career progression; and v) establishing a sound

knowledge base of teachers' use of their time. All of these efforts should consider the needs and particular contexts of rural and remote teachers.

Future efforts and policies should be underpinned by the effective engagement of all relevant stakeholders early on, including the largest teacher union (and other unions at local and regional levels), school leaders and teacher educators, and be informed by evidence and research in education. Effective consultation would not only facilitate implementation and help build trust between actors, but could also contribute to greater continuity in teacher policy. Policies should be developed on the basis of adequate forecasting of resource implications – the implementation of initiatives often has implications for the workload of school agents and may require additional resources.

Strengthen teacher learning by connecting school-based with external teacher development and by developing specific models for rural teachers

Efforts to improve teacher education and development are areas that require further attention. In particular, this should involve steps to connect school-based teacher learning with external opportunities and models for teachers in rural and remote areas, for example through distance learning and collaboration within schools clusters.

Initiatives such as Let's All Learn need to be sustained and should inspire initiatives at other levels of school education to establish job-embedded forms of teacher learning. Considering the risk that the effects of teacher coaching may fade over time or that teacher coaching may benefit some teachers more than others, these programmes should be subject to further evaluations to inform adjustments in the future. Investments in stronger leadership in schools and sufficient attention to teachers' working conditions, such as assignment, time, space, materials and access to colleagues are also required.

External professional development also has an important role to play and Secretaries of Education should have the resources and capacity to ensure training is of high quality and available to all teachers, including those working in more remote school sites. Central leadership on teacher learning should be strengthened. The creation of a central institution on teacher learning could support a central role on a long-term basis. The ministry should provide leadership for building the notion in teacher education that strategies for specific groups of students, such as multi-grade teaching, may be beneficial for all learners. It should also ensure an adequate offer of specialised degree programmes to ensure a supply of specialised teachers in areas such as ethnic and special needs education.

Make the recruitment and allocation of teachers more equitable and efficient, also to ensure adequate working conditions in rural schools

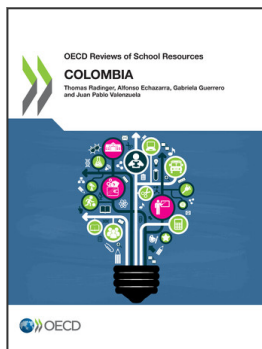
The central recruitment introduced as part of the new teacher statute in 2002 has established greater transparency and fairness, but filling positions within a reasonable time has been a considerable challenge. The long recruitment cycle may deter high-quality applicants and has contributed to an overuse of temporary teachers, concentrated in disadvantaged and rural parts of the country. As a result, the system has contributed to different types of employment for staff performing the same work, with teachers in the most challenging schools most likely to be employed under less favourable conditions.

The ministry's goal should be to maintain reasonable numbers of temporary teachers and reduce the number of temporary teachers in disadvantaged areas. This should entail regularising temporary teachers who often bring useful skills and experiences. Steps to

reduce rigidities in the teacher labour market by facilitating transfers across certified territorial entities and by monitoring the efficient allocation of permanent staff within them would also help reduce the use of temporary employment. Together with the national civil service commission, the ministry should make sure the central recruitment better reflects particular contexts, possibly as part of wider public sector reform.

While there is limited evidence on what motivates effective teachers to work and remain in challenging settings, a number of studies consistently find that both financial and non-financial factors are important. General quality of life and issues such as personal security certainly matter and long-term improvements in disadvantaged areas will help attract and retain effective teachers. The ministry and Secretaries of Education, however, can help to make teaching in disadvantaged schools more attractive by shaping the working conditions and professional opportunities in these schools. Initiatives should reflect different contexts, such as working in a remote school rather than a rural school close to an urban area. Stronger financial incentives could also be put in place.

Teacher labour markets have an important local dimension. Improving the supply of high-quality options for initial teacher education in all regions of the country, including rural areas, will also be essential for ensuring an adequate supply of qualified teachers in these areas. Higher teaching schools fulfil an important function in providing teacher education in more rural parts of the country. It is therefore important that higher teaching schools benefit from adequate funding and governance arrangements to offer high-quality teacher education to their students and favourable conditions for their staff. Initial teacher education should also provide insights to students about teaching in rural areas, for example through practical experiences, shorter visits and field trips to rural schools.



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