



## SABER

## Early Childhood Development

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*A child's earliest years present a window of opportunity to address inequality. The potential benefits from supporting early childhood development (ECD) range from healthy development to greater capacity to learn while in school and increased productivity in adulthood. In fact, investing in young children through ECD programs is one of the smartest investments a country can make to address inequality, break the cycle of poverty, and improve outcomes later in life. Developing countries have expanded access to preschool provision in the past decade, with all regions of the world increasing preprimary enrollment. Yet, today, far too few children, especially those from the poorest families, benefit from this critical human development service. The World Bank Group's SABER-Early Childhood Development tool allows policymakers to take stock and analyze existing ECD policies and programs, identifying gaps and areas needing policy attention to promote healthy and robust development for all children.*

### Why do countries invest in early childhood development?

Investments in ECD have proven highly cost-effective and a wise use of limited government resources, with potential returns extending well beyond the direct benefits to children. Experiences in early childhood affect the development of a child's brain and provide the foundation for future learning, behavior, and health. Investments in ECD can address early gaps in opportunity, yield sustained high returns, and have been linked to lifelong benefits for participants and society in general, including increased

wage-earning potential, decreased crime and lower reliance on welfare. Effective ECD policies and service provision can play a role in achieving other desirable policy goals, including improving maternal health, promoting female labor participation, raising additional tax revenue, and reducing expenditures on social assistance programs.

### What challenges exist?

Improving basic learning outcomes across the world, especially among children from poor families, requires investing in quality early childhood programs that support physical growth and

overall development of skills (including cognitive, linguistic, and socioemotional) from a very early age. Yet in many countries, public policies remain deeply inadequate to provide all children with opportunities to fully develop and thrive. Despite recent progress, access to preprimary school varies around the world. Within countries, there are significant inequalities in access to preprimary school by socioeconomic status. ECD presents a particular challenge to policymakers because it is multi-sectoral and must reach a variety of stakeholders to influence outcomes. The various sectoral policies that affect ECD outcomes

include: healthcare and hygiene, nutrition, education, poverty alleviation, and social and child protection. Many countries also currently lack the monitoring and quality assurance mechanisms essential to protecting young children's well-being and to promoting their development and learning. Often, particularly in light of political and budget pressures, policymakers focus efforts on expanding access to ECD services.

## What is SABER-Early Childhood Development?

Using new diagnostic tools and detailed policy information, the World Bank Group's Systems Approach for Better Education Results (SABER) platform collects and analyzes comparative data and knowledge on education systems around the world and highlights the policies and institutions that matter most to promote learning for all children and youth. SABER's detailed data-gathering and analysis are organized by "domains," or areas of education policymaking within an education system. These currently include levels of education (early childhood development, primary and secondary, workforce development, and tertiary), types of quality resources and supports (school finance, school health and school feeding, and teachers), areas of governance (engaging the private sector and school autonomy and accountability), information

sources (education management information systems and student assessment), and complementary inputs and cross-cutting themes (equity and inclusion, information and communication technologies, and resilience). SABER aims to give all parties with a stake in educational results—from students, administrators, teachers, and parents to policymakers and business people—an accessible, detailed, objective snapshot of how well the policies of their country's education system are oriented toward ensuring that all children and youth learn.

The SABER-ECD tool collects, synthesizes, and disseminates information on ECD to enable policymakers, World Bank Group staff, and development partners to learn how countries address similar policy challenges related to ECD. SABER-ECD utilizes a comparable and comprehensive approach to multi-sectoral data collection and analysis to help countries assess their education policies in a systematic way and achieve the ultimate objective of learning for all. This tool is part of the World Bank Group's support to countries as they tackle the new Sustainable Development Goals agenda, which includes access to ECD for all young children.

## What drives effective early childhood development?

Based on a comprehensive review of the literature, the

SABER-ECD tool assesses a country's ECD system in terms of progress towards three policy goals:

**Establishing an enabling environment.** This is the foundation for effective ECD policies. A country's enabling environment can encourage diverse participation and service uptake, promote efficient service delivery, and ensure adequate financing and institutional capacity. In the context of ECD, establishing an enabling environment entails developing an adequate legal and regulatory framework to support ECD provision. Coordination within sectors and across institutions is necessary to ensure effective service delivery. Finally, the availability of adequate fiscal resources and systems to allocate financing will determine the extent to which the enabling environment supports the ECD system.

**Implementing widely.** This is the scope of existing programs offered and their coverage level, as well as the extent to which access to these programs is equitable and children's holistic development is addressed. A robust ECD system should include policies that support programs in essential sectors and target all beneficiary groups, particularly children from disadvantaged and marginalized backgrounds and those with special needs.

**Monitoring and assuring quality.** This is the availability of data and systems to monitor ECD outcomes,

the development of quality standards for ECD service delivery, and the establishment of systems to monitor compliance with these standards. Sound evidence is required to inform policy decisions. Further, in many countries, a large proportion of ECD services are provided by the private sector; for these systems, well-defined and enforced monitoring and quality assurance mechanisms are critical to ensure that standards for service delivery are met.

## How is SABER-Early Childhood Development helping to improve education systems?

SABER-ECD is supporting governments in their efforts to improve education results by:

- Providing a comprehensive framework based on a thorough review of global evidence and related diagnostic tools.
- Enhancing the global knowledge base on effective ECD policies.
- Enabling cross-country learning and fostering informed dialogue and decision-making using a structured framework and methodology.
- Highlighting the need for governments to adopt a comprehensive multi-sector approach to policy planning and program development and to implement a wide range of essential

interventions for young children.

- Involving key system leaders and stakeholders in identifying reform priorities, leading to education policy reform and new program initiatives in several countries.

## How are countries and partner organizations using SABER-Early Childhood Development to improve system effectiveness?

**Indonesia.** SABER was used to assess ECD policies and programs in Indonesia, where the application of the SABER-ECD tool was complemented by a more detailed assessment of the coverage of essential early childhood interventions at the provincial level. SABER-ECD was conducted in five districts, as implementation of ECD policies has been decentralized in the country. Results revealed substantial differences in the quality of ECD policies and programs across districts.

**Jamaica.** SABER-ECD helped the government take a comprehensive look at the achievements of Jamaica's existing ECD system, validate policies under implementation, identify gaps, and learn from global good practice. SABER findings were well-received by government counterparts at the Early Childhood Commission Board of Commissioners which has oversight of ECD policies. Findings and recommendations from SABER informed the revision of the national ECD

Strategic Plan for 2013-2018, which is supported by the World Bank Group through a project aiming to improve parenting, care, and school readiness for children ages 0-6 while also focusing on screening and early stimulation for children at risk.

**Kyrgyz Republic.** SABER-ECD identified gaps in legislation on a sustainable financing mechanism, weakness in maternal childcare provision, and lack of a system for tracking child development. The dissemination of findings from the analysis helped reshape the government's priorities, which expanded to include more equitable access to affordable models of education provision by targeted low-income groups. The quality of the early childhood development/ early childhood education (ECD/ECE) programs was also prioritized by establishing new ECE standards and building capacity to track child development. The analysis also informed the design of the Global Partnership for Education (GPE)-financed Kyrgyz Early Education Project, as it highlighted increased access to preschool services, school readiness for preprimary cohorts, training of preschool teachers in early diagnosis of learning disabilities, and pilot testing of an early development instrument in key education domains.

**Russia.** In the Russian Federation, the SABER-ECD analysis was used to inform the preparation of

new ECD/ECE standards for children benefiting from ECD programs. In particular, the SABER analysis was used to strengthen the framework for quality assurance in ECD/ECE, make ECD/ECE standards child-centered, emphasize the interagency nature of ECD/ECE, and create conditions for increasing efficiency in the system. SABER-ECD was also used to inform the preparation of the Sakha Yakutia project, Innovative Development of Preschool Education. This large investment operation in the pipeline aims to reform the ECD/ECE system of a specific

Russian region and will include infrastructure modernization, rigorous teacher training, and management reform.

**United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF).** In Kiribati and Solomon Islands, the SABER-ECD assessments were complemented with UNICEF's Early Childhood Education Situation Analysis (ECE SITAN), which delves further into issues of implementation. This joint work was greatly welcomed and appreciated by the respective governments and complemented the World Bank Group's more policy-focused analysis.

## **SABER-Early Childhood Development Partners**

The SABER-ECD team recently collaborated with UNICEF, lead agency for ECD at the country level, on a variety of dimensions, from data collection and feedback processes to the drafting and dissemination of reports. The Australian Government's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) is a strong supporter of SABER and education systems research and has done much work to support the application of SABER globally.