

Chapter 3

Primary and lower secondary education in Colombia

Over the last 25 years, legislative reforms have transformed primary and lower secondary education in Colombia, establishing the objectives, principles and structures which define basic education. This chapter examines the major policy developments and the main performance trends in this sector. It then proposes the significant changes in policy and practice that Colombia must undertake in order to provide quality basic education for all children. Teachers and schools need to ensure that curricula, assessments and classroom time are all being used effectively to enable the acquisition of basic skills. The skills of the teaching workforce will also need to be upgraded and investing in school leadership will be pivotal to improvement. Schools and local governments need additional support to lead these efforts, such as the right incentives, a better balance of autonomy and accountability, and information systems to enable and encourage policy reform.

The statistical data for Israel are supplied by and under the responsibility of the relevant Israeli authorities. The use of such data by the OECD is without prejudice to the status of the Golan Heights, East Jerusalem and Israeli settlements in the West Bank under the terms of international law.

A quality basic school system ensures that all children achieve their full learning potential and acquire the core skills needed for life and work. In Colombia, basic education comprises five years of primary school (for 6-10 year-olds) and four years of lower secondary school (for 11-14 year-olds). Together with the transitional year of pre-school, this forms the compulsory phase of education. Access, free of charge, is guaranteed by law. Colombia has made tremendous progress over the past two decades in expanding the coverage of basic education. It has introduced and scaled up innovative programmes to reach marginalised communities, such as the New School (*Escuela Nueva*) which other countries have adopted as a model. Within the last ten years, participation in lower secondary education has increased by close to 50%. Colombia has also taken important steps to professionalise the teaching workforce and build information systems to support learning improvement. However, access to basic schooling remains out of reach for a large number of Colombian children. In 2011, some 15% of 6-year-olds were not in primary school (UNICEF, 2014). For those in school, the quality of education is often insufficient to enable children to acquire basic skills. Achieving good quality universal basic education is the first priority for the government. This chapter looks at the important milestones Colombia has already achieved in this direction. It then examines policies and practices that could enable the country to bridge the remaining equity and quality gaps.

Context and main features

Recent and current policy developments

Over the last 25 years, the Colombian primary and lower secondary education system has undergone a structural and substantive transformation. Since 1991, the operation of basic education services has been progressively devolved to departments and large municipalities with the aim of improving the effectiveness of education delivery and strengthening democratic participation. In 1994, the General Education Law established the main pillars of basic education (i.e. the objectives and principles of education, the structure of education services and the distribution of responsibilities), and gave schools far-reaching autonomy to define their own curricula. In 2001, the responsibilities of each level of government were clarified to address some of the initial challenges created by decentralisation. The system for allocating resources for education across sub-national entities was restructured in an attempt to better align funding with actual need. In the 2000s, several policy initiatives known collectively as the “Education Revolution” resulted in the considerable expansion of lower secondary education and introduced mechanisms to strengthen accountability and incentivise improvement. In 2002 a new statute for the teaching and

leadership profession was introduced, making performance and evaluation the basis for career progression. The introduction and continued improvement of national assessments has shifted national attention towards learning outcomes and provided tools to measure the performance of schools and the school system as a whole.

The current policy priorities are to close the remaining access gaps and improve the quality of education. The National Development Plan 2010-2014 (*Plan Nacional de Desarrollo 2010-2014*, PND; see Chapter 1) defines six axes to improve primary and lower secondary education: 1) fostering teaching excellence; 2) extending the number of schools teaching a full day to reinforce basic competences; 3) reviewing the current distribution of resources to improve equity and efficiency; 4) tackling illiteracy; 5) reinforcing the English language; and 6) identifying and supporting the most talented students (DNP, 2015). It also sets three objectives to measure progress in primary and lower secondary education between 2013 and 2018: a 12% increase in the proportion of Grade 5 students who score over the baseline in the SABER 5 national assessment, a rise in the share of students in full-day schools from 11% to 30% and an increase in the proportion of students who perform at B1 level in English from 2% to 8%. The PND also includes initiatives to improve the quality of ECEC, to provide students with a stronger start in school (see Chapter 2). Reforms in primary and lower secondary education are also intended to influence the achievement of ambitious objectives set for upper secondary and tertiary education.

Governance and funding

The responsibilities for the governance and funding of primary and lower secondary education are shared between the central, regional, local and school level (see Chapter 1). At the national level, the Ministry of National Education (*Ministerio de Educación Nacional*, MEN) is responsible for formulating policies and objectives to develop the sector, regulating the organisation and provision of services (e.g. funding principles, teacher numbers, salaries and pedagogical competence), and monitoring the system (e.g. information and evaluation systems). In recent years, the national government has taken on an increasingly important role in the design and implementation of programmes to improve the delivery of education services in public schools. At regional and local level, the main responsibilities of the certified departments and municipalities – those granted the status of Certified Territorial Entities (*Entidades Territoriales Certificadas*, ETCs; see Chapter 1) – are to manage financial resources (national transfers, local revenues and oil and mining royalties) and the teaching workforce; to design and implement plans to improve education access and quality; and to oversee and inspect education services. Departments are also tasked

with providing technical assistance to non-certified municipalities. The latter play a limited role in education service delivery, lacking financial and technical capacity and receiving only a small amount of resources from the General Participation System (*Sistema General de Participaciones*, SGP), the mechanism used to redistribute national funds to support health and education services across the country (see Chapter 1).

In comparison with OECD countries, school principals in Colombia have little autonomy over their teaching workforce, but considerable responsibility for determining curricula and student assessment policies (OECD, 2013a). Principals take the lead in defining their school's Institutional Educational Project (*Proyecto Educativo Institucional*, PEI), which explains how the school will adapt national directives and curricula guidelines. Principals also distribute teaching tasks and appraise teachers' performance on an annual basis, but have no say in their recruitment, dismissal and remuneration (MEN, 2015a). Each school is expected to have an Executive Committee that gathers the main stakeholders for the school and local community to discuss and provide guidance on academic and administrative issues.

Education funding remains highly centralised, with the lion's share of resources for schooling from the transition year through to the end of upper secondary education transferred by the MEN to departments, municipalities and schools through the SGP. Between 2002 and 2013, the SGP's share of total education expenditure decreased markedly, from 80% to 60%, and the share of direct spending by the national government almost doubled from nearly 9% to 17%. Spending by ETCs from their own revenues has also increased but it still only accounted for 13% of total spending in 2013 (Álvarez et al., forthcoming). While total (public and private) spending per student on primary and lower secondary education relative to GDP (20% and 21%, respectively) is close to the OECD average (23% and 26%, respectively), in absolute terms expenditure per student is very low and private resources play a more important role than they do in the majority of OECD countries (OECD, 2014a; see Chapter 1).

The bulk of SGP resources (80% in 2011) are transferred to certified entities on a per-student basis to cover the costs of teachers and administrative staff, school buildings, maintenance and general operational costs. The ETCs then distribute the public resources to individual schools at their own discretion. Most, if not all, of the resources from the SGP go to cover teacher salaries; often the initial estimate is insufficient and has to be topped up at the end of the year to cover the deficit for salary costs. The formula, which is made public, has been refined at least five times in the last decade to improve the equity and effectiveness of allocations. It contains 15 variables related to 4 components (education development, local economic and institutional

conditions, social vulnerability, and costs) (MEN, 2015a). The MEN is exploring ways to further improve resource allocation by increasing the accuracy of per-student costs, clarifying the distribution of responsibilities across different government levels and improving its oversight of resource use (DNP, 2015). Such reforms are critical given that corruption is a persistent concern across the country (see Chapter 1).

The SGP also now includes an additional performance-based allocation known as the quality component to provide incentives for certified and non-certified municipalities to improve learning outcomes and reduce grade repetition and dropout rates. However, the gradual increase of staff costs has limited the resources available for quality investment, which represented only 8% of the SGP in 2013 (Álvarez et al., forthcoming).

Public schools receive a small amount of resources directly from the SGP (around 5% in 2013). Resources are mainly distributed on the basis of the size of school and the poverty index of the relevant municipality. Since 2011, criteria related to school effectiveness and quality are also taken into account. Schools that increase their overall performance and rate of improvement across key indicators (SABER results, grade repetition, dropout rates) receive an additional monthly allocation. Public schools are not allowed to charge tuition or additional fees from parents. The free schooling policy was implemented in 2008 for the poorest students, made universal for primary education in 2011, and expanded to lower secondary and other grades in 2012. The MEN sets maximum yearly increases of tuition fees for private schools on the basis of an institutional evaluation and national assessment results.

Learning goals and curricula

The most distinctive feature of the Colombian basic education system is the autonomy schools have over the curriculum. According to the General Education Law of 1994, every school in Colombia has the right to define its own curriculum and study plans through its PEI. It is rare for schools to have full autonomy over their curricula but in Colombia it is a central aspect of its decentralisation policy and regarded as crucial to ensuring that schools meet the needs of the country's diverse population groups and communities.

The MEN has issued curriculum guidelines (1998) and basic competence standards (2003), along with pedagogical guidelines, to help steer schools in designing their own curricula. Curriculum guidelines support the development and planning of compulsory and core subjects. Competence standards establish criteria to determine whether a student, educational institution or the education system as a whole complies with common quality

expectations in the subjects evaluated in national external assessments (i.e. mathematics, languages, natural sciences and civic education). These standards are established by cycle rather than individual grade (Grades 1-3, 4-5, 6-7, 8-9 and 10-11). Pedagogical guidelines provide guidance on teaching practice in compulsory and core subjects. Through specific programmes, such as the “Let’s All Learn” programme (*Programa de Transformación Educativa “Todos a Aprender”*, PTA), the MEN has provided additional, more prescriptive, curriculum and pedagogical guidance to schools with poor performances in national assessments. In 2015, the MEN launched the Basic Learning Rights (*Derechos Básicos de Aprendizaje*) initiative to inform teachers and parents about the competences that children should acquire in mathematics and language in each grade. Some municipalities and departments (e.g. Antioquia, Barranquilla, Bogotá, Envigado and Medellín) have also developed their own curriculum guidelines for schools and teachers. There is increasing discussion in Colombia regarding the need for a more clearly defined national curriculum providing greater guidance to schools, while respecting the country’s socio-cultural diversity.

Organisation of schools

School network

An important aspect of the Colombian school system is the existence of a wide array of education modalities addressing the needs of a linguistically, culturally and geographically diverse population. Of the 7.5 million students enrolled in primary and lower secondary education in 2014, 84% were enrolled in mainstream schools, with most of the remainder participating in what are called “flexible models” in Colombia (Table 3.1). There are 23 of these, but the single most widespread flexible education model is the New School (*Escuela Nueva*), which accounts for some 8% of all students enrolled in basic education. It provides basic education to rural and isolated populations through multi-grade classes (Box 3.4). Other models include the post-primary model, in which one or two primary school teachers are responsible for teaching all lower secondary education subjects with limited additional support, and the tele-secondary which uses television as the main instructional tool, building on a similar programme in Mexico for lower secondary education. Ethnic communities (e.g., indigenous peoples, Afro-Colombians) have considerable autonomy to organise their own schools and curriculum. In 2014, such “ethno-education” programmes accounted for 2.3% of total enrolment. Wherever possible, students with special needs attend mainstream schools with the assistance of specialists. However, many schools continue to lack the infrastructure, trained teachers and specialists needed to create an inclusive learning environment. According to MEN data, 2% of public basic education

students in urban areas and 1.4% in rural areas had special needs in 2014, although this is likely to be an underestimate given the absence of clear methods to identify and register special needs in the country.

Table 3.1. **Number of school branches and students (2014)**

	School branches		Students		
	Public education	Private education	Public education	Private education	Total
TOTAL	44 416	6 575	6 434 700	1 065 987	7 500 687
By level of education					
Primary	43 739	6 399	3 735 902	640 822	4 376 724
Lower secondary	10 814	3 418	2 698 798	425 165	3 123 963
By methodology					
Traditional	16 255	6 542	5 260 949	1 061 978	6 322 927
Traditional and flexible	1 104	12	298 506	2 571	301 077
<i>Escuela Nueva</i>	25 318	15	569 525	1 282	570 807
Other flexible models	1 739	6	305 720	156	305 876
Ethno-education	2 588	1	169 792	1	169 793
By location					
Urban	9 718	6 256	4 568 827	1 007 458	5 576 285
Rural	34 698	319	1 865 873	58 529	1 924 402

Note: Public education includes publicly funded alternatives (public schools, *escuelas concesionadas* and *matriculas contratadas*). The number of school branches by type of provision and level of education cannot be aggregated as they might be counted in more than one category.

Source: Data from the Colombian National Ministry of Education.

Public education is either provided directly through publicly managed schools or, where there is not enough capacity, through *escuelas concesionadas* – public-private partnerships where the school is privately operated with autonomy over the use of resources but publicly subsidised and under the supervision of the certified entity – or *matriculas contratadas* – private schools with a limited number of publicly funded places for low-income students. According to data from the MEN, 86% of basic education students were enrolled in public education in 2014: 80% in fully public schools, 4% in *matriculas contratadas* and 1.5% in *escuelas concesionadas*, which have been used to facilitate the expansion of enrolment. The 14% of students in private education is a similar proportion to the average across OECD countries of 11% at primary and 14% at lower secondary level

(OECD, 2014a). Private schools in Colombia are primarily located in urban areas; in 2014 only about 5% of students attending fully private schools were in rural areas, compared with 29% of students attending public schools. Students in private schools also tend to have a higher socio-economic background, although some low-cost private schools cater to disadvantaged groups. The difference in socio-economic background between students in private (subsidised or not) and public schools in Colombia was one of the largest among countries participating in the 2012 PISA survey, and more than double the OECD average, although it was below some other Latin American countries such as Mexico and Brazil (OECD, 2013a).

Since 2003, the MEN has promoted the clustering of public schools to ensure students have access to all grades from the transition year to upper secondary education within one school network in an effort to smooth the transition between levels and reduce dropout rates (Piñeros, 2010). In 2002, 48% of schools only offered primary education, 35% offered pre-school and primary education and only 5% offered the complete pre-school, primary and secondary cycle. In the 2013 school year, each public school cluster had on average 3.37 branches, although this figure varied widely from 1 to 30. Most branches (65%) were located in rural areas (MEN, 2015a). Clusters of rural schools tend to have a larger number of branches which can be spread across considerable distances, making co-ordination difficult, and transition still a challenge for students. Each cluster is managed by a school principal, with the support of deputies or teacher co-ordinators for each branch of the school cluster and other staff for administrative and financial issues. Within the public school system, parents are free to choose the school they would like their children to attend as long as there are places available; otherwise, priority is given to students who have siblings in the school or who live nearest.

Instruction time

Primary and lower secondary students in Colombia attend at least 15 days more school per year than the OECD average. This translates into an above-average number of total hours of compulsory instruction during primary and secondary education in Colombia: 9 800 hours, the second highest number of hours for which data is available, and about 2 300 hours more than the OECD average of 7 475 hours (OECD, 2014a). Plans to increase the length of the school day to the full 7 hours would increase this to 12 600 hours. The effective instruction time is, however, much shorter. A study on the use of classroom time revealed that teachers dedicate 65% of their time to academic activities with students, 25% to class administration tasks (e.g. instructions, discipline, marking homework and the register) and almost 10% to off-task activities (e.g. social interactions, absence from the

classroom) (World Bank, 2012). As a result, only 32 minutes of a 50-minute lesson in primary education is spent on teaching students. These results are similar to other Latin American countries and suggest that more than 20% of potential instructional time is lost.

The accommodation of an ever-expanding student population has been one of the main challenges of the Colombian school system in the last decades, resulting in multiple shift schooling and many large classrooms, especially in urban areas. According to data from the MEN, 27% of public school branches operated a full day (defined as at least 7 hours), 60% operated a single shorter shift, and 13% two or more shifts in 2014. About 63% of public school students were enrolled in a morning shift, 26% were enrolled in an afternoon shift, and only about 11% participated in a full day of school. In contrast, 60% of students enrolled in fully private schools benefited from a full day. Attendance at a full-day school is highly correlated with socio-economic background, with roughly 27% of those whose family income was less than the minimum salary benefiting from a full-day school, compared with 75% for those with family earnings above 10 times the minimum salary in 2009 (Bonilla, 2011). The proportion of primary and lower secondary students who experience a full day of public schooling in Colombia is similar to that in Mexico (INEGI/SEP, 2013), but far below Chile where almost all schools operate on a full-day basis.

The nationwide expansion of full-day schooling (*jornada única*) is one of the current government's flagship initiatives. The objective of establishing a single daytime shift dates back to the 1994 Law on Education, but the provision was set aside in 2002 because of tight budgets in a trade-off between a longer school day and the expansion of enrolment (MEN, 2015b). The MEN is currently exploring ways to gradually increase the number of full-day schools in an attempt to strengthen basic competencies (mathematics, science and language) and reduce the exposure of vulnerable children to out-of-school risks (such as crime, drugs and pregnancy) that can negatively impact their education and well-being (DNP, 2015). The goal is that all schools will provide full-day schooling by 2025. Many departments, municipalities and schools have already implemented a variety of approaches to lengthen the time at school with curricular or extracurricular activities, which have informed the current national initiative.

Even with the use of shifts, classrooms are typically large compared to OECD countries, with the maximum student-classroom ratio set at 35 for primary education and 40 in lower secondary in urban areas, and 25 and 28, respectively in rural ones. According to the reports from school principals in PISA 2012, the average class size in lessons on the language of instruction in lower secondary students was 33.5 students in Colombia, but this ranged from 25.3 in sparsely populated areas to 34.8 in cities.

These are well above the OECD averages of 22, 20.1 and 24.6, respectively, but similar to other Latin American and Asian economies participating in PISA (OECD, 2013a).

Reaching out-of-school students and reducing dropout rates

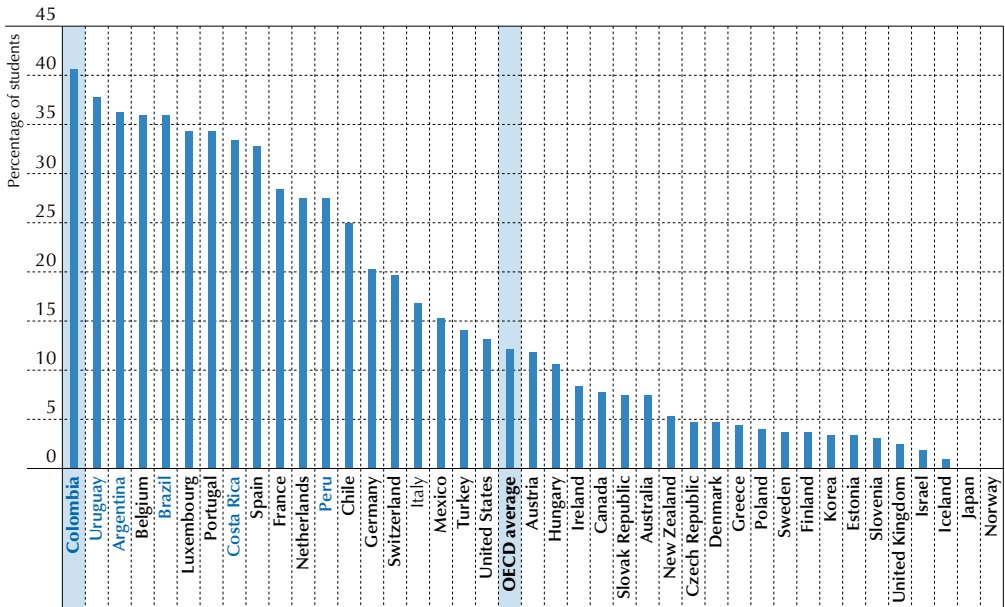
Colombia has adopted a wide range of initiatives to improve coverage for disadvantaged groups and reduce dropout rates. In addition to flexible schooling models, the abolition of school fees, food and transport programmes, and communication strategies to raise public awareness of the importance of school attendance have helped to expand access for students from poor families. Specific strategies have been designed to reach students who are considered to be particularly at risk, such as children from ethnic minorities, those displaced by conflict, children with special needs or child workers, and those from dispersed rural communities (see Chapter 1). Increased efforts are being made to actively identify individuals who have never attended school or have dropped out. For instance, ETCs are provided with a list of intra-annual dropouts to facilitate local initiatives to bring children back into the education system before they become permanently disengaged. In 1998, the municipality of Armenia introduced an initiative, “School Reaches Out to the Children”, to identify students who are outside the education system and provide them with comprehensive support to re-enter. The success of the initiative has led to its extension to several other municipalities and departments.

Student assessment

Schools have a large degree of autonomy over the definition of policies to assess student learning outcomes, such as the choice of evaluation methods and criteria for promotion. In contrast with most OECD countries, Colombia has no external individual student assessments in basic education. The main role of school-level student assessment in Colombia is to determine progression to the next grade. Evaluation and promotion committees, consisting of the school principal, three teachers from each grade and a parent representative, determine student promotion and recommend support initiatives for those with learning difficulties. In 2002 the MEN attempted to reduce grade repetition by establishing a maximum failure rate of 5% for each school, but the measure was withdrawn in 2009 due to resistance from parents and schools (MEN, 2015a). In PISA 2012, 41% of 15-year-olds reported having repeated at least one grade in primary, lower secondary or upper secondary school, compared to 12% on average in OECD countries (OECD, 2013a) (Figure 3.1). About 22% of students in primary school had repeated at least one grade, as had 29% of those in lower secondary education, compared with OECD averages of 7% and 6%, respectively.

About 4% of students had repeated at least twice in primary and 6.7% in lower secondary school, compared to 0.7% and 0.5% on average in OECD countries. However, average OECD repetition rates conceal wide ranges from no grade repetition in Japan and Norway to 28% in Spain in lower secondary education. High levels of grade repetition are also common in other Latin American countries.

Figure 3.1. Share of 15-year-old students who repeated at least one year, PISA 2012



Note: Non-OECD countries are shown in blue.

Source: OECD (2013a), *PISA 2012 Results: What Makes a School Successful (Volume IV): Resources, Policies and Practices*, PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264201156-en>.

External and internal evaluation of schools

With the increasing emphasis on education quality, Colombia has introduced instruments to measure the performance of schools in terms of learning outcomes and to strengthen internal school evaluation and improvement processes. At the centre of the external school evaluation system are the SABER standardised assessments. For the compulsory years of education, these consist of a standardised student assessment in Grades 3, 5 and 9, with a proposal under consideration to assess Grade 7 as well. The assessments evaluate mathematics and language in all grades, science and

citizenship skills in Grades 5 and 9, and financial competence in Grade 9. The national evaluation institute, the Colombian Institute for the Evaluation of Education (*Instituto Colombiano para la Evaluación de la Educación*, ICFES), is responsible for the design and application of these assessments and has made considerable improvements to the SABER tests in recent years. In 2009, SABER 5 and 9 were restructured in order to enable comparisons between years. Between 2010 and 2014, the frequency and scope of SABER 5 and 9 were modified, and they now run annually and in all schools instead of a sample of schools.

In 2015 Colombia introduced the Synthetic Education Quality Index (*Índice Sintético de la Calidad Educativa*, ISCE), a multidimensional index of school quality that builds upon the successful experience of the Brazilian Basic Education Quality Index. The ISCE takes into consideration student performance in national assessments, school progress in reducing the proportion of low-performing students, grade repetition and factors related to the school environment. Unlike most OECD countries, Colombia does not have a national quality inspectorate to evaluate school-level processes. However, some departments and municipalities still have a small body of school supervisors who, like the national supervisory body which was disbanded a decade ago, are primarily responsible for checking school administrative compliance. School principals are also required to conduct an internal school evaluation every year and, on the basis of this, to develop an improvement plan. In 2008, national guidelines were issued to support schools in their self-assessment processes.

Physical and instructional resources

Evidence suggests that many Colombian schools lack adequate physical and instructional resources. There is limited school-level information about the availability and state of school buildings and facilities, but self-reported data from school principals in PISA 2012 suggests that a shortage of school infrastructure is hindering instruction (OECD, 2013a). The lack of basic facilities, including running water and latrines, was evident to the review team during the visit and has been documented elsewhere (García et al., 2014). The state of school infrastructure is related to the limited funds available to local authorities and schools to upgrade facilities. Overall public and private expenditure on education infrastructure is very low in Colombia compared with other OECD countries and neighbouring countries such as Brazil and Mexico. Capital expenditure refers to spending on assets that last longer than one year, such as construction, renovation or major repair of buildings, and new or replacement equipment. In 2011, such expenditure was 1.7% of the primary and secondary school budget, compared to 7.7% and 7.1% respectively across OECD countries (OECD, 2014a). Similarly, expenditure

on sub-contracted services (8.2% in primary education), which includes expenditure on infrastructure such as the maintenance of school buildings or rental of facilities, was well below the OECD average of 20% (OECD, 2014a). An ambitious plan is under way to improve school infrastructure across the country and build the additional capacity needed to lengthen the school day. More than 50 000 classrooms will be built by 2018, drawing resources from the national budget, oil and mining royalties, and local governments (MEN, 2015a).

Many Colombian classrooms face a shortage of textbooks, information technology tools, and other teaching and learning materials. Following the delegation of autonomy over their curricula to schools, the MEN stopped providing textbooks to schools and instead included funding for such resources through the financial transfers system. With limited funds available under the SGP and local education budgets for quality investments, there are indications that many students in Colombia lack access to textbooks and that those learning materials that are available might be outdated (OECD, 2013a; MEN, 2014). In 2009, less than 20% of school branches used textbooks as a basic guide for students (Álvarez et al., forthcoming). National and local governments have introduced several programmes to address the shortage of quality materials in schools. Under the National Reading and Writing Plan (*Plan Nacional de Lectura y Escritura*, PNLE), for example, over 5.5 million books were distributed in 2014 to more than 20 000 pre-primary to upper secondary educational institutions, providing additional materials to some 7.5 million children (MEN, 2015b).

Teachers and school leaders

Fostering teaching excellence is one of the main policy priorities of the National Development Plan. To this end, there are proposals to strengthen the PTA programme, which seeks to improve teaching in poorly performing schools (Box 3.1), and also to review the whole teaching career structure. This includes actions to attract the best upper secondary graduates into initial teacher education programmes, improve initial teacher education institutions, reform career entry requirements and strengthen induction processes for new teachers. Initiatives for in-service teachers include the provision of scholarships to participate in master's programmes, a refined promotion and relocation procedure, and an increase in remuneration, as well as incentives for early retirement (DNP, 2015). The MEN also plans to explore ways to develop the leadership skills of school principals and their teams, an area which has received remarkably little attention in Colombia considering the high degree of autonomy schools have to determine teaching and learning practices.

The scope for upgrading the teaching and leadership profession is defined by the statutory conditions that regulate the teaching workforce. Teaching in Colombia is in transition between two statutes. Basic education teachers and school leaders who entered the profession after 2002 are regulated by Decree 1278 of 2002, which requires teachers and leaders to undergo an evaluation to enter, stay and be promoted in the profession. The statute was introduced to improve the quality of staff through stronger appraisal processes and performance-based (rather than seniority) promotion and pay. Older teachers are still regulated under Decree 2277 of 1979, where teachers automatically entered the profession on completing their initial training, and career progress and salary scale are determined primarily by years of service. A small share of older teachers have opted to join the new system, and the number of staff under the old statute is gradually declining due to retirement, but it will be another 25 years until the entire workforce is governed by the 2002 decree. By 2014, 28% of teachers were under the new regulations but 53% were still under the 1979 statute; the remainder (19%) were in provisional or temporary posts which are not fully regulated by either statute. These posts might be ones which are only created for a short period, or they might be permanent ones for which there were no 2002 or 1979 statute candidates. They could be held by teachers who did not pass the entrance examination, or were not successful enough in it to opt for a permanent post. The proportion of teachers with provisional positions is larger in municipalities with high levels of poverty and violence, which is probably related to the difficulties of recruiting teachers in these challenging contexts.

Profile of the current workforce

In the 2014 school year, there were 370 410 teachers and school leaders, an increase from 321 180 in 2005. In 2014, 259 445 teachers and 6 726 school leaders worked in schools providing public education. There are no indications of an overall national teacher shortage in primary and lower secondary education, except for in specific subjects and locations. Demographic trends also show no evidence of future national shortages, enabling more resources to be invested in improving teacher quality. However, different population growth rates across regions, urbanisation and progress towards peace are all likely to lead to significant internal migration, bringing the need for greater flexibility in the allocation of teachers.

As in most countries, the majority of primary school teachers in Colombia are female (76%), while only 54% of teachers in lower secondary education are women. Teachers tend to have long experience in the education sector, with an average of 23 years of service for those under

the 2277 statute. Although teachers have the right to retire at the age of 55, most choose to continue working as remuneration by seniority under the old statute automatically results in higher salaries and pensions over time (García et al., 2014). A significant proportion of teachers have not completed a university degree in education or other fields (33% in primary education and 19% in lower and upper secondary education for those under the old statute and 37% and 8% respectively for those in the new scheme). For the majority with a tertiary education degree, there are indications that the quality of initial education programmes they receive is poor (García et al., 2014).

Entering a teaching career

Aspiring teachers in Colombia need to have completed a teacher education programme or hold a tertiary degree and then successfully complete a competitive assessment and a probation period to enter into the profession. At present, there are two main pathways to obtain a teaching degree in Colombia: a post-secondary but non-tertiary degree from one of the Higher Teaching Schools (*Escuelas Normales Superiores*, ENS) which allows teaching in Grades 0 to 5, or an undergraduate university degree which allows teachers to teach all grades up to the end of upper secondary education. There are a large number of providers, with 138 ENS and 80 universities offering 376 teaching training programmes in total in 2013 (García et al., 2014). Most universities (76%) are located in the departmental capitals, while ENS have a greater presence in rural areas.

Colombia does not have clear national standards setting out the skills and knowledge teachers and school leaders should possess. Universities have the autonomy to define their own teacher training programmes and set the threshold for entry and graduation. The MEN has made some effort to improve the higher education quality assurance system (see Chapter 5) and provide technical support for ENS but initial teacher education is one of the few areas of the primary and lower secondary education system that has not been the subject of major reform in the last 25 years. The current government recognises this, and has signalled its intention to strengthen teacher training programmes as part of its efforts to foster teaching excellence.

Concerns regarding the quality of initial training have led the government to raise the standards for entry into the profession. Since 2004, entrance into the teaching profession requires the successful completion of a competitive assessment and a probation period of four to ten months. The assessments are organised by the National Civil Service Commission and consist of a content

mastery test, a psycho-technical test, the evaluation of their CV and an interview. Those aspiring to leadership positions have to undertake a similar merit-based assessment.

Professional development opportunities

There are no national requirements in Colombia for teachers to participate in professional development activities, or for school leaders to undertake further training on assuming their new responsibilities. The availability of professional development opportunities is likely to vary considerably across schools, municipalities and regions. Internationally comparable data on the actual extent of participation, and how much teachers value professional development activities will be made available when Colombia takes part for the first time in the next (2018) edition of the OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS). The information currently available suggests that most teachers participate regularly in some form of professional development activity, but less frequently than on average across OECD countries, and with potentially less benefit (OECD, 2013a). In PISA 2012, school principals reported that about 22% of their mathematics teachers had undertaken a programme of professional development with a focus on mathematics in the three months prior to the assessment, compared to 39% across OECD countries. The proportion varied from 13% in socio-economically disadvantaged schools to 28% in advantaged ones, and from 16% in locations with less than 3 000 inhabitants to 23% in cities with over 100 000 inhabitants (OECD, 2013a).

A range of professional development activities are available across the country, including short courses, graduate and postgraduate courses, and school-based developmental activities. For the majority of teachers, however, the main opportunity for in-service teacher training is through short professional development activities (e.g. courses, workshops or seminars). These are delivered by multiple providers (national and local governments, the national teachers' union, and tertiary education institutions), with limited quality assurance and regulation. Information on the relevance and effectiveness of such activities is therefore lacking, but various factors, including the absence of teacher standards that could guide such training, suggests that it is likely to be of variable value at best.

In recent years, there have been increased efforts to improve the availability and quality of professional development activities. Since 2010, the main national initiative to support the development of teaching skills of in-service teachers has been the school-based programme PTA (Box 3.1). There is also a national initiative to support new teachers through a two-year mentoring programme, operating across seven certified entities (Bolívar, Cali, Chocó, Córdoba, Magdalena, Pereira and Tolima) (MEN, 2015b). In

early 2015, the MEN provided 3 000 scholarships for “excellent” teachers, defined as those in schools that have seen the greatest increase in their students’ SABER 9 and 11 tests, to enrol in a master’s programme in a university with high-quality accreditation to strengthen their professional competence. In 2010 the Foundation of Businesses for Education (*Fundación Empresarios por la Educación*) launched the Transformative School Principals (*Rectores Líderes Transformadores*) initiative in an attempt to address the limited specific in-service training opportunities available to school leaders (Box 3.3). With the support of local governments, the initiative has grown progressively in scale and now operates in eight municipalities and departments.

Box 3.1. The programme *Todos a Aprender*

The “Let’s All Learn” programme (*Programa de Transformación Educativa “Todos a Aprender”*, PTA) is the leading initiative to improve transition grade and primary school teachers’ skills in Colombia’s most disadvantaged schools. It builds upon the experience of the Programme of Rural Education which aimed to raise teaching skills through school-based coaching methods, strong pedagogical content strategies and well-sequenced instruction. Between 2010 and 2014, PTA has benefited 2 345 372 primary education students, over 90 000 teachers and has supported 4 303 schools located in 833 municipalities. Through a cascade teacher-training model, 100 trainers have provided pedagogical and didactic strategies to 3 000 mentor teachers who in turn provide on-site support for language and mathematics teachers to transform their classroom practices to improve student performance in the SABER 5 test.

The programme has several components including a coherent and relevant curriculum that identifies fundamental learning outcomes and serves as a guide for teaching practices. This is reinforced with textbooks, SABER tests in Grades 3 and 5, and a formative diagnostic test that teachers can use in addition to the SABER test results to identify learning gaps and improve student competences. Mentors are an important component of PTA as they are expected to conduct direct classroom observations and organise study groups built around the concept of communities of practice and learning, which includes reflection, collaboration and inclusiveness. Mentors also meet with school principals to improve leadership, strategic and results-based management, and the evaluation and monitoring of the school. PTA also aims to ensure that schools meet the basic conditions needed to operate (e.g. food, transport, physical infrastructure) and to foster the commitment of all educational actors (directors, teachers, students, parents and society in general) to improving education. In 2015, the programme is being redesigned to place a greater focus on teaching and academic excellence.

Source: MEN (2015b), *Informe de Rendición de Cuentas 2014*, Ministerio de Educación Nacional (Ministry of National Education), Bogotá.

Teacher and school leader appraisal

The introduction of evaluation processes throughout teachers' careers is one of the major advances brought by the new teacher statute of 2002. School principals are expected to evaluate annually whether teachers and other school leaders are complying with their roles and responsibilities. Teachers and school principals can also participate in an external competence-based written examination, which is voluntary, but required if they want to be promoted or teach a different subject or educational level. Since 2010, there have been five rounds of external evaluations, with a success rate of around 20% (MEN, 2015b). In September 2015, external teacher appraisal was reformed to introduce videotaped classroom observation, which accounts for 80% of the final mark, and those who fail the appraisal are required to take a professional development course. Teachers under the old statute are not subject to an evaluation at any point in their careers, meaning unless they opt for assimilation into the new statute there are limited mechanisms to support their improvement or reward performance.

Career structure and remuneration

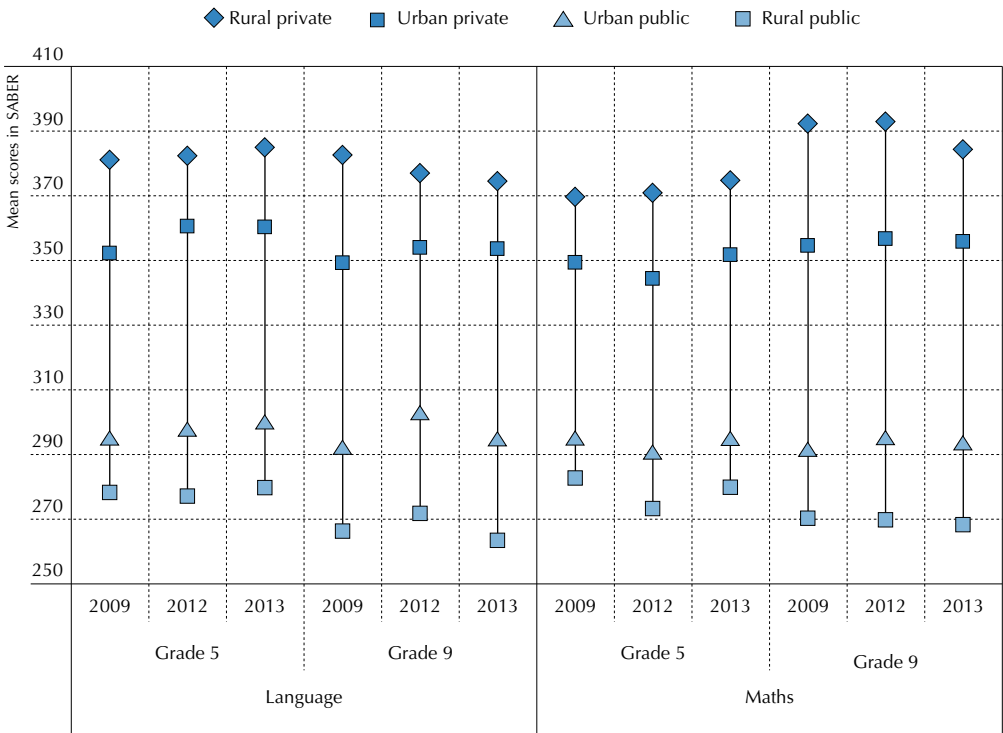
The 2002 statute moved Colombia towards a performance-based system for the remuneration of teachers and school leaders. Under the old statute, teachers were paid according to their number of years of experience, with supplements for publications, placement in rural and remote areas, and leadership responsibilities. Most teachers under the old statute are in the 3 highest categories of the 14-grade scale. The new statute pays teachers on the basis of their level of education according to three sub-scales: 1) ENS degree or other non-tertiary degree; 2) an undergraduate degree or equivalent; and 3) graduate or post-graduate qualifications. Within their grade, teachers can be promoted to a higher level if they have at least three years of experience, have been positively evaluated by their school principal and have successfully completed a national assessment. Between 2008 and 2010, the salary scale established in 2002 was adjusted with the aim of addressing low starting salaries and lack of early performance incentives. Under the new statute, the starting salary is about 26% higher and the top salary is 127% higher than it was before, while teachers can reach the top salary faster if they participate successfully in appraisals (Barrera, Maldonado and Rodríguez, 2012). In July 2015, a bonus was introduced for staff whose schools are participating in the two flagship initiatives of the MEN (PTA and *jornada única*). It rewarded meeting the minimum improvement target, on the basis of the ISCE, with an additional 50% of a full month's salary.

Trends in enrolment, performance and completion

The expansion of access to primary and lower secondary education is one of the major achievements of the Colombian education system in the last decade. While full enrolment has not yet been achieved, substantial progress has been made in increasing the number of children who start education at the appropriate age, reducing the proportion of children who never attend school and decreasing dropout rates. According to national trend data, between 2002 and 2013 the net enrolment at lower secondary level rose markedly from 57% to 72%, while that of primary education decreased slightly from 90% to 85% (MEN, 2015a). The expansion in lower secondary coverage might even be greater, as an audit of the full enrolment, which has been carried out since 2012, has shown that enrolment data from earlier periods might not be reliable as student numbers were largely over-reported by schools and local secretaries of education (MEN, 2015b). This also explains the apparent drop in primary enrolment, which is likely to reflect improvements in reporting rather than a fall in actual numbers. Today, over 90% of Colombia children from 7 to 13 years old attend school, which means that they are in the education system for at least seven years. This is an important improvement on previous generations. However, Colombian children spend considerably fewer years in school than their peers in OECD countries, where over 90% of children from 4 to 16 years old are enrolled in education (OECD, 2014a). This short education lifespan has implications for the level of skills Colombian students will have acquired when they leave basic education, and the extent to which they are prepared for further learning, work and life.

Ensuring the progression of students through the education system remains a considerable challenge in Colombia. Only 44% of students in public education complete their primary education on time and just 16% their lower secondary education, as the majority either start late, repeat a year and/or drop out (Álvarez et al., forthcoming). In 2011, 22% of 7 year-olds were enrolled below the corresponding grade for their age and 53% of those in the last lower secondary grade were over age (UNICEF, 2014). Comparison with other countries participating in PISA shows the extent of the difficulties Colombian students face in progressing through the system. Across OECD countries, 74% of students are at the modal grade (the expected grade for their year), 9% are in grades above, and 17% are in grades below. In contrast, in Colombia, only 40% of 15 year-olds in school are in the modal grade (Grade 10), while 39% are below and 21% are above (OECD, 2013a). Dropout rates fell between 2002 and 2013 from 7.6% to 4.5% in lower secondary education and from 8.7% to 3.2% in primary education but they are still high (MEN, 2015a). The cumulative effect of repetition and dropout significantly reduces the proportion of students who remain in the school system over the years (see Figure 4.2 in Chapter 4).

Figure 3.2. Performance in SABER 5 and 9, by type of school and location (2009, 2012 and 2013)



Source: MEN (2015a), “OECD-Colombia education and skills accession policy review: Country background report”, Ministerio de Educación Nacional (Ministry of National Education), Bogotá.

National and international assessments suggest that Colombia has a long way to go to ensure that its students enjoy the same quality of education as their peers in OECD countries and top-performing countries in Latin America (see Chapter 1). In 2014, national assessments showed that about half or more students are performing at an insufficient or minimum level in language (48% in Grade 3, 58% in Grade 5 and 59% in Grade 9) and mathematics (49% in Grade 3, 67% in Grade 5 and 73% in Grade 9). The results since 2009, when assessments were restructured to enable comparison over time, show little improvement in student performance in either mathematics and language. Since 2006, Colombia has participated in the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), an international survey that measures the knowledge and skills of 15-year-olds in reading, mathematics and science. In 2012, the mean score of Colombian 15-year-olds in mathematics, which was the main field of assessment, was

376 score points, well below the OECD average of 494 (OECD, 2014b). In other words, Colombian students are performing some three years behind their peers in OECD countries on average. Colombia also performs well below other PISA participants, including other large economies in Latin America, such as Chile, Mexico and Brazil.

Important progress has been made in narrowing equity gaps, but education access and outcomes remain strongly related to socio-economic background and location in Colombia. Net enrolment for basic and upper secondary education was 20.1 percentage points higher in urban than in rural areas in 2008; by 2013 the difference had been reduced to 8.53 percentage points. Almost 70% of the new places created in public schools between 2010 and 2013 were in rural areas. Yet, while disadvantaged students have increasing access to education, they remain at much greater risk of falling behind than their more advantaged peers. Figure 3.2 shows the performance of students by type of school and location in language and mathematics in SABER 5 and 9. The performance difference between students in private and public education, regardless of location and subject assessed, are stark and have widened slightly since 2009. The differences between students in public schooling in urban and rural areas are smaller but significant and have also increased in both mathematics and language at Grades 5 and 9.

Key policy issues

Achieving universal access *with quality* is Colombia's central goal for basic education in the next four years. The past two decades have seen a remarkable expansion of enrolment in primary and lower secondary education. However, each additional year of education has realised few gains in national and international assessments, raising awareness of the urgent need to improve the quality of schooling so that all students acquire the skills they and their country need. Raising the quality of learning outcomes in Colombia will require significant changes in education policy and practice. First, it will require a shift in teaching and learning practices in schools to make sure curricula, assessments and classroom time are all being used effectively to enable the acquisition of basic skills. Second, it will require measures to further upgrade the skills of the teacher workforce, including a closer look at the quality of initial teacher training and professional development, the use of appraisal to encourage performance, and more investment in school leadership. Finally, schools and local governments need more and better support to lead these improvement efforts, including the right incentives, a better balance of autonomy and accountability, and information systems that enable and encourage school-level reform. Many of these issues are the object of government policies; some are not and could be and there are several instances where policies might be improved to have greater impact.

Across these key policy issues there are two overarching concerns that must be central to the drive to improve quality. The first is that of equity. Efforts to improve quality must benefit all Colombians. This means that additional attention needs to be paid to raising learning outcomes for disadvantaged students, schools and regions. It must be clear that the aspiration to excellence is an aspiration for every child. The second concern is capacity. Reducing performance gaps will not happen without stronger capacity across the board and particularly in disadvantaged schools and regions. Recent policies are intended to make each school's performance much more visible as a means of building demand and commitment for change. This will only have the desired impact if schools and communities have the capacity to make these changes happen. Without attending to the enablers of improvement, incentives for improvement risk reinforcing inequity and further segregating students and schools.

Policy issue 1: Placing student learning at the centre

There are many different ways to improve a school system but a common feature of successful reforms is their intensive focus on student learning. Placing student learning at the centre means having a clear, common understanding of what students should know and be able to do at different stages of their education, and ensuring that teaching and learning resources are aligned in support of these goals. To enable learning, teachers need to know how each student is progressing and have a range of supports to address individual learners' needs and design effective support strategies for those at risk of falling behind. Teachers also need to have adequate time in the classroom for activities that promote learning and know how to use this time effectively. Ensuring coherence across these policies is crucial, as innovations in curricula and teaching methods are unlikely to be successful unless they are supported by appropriate assessment methods and classroom practices.

Clarifying what students should learn

The great degree of autonomy Colombian schools have to develop their curricula poses a significant challenge to national efforts to improve learning. Many stakeholders interviewed during the review visit, from both government and the teaching profession, highlighted the need for much more detail and direction in learning standards in order to raise student performance. Expectations of what students should know and learn vary considerably, not only across regions and municipalities, but across the more than 20 000 individual institutions that make up the school system. Concern over this fragmentation, and the inequalities in learning it may create, have

resulted in a series of local and national initiatives to provide greater clarity on what Colombian students should learn in different subjects and stages. The review team supports these reform efforts and suggests they be further strengthened.

The curriculum is at the heart of any education system (Kärkkäinen, 2012). It defines the objectives, contents and expected outcomes of schooling and defines a country's vision and aspirations for its citizens, its society and its economy. The curriculum is an important tool for teachers, as it specifies what kind of knowledge, skills and values should be taught to students. The curriculum is also the basis for the development of many other learning resources, such as textbooks and instructional materials, as well as for the assessment of student learning outcomes. A high-quality curriculum can be an influential driver of reform across the education system. The process of developing a curriculum, if it is inclusive and carefully planned, can also be a valuable means for forging a shared vision of the future. In Colombia, it could provide a touchstone for the country as it transitions to a new era of peace and greater equity.

The extent of autonomy given to schools in Colombia to set their own curriculum is rare among OECD member economies. Curriculum practices vary considerably across the OECD, but, given the importance and complexity of curriculum development, no country relies on either a purely school-based or a purely centralised approach. In New Zealand, which is perhaps the OECD country with the highest degree of school autonomy over curriculum development, the national government sets the direction for student learning (i.e. vision, values, key competencies, learning areas, achievement objectives and principles) and provides guidance to schools as they design and review their own curricula. Likewise, the existence of a national curriculum does not mean there is no room for local adaptation. In Italy, for example, national student learning objectives can be developed at the school level and schools can devote up to 20% of learning time to issues defined as relevant by local stakeholders, such as local historical events or specific skills to enter the local workforce (OECD, 2013b). The United States, which has introduced common learning standards in core subjects in an effort to improve student performance, still provides space for states and schools to develop local learning objectives. Each country must find its own balance between national consistency and local diversity. What is important for all countries, however, is that those with the responsibility for curriculum development have the capacity to do so, and that all students have equal opportunities to learn and acquire basic skills.

One challenge with a highly decentralised approach to curriculum development is that it can lead to inequalities in student learning, particularly in contexts where socio-economic inequities are already pronounced and

where there are concerns about poor teaching and leadership in schools, as is the case in Colombia. The development of a curriculum is a very complex task which requires considerable expertise, capacity and time. If the curriculum used in schools does not build up students' knowledge and skills in a progressive and coherent way, students might not acquire what they need to advance their learning. This puts students at particular risk in transition between different education levels, and between different schools. School capacity varies widely in Colombia, but tends to be weakest in disadvantaged areas where students are in particular need of well-structured, well-sequenced support to acquire and deepen basic skills. Rural schools visited by the review team reported that they were unprepared and lacked assistance in the development and periodical update of the curriculum, suggesting that their curricula might be outdated and of poor quality. In OECD countries where schools have autonomy over curriculum development, support is provided to teachers and school leaders on how to design content, lessons plans and teaching so that they enable effective learning. For example, Australia, Japan and Korea support schools and teachers to undertake research as part of professional development programmes to help them in developing a curriculum that responds to the needs of students and the local community (Kärkkäinen, 2012).

The review team found widespread agreement among teachers interviewed that a well-defined curriculum and supporting instructional materials could help them in their job. As well as guidance on the fundamental skills and knowledge students need to acquire to progress in learning and in life, teachers require advice on how to understand and translate learning standards into teaching practices and to differentiate the curriculum to address the widely varying needs of students. Support for curriculum implementation is especially important in disadvantaged areas, where teacher preparedness is often poor. One of the hallmarks of the PTA programme is the holistic approach to learning, which provides both learning standards, implementation support to teachers and relevant learning materials (see Box 3.1). Departments and municipalities, such as Bogotá, have also developed their own curriculum and teaching and learning materials in an effort to raise standards and reduce inequities. However, the impact of these initiatives is limited by their focus on a particular education level or region. A nationally co-ordinated approach could be more effective, lead to economies of scale and establish common standards across the country, helping to reduce disparities and ensure greater consistency in the quality of schooling.

A curriculum also provides a framework for developing other key aspects of the learning environment, such as teaching approaches, textbooks and assessment practices. In the absence of a common curriculum, national

and local authorities can find it much more challenging to develop these other drivers of learning. A curriculum provides an important basis for the development of textbooks and other teaching and learning materials. The lack of an official curriculum might explain why only a small fraction of Colombian schools use textbooks (Alvarez et al., forthcoming). A curriculum can also be a powerful tool to help shift traditional teaching methods towards a more learner-centred approach that can better support autonomous learning and other “21st century” skills. This is a stated priority for Colombia, as for all OECD countries conscious of the need to adapt to changes in the economy and labour market.

The curriculum is the cornerstone of a coherent approach to evaluation and assessment (OECD, 2013b). In the absence of detailed national learning objectives, the ICFES has developed its own testing standards to externally assess the performance of schools. There is the risk that, without a common curriculum, such external examinations become a default guide for learning goals, which they are neither intended nor equipped to provide. International research has pointed to the risks associated with the prevalence of testing at the expense of the curriculum, as the former cannot capture the full complexity of the latter (OECD, 2013b). In Colombia, the underperformance of half of students in the SABER tests points both to a mismatch between national expectations and school-level learning standards, as well as the extent of guidance and support that teachers and schools will require to improve student outcomes. The development of a national curriculum could help Colombia to ensure that its students acquire the full range of knowledge, skills and values that all citizens hold to be important.

Using assessment to support students’ learning and progression

Assessing students’ learning outcomes is important to measure progress towards national learning standards and further improve teaching and learning strategies. In Colombia’s current evaluation culture, teachers use assessment mainly in a summative form to summarise the learning that has taken place, in order to record, mark or certify achievements. When students fail to meet expected outcomes, assessment often leads to grade repetition. Assessment is rarely used as a tool to improve teaching and learning practices in schools and address individual student learning needs early on. Supporting teachers to embrace more effective assessment practices would be an important step towards encouraging all students to achieve their full learning potential.

Teachers and parents in Colombia continue to consider that one of the most effective ways to support students who perform poorly in school

assessments is to require them to repeat a year. With large classes and limited training and resources, teachers often lack the tools to take a more individualised and preventative approach to assist struggling students and instead resort to giving them the chance to go over the same lessons again. However, national and international research studies have shown that grade repetition is not an effective means to improve performance: the academic benefits of grade retention are slight and short lived, while it increases the chances of dropping out (Sarmiento, 2006; García, Fernández and Sánchez, 2010; OECD, 2012). Moreover, those who repeat a year take up places that could be used to expand enrolment and/or reduce large class sizes.

The MEN is well aware of the ineffectiveness of grade repetition and has attempted to establish legal limitations to its application in schools (MEN, 2015a). However, these measures have encountered strong resistance from schools and parents in the absence of alternative support strategies for students. To effectively improve student learning, legal measures to limit grade repetition need to be accompanied with a range of support for students and teachers, including additional instruction time and instructional materials. Particularly important are measures to prepare teachers to address diverse learning needs and to detect gaps in skills and knowledge early on. It is both more effective and less costly to target resources to assist students in the early years of schooling, before they become disengaged and when the learning gaps are still small (OECD, 2012).

Student assessment can be an important tool to help teachers identify students who are falling behind early on, develop effective instructional interventions, and engage students and their parents in the quest for improvement. However, classroom assessment is mostly of a summative rather than formative nature in Colombia, which means that the assessment of learning outcomes is not used effectively as a means to foster further learning. For instance, the results of assessments are often communicated to students in the form of a numerical score rather than with detailed information and illustrative examples on their strengths, areas of concern, and recommendations for improvement. Students also do not receive individual results for their participation in three national standardised assessments in basic education, which means that teachers and students lack a clear reference on how well they are performing against national standards (see Policy Issue 3).

To make the most of student assessment tools, many countries have invested considerably in strengthening the capacity of teachers and school leaders to ensure they have the skills to assess learning and, most importantly, develop appropriate interventions and effectively communicate results to students and parents (OECD, 2013b). Assessment packages

combined with hands-on training can be particularly helpful in contexts where teachers have limited pedagogical knowledge and experience. South Africa, for example, has created assessment resource banks with simple-to-use materials that teachers can employ to assess student learning (UNESCO, 2014). By increasing the capacity of teachers and schools to assess and support individual student learning, Colombia could both improve performance levels and reduce inequities in learner achievement.

Making more effective use of learning time

There is considerable evidence that classroom time could be better used in Colombia to support student learning. While students in Colombia will have experienced more hours of compulsory instruction by the end of basic education than those in most OECD countries, a large part of this time will not have been spent on effective learning. Current efforts to enable more effective learning time are focused on the progressive transition from multi-shift schools towards a single, full school day of seven hours for all children by 2025. There is some evidence that the existence of two or three shifts in schools has a negative impact on learning outcomes. Results from SABER, for example, suggest that learning is less effective in the afternoon than in the morning (Bonilla, 2011). However, there are other factors that also detract from learning in the classroom that Colombia will need to address if the significant investment in the full school day is to pay off.

Building upon the lessons of local initiatives to implement a full school day, the national *jornada única* programme is intended to meet a range of social and educational goals. It aims to improve learning outcomes by providing additional time to reinforce mathematics, science and language skills. It seeks to improve student nutrition through the provision of a midday meal and to protect children from external social risks. The programme is further intended to enhance system efficiency, by encouraging certified entities to make fuller use of their human and physical resources. Specific research studies for Colombia show that the full-day school has the potential to generate important gains in terms of reduced grade repetition and dropout rates and increased learning outcomes (García, Fernández and Weiss, 2013; Bonilla, 2011). These findings are consistent with international research which also points to the positive impact of a longer school day in reducing students' exposure to risks outside schools, such as crime, pregnancy, alcohol and drugs (Gromada and Shewbridge, forthcoming).

While the potential benefits of expanding the school day are large, the experience of other countries, such as Chile, shows that lengthening the school day is a very costly initiative that will only yield returns if carefully resourced and designed, and, most importantly, if the extra time is used effectively (Bellei, 2009). The implementation plan for full-day schooling

includes specific provisions on the use of the additional time to strengthen core skills. It also presents the extended school day as an opportunity to reflect on the school's overall curriculum and pedagogical strategies. However, the programme does not appear to pay enough attention to some of the central issues that are preventing teachers and students from making most effective use of learning time.

Research and the review visit point to multiple pressures that detract from quality learning time. The administrative burden that falls on schools and the limited capacity of school leaders to ensure that teachers are present in the classroom (e.g. remediate shortages, replace sick teachers and tackle absenteeism) has been shown to significantly reduce instruction time (World Bank, 2012). These problems are particularly prevalent in rural areas. At the same time, disruptive student behaviour is common and teachers and schools often lack resources to tackle it. A recurrent issue in schools visited by the review team was the difficulty teachers face in addressing societal factors that undermine the learning environment, such as violence, drugs and crime. Teachers receive little pre-service or in-service preparation on how to manage these factors, nor on how to handle a large and very diverse student body with different learning needs (see Policy Issue 2). Poor pedagogical training, and the limited availability of textbooks or practice books, might mean students are obliged to spend a considerable amount of time copying from the blackboard rather than engaged in problem-solving exercises or other more effective learning activities. Providing teachers with better support to manage the classroom reality in Colombia, and reducing the bureaucratic duties that draw their attention away from teaching, would appear to be an essential step towards improving the effective use of learning time.

Colombia also needs to consider how it can provide additional learning time in a way that helps those who need it the most. While more time does not automatically lead to better performance, research indicates that students who are struggling to progress seem to particularly benefit from more time and opportunities to learn at school, especially when support for learning might be lacking at home (Lavy, 2010; Gromada and Shewbridge, forthcoming). OECD countries offer a range of strategies to provide extra time to students so they can catch up with their peers, such as breakfast clubs, remedial classes and summer schools (OECD, 2012). As the Success for All programme in the United States illustrates, additional hours of intensive tutoring for low-performing students in the early grades can be particularly effective in boosting learning outcomes. Such arrangements are not widespread in Colombia, although there are some promising small-scale initiatives. In the Colombian municipality of Manizales, for example, primary school students benefit from additional instruction time

for core subjects and extra teachers and assistants have been recruited to support struggling students. The national government is also piloting the use of trainers from the National Training Service (*Servicio Nacional de Aprendizaje*, SENA) to reinforce core subjects (mathematics and science) with an additional two hours per week. This programme currently benefits 53 000 Grade 9 students. Both the national and local governments should look at how these practices could be expanded to bring additional learning opportunities for disadvantaged students, in particular in the first years of school. This has the potential to bring effective, and cost-efficient, benefits to students who are struggling to learn more quickly than the *jornada única* programme, which will not reach all schools until 2025. When rolling out full-day schooling the government should also pay much more attention to prioritising disadvantaged schools or schools with a large number of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Policy issue 2: Building a stronger teaching and school leadership workforce

The year 2002 marked a turning point for the teaching and leadership workforce in Colombia. The new law on the teaching profession placed merit at the centre of career progression and introduced merit-based procedures for entry, promotion and retention. These are significant steps that align Colombia with OECD best policies and practices. The government is committed to building on this progress and has made fostering teaching excellence one of the priorities for education reform in the PND. Important milestones on the path to excellence will include: defining quality teaching and school leadership and aligning all teaching policies behind this goal; reviewing initial teacher training and recruitment processes to raise the bar for entry to the profession; enabling teachers to develop their skills throughout their career; recognising and rewarding good performance; and empowering school leaders to be catalysts of improvement in schools.

Ensuring clear standards and effective support

The development of teaching and leadership skills needs to be seen as a continuum that encompasses all phases in a teacher's career, from initial teacher education through to retirement. An important departure point is to have professional standards defining what being a good teacher and school leader means, providing direction to all the different aspects of teacher policy. Raising the quality of teaching also requires increasing the attractiveness, selectivity and quality of initial teacher education, and

ensuring a high standard for entry into the profession. Opportunities for professional development also need to be available throughout teachers' careers, but particularly in the initial years of service which are so important for consolidating effective teaching practices.

Define quality teaching and leadership

The definition of clear professional standards would provide coherence across current efforts to reform teaching careers. In Colombia, there is no national framework of teaching standards, nor a clear statement or profile of what teachers and school leaders are expected to know and be able to do. The formal description of teachers' responsibilities in the 2002 statute is insufficient to define the full range of competencies required for teaching excellence. Similarly, the competencies included in the criteria for the appraisal of teachers and school leaders are not detailed enough, have not become the basis for the development of teaching policies and are not widely recognised as a reference for good teaching within the profession.

An increasing number of OECD countries are using professional standards as the backbone of teaching policy reforms. Standards can provide clear expectations of what teacher education and professional development should aim to achieve, offer a credible reference for making judgements about teacher competence (as in teacher appraisal), and provide the basis for career advancement. The format and content of standards vary considerably across OECD countries but some common elements of effective frameworks can be identified (OECD, 2005). First, teaching and school leadership standards should contain quality criteria or indicators for professional teaching and school leadership practice. Second, standards should recognise the different levels of performance and responsibilities expected at different stages of teachers' and school leaders' careers. Third, standards need to be informed by research and reflect the student learning objectives that the school system is aiming to achieve. Finally, standards need to be developed through a participatory process that involves governmental authorities at all levels, professional associations of principals and teachers, groups of educational administrators, researchers, and representatives from teacher education institutions. This is essential to building a shared understanding of the process and ensuring the legitimacy of the standards agreed. In Chile, for example, teaching and leadership standards have become a positive, basic reference for the profession and the foundation for other teacher policy reforms (Box 3.2). By establishing a common vision of what good teaching school leadership mean for Colombia, standards could provide a valuable tool for improving pedagogical practice and a framework for guiding other training reforms.

Box 3.2. Professional standards for teachers and school leaders in Chile

Chile developed professional standards for teachers and school leaders in the last decade. The Good Teaching Framework (*Marco para la Buena Enseñanza*, MBE) defines teacher performance standards and serves as a guide to improve teaching professional practice for both beginning teachers and the more experienced. The MBE includes 21 standards grouped into four domains specific to the task of teachers: 1) creating an environment conducive to student learning; 2) teaching for student learning; 3) preparing for teaching: content organisation based on student learning; and 4) professional responsibilities. Each standard of practice is described by performance levels (outstanding, proficient, basic, poor). These are written in behavioural language, which permits both teachers and administrators to translate the standards into actual events in the classroom or into instructional planning. In their appraisal, teachers are provided with feedback on their performance relative to the professional standards. The MBE was developed through a three-year process of consultation between a national commission and the teachers' union.

The “Framework for Good School Leadership” (*Marco para la Buena Dirección*) was developed in 2004 to improve school leadership and impact the quality of institutional management and student learning. It also provides guidance on what is to be expected of school leaders. The framework is organised into 4 areas of professional competency that groups 18 performance and professional development standards: leadership, curriculum management, management of the school atmosphere and coexistence, and resource management. These serve as a common benchmark for the training and appraisal of school principals, other school leaders and technical-pedagogical teachers.

Sources: OECD (2013b), *Synergies for Better Learning: An International Perspective on Evaluation and Assessment*, OECD Reviews of Evaluation and Assessment in Education, OECD Publishing, Paris, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264190658-en>; Pont, B., D. Nusche and H. Moorman (2008), *Improving School Leadership, Volume I: Policy and Practice*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264044715-en>.

Initial teacher education

Achieving teaching excellence requires ensuring that those who aspire to enter the profession have the potential and motivation to develop high-quality teaching skills and that they are enabled to do so through well-designed teacher training programmes. There is evidence in Colombia that the teaching profession is not attracting high-calibre students and that many of those who seek to become teachers might lack the basic competencies required to excel. Students who enrol in teacher education programmes tend to have the lowest results across all tertiary programmes in the university entrance examination (SABER 11) (García et al., 2014). In contrast, a common feature of high-performing education systems is that they recruit their teachers from the top tier of secondary graduates (Barber and Mourshed, 2007).

To attract top graduates into teaching degrees, Colombia introduced a scholarship programme in recent years and is currently considering its further expansion through a specific scholarship for top-performing disadvantaged students (see Chapter 5). Scholarships to attract high performing students have had some positive results in other countries. For instance, in Chile, the proportion of students with top scores enrolled in quality initial teacher education programmes almost doubled after the introduction of targeted scholarships (Alvarado et al., 2012). There are additional steps that Colombia could take that could help to draw more high-calibre students into the profession, and deter those who may not have the right skills. Finland provides an example of how stringent admission procedures, which focus on the right qualities and limit the number of places on the basis of performance and a firm projection of teacher needs, could guide entry to initial teacher education. In Finland, the selection process is structured in two rounds: first, a national multiple-choice examination is applied to all candidates to test their numeracy, literacy and problem-solving skills; second, the top-scoring candidates are invited to the following stage of the selection procedure, which is organised by universities and consists of assessing candidates' communication skills, willingness to learn, academic ability and motivation for teaching (Barber and Mourshed, 2007). To attract and retain top graduates, Colombia needs to be more selective in its intake of potential teachers and introduce additional pay and career progression incentives.

As well as improving admissions procedures, Colombia needs to ensure that all teacher training programmes adequately prepare students for entry into teaching. There are several concerns regarding the quality of initial teacher education in Colombia. Primary teachers still only need a post-secondary but non-tertiary qualification, such as that provided by an ENS. The vast majority of OECD countries have raised the requirement for teacher training to a tertiary-level qualification, which signals a higher level of knowledge and skills and can also help raise the social status of the profession (OECD, 2005). Raising the threshold in Colombia, however, would only enhance teacher preparedness if the quality of teacher training provided by tertiary institutions is significantly improved. Only 19% of the tertiary institutions providing teaching degrees in Colombia have received high-quality accreditation (García et al., 2014), raising questions about the standard of training in the majority of education faculties. The results of the university exit examination (SABER PRO) confirm that the skills of future teachers might be of concern. Graduates of initial teacher education programmes have lower critical reading and quantitative reasoning skills, and no higher writing abilities than those of other degrees, while those in accredited universities obtain better results than those in non-accredited ones (García et al., 2014). If teachers themselves have weak numeracy and literacy skills, it is unlikely that they will be able to instil them in their students.

Further reform of Colombia's tertiary education sector, and in particular of the quality assurance system, might address some of these challenges (see Chapter 5) but specific actions will also be needed to improve the content of initial teacher education programmes.

Initial teacher education programmes need to have a practical focus in order to adequately prepare teachers to engage students in the classroom. However, initial training programmes in Colombia tend to have a more theoretical than practical approach to teaching, and universities often have little contact with schools (Alvarez et al., forthcoming). As a result, graduates often lack strong pedagogical methods and skills. International research has shown that practical experience in high-performing schools can be an effective means of providing candidates with a broad understanding of what it takes to be a teacher, including such critical skills as actual classroom teaching and management, student guidance, curriculum and school improvement planning, student- and self-assessment, and collaboration with parents and external partners (OECD, 2005). The absence of a strong practicum component within initial teacher training programmes in Colombia is of particular concern considering that teachers are likely to work in very challenging school contexts and with limited support. Increasing the practical focus of teaching degrees will be important for preparing Colombia's teachers to enable student learning in large classrooms with a wide range of ages and abilities.

Entry into the profession

One of the major advances of Colombian teaching policy was the introduction of a competitive and meritocratic procedure for recruiting new teachers and school leaders in 2004. This has been an important step forward in a system in which the process for recruitment was not transparent and there were no mechanisms to guarantee the quality of candidates and prevent corruption over appointments. To ensure that the best candidates are recruited, the selection procedure could place greater emphasis on assessing the skills and attributes that effective teachers and school leaders should possess rather than focusing only on content mastery. Defining professional standards would help guide this assessment. In addition, the proportion of teachers occupying provisional vacancies needs to be kept to a minimum to ensure that provisional positions do not become a back door into the profession.

Structured induction programmes are an important way to consolidate the skills of new teachers. They can help new teachers adopt good practices, face challenges for which they might have not been adequately prepared, and channel their motivation towards improvement. Research in several countries has shown that mentoring and induction for beginner teachers can improve teacher commitment and retention, teacher classroom instructional practices, and student achievement (Ingersoll and Strong, 2011). A wide

array of measures have been adopted in OECD countries to steer the professional and personal growth of new teachers during their first years of service (e.g. supervision, coaching, induction programmes and reduced workloads) (OECD, 2012). In Colombia, the MEN has taken steps to introduce a two-year mentoring programme for new teachers but so far the initiative has only been implemented in 7 out of Colombia's 95 ETCs. The introduction of well-structured induction programmes could ensure teachers make a successful transition from the largely theory-based training provided by initial teacher education institutions to the practical realities of the classroom.

A probation period can serve as a valuable mechanism for ensuring that teachers have the skills and knowledge needed before graduating to a permanent post. Although teachers in Colombia do undergo a probation period, there are indications it is not as effective as it could be. First, the probation period is not accompanied by an induction programme. Second, the probation period of between 4 and 10 months is not long enough to assess new teachers' potential. The ideal length by international standards is between one and two years (OECD, 2005). Finally, the high proportion of new teachers passing probation raises questions over the extent to which teaching skills are appraised and probation used effectively.

Continuing professional development

Professional development opportunities enable teachers to enrich their knowledge and skills throughout their career. In Colombia, access to ongoing professional development is of particular importance given concerns about the quality of initial teacher education programmes, the large number of teachers that entered the profession without a merit-based selection process and are not subject to appraisal, and the changing demands of a school system that is increasingly focused on learning outcomes. Evidence from Colombia, and experience from across OECD countries, suggests several ways in which professional development opportunities could be improved to better support teachers in their work.

The government's main strategy to develop the skills of in-service teachers since 2010, the PTA programme, seeks to increase the impact of professional development through a school-based strategy (see Box 3.1). Such an approach is also in line with trends in professional development in OECD countries, where school-based and peer learning methods are increasingly regarded as one of the most effective means of enabling teachers to improve their practice. The programme has already been scaled up, reaching about half of all teachers in the transition year and primary education by 2014 (MEN, 2015b). One of its strengths is the focus on low-performing schools and early years education, which is where better teaching can have the

greatest impact on learning outcomes. Another valuable aspect is that facilitators stay in the assigned school for at least one year in order to have greater opportunities to penetrate the culture of schools and spur sustainable changes. Despite these positive design features, however, the programme has not yet been shown to have had a significant impact on student performance in national assessments. A recent evaluation identified some potential reasons for this including inconsistencies in implementation, such as failing to recruit high quality teachers as facilitators; inadequate training and support provided to facilitators; and the limited focus on changing teaching methods and practices in the classroom (UNIANDES, 2014 in Álvarez et al., forthcoming). These are issues that the review of the PTA programme, currently under way, will need to address.

It is difficult to assess the effectiveness of the various short professional development opportunities that constitute the most common form of in-service training available to teachers in Colombia. These include a wide range of activities provided by many different actors (e.g. the MEN, departmental and municipal governments, faculties of education, the teachers' union and NGOs). There are no regulations or co-ordination of the provision of these activities. Each provider tends to determine the professional development activities they offer independently. The lack of co-ordination inhibits quality assurance. For example, it means that there is no means of preventing the use of outdated pedagogical methods. This fragmentation is compounded by the absence of teaching standards. Moreover, traditional short professional development opportunities, which are typically delivered through a cascade methodology and take place outside the school, tend to be more theoretical than practical and disconnected from the actual needs of teachers. They are perceived as ineffective at helping teachers improve their practice in Latin American countries (Bruns and Luque, 2014). A stronger approach to professional development opportunities, with clear standards and objectives for different courses and quality controls, could increase their impact on teaching. Greater co-ordination would also enable economies of scale and facilitate the creation of communities of practice.

The cost and impact of different alternatives matters, especially when seeking to effect system-wide improvements. Scholarships for teachers to undertake undergraduate or master's programmes are often used in Colombia, as well as in other Latin American countries, where a tertiary degree has high social status (Bruns and Luque, 2014). While these initiatives may benefit individual teachers and schools, and help raise the attractiveness of the teaching profession, their high costs need to be balanced against their capacity to create improvements across the school system. The number of potential beneficiaries is typically very small, given the costs of tertiary education. The 2015 initiative to provide 3 000 teachers with a scholarship to pursue a master's degree will benefit about 2% of the teaching workforce at

an estimated cost of over USD 18 million (August 2015), which is equivalent to over one-third of the PTA budget (MEN, 2015b).

Scholarship programmes also need to be carefully designed so that they address the actual needs of teachers in schools and help them to improve learning outcomes for their students. The present initiative places welcome emphasis on enabling school improvement by encouraging participating teachers to learn how to lead change in the classroom and including school-based activities. This is not only beneficial to participants but could also improve teaching degrees by connecting universities to the realities of schools. However, it would be much more effective if the programmes were based on the results of teacher appraisals. Not using teacher appraisals to inform either the uptake or the supply of professional development deprives Colombia of a means of ensuring that training opportunities meet teacher needs. Not only does this mean that development opportunities might not contribute towards good teaching, but also that there is lack of continuity between initial and in-service teacher training, making it difficult for teachers to progressively develop their skills or pursue specific career objectives.

Another important aspect in the design of scholarships is determining who is eligible. The present initiative focuses on “excellent teachers”, based on improvements in their schools’ SABER 9 and 11 tests. While this can send a message that teaching excellence is valued, teachers in schools with lower levels of performance growth are likely to be the ones most in need of improvement and for whom further training could achieve the greatest impact. The selection might have a demotivating effect if it is perceived as unfair, which is a risk as it does not take other factors that influence student performance (such as school resources and students’ background) into account. In sum, the cost-effectiveness of scholarship programmes need to be considered alongside other initiatives to reward teacher performance, especially given the overall shortage of funds available in Colombia for quality improvements.

Using appraisal to foster high-quality teaching

Another major advance of the 2002 reform was the introduction of regular cycles of teacher appraisals by school principals and voluntary national appraisal for career advancement. These are important steps as they provide a clear signal that continued improvement is valued and that career progression is based on merit. Further refinements to these appraisals could be made, however, to reinforce their potential in assessing what teachers know and can do, how they are progressing, where they would benefit from additional support, and how their contribution to the school as whole might be enhanced. The experience of OECD countries has shown that an effective

appraisal system requires careful attention to its consequences as well as key elements of its design (who is appraised, by whom and on what basis) (OECD, 2013b).

The establishment of clear criteria and use of a wide range of evidence are important to ensure that appraisal is accurate and accepted by the profession. The lack of professional standards in Colombia implies that there is no common measure nor common understanding of teaching quality across the country. Another challenge is that the evidence base for appraisal appears too narrow to enable a well-rounded judgement of teacher performance. Notably, in appraising teachers, school leaders do not observe classroom practice and they use other sources of information (e.g. portfolios, student assessment results and parental surveys) largely at their discretion. The reform of the voluntary national appraisal in September 2015, which introduced a videotaped classroom demonstration as the main source of evidence, is a positive step towards opening up Colombian classrooms. However, further steps are needed to ensure that the full spectrum of teachers' responsibilities are evaluated on the basis of adequate evidence and clear, commonly understood criteria.

Appraisal needs to have consequences if it is to have a positive impact on teaching and learning quality. The voluntary national appraisal can lead to higher remuneration for successful candidates and, since September 2015, unsuccessful candidates are also required to undergo a remedial course. However, the mandatory appraisals by school principals do not lead to structured feedback or training opportunities to improve teaching practices and have a very small impact on external appraisals. There are limited consequences for consistently poor appraisal results. In some OECD countries, an unsatisfactory appraisal can have an impact on career advancement or salary levels, and there are clear paths out of the profession for those with very poor teaching skills or high rates of absenteeism (OECD, 2013b).

Capitalising on the potential of all staff is an important way to accelerate and deepen the transformation of the school system. External appraisals could also be further used to capitalise on the potential of staff, by identifying those who could act as mentors for new teachers, future school leaders or facilitators for the PTA programme, and help those with weaker teaching skills to move to more administrative positions or early retirement schemes. Singapore provides an example of how teacher appraisal can be used for long-term career planning and promotions in a way that benefits the whole school system. Teachers are assessed with regard to their potential for three professional career tracks: 1) the teaching track, which allows teachers to advance toward the level of “master teacher”; 2) the leadership track, which allows teachers to take on management roles in schools or in the MEN; and 3) the senior specialist track, which allows teachers to support other teachers as pedagogical specialists (OECD, 2013b).

To be fair and effective, all teachers should be subject to an appraisal process. In Colombia, more than half of all teaching staff are not subject to any appraisal, including teachers under the old statute and those in provisional positions. Yet, these are the teachers who could particularly benefit as most were not recruited through transparent and merit-based procedures. Making the appraisal mandatory for all teachers could be an important step in Colombia to improve the quality of teaching and hold all teachers to the same standards.

Rewarding teaching quality

Several initiatives have been introduced in recent years to improve overall remuneration levels, provide incentives for good performance and improve working conditions for teachers in Colombia. These are intended to address concerns about the status and attractiveness of the profession, and its ability to attract, retain and advance high-performing individuals. Teachers in public schools currently earn about 18% less than professionals in other sectors such as doctors, economists, lawyers or engineers, and salary differences between the lowest and the highest paid are also smaller than for other professions (García et al., 2014).

The 2002 reform of the teaching profession introduced a new remuneration scale with two positive aspects. First, external appraisal replaced length of service as one of the two major factors deciding career progression and remuneration, alongside educational attainment. This gave greater importance to their actual performance and more effective measures of what makes a difference in classrooms. Second, overall remuneration levels and speed of progression were significantly increased on teachers' successful participation in the external appraisals. Despite these positive changes, however, low participation and success rates suggest that the voluntary national appraisal might not be used as intended. If appraisal is used as an instrument to manage staff costs by setting the bar for promotion too high, it will not fulfil its role in encouraging and rewarding excellence, and is also likely to have a demotivating effect on teachers and weaken trust in the appraisal system.

The introduction of an annual bonus for staff in schools meeting improvement targets in the Synthetic Education Quality Index (ISCE) is a recent attempt to provide incentives to foster teaching improvement. Bonuses can be attractive for teachers in countries with low remuneration levels, such as in Colombia, but there is still no conclusive evidence on their effectiveness at improving teaching practice (Bruns and Luque, 2014). At the time of writing, it is too early to evaluate the potential effects the scheme might have on teaching performance and the school system but some aspects of its design are worth mentioning. The bonus is not based on a comprehensive appraisal

process but on a multidimensional indicator (ISCE), which might capture performance better than the results of student assessments alone, but might fail to consider the actual improvement efforts of individual staff as long as these are not reflected in the index. The fact that all teachers in a school receive the same bonus can incentivise collective improvement efforts but also means that good and poor teaching will be rewarded equally. Careful consideration is needed over whether the bonus based on the ISCE is the most effective incentive to improve performance compared with other options, such as a bonus based on individual staff appraisal, as is used in countries such as Chile and Singapore.

A renewed focus on teacher remuneration could also reduce the need for additional sources of income that can lead teachers to take on heavy work schedules which might hamper their performance in the classroom. Despite the lack of reliable data on teachers' employment outside the public education sector, anecdotal evidence suggests that some teachers hold another job either in education (e.g. in a private school or tutoring for SABER 11) or in other sectors. A heavy teaching load or additional job leaves little room for teachers to engage in other activities at the school such as collaboration with colleagues, reflection on their practices, mentoring of less experienced teachers, communication with parents and professional development. The fact that teachers are only expected to stay on the school premises for six out of their eight working hours might also limit their engagement with students and the time actually spent on their teaching duties. Further progress on teacher remuneration will help to ensure that teaching is well valued in Colombia and that those who have responsibility for one of the nation's most important assets – its children – are adequately rewarded and recognised.

Strengthening school leadership

School leadership has received limited attention in the ambitious teacher reforms undertaken in Colombia in the last decades, but there is an emerging debate in the country about the roles that principals can play in raising education standards. In OECD countries, school leadership is considered one of the most direct means of improving the quality of teaching and thus student learning. Acting as a key intermediary between policy and practice, school leaders can help teachers and other school staff to improve their practices and reshape school processes, cultures, attitudes and behaviours (Leithwood et al., 2004; Pont et al., 2008). Strong school leaders can also play an important role in mentoring other leaders, expanding good practice and fostering systemic improvement. In Colombia, where many schools are isolated and might receive limited local government support, school principals need to take the lead in delivering change. The important responsibilities given to schools to develop their curricula also make school

leaders, and their capacity, pivotal to the success of national reform efforts. Given the relatively small number of school leaders and their potential impact, investments in strengthening their skills could be one of the most effective, and efficient, ways to generate systemic improvements.

An important first step will be to rethink the role and distribution of school leadership in Colombia. The responsibilities of school principals are presently mainly administrative and they have no clearly defined responsibilities for observing classroom practice, providing guidance to teachers and promoting better teaching practices in the school (Weinstein, Hernández and Muñoz, 2014). In contrast, an increasing number of OECD countries are placing far more emphasis on the pedagogical aspect of school leadership as a critical driver of school improvement (Pont et al., 2008). The limited focus on how principals can support teaching and learning in Colombia might be partly explained by the fact that school principals often oversee a number of individual school branches, in particular in rural areas where branches can be numerous and spread over large distances. Various other factors, such as the acute shortage of resources in many schools or the large number of administrative requests, also draw principals in Colombia into management functions.

School principals in Colombia also tend to bear most of the leadership responsibilities on their own. A trend in OECD countries is to recognise that strategic and pedagogical leadership cannot be exercised by one person alone, and that school leadership teams are the basis for increasing leadership capacity and fostering more sustainable improvements (Pont et al., 2008). A step in this direction in Colombia would be the definition of clear roles and expectations for each leadership position through professional standards and formal recognition through career structures. Australia, England (United Kingdom), New Zealand and Singapore, for example, differentiate several roles or stages in leaders' career structure. In England, for example, there are five stages in a school leader's career ladder: 1) emergent leadership, when a teacher is beginning to take on management and leadership responsibilities; 2) established leadership, comprising assistant and deputy principals; 3) new school principals; 4) advanced leadership, when leaders look to mature in their roles; and 5) consultant leadership, when they take on training, mentoring and other responsibilities (Pont et al., 2008).

Clearly defining expectations for school leaders will help Colombia to improve other defining policies for the profession, including recruitment, professional development, appraisal and remuneration. The recruitment process and the development of leadership skills are of particular importance, as good teachers might not automatically become good leaders. In Colombia, the selection of school leaders, as with teachers, is mainly based on a

written exam, which places greater emphasis on their knowledge rather than leadership skills. However, being abreast of the laws and regulations governing schools does not automatically mean that they will be good pedagogical leaders. Moreover, school leaders are not required to participate in any professional development courses that would enable them to further improve their leadership potential.

The programme Transformative School Principals (*Rectores Líderes Transformadores*) is a promising initiative to strengthen leadership skills through mentoring and participation in a professional learning community (Box 3.3). Such new forms of professional development based on peer learning are increasingly supported in OECD countries and a growing body of evidence shows the effectiveness of networks and communities of practice in helping school leaders develop their skills, acquire tacit knowledge about the responsibilities of the position, build confidence, and break the professional isolation characteristic of the job (Weinstein and Hernández, forthcoming). Peer learning can take different forms such as structured conversations in which an experienced school principal mentors a newly appointed one, or where principals regularly share their successes and failures in a small group. Professional development courses, peer learning opportunities, professional networks and other initiatives to develop leadership skills could help Colombia to create a stronger culture of improvement in its schools and use the autonomy provided by decentralisation as a positive force for change.

Box 3.3. Transforming school leaders to transform schools

In 2010, the business sector partnered with the Ministry of Education and academics to create an innovative programme, Transformative School Leaders (*Rectores Líderes Transformadores*), to foster the development of leadership skills in public schools. The programme clarifies the competences that school principals need to successfully perform their pedagogical, management, administrative and community responsibilities. It targets school principals and the whole leadership team. As part of the programme, school principals participate in four intensive courses over a period of 10 months for a total of 40 hours of training per week and 160 over the whole process. After the training, the leadership team prepares a report on the lessons learnt and their school transformation plans. During the following two years the team receives technical guidance and support as they implement the school transformation plan. In 2015, the initiative was present in five municipalities (8% Bogotá, 100% Itagüí, 28% Manizales, 35% Medellín, 75% Cali) and three departments (15% Cundinamarca, 38% Antioquia, 61% Atlántico).

Source: ExE (2013), *Rectores Líderes Transformadores: Guía General del Programa*, Fundación Empresarios por la Educación (Foundation of Businesses for Education), Bogotá.

Policy issue 3: Improving schools to provide all students with equal learning opportunities

Colombia still has progress to make to ensure all students have access to high-quality learning opportunities. Persistent gaps in enrolment and completion remain, and there is considerable scope for quality improvement in most schools. Colombia has a higher proportion of children failing to complete basic education and acquire basic skills than any OECD country. The quality of schooling is a particular concern in rural areas, where student outcomes are especially low and dropout rates high. Colombia could reduce equity gaps in student learning in three ways. The first is through concerted efforts to improve the quality of teaching and learning in disadvantaged schools. This requires tackling the factors – low parental engagement, school segregation and inadequate attention to the quality of learning in flexible modalities – that weaken school and student performance. The second is through more equitable and efficient resourcing of schools to ensure that all schools have at least the minimum resources needed to deliver education, and that schools serving the most disadvantaged students receive additional resources to offset obstacles to student learning. Finally, external assessments need to provide schools with better tools to foster improvement. Improving schools, particularly disadvantaged ones, is vital if education is to be an engine for inclusive growth and social cohesion in Colombia.

Shifting the focus from schooling to learning for all

There is little doubt that the expansion of enrolment in basic schooling has been one of the greatest achievements of the Colombian education system in recent decades. It is also clear that the introduction of flexible models has been an important part of this success story, enabling many students in rural and marginalised areas to be the first in their family to get an education. However, the large number of students leaving school without basic skills and the growing performance differences between schools, as measured by national and international assessments, suggest that there is still considerable room to improve the quality of education services, particularly in the most disadvantaged areas, to ensure that all students have equal opportunities to learn. This implies rethinking the use of flexible modalities and greater efforts to reduce the socio-economic stratification of schools. Awareness campaigns and efforts to increase parental engagement in the education of their children can also be beneficial both for expanding enrolment and raising expectations of learning outcomes from schooling. In parallel, more proactive measures are needed to reach out-of-school children and overcome the remaining barriers to universal access and completion of basic education.

Improving education in rural areas

The use of flexible modalities has facilitated the rapid expansion of education services, particularly in rural and remote areas, but a range of concerns have arisen on the quality of education they provide. A recent national review of the main flexible models has underlined that the capacity for implementation and the results they achieve vary greatly (Econometría/SEI, 2014). One concern relates to the limited capacity of certified entities to identify the most suitable model for a specific population and effectively implement it. Weak local management is compounded by the proliferation of models and the difficulty of creating pathways between them and between flexible models and traditional schooling to enable students to move into formal education and progress onto higher levels of learning. The poor preparation of teachers and lack of resources is another issue of concern. The post-primary model, with one or two primary school teachers having to cover the whole of the lower secondary curriculum, illustrates the limitations in the quality of education that can be provided. The *Escuela Nueva* model has shown more potential to foster positive learning outcomes than both other rural education modalities and many conventional schools (Box 3.4), but a review found that many of the learning materials and activities built into the programme’s methodology are outdated, not relevant for all students and fail to facilitate the development of complex problem-solving skills (MEN, 2014).

Box 3.4. *Escuela Nueva*, a Colombian innovation

Developed in the mid-1970s, the New School (*Escuela Nueva*) is one of Colombia’s most globally well-known educational innovations. The *Escuela Nueva* has aimed to universalise rural primary school and has been implemented in more than 20 000 school branches to reach approximately 40% of Colombia’s rural school children. Classrooms are multi-grade and students advance in their education at their own pace, while teachers move away from traditional teaching to facilitating student learning. This student-centred methodology employs a variety of innovative pedagogies to promote active, participative and co-operative learning; develop analytical, creative and research skills; and support self-esteem. Four key components are: 1) a curriculum which provides teachers with a unique planning tool and the opportunity to adapt it to the local context and students’ interests; 2) active engagement of family and community in school life; 3) teacher training in the use of active pedagogies through professional networks, in-service training and classroom observation; and 4) encouragement of school leaders to take greater responsibility for results and to create a positive attitude towards advising and supporting teachers.

Evaluations of the model have consistently shown that it can help increase attendance, boost performance scores on national assessments, reduce dropout and grade repetition rates, and improve non-cognitive outcomes such as stronger civic learning and democratic values.

Box 3.4. *Escuela Nueva, a Colombian innovation (Continued)*

The implementation and success of the programme, however, appears to vary by region, due in large part to the sense of ownership over the programme and commitment of children, teachers and communities. The coffee producing department of Caldas provides an interesting example of how a community, in collaboration with the Coffee Growers Committee, has adapted the *Escuela Nueva* model for secondary students to meet local education goals. Manizales, the capital city of Caldas, provides another interesting innovation, adapting the model for urban areas in 38% of public schools in 2015. With the support of the Luker Foundation, the city launched the Active Urban School (*Escuela Activa Urbana*, EAU) in 2002 as a response to the high dropout rates. The EAU focuses on targeting instruction to the needs and learning paces of students, strengthening schools and building bridges with the community and some preliminary data suggests it has led to improvements. It might also help explain why Manizales scored the highest of the four Colombian participating cities in PISA 2012 (Puryear et al., 2014). The success of the New School in Colombia has prompted the design of similar programmes in other countries such as Brazil, India, Mexico and Viet Nam.

Sources: Fundación Escuela Nueva (n.d.), Fundación Escuela Nueva website, www.escuelanueva.org (accessed July 2015); Puryear, J.M, F. Barrera-Osorio and M Cortelezzi (2014), *Escuela Activa Urbana: Informe de Evaluación Externa*, Inter-American Dialogue, www.fundacionluker.org.co/new/descargas/Informe_Preal.pdf.

In the immediate future, it will be important for Colombia to introduce measures to address weaknesses identified in the current flexible models. The required expansion of the school network to meet plans to make upper secondary education compulsory (see Chapter 4) provides an opportunity to develop a new long-term strategy for education in rural areas. It should establish clear criteria for the size of schools, review the education models used, include measures to foster collaboration between them, and set time-bound targets to raise learning standards in disadvantaged rural communities and narrow the disparities with urban areas (see Chapter 4). As countries that have made strides in transforming rural education have shown, this needs to be integrated within a broader socio-economic regional development strategy and backed by adequate resources. Colombia's success in raising learning outcomes in rural areas will be decisive to meeting national education goals and wider economic objectives.

Reducing school segregation

Another factor contributing to learning inequities in Colombia is the socio-economic stratification of schools. This is a common concern in Latin American countries, where levels of income inequality and residential segregation are very high. In Colombia, the public sector mostly caters to

students from low-income families. The city of Bogotá, which is home to one-sixth of the Colombian population illustrates the issue. Its Annual Statistical Report indicates that virtually all (99%) of the primary and lower secondary students in public education were from the three lowest socio-economic groups (status levels 1, 2 and 3 out of six) in 2013 (Secretaría de Educación de Bogotá, 2014). It did not report the equivalent proportions of low and high-income students attending private education or the level of socio-economic diversity in schools. However, analysis of a sample of upper secondary students in Bogotá in 2009 shows that about 80% of students from status level 1, more than 50% from status level 2 and only about 30% from status level 3 were enrolled in public education (García and Quiroz, 2011). These data confirm that the choice of public education is strongly inversely correlated with the socio-economic background of students.

International evidence has shown that segregation not only weakens student performance but also undermines social cohesion (OECD, 2012). The concentration of disadvantaged students in the same schools compounds factors that hamper performance (such as poverty and low levels of parental education) to curtail their learning opportunities even further. Schools with a large proportion of children from disadvantaged backgrounds tend to have a less positive learning environment, with students who have a wider range of abilities, receive less parental support and encouragement, and are more vulnerable to negative social pressures such as violence, crime and early pregnancy. Socio-economic segregation is likely to lead to unequal access to the best teachers and other resources unless strong policies are introduced to counter this risk (Lupton, 2004). Schools with high rates of disadvantage, which are most in need of well-trained and motivated teachers, struggle to attract and retain qualified staff. Segregation also deprives poor students from the beneficial peer effects of learning alongside children from more advantaged backgrounds who could broaden their educational and professional expectations.

Reducing school segregation, however, does not appear to be a priority in Colombia's national and local education plans. Some actions which have been taken to improve the learning environment in public schools (smaller class sizes, more resources, specific educational projects) might make them more attractive to better-off families, reducing the perceived need for private schools. Vouchers for students from low income families to attend private schools have been used to expand access to school in several cities such as Bogotá, Cartagena, and Medellín at a time of rapid expansion of enrolment. These have had the additional advantage of reducing school segregation. Within public education, OECD countries commonly use measures to balance equity criteria with the right of parents to choose the school that they want their children to attend. These include redrawing catchment areas, using quotas or lotteries for enrolment, forbidding schools to select students or charge additional fees, and providing more information and transport

options to the most disadvantaged parents (OECD, 2012). To significantly increase the social mix in schools, Colombia will also need to tackle income inequality and the strong residential segregation observed in urban areas. Local indicators of the level of school segregation could also be widely disseminated to trigger a debate on its negative effects on student learning and social inclusion.

Reducing the number of out-of-school children

Improving access to education for disadvantaged students, and enhancing the quality of education they receive, will be central to national efforts to close enrolment and retention gaps. Initiatives to expand enrolment have placed considerable focus on financial measures to decrease the costs of school attendance and provide incentives to stay on in the education system. Evaluations have shown that these have been effective in increasing school attendance. For example, an evaluation of the impact of the abolition of school fees in Bogotá found that the probability of enrolment in basic education for the poorest individuals increased by 3%, and the effect was larger for those outside the school system (Barrera, Linden and Urquoilá, 2007). The conditional cash transfer programme More Families in Action (*Más Familias en Acción*) has also had a positive and significant impact on enrolment rates (see Box 1.3 in Chapter 1). The provision of financial incentives, however, is resource intensive and the effectiveness of such programmes needs to be periodically reassessed to ensure they are having maximum impact (Slavin, 2010). Evidence suggests that there is considerable scope, for example, to improve the effectiveness of More Families in Action (see Policy Issue 2 in Chapter 4).

In addition to general programmes, more proactive, targeted efforts are likely to be needed to reach the large number of children who are still out of school. In 2011, this amounted to about 15% of 6-year-olds and 12% of 14-year-olds (UNICEF, 2014). The programme School Seeks the Child (*Escuela Busca al Niño*) is a promising initiative to ensure that all children enrol and then stay in school. It comprises an array of strategies to find those who are outside the system (e.g. home visits and recreational activities), support and follow up those who decide to enter or go back to school, help teachers to foster an inclusive learning environment, and raise awareness amongst families on the value of education. The initiative has progressively grown in scale and impact, with more than 10 000 children identified and about 5 500 enrolled in 5 departments in 2014 (MEN, 2015b). Efforts to expand this and other similar initiatives, as well as to improve information systems and strengthen the social mobilisation for schooling, are likely to enable students who are outside of the school system to be identified and lead to more effective measures to enrol and keep them in school. Personal identification numbers can be a useful instrument to identify students at

risk of dropping out on the basis of key predictors (e.g. academic failure, truancy, socio-economic background) in schools where information can be electronically registered. It could also help to keep track of students' records given Colombia's significant numbers of displaced people. In the Netherlands, for example, the Personal Identification Number has played a key role in ambitious strategies to tackle dropout rates by providing reliable and timely information to schools, municipalities and regions to prioritise their actions to those at risk as well as to hold them accountable against reduction targets (OECD, 2012).

The success of strategies to raise participation in schooling will depend considerably on the extent to which parents value and are engaged in the education of their children. Perceptions of the value and quality of education are considered an important factor influencing attendance and dropout rates in Colombia (Ricardo, 2014). In the 2014 Survey on the Quality of Life (*Encuesta Nacional de Calidad de Vida*), 37% of 10 to 17 year-olds who are outside of the education system indicated that this was due to their lack of interest or expectations from education (Sarmiento, 2015). These perceptions are likely to be influenced by the opinions of their parents, many of whom will not have attended or completed school themselves. Disadvantaged parents in Colombia, as in OECD countries, also tend to be less involved in their children's schooling. However, research has shown that engaged parents encourage more positive attitudes towards school; improve homework habits; reduce absenteeism, disengagement and dropout; and enhance academic achievement (OECD, 2012).

Several initiatives have aimed to raise public awareness about the importance of education in Colombia, such as the National Education Excellence Day campaign. Yet, the review team formed the impression that there was scope to do more to strengthen parental support and engagement in their children's education, particularly at the school level. OECD countries have developed a range of initiatives that Colombia could consider (OECD, 2012). In France, for example, parents receive clear guidelines in the form of a toolbox on the schooling their children will receive and how best to support them, and are invited to participate in three meetings at the school during the school year, on topics such as school organisation, helping with homework and sleeping patterns. In Ireland, home-school-community liaison co-ordinators organise locally based activities to encourage greater contact between parents, teachers and local groups to tackle issues in the community that impinge on learning, with a particular focus on disadvantaged students. In the Netherlands, specific school-level initiatives are devoted to parents from migrant groups, including home visits by teachers, creating a room for parents in the school, sometimes in combination with the provision of courses for parents, and the creation of parent information points in the school. Programmes to improve adult literacy skills, which Colombia is expanding in

a drive to eradicate adult illiteracy, provide an additional platform to improve the ability of parents to support their children's schooling.

Allocating resources more equitably and effectively

How resources are allocated across schools is closely associated with performance and equity. Colombia has taken steps to channel additional resources towards more disadvantaged regions and schools with a view to improving access and raising standards. This section examines these policies and how they could be enhanced to address the resource gaps that still hamper the educational progress of many students. It looks in particular at the allocation of human resources (teachers and school leaders), which constitute the bulk of education expenditures and have the greatest impact on learning. While the review team considers that system-wide improvement in Colombia is likely to require an overall increase in education spending (see Chapter 1), the present focus is on gains that could be achieved within the current budget through greater efficiency and equity.

International research indicates that the absence of basic teaching and learning resources is detrimental to student performance. This is particularly the case for students from poor families, who are less likely to receive additional support from their home environment. A study of 15 Latin American countries found that basic infrastructure and services (water, electricity and sewage) as well as instructional facilities and materials (e.g. sport facilities, laboratories and libraries) correlated with student performance, even when controlling for the socio-economic status of students and schools (Murillo and Roman, 2011). In Colombia, there are indications that a significant number of schools lack the minimum resources for learning, but the limited information available on individual schools hampers the ability of national and local authorities to tackle this challenge. Self-reported data by school principals in PISA 2012 suggests that a significant number of 15-year-old students are in schools where shortages or inadequate resources hinder the school's capacity to provide instruction: more than one-third report shortages of qualified teachers, two-thirds shortages of instructional materials, and half inadequate school infrastructure, compared to less than 20%, 33% and 35% respectively in OECD countries (OECD, 2013a). The availability of information on the teaching and learning resources in individual schools, however, is limited by Colombia's multiple funding, governance and monitoring systems, and there are questions as to the accuracy and timeliness of data collected through local and national surveys of schools (see Chapter 1). Some steps have already been undertaken to improve the quality of information on schools, such as a current assessment of the state of school infrastructure and audit of staff and student numbers. However, it will be difficult to improve the equity and efficiency of school funding in Colombia without better data on school resources and needs, in

particular in the most underdeveloped, rural regions of the country, where information gaps are greatest.

Ensuring that all students have access to equal learning opportunities requires funding schemes to be responsive to the different socio-economic profiles and varying needs of students and schools (OECD, 2012). Colombia has sought to refine the formula for distributing national resources across departments and municipalities to better reflect the costs of education in disadvantaged schools and regions. However, a recent study suggests that the redistributive effects of the General Participation System (*Sistema General de Participaciones*, SGP) have actually decreased over time, with the difference in resources received by the poorest and richest departments falling from 27% to 13% between 2005 and 2013 (Álvarez et al., forthcoming). Moreover, the scope for using the SGP to improve the distribution of resources is limited by the fact that most funds are absorbed by staff costs. Unless it is able to reflect the actual per-student costs, a per-student financing scheme is unlikely to lead to greater equity and efficiency. Similarly, the review team was informed that an increasing amount of resources is distributed to certified entities through contests or match funds, which can increase disparities across regions in the absence of equity criteria as the most disadvantaged areas cannot compete on an equal footing.

The certified entities have considerable autonomy for deciding how the resources they receive are allocated across schools under their responsibility. The criteria for distributing funds at the departmental or municipal levels are not made public, and therefore it is difficult for either the national government or local citizens to monitor whether resources are equitably distributed across schools. The government has sought to increase the effectiveness of national resources to leverage improvements at the school level by allocating an extra monthly allocation of the SGP to those that perform better in key indicators. However, unless the school context is taken into account when rewarding performance gains there is the risk that this additional allocation will have a demotivating effect on the most disadvantaged schools and might actually deepen inequities. The focus on efficiency in the distribution of resources is welcome given the resource constraints that Colombia faces, but equity needs to be placed at the forefront to ensure that all children have an equal chance to learn.

Targeted programmes are a complementary way to allocate additional resources to specific groups of schools. The use of targeted programmes is common in Colombia, and often combined with support on how to make the most of additional resources. The National Reading and Writing Plan (*Plan Nacional de Lectura y Escritura*, PNLE) is an example of such an integrated initiative, which both distributes learning materials to schools and provides training to teachers on how to use them. The use of targeted programmes to support the most disadvantaged schools is also common in OECD countries. Evidence from the Focused Intervention Program in

Ontario (Canada) and the Success for All programme in the United States, for example, show that well-designed targeted programmes can be an effective means of lifting school performance (OECD, 2011; Slavin and Madden, 2010). Looking at international experience, there are measures that Colombia could take to increase the impact of targeted programmes which should also be informed by more rigorous evaluation. Colombia might also consider reviewing the overall number and scope of existing programmes. Fewer but better integrated and targeted programmes could have a greater impact. For instance, merging the PNLE and the PTA “Let’s all Learn” initiative could increase the resources available in schools while reducing the administrative burden. Defining the programme target also requires careful consideration, as too wide a scope might reduce its impact, particularly when budgets are constrained. The PTA is intended to benefit half of all students in Colombian primary schools; a more targeted approach, focusing on the most disadvantaged schools in regions with the weakest local capacity, might have a greater impact.

Staff salaries make up the bulk of expenditure and the way in which teachers and school leaders are distributed across schools is one of the most important factors influencing student performance. Most OECD countries try to allocate at least an equal, if not a larger, number of teachers per student to disadvantaged schools (OECD, 2013a). In the Netherlands, for instance, schools with a high proportion of disadvantaged students have on average about 58% more teachers per student and also more support staff (Ladd and Fiske, 2009). International evidence also points to the importance of allocating high-quality teachers to support the most disadvantaged and poorly performing students and schools (OECD, 2012). In Colombia, municipalities with high levels of poverty, rurality and violence have teachers with the lowest levels of education, lowest career position, lowest results in teaching post competitions and the least experience (García et al., 2014). That is, students with the greatest needs and in the most challenging contexts are supported by teachers with the least preparation and skills. Several factors influence the uneven and inequitable distribution across schools, including the capacity to manage resources at the local level and the willingness of teachers to teach in more challenging contexts.

The policy allowing teachers who obtain the highest scores in the teaching post competition to choose the school they prefer also accentuates the shortage of well-qualified teachers in disadvantaged schools, as do the limited financial incentives to teach in rural and remote areas. Attracting high-quality teachers to disadvantaged schools is also a common challenge across OECD countries. Evidence from the United States has shown that financial incentives for teachers in disadvantaged schools need to

be very large (between 20% and 50% of salaries) to make a difference (Hanushek, Kain and Rivkin, 2004). Non-financial incentives can be equally effective, and more cost-efficient, in attracting highly qualified teachers to disadvantaged schools. These include more opportunities for career advancement, less instructional time or the ability to choose the next school where one works. Measures to recruit teachers and improve initial teacher education institutions in regions where shortages are most acute are also options to improve the quality of teaching in these areas.

When budgets are tight, the efficient management of human resources is essential. This involves making the right trade-offs, for example between the quality of teaching and the overall number of teaching staff. The success of Asian economies in PISA is often explained by their consistent focus on nurturing teacher quality over reducing class sizes (OECD, 2011), which are similar or even larger than in Colombia. Colombia has taken steps in recent years to manage teacher numbers in order to invest more in teacher training, development and remuneration. The establishment of staff ceilings, the approval required for new vacancies and the audit of the workforce under way are all intended to ensure that Colombia has the teachers it needs in terms of both numbers and skills. There is also the need, however, to align the incentives that influence the recruitment and support of teachers by certified entities and provide the latter with greater flexibility, and capacity, to manage their human resources. Certified entities have no incentives to reduce their staff costs in order to invest in other quality improvements as they cannot retain the potential savings (Barrera, Maldonado and Rodríguez, 2012). Also, they require national approval to reallocate teachers to other positions where they might have a greater impact. This limits their ability to increase staff in disadvantaged schools, retrain surplus teachers when demographic changes lead to decreases in school rolls, and address shortages in specific subjects or other educational levels. These barriers to investing in teaching quality need to be addressed.

Using information and evaluation to foster school improvement

Over the last 20 years, Colombia has invested considerably in developing tools to monitor and evaluate the performance of schools. With three external standardised assessments (and a fourth under development), it is one of the countries with the highest number of national student surveys in primary and lower secondary education. These assessments provide valuable information to monitor school, regional and national performance. However, further improvements to the assessments and the overall school evaluation framework could increase their potential for fostering school improvement. To this end, the capacity of schools, parents and students to understand and use them also needs to be strengthened.

Reviewing the external evaluation system

The central component of Colombia's school evaluation system are the SABER standardised student assessments, which assess learning outcomes at Grades 3, 5 and 9, with an additional assessment in Grade 7 under consideration. The SABER assessments have been a game changer in schools as they have helped to shift the focus towards student performance and contributed towards building a more results-oriented culture. The review team observed that school leaders and teachers are focused on student learning outcomes and are aware of the results of their school in SABER and how they compare nationally. The SABER assessments have been refined over the years, for example to enable comparisons over time and increase reliability. These are positive developments. However, there remains scope for further review of the purpose and design of the SABER assessments to ensure that they are as valuable as possible for policy development and school improvement. Several aspects of the current system merit attention.

First, Colombia's national standardised assessments for basic education do not measure individual student performance, nor do they track progression over time. At present, the SABER assessments provide a general picture of how individual schools are performing in core subjects every two grades. This can be helpful in identifying schools that are in need of particular assistance and to see how they are progressing over time. However, it does not provide the level of information on individual student performance that would enable teachers to understand students' strengths and weaknesses in relation to expected national standards and to target and improve classroom instruction. At least one of the SABER assessments could be re-designed to provide students with information about their individual results.

Second, the frequency of SABER assessments might need to be reconsidered. Running SABER at two-yearly intervals may have the value of signalling where the difficulties in progression lie within schools, if the latter or their local authorities have the capacity to analyse and interpret results. However, the benefits of such additional information needs to be weighed against the costs of adequately designing and implementing the tests, and the time they may take away from effective classroom instruction. In OECD countries, external assessments are typically applied at the end of primary and lower secondary education (OECD, 2013b). Fewer but more powerful tests could provide better diagnostic information to help schools and policy-makers in raising educational outcomes.

Third, while the SABER assessments in basic education were originally designed to monitor school and system performance without formal consequences for schools or teachers, over the years they have acquired higher stakes. For example, SABER results are a prominent indicator taken

into consideration when distributing the quality component of the SGP to schools and staff bonuses. Using a single test for many purposes is risky: it might not adequately capture what needs to be measured and can lead to distortions such as teaching to the test, which can undermine and invalidate the whole evaluation system (OECD, 2013b). Mexico's recent experience with its national external assessment provides a cautionary tale on the risks of attaching high stakes to formative assessments (Martínez, 2015). Using a broad range of approaches to evaluate performance can help to reduce the stakes attached to one single measure and minimise unwanted side effects. This can also provide a fuller, and more accurate, picture of teaching and school quality, which an external assessment alone cannot capture. The introduction of the ISCE is a positive step in this regard, as it addresses other relevant indicators of school quality, such as student retention and school climate, while also communicating performance results in a way that is easily accessible to teachers, students and parents.

Fourth, it is essential for results, whether from SABER or the ISCE, to be adequately contextualised to enable fair comparisons and foster a constructive culture for improvement. A positive feature of SABER tests in basic education is that the socio-economic level of schools is included in the dissemination of results and no rankings are published. This is not the case, however, for the results at the end of upper secondary school (SABER 11) and for the initial results of the ISCE. Without contextual data, comparisons between schools can be unfair and misleading as raw student achievement reflects the impact of many factors, including students' family background, previous learning and the resources of the school (OECD, 2013b). As such, these can have a demotivating and alienating effect on teachers, parents and students, which is of particular concern in a school system that is already highly segregated and where resources are inequitably distributed. Given the wealth of contextual data collected in the tests, further information could be made available and analysed to facilitate the interpretation of performance levels and enable a better understanding of the factors that influence achievement. This is the case, for example, with the Brazilian Basic Education Quality Index (IDEB), which inspired the design of ISCE. One of the strengths of the IDEB, and one of the reasons why it has been accepted by educators, is that the index is set individually for each school and progress is measured against a school's own baseline, rather than what may be perceived as an arbitrary score for all schools (OECD, 2011; Álvarez et al., forthcoming).

Supporting schools to make a greater use of evaluation for improvement

The MEN is increasingly encouraging schools to undertake initiatives to improve their results with financial incentives and strong communication campaigns. As part of the 2015 National Education

Excellence Day, for example, schools were encouraged to debate their ISCE results, set performance targets and a strategic plan on how to reach them. However, such debates will only trigger improvement if schools receive considerable additional guidance and support on how to turn results into change in the classroom. In Colombia, many schools lack a strong leadership for learning (see Policy Issue 2) and the analytical capacity to act upon SABER, ISCE and other results. While ICFES provides training on how to analyse and use assessment data, this reaches only a limited number of teachers and principals. Evidence from successful school improvement efforts in OECD countries demonstrates that there is no way around school capacity building and leadership on the path to reform (OECD, 2015).

Given the scale and wide differences in need among schools in Colombia, building improvement capacity will require a well-structured and long-term approach. Many local authorities lack the capacity to support schools as their staff are mainly focused on the management of financial and human resources rather than on how to foster improvement efforts. Reintroducing supervisory bodies could serve to support school improvement as long as they are focused on evaluating learning processes in schools, rather than solely on compliance issues as was the case with the former inspectorate. Such bodies can collect valuable qualitative information on schools, on top of the quantitative indicators currently available. In this way, external evaluators would be able to provide guidance and accountability for performance on the basis of a comprehensive body of evidence, including direct observation of classroom practice. External evaluators could validate and provide guidance on key internal processes such as the evaluation of staff, school self-evaluation and curriculum development and implementation. A supervisory body could also disseminate examples of successful school improvement and help pair strong schools with weaker ones. In a nutshell, it could help national and local authorities to connect with schools and build capacity for improvement whilst providing school with valuable guidance and support in their efforts. Chile, for example, introduced the Agency for Quality Education in 2011 to undertake some of these functions (OECD, 2013b).

Recommendations

The first priority of basic education reform efforts in Colombia must be to ensure that all children have the opportunity to achieve their full learning potential. The country has made impressive gains in expanding access to primary and lower secondary education. However, the quality of schooling is deeply unequal and too many students leave compulsory education without the basic skills they need to succeed in life, work and

further learning. Improving student achievement will require a long-term, holistic approach that addresses the obstacles to learning that exist inside, and outside, the Colombian classroom. Three sets of policies could together catalyse system-wide reform: making student learning the focus of teaching and school practice; recruiting, preparing and developing teachers and school leaders to meet their demanding roles; and ensuring that schools are equipped with the resources they need to support all students, in particular the most disadvantaged. Achieving such a transformation would not only strengthen Colombia's education system, by ensuring those who enter school stay, learn, and progress to higher levels of attainment. Ensuring that basic education equips all students with basic skills would also yield important social and economic returns, strengthening national cohesion, productivity and development.

Placing student learning at the centre

Recommendation 1.1: Establish a national curriculum framework for school education

The establishment of a national curriculum framework would help in setting high, and equal, expectations for all children in Colombia and provide guidance to teachers on what students should be learning at each stage of their school career. To ensure ownership, it will be important to proceed through broad consultation and involve key stakeholders, in particular teachers. Given Colombia's considerable diversity, it will also be essential to provide adequate space for local and school-based adaptation. It will also be critically important to align the implementation of such a curriculum with a new curriculum for teacher education, assessments, instructional materials and other relevant policies, which will require a long-term planning horizon.

Recommendation 1.2: Encourage and support teachers to make more effective use of student assessment

Teachers and schools in Colombia require much more support in enabling students, in particular disadvantaged ones, to develop basic competencies. Teachers need greater assistance in how to assess whether students are learning, identify those at risk of falling behind early on and design effective support strategies. To this end, teachers need to be provided with adequate supports such as assessment tools, instructional materials, teacher assistants and recourse to remedial courses. The use of grade repetition should be strongly discouraged through legal restrictions combined with incentives and awareness campaigns to change its favourable reputation in Colombia.

Recommendation 1.3: Support teachers to manage classroom time more effectively and lengthen the day for the most disadvantaged

Teachers need additional support on how to use classroom time effectively to support learning. Improvements in teacher education and professional development are required to develop teachers' skills to manage large and diverse classrooms. Measures to reduce schools' administrative burdens, teacher absenteeism, and the shortage of basic instructional materials also need to be explored. Resources for increasing learning time should be channelled into supporting learning in the early years for the most disadvantaged students and schools. In particular, the full-day schooling initiative could prioritise the most disadvantaged or poorly performing schools and the early grades.

Building a stronger teaching and school leadership workforce***Recommendation 2.1: Develop professional standards***

Colombia's drive to achieve excellence should start with clarifying what it means to be an excellent teacher and school leader. The definition of professional standards could help to raise the status and attractiveness of the profession, improve the effectiveness of other teacher policies, and, most importantly, ensure teachers have the knowledge, skills and values to support student learning. The standards should be the result of a participatory process that includes a wide range of stakeholders (e.g. unions, professional associations, researchers and teacher education institutions) to ensure they build on existing knowledge and evidence on what makes for good teaching and are useful to teachers.

Recommendation 2.2: Improve initial teacher education and professional development

Initial teacher education programmes should be aligned with the national curriculum framework and professional standards and have a greater practical focus to strengthen pedagogical skills and enable more student-centred learning. Induction programmes that provide quality and intensive support for new teachers should be available nationwide. Initiatives to build stronger professional communities inside and outside schools, such as the *Todos a Aprender* programme, need to be reinforced and spread across the country. Teacher appraisals should be used more systematically to inform professional development activities.

Recommendation 2.3: Use appraisal to foster improvement and reward teachers more effectively

The appraisal system needs to be reformed to foster and reward high performance. Reliance on written tests for teacher recruitment should be reduced and greater emphasis placed on teaching skills and motivation. The appraisal at the end of the probation period should ensure that only those with the potential to become excellent teachers and leaders are permanently awarded a post. Appraisals should be mandatory for all teachers, including those under the old statute or in provisional positions. They should take greater consideration of classroom observations and a broader array of evidence, and provide feedback and support to all teachers on ways in which they could improve their practice. Teachers' career and remuneration structures also need to be reformed to increase the attractiveness of the profession and adequately reward staff for their work.

Recommendation 2.4: Build a stronger school leadership profession

Strengthening school leadership will be important to ensure that curriculum and teaching policy reforms result in improvements in the classroom. The introduction of professional standards for school leaders could help to shift their focus from administration to the improvement of teaching and learning processes in the school. This new role will require establishing distinct career structures and school leadership roles, reforming the recruitment and appraisal processes to take greater account of their leadership potential, and providing them with adequate support to fully develop their leadership skills. In particular, mentoring and professional learning communities, such as the Transformative School Principals (*Rectores Líderes Transformadores*) programme, could be encouraged to spread good practices, help principals use their autonomy to drive improvements in learning, and overcome their isolation.

Improving schools to provide all students with equal learning opportunities

Recommendation 3.1: Tackle inequities in access to provide equal learning opportunities

Reducing the stark geographic and socio-economic inequities in the school system is one of the biggest challenges facing Colombia. An ambitious national strategy, backed by adequate financial resources, will be needed

to ensure that all children in rural areas enter school on time and have an equal chance to learn. It should include measures to improve the quality of the flexible education models, for example by reducing their overall number and matching them to the relevant student population, improving the quality of teaching and learning resources, and building bridges to traditional schooling. In urban areas, reducing school segregation should be a policy priority at national and local level. To this end, greater consideration could be given to measures to avoid student selection and ensure that disadvantaged families have access to high-quality schools, public or private. Awareness campaigns and school-level efforts to engage parents and inform them on how they can support the learning of their children could help address many of the factors that weaken schools in Colombia, including disengagement, classroom disruption and truancy.

Recommendation 3.2: Foster a more efficient and equitable distribution of resources

An increase in overall funding will be required to substantially transform Colombian schools and achieve the ambitious goal of becoming the most educated Latin American country by 2025. Further steps are also needed to distribute the resources available in a more equitable and efficient way. The national transfer system (SGP) should ensure that all schools receive at least the minimum resources required to provide quality learning opportunities, and greater consideration should be given to the level of disadvantage of students and schools to provide teachers in the most challenging contexts with more resources to support their students. Given concerns over teaching quality, national and local governments should prioritise investments to raise the quality of teaching, particularly in disadvantaged schools, over increasing numbers of teachers or other inputs. Strengthening information and accountability systems, in particular at the local level, will be important to ensuring that resources are invested where they can have greatest impact.

Recommendation 3.3: Use evaluation to foster school improvement

The overall evaluation framework needs to be reviewed to adequately measure and trigger school improvement. Colombia could consider reducing the number of SABER standardised assessments and re-designing at least one in order to provide student-level performance data. Carefully attention should be given when attaching consequences to assessment results to avoid distortions; using a broad range of coherent evaluation approaches when assessing performance can minimise the risk of one assessment acquiring high stakes for teachers, schools or students. Teachers and schools need to be given more support in interpreting SABER and ISCE results and

direction on how to use these to improve school and teaching practices. Contextual information, such as the level of disadvantage and resources available in schools, needs to be included in the publication and use of results to enable fair comparisons between schools. The establishment of a dedicated body of supervisors could help guide and accompany schools in their improvement efforts. This body could focus on evaluating school processes essential for learning (e.g. curricula, teacher appraisal, use of formative assessment, self-evaluation), and identify and spread good practice across the school system.

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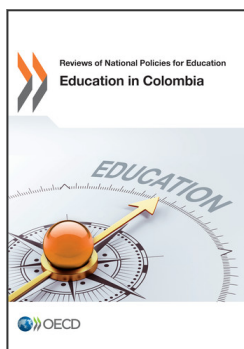
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