

Demystifying Education Public-Private Partnerships

What Every Policymaker
Should Know



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PEX Public Education Exchange
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l'éducation publique

PSI PUBLIC SERVICES
INTERNATIONAL

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Regroupement Education Pour Toutes et Tous

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TEACHERS AND EMPLOYEES'
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Endorsing organizations

1. ActionAid
2. Africa Network Campaign on Education For All
3. Albanian Coalition for Education
4. Asia South Pacific Association for Basic and Adult Education
5. Asociación Latinoamericana de Educación y Comunicación Popular
6. Associazione Dottorandi e Dottori di Ricerca in Italia
7. Arab Campaign for Education for All
8. Arab Network Popular Education
9. Brazilian Campaign for the Right to Education
10. Cameroon Education For All Network
11. Campaña Argentina por el Derecho a la Educación
12. Campaña Latinoamericana por el Derecho a la Educación
13. Center for Economic and Social Rights
14. Centre d'encadrement des personnes opprimées-RDC
15. Civil Society Action Coalition On Education for All-Nigeria
16. Coalición Colombiana por el Derecho a la Educación
17. Coalition Éducation
18. Coalition des Organisations en Synergie pour la Défense de l'Éducation Publique-Sénégal
19. Coalition nationale de Madagascar pour L'éducation pour tous
20. Coalition Nationale Togolaise pour l'Éducation Pour Tous
21. Coalition Nigérienne pour une Éducation de Qualité pour Tous
22. Coalition for Transparency and Accountability in Education
23. Corporate Accountability and Public Participation Africa
24. East African Centre for Human Rights
25. Education For All Coalition-Sierra Leone
26. Education International
27. E-Net Philippines
28. Equal Education
29. Equal Education Law Centre
30. European Network on Debt and Development
31. Fédération internationale des Centres d'Entraînement aux Méthodes d'Éducation Active
32. Foro venezolano por el derecho a la educación
33. Global Campaign for Education
34. Global Campaign for Education-United States
35. Global Initiative for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
36. Global Student Forum
37. Government Teachers' Union Mauritius
38. Halley Movement Coalition- Republic of Mauritius
39. Initiative for Social and Economic Rights
40. In the Public Interest
41. Mouvement Ivoirien des Droits Humains
42. National Campaign for Education Nepal
43. Oxfam
44. Pakistan Coalition for Education
45. Public Education Exchange
46. Public Services International
47. Regroupement Education Pour Toutes et Tous
48. Results UK
49. Réseau Ivoirien pour la Promotion de l'Éducation Pour Tous-Côte d'Ivoire
50. Right to Education Forum-India
51. Right to Education Initiative
52. Section 27
53. Solidarité Laïque
54. Teachers & Employees Association for Change, Education Reforms & Solidarity, Inc.
55. Union Syndicale pour une Éducation de Qualité
56. West Africa Youth Network for Peace Education and Economic Development Sierra Leone
57. World Organization for Early Childhood Education

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Introduction

The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) articulates the ambition that, within the next generation, all learners should complete free, equitable, and quality primary and secondary education.¹ According to human rights law, states bear the primary responsibility for education, as outlined in the Abidjan Principles on the human rights obligations of states. This includes providing public education and regulating private involvement in education.²

However, at the midpoint of the rollout of the SDGs, 250 million children remain out of school, the percentage of trained teachers has remained stagnant since their inception, and institutions repeat warnings about the “global learning crisis.”³ Addressing these issues requires substantial investments to improve quality and expand access to education while ensuring that systems are more equitable and inclusive.

Instead, the world has an average annual financing gap of \$97 billion per year for low- and lower-middle-income countries to reach their national SDG4 targets.⁴ To fill this gap, a growing number of international actors are encouraging governments to turn to the private sector to relieve the burden from or help fix failing public school systems. Powerful development actors like the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and other donors have supported this privatization push.

This brief examines the performance of one prominent manifestation of this trend – the growth of Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) in education. PPPs are long-term contractual arrangements where the private sector provides infrastructure, assets, and/or services traditionally funded and managed directly by governments. They often include some form of risk sharing between the public and private sectors.⁵



“A growing number of international actors are encouraging governments to turn to the private sector to relieve the burden from or help fix failing public school systems.”

Policymakers find themselves on the cutting edge of financial and political pressures to partner with private actors, while needing to deliver on the state's responsibility to provide high-quality public education. Policymakers' decisions are further complicated when they are targeted by advisors, alleged experts, and think tanks who may selectively filter and frame the evidence to make the case for PPPs.⁶ Figure 1 shows the different decision-making responsibilities of policymakers.

Figure 1.
*Policymaker
Responsibilities
Regarding PPPs*



This brief, combined with the greater detail included in the accompanying position paper,⁷ published by the International Partnership for the Study of Educational Privatization,⁸ provides evidence for policymakers to facilitate informed decision-making regarding PPPs, in particular by contrasting the claims made by their proponents with the reality of their implementation. The brief aims to support more informed and strategic decision-making regarding PPPs, protect public resources, improve policy implementation and enhance accountability.

It considers three scenarios and tries to address policymaker information needs in each. The first pertains to policymakers considering entering into a PPP. The second section offers strategies to policymakers to mitigate harm in the face of problematic education PPPs. The final scenario explores alternatives to PPPs, relevant to both groups of policymakers.



Scenario 1: Governments considering entering a PPP

Policymaker rationales for entering a PPP vary based on context, the service delivered by the PPP, and its specific design elements. Governments view education PPPs as a solution for budget constraints, quality improvement, and innovation, often without a clear understanding of how to achieve these outcomes.⁹ This section enables policymakers to understand the evidence related to the functioning of PPPs before entering contracts with private actors.

What rationales for PPPs do policymakers encounter?

Argument #1

PPP advocates argue that the private sector's more frugal approach can do more with the same resources, providing greater value for money. PPP advocates also argue that private sector entities bring technical expertise and operational capacity that governments can use.

Reality #1

PPPs are not a panacea for limited budgets because they:

- **have misaligned interests and incentives.** The primary goal or motive of private sector partners is typically profit,¹⁰ whereas the public sector's goal is to provide high-quality public education to all students.¹¹ The desire to keep costs down risks triggering pedagogically dubious cost-cutting measures which can negatively impact educational outcomes. PPPs actually increase the government's role since it needs to enhance its capacity for procurements, monitoring and evaluation, governance and regulation. Indeed, the World Bank's 2018 World Development Report concludes that governments may deem it more "straightforward" (i.e. efficient) to provide quality education than "to regulate a disparate collection of providers that may not have the same objectives."¹²
- **often cost more while undermining fiscal sustainability, particularly when governments ignore or are unaware of their deferred costs and associated fiscal risks.** PPPs across sectors tend to be more expensive compared to public procurement.¹³ Estimates show that the total transaction costs of all types of PPPs could be as high as 20% of the project value.¹⁴
- **are difficult and time-consuming to negotiate when protecting educational interests, and often force governments to absorb risk when projects fail.** PPP contracts are much more complex than direct delivery by the government because they need to address all possible contingencies likely to be encountered over the contract duration. Poorly managed PPPs can lead to inefficiencies, cost overruns, and project failures, thus

exacerbating budgetary pressures.¹⁵ When partnerships fail, states must intervene to fulfil unmet goals and responsibilities, a cost not included in most cost-benefit analyses of PPPs. PPPs can also create unsustainable dependency on external funding and expertise.

- **do not lower the state's burden since the politics of the PPP may become challenging.** PPPs are viewed publicly as entities owned by the private party, which can result in reduced political support.¹⁶
- **can reduce funding available for government schools in order to meet contractual obligations resulting from a PPP.** For example, in the U.S., while Arizona increased its spending on voucher programs by 270% between 2008 and 2019, the state decreased its per-pupil funding for public education over this period by 5.7%.¹⁷
- **bring weaknesses associated with the private sector into the public system,** including removing social obligations to students, increasing business management culture at the expense of transformative education, and declining public accountability.
- **still involve direct or indirect payment by taxpayers and/or students.** The government pays for the costs of the PPP from taxation for a service that the public system could provide. If the PPP allows fees levied from students, the service is still not free; the costs are passed directly to students' families instead of being paid through public budgets.

Argument #2

Governments struggle to provide enough schools, so private schools should open to fill that need.

Reality #2

PPPs harm educational equity and exacerbate inequality.

- **PPPs harm equity.** They often recruit the “cheapest to educate” students while discriminating against those with additional educational needs. Most research on education PPPs shows negative equity impacts and increased school segregation, particularly in partnerships with for-profit entities.¹⁸ Chile's voucher program, the world's largest, has resulted in high education inequality and segregation with the poorest students generally concentrated in neglected, low-performing government schools.¹⁹ PPPs have a particularly adverse impact on students from marginalized backgrounds. A study of 17 countries found that “in a majority of countries, [PPP schools] are reinforcing social disparities by disproportionately serving students in the upper-income quintiles.”²⁰ Similarly, women and girls have a greater risk of marginalization.

- **PPPs leave government schools to educate those with the highest educational needs**, putting public schools under even greater pressure given the redirection of resources to PPPs.
- **PPPs often fail to bring new students into education, instead displacing students from other schools.** Research from Punjab, Pakistan shows that increased enrollment in a PPP appeared to stem from pulling in students from other private schools.²¹ In another instance, establishing a new PPP school reduced neighborhood public school enrollment by 3%.²²

Argument #3

PPPs can address the learning crisis through innovation and “disrupting” the “status quo” of government-funded, maintained, and operated education systems.

Reality #3

PPPs do not necessarily deliver better results.

- **Private schools do not inevitably perform better than government schools and any difference does not translate to PPPs.** Any difference in the quality of education between PPPs and public schools is marginal, often disappears after factoring in the socio-economic background of the pupils, and stems from the adoption of organizational strategies, such as longer school days, and instructional practices more oriented toward discipline, ability grouping, and external test preparation.²³ An analysis of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development’s Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) across 17 high- and middle-income countries found no achievement advantage in PPP schools after accounting for student selection and peer group effect, finding that “PPP schools appear to be outperforming public schools not through any superior or innovative practices, but rather by cream-skimming more capable students into the private sector.”²⁴
- **PPPs cut costs by diminishing the teacher profession.** Any “efficiency gains of PPPs usually come at the cost of worsening working conditions for teachers,” with long-term implications for the quality of teaching and learning.²⁵ Doing so ignores the critical role teachers play in improving quality.²⁶ PPPs often do not place sufficient emphasis on teacher training and professional development, opting instead for increased investments in technology.²⁷
- **Private providers in PPPs tend to favor traditional education approaches over experimentation.** Their innovation often focuses on symbolic aspects, such as school marketing, and management practices, but not necessarily pedagogy and classroom practices.²⁸ PPPs’ market logic forces them to maintain a short-term focus, prioritizing rapid financial returns over longer-term educational outcomes.²⁹

Argument #4

PPPs are rapidly scalable because private providers can theoretically respond more quickly and flexibly than the “slower” public system. They can bypass existing restrictions (like unionization or employment laws) and politicization and corruption inherent in the public system.

Reality #4

The quest for rapid scaling creates multiple problems for the education system.

- **PPPs rarely scale.** While pilot projects or small-scale interventions might succeed, scaling these initiatives towards meaningful national impact presents serious logistical and planning challenges that governments already face in the public system. Building new facilities, recruiting qualified staff, and developing robust administrative systems require larger initial investments and take time, causing PPP implementation on a limited scale that fails to reach the broader population affected by the learning and access crisis.
- **PPPs also lack meaningful consultation and ownership from communities** (parents, learners, teachers, etc.). When PPPs design and implement programs without consulting and involving local stakeholders, they may either fail to address the specific needs and challenges or foster resistance to change and a lack of trust.³⁰ Failing to build support for a given “reform” risks the PPP devolving into churn that stakeholders eventually tune out, preventing opportunities for real educational gains.³¹
- **PPPs find maintaining quality while scaling difficult.** Scaling up quickly can compromise quality if adequate control measures are not taken and is constrained by the availability of skilled teachers and administrative staff who are hard to find, train and retain. Thus, in Punjab, Pakistan, increased enrollment in PPP schools was accompanied by a rapid decline in test scores.³²

Argument #5

Private schools are more accountable since they directly respond to fee-paying parents. Furthermore, parents actively choose private schools and governments must respect and support this preference.

Reality #5

PPPs may lead to further privatization and introducing “choice” does not improve accountability.

- **Private schools and PPPs are not inherently more accountable.** Space for citizen engagement in private schools may be fairly limited. A DFID Rigorous Review found some limited evidence of parental engagement in decision-making in low-fee private schools, but no evidence of users actually

exiting schools due to quality concerns.³³ Furthermore, the focus on choice ignores the counterfactual; parents can exert direct accountability in private schools through empowering Parent Teacher Associations and more generally by amplifying parental voice.³⁴

- **Parental choice is constrained and often not based on an objective sense of quality.** The “choice” argument rests on the assumption that parents have (equal) access to information; however, they often lack information or value different aspects of an educational institution from what education policymakers might expect. Economically marginalized parents may lack literacy, time, and/or capacity to absorb information and act on it (given a lack of political power) relative to middle-class parents, making it unlikely that all parents will have the same information or ability to make a school choice. Also, parents often have a variety of reasons for choosing schools, such as their children’s peers having the social status to which they aspire, different extracurricular opportunities, specialized programs, etc.³⁵ Lastly, educational choices that parents make may run counter to the research on the impact of quality. Thus, as the World Development Report 2018 points out, “families are not necessarily knowledgeable about pedagogy,” allowing private schools to induce them to make choices that slow student learning – e.g. discouraging mother tongue instruction.³⁶

Figure 2.
Summary of Arguments
for and Realities of PPPs

<i>Argument</i>	<i>Reality</i>
PPPs are more efficient and save government resources.	PPPs have misaligned incentives, cut corners, increase costs, and risk creating long-term obligations.
PPPs can reach geographies and students that the state cannot.	PPPs harm educational equity and exacerbate inequality.
PPPs are innovative and can address the learning crisis.	PPPs do not necessarily deliver better results; instead, they neglect critical quality issues and discourage pedagogic innovation.
PPPs are rapidly scalable.	The quest for rapid scaling creates multiple problems for the education system.
PPPs reflect citizen choice and offer ample space for accountability.	PPPs may be a Trojan horse for privatization and introducing “choice” fails to improve accountability.



Scenario 2: What to do when a PPP is not working

PPPs should have clear contractual terms, have fair risk allocation, be demand-driven, focus on beneficiaries' needs, and have financial and political sustainability. The Abidjan Principles can provide a human rights framework to evaluate the effectiveness of PPPs in education.³⁷ Governments in PPPs should address the following five key issues:

1

Impact on equity: screening, selecting students, and cream-skimming. Governments should ensure that PPPs:

- a. minimize the scope for schools to select students (to minimize cream-skimming) and put in place systems to support students from marginalized backgrounds, ensure that teachers are prepared to support students with diverse learning needs and that the curriculum, learning materials, and teaching methods are culturally and linguistically appropriate. It is particularly important to track instances of explicit discrimination and the composition of the student body (both at the time of admission and over time) to address risks of segregation.
- b. address profiteering and regulate fees and other charges (particularly the ability to levy additional fees and informal charges). Allowing for-profit providers to participate in PPP schemes tends to aggravate inequalities.³⁸
- c. ensure that first-time students are truly new students and not displaced from other schools.

2

Keep costs down without cutting corners. Governments should ensure that PPPs:

- a. adhere to all applicable national/local laws and other requirements (curriculum, quality, teacher qualifications, labor rights, infrastructure and facilities, safety, fee regulation, parent participation and other relevant dimensions) and ensure that teachers are supported as the most important determinants of quality.
- b. capture all relevant dimensions of the intervention's delivery (including metrics of quality that go beyond narrowly defined learning outcomes) with disaggregated data to capture the impact on marginalized communities and ensure that this data is publicly available. Tease out the extent to which positive results reported by PPPs are because of the introduction of extra resources relative to public provision or because the PPP school was able to remove lower-achieving students.
- c. undertake proper cost-benefit analysis of the PPP (capturing the full range of costs incurred by the government over the entire project duration and including the costs of mitigation strategies to be adopted by the government). The European Investment Bank found "transaction costs" for PPP deals charged by consultancy firms have "not received much attention," yet amount to "well over 10% of total project capital value."³⁹

- d. are evaluated by an independent party to review and validate financial arrangements and performance outcomes. Governments should undertake performance audits and independent reviews of PPPs to provide independent verification of the claims made by the private party. Potential inappropriate behavior includes nonadherence to goals, noncompliance with conditions of financial grants, application of funds for purposes not supported by the government, and embezzlement or misapplication of funds.⁴⁰

3

Improve weak accountability. Strong financial and administrative systems and oversight are needed to implement PPPs. Governments should:

- a. introduce clear accountability mechanisms in the Memorandum of Understanding for individual projects which lay down clear responsibilities and penalties for non-delivery, and ensure consultations with local communities and other direct stakeholders in PPP design and implementation. All PPPs, not just individual projects, are made accountable by building mechanisms like reporting to the government. The government should have the power to suspend or modify the arrangement in emergencies like a pandemic.
- b. institutionalize grievance redress mechanisms that are independent, transparent and clearly defined, build space for parents and broader citizen voices in PPP design and administration, and popularize provisions for reporting malfeasance. In Uzbekistan, 73% of relevant public-sector employees were unaware of the existence of sanctions for violating integrity rules in PPP selection processes.⁴¹
- c. ensure adequate government capacity (including clear mechanisms and staffing) to monitor and support individual projects and PPPs in general.

4

Ensure transparency. Governments should ensure public disclosure of contracts under which the PPP operates, the parameters and process of capturing performance, the basis and process for project renewal, finance, and performance data (including baselines, progress reports and evaluations), and the consequences of non-compliance and other relevant information.

5

Realign power asymmetries. Historically, various stakeholders defend and promote PPPs (sometimes with conflicts of interest), including Development Finance Institutions (DFIs), the private sector, and philanthropic organizations and NGOs linked to the private sector. Governments should build alliances with groups questioning PPPs, engage in peer learning with other countries about successfully managing power asymmetries, and involve civil society organizations, teacher unions, parent-teacher associations, and community groups in the decision-making process.

In some instances, policymakers may consider exiting a PPP. The government may need to consult lawyers and other experts before doing so to understand existing contractual obligations.



Scenario 3: What policymakers should do instead of PPPs

Policymakers should consider the public alternative. Empowering public institutions, strengthening public education and ensuring adequate investment in public schools will provide a robust alternative to dependence on public-private partnerships.

Public provision offers greater flexibility, control, and effectiveness and should be preferable to PPPs, especially those with commercial actors.

A recent review of examples of public education in low- and middle-income countries shows that, in direct contrast to widely disseminated (and empirically unvalidated) ideas, public education can be highly effective, efficient, and transformative. The review identified five examples that provide valuable lessons for strengthening public systems.⁴²

Figure 3.
*Five Examples of
Public Education
Working Well*

1

The principles of Buen Vivir applied to the educational systems in Ecuador and Bolivia expose how education is thought of as a tool for conceiving and building a new society. They exemplify an alternative indigenous/non-western reasoning applied to education to promote a new form of “sustainable development”.

2

The schools of Brazil’s Landless Rural Workers Movement (MST) are an example of increasing education access and quality to rural populations through the work of social movements with the government. The case also depicts the work of a participatory governance that draws from a critical approach, or Freirean pedagogy.

3

The Cuban educational system is an example of the centrality of teachers to promote high education quality with equity, which is based on intense training and support in schools.

4

The education reform in Namibia, which was focused on reforming teachers’ training, illustrates how education can be thought of as a tool for social change and how teachers can, and should be, a central element in this effort.

5

The Vietnamese educational system is a case with remarkable performance that is centered on teachers. This case is focused on how accountability can be framed in a developmental way to foster teacher professionalism, instead of performativity.

Governments delivering education should:

- **build capacity in the public system to deliver universal, fee-free education from pre-primary to secondary and policies that can provide quality for all.** They should devote the maximum available resources to public education provision, to ensure adequate and equitably financed public schools. They should avoid diverting scarce public resources and attention away from the essential task of building good-quality inclusive public schools that are free and accessible for all students. Government spending must proactively redress disadvantage, including by adopting equity-of-funding approaches to address the historical disadvantage faced by the poorest groups.
- **invest in teachers**, a key factor in achieving quality education. This means guaranteeing labor rights and ensuring good working conditions, manageable workloads and competitive salaries for teachers and education workers. It also means valuing and respecting teachers and trusting their pedagogical expertise.
- **ensure that regulations meet human rights standards.** They should ensure adequate regulation of private education providers, especially commercial schools, to ensure educational quality and standards are being upheld.
- **design, staff, resource, and implement real regulatory enforcement** to ensure full implementation.
- **put forward evidence on alternatives to austerity** which could help to transform education financing. These alternatives include expanding the progressive tax reforms, reducing or eliminating debt, and eliminating illicit financial flows, corruption, and waste in public expenditure.

DFIs/donors should:

- cease promotion and funding for market-oriented education PPPs.
- commit to excluding social services including education from approaches which center on mobilizing and subsidizing private finance and private providers.
- the World Bank (International Bank for Reconstruction and Development and the International Development Association) should redouble its focus on supporting governments to strengthen public education provision.
- cease funding commercial private schools at the basic (K–12) level through intermediated investments.

All donors should:

- substantially increase their aid commitments to education, especially to basic education and in countries with the greatest needs, to ensure that countries can devote sufficient resources to build quality public education provision.
- cease funding and promoting market-oriented PPPs, especially those that support low-fee and commercial private schools. Stop directly funding commercial private schools through their private finance arms.
- support the improvement and expansion of public education delivery, and cease support for market-based PPPs, low-fee, and commercial private schools.

**Conclusion**

This policy brief highlights significant challenges and pitfalls associated with PPPs. It shows that they often exacerbate educational inequity, incur hidden costs, and compromise long-term sustainability. The profit motives of private entities can conflict with the public interest, leading to cutting corners and a focus on short-term gains rather than holistic educational outcomes.

Policymakers need to critically evaluate the implementation of PPPs, ensuring robust accountability mechanisms, administrative capacity for contract enforcement, equitable student access, and sustainable financial models. Public provision offers greater control, flexibility, and effectiveness in delivering universal, quality education and fulfilling the right to education for all. This brief calls for increased investment in public education and cautious consideration of PPPs, especially those involving commercial actors. It also encourages international donors and development finance institutions to support public education systems rather than market-oriented PPP models.



“Public provision offers greater control, flexibility, and effectiveness in delivering universal, quality education and fulfilling the right to education for all.”

Endnotes

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