
Dropping Out: School Attendance in the Kyrgyz Republic

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There are a number of people and organizations to whom I am grateful. First, I would like to thank UNICEF for sponsoring this study and the student volunteers who participated in the physically and emotionally exhausting work of gathering the data for this research. Their long hours and often difficult interviews with families in desperate circumstances were borne with diligence and compassion. A special thanks goes to Bermette Sydygalieva, the local research coordinator, without whom this study would have been neither as thorough nor complete. There is no part of the finished work that does not bear the mark of her intellect and insight. Finally, I must thank all of the people who took the time to share their stories and opinions with us. It is the most sincere hope of all who conducted the research that the findings will contribute to more informed policies to address their needs.

Ruslan Papoirdanits was supposed to finish the fifth grade last year, but he will probably be held back for a second time. He lives with his mother, Galina, and his older sister in Kemin, a small town on the eastern edge of the Chui Oblast in the Kyrgyz Republic. It is a town dying a death familiar to many post-Soviet industrial towns in Central Asia, where all the factories and plants have long since shut down. Ruslan's is one of the few Russian-speaking families not to leave this region in the early years of independence amid fears of limited future opportunities for non-Kyrgyz citizens. In this country of nearly five million, the Kyrgyz people comprise only a slight majority, sharing their country with minority populations of Russians, Uzbeks, Germans, Tajiks, Uigurs and others. Ruslan, 12, explains his family situation.

My mom is disabled and so she can't get regular work. We all have to live on her small pension. Often we have nothing to eat at home. In the mornings, my mom goes looking for a job in the sugar beet fields. Since she is disabled and works slower than others do, few want to take her. So, she usually gets 30 soms (\$.80) a day. When she works, we buy bread for a few days and some milk. Nothing else.

For the past 2 years, Ruslan has skipped school in the spring. For this reason he was held back two years ago and will be held back again this year.

I stopped going to school in April because I don't see why I need to go. I am still going to be unemployed after I graduate. And I don't want to study, anyway. In the spring I can earn money in the fields. I have friends who don't go to school and they work. They've been out of school for several years already. Every time you go to school, the school director and teachers start asking for money: money for books, money for school building repairs.

Galina confirms what Ruslan is saying, but takes care to note that last year when she paid 30 soms for her daughter's school building repair fee and 35 soms for her books, both Eric Eversmann has a master of education (EdM) from Harvard University. Prior to this research, he worked in the Kyrgyz Republic from 1993-96, first as a Peace Corps Volunteer and later as an academic exchange program manager. He is currently working as an educational consultant in New York City while he finishes his masters thesis for the Fletcher School.

reflected a 50% waiver because of the family's poverty. Ruslan was waived from paying fees entirely.

Ruslan talks of the social implications of poverty as well. "Kids at school laugh at the poor kids' clothes," says Ruslan. "If you are dressed poorly, they will call you a loser. Teachers also note if you are dressed badly and look down on you." Ruslan has no school clothes and his own sister says she is ashamed of him. To make matters worse, he's already worn out the clothes that his relatives sent them. Galina does not know what is going to happen this coming winter when the weather turns cold.

For her part, Galina seems resigned to the reality of the situation. Despite her desire for Ruslan to return to school, she respects his decision to drop out. With a sigh she acknowledges both her limited control over his attendance and the sad fact that his decision makes sense given the current economic state of the family.

Introduction

Sadly, Ruslan's case is not unique, and his family's difficulties summarize many of the issues surrounding declining school attendance in the Kyrgyz Republic. The phenomenon of out-of-school children, virtually unknown during Soviet times, is a by-product of economic collapse and declining support for the social sector. Ten years ago, education played a central role in Soviet society and literacy was nearly universal. All children attended school through the ninth grade and most continued for further academic or vocational training. Dropout rates were as low as one in one thousand children. Today, in independent Kyrgyzstan, situations such as Ruslan's prevail in one in ten families. The education system, like much of the country's social support infrastructure, continues to fall into ever-deepening disrepair.

As elsewhere in the former Soviet Union, widespread economic collapse is behind the changes. Between 1989 and 1997, real gross domestic product (GDP) in the Kyrgyz Republic fell by more than 40 percent. Despite relatively stable expenditures on education as a proportion of GDP -- between four and six percent -- the nation's shrinking productive capacity has resulted in a parallel reduction in real expenditure on education. As a result, increased local responsibility for school financing in the form of school fees has become necessary as central ministry allocations have proved insufficient to provide for the nation's 1,900 schools, 70,000 teachers, and 1,075,000 pupils.

Economic changes have also taken a toll on the quality and range of educational services provided. Teachers are paid only sporadically and their salaries in real terms have fallen steeply. A first-year teacher earns 320 soms (\$8 US) per month. Low salaries have

prompted many of the best teachers to leave the system and have also resulted in declining numbers of young people entering careers in teaching.

Due to the same financial constraints, the Ministry of Education has been slow to replace outdated Soviet-era textbooks and curricula. The physical condition of many schools has deteriorated due to lack of funding for major repairs. New schools have not been constructed to accommodate growing populations, and overcrowding has become a serious problem in areas where there are large numbers of internal migrants. (Studies estimate that one-fifth of the population has moved in search of work over the past ten years.) Most schools have now adopted two and sometimes three shifts per day. Extracurricular programs have suffered as well. In the past, schools were centers for the academic and social growth of children. Today they barely fulfill their academic functions as there is no money for clubs, excursions, sports, or other activities.

Shrinking budgetary allocations have also curtailed the range of educational services available. Currently only nine percent of children in the Kyrgyz Republic are attending preschool due to financial cuts and school closures. Likewise, special boarding schools (*internats*) for children with mental and physical disabilities have closed in all but the country's largest cities. The number of children attending *internats* fell from 5,734 in 1990 to 2,525 in 1996. Evening schools have also closed following a 1994 presidential decree severing their budgetary support and requiring the schools to become financially self-sufficient. Vocational and technical schools have remained open but have been unable to restructure their course offerings to reflect the new employment realities of the country.

As the school environment has been transformed, the roles of children outside of school have also shifted. With the collapse of the formal economy and the rise of the informal sector, children play a more prominent role in the economic life of the family. Their contribution to the family economy may be direct, through work on farms or in markets, or indirect, as children accept additional responsibilities at home in place of parents who are increasingly absent for economic reasons. Those responsibilities, in combination with increased social disruptions such as divorce and alcoholism, have changed the nature of childhood for children in the Kyrgyz Republic. In response to these pressures, many children have dropped out of school.

Data on the actual numbers of children out of school in the Kyrgyz Republic are ambiguous. According to official statistics, the number of children not attending school is .3 percent of the total school-going population, or 3,438 children. Independent observations by both domestic and international organizations, however, place the number much higher. They estimate that 30,000 (i.e., 3%) school-age children are not attending school. This estimate is in line with those of other CIS countries and is generally considered to be accurate.

Methodology

This paper examines the changing impact of education in the Kyrgyz Republic. The research was conducted in June and July of 1999 in an attempt to look beyond the numbers and gather information at the school level in order to better understand the reasons for increasing dropout rates. In order to do so, the research team:

- visited 15 schools in three regions;
- conducted meetings with administrators in 12 schools and focus groups in 9;
- interviewed 61 children from 8 different schools; and
- conducted interviews with over 40 parents.

School-based interviews with teachers and school directors were conducted in focus group discussion format in the language of the school, either Russian or Kyrgyz. Home-based interviews were conducted by university student volunteers trained specifically for the survey. Home-based interviews were conducted in the language of the family (Kyrgyz, Russian, Uzbek), except in the case of Azeri families, interviews with whom were conducted in Uzbek or Russian.

This survey has especially sought to gain and communicate a child's perspective, as it is ultimately his or her right to an education that has been jeopardized. The research team has identified four primary issues which will be examined in turn: those associated with family, the reasons for dropout associated with the school, the challenges for marginalized groups, and the reasons that dropout is under-reported.

Family-Related Factors

In speaking with children, parents, teachers and school administrators, it is clear that the reasons for many cases of dropout and chronic non-attendance can be traced back to difficult circumstances in the child's home. Official government statistics refer to such circumstances as "family troubles." These include divorce, alcoholism in the home, or the death of one or both parents. The children of these families are often very poor. Poverty, in turn, means that children are more likely to be working, sick, or neglected. They may not have sufficient clothing for school or be unable to pay school fees, hence experiencing the shame that accompanies the latter two circumstances. All of these factors lead to irregular attendance and poor academic performance, precursors to dropping out of school. According to the President's Office on Education and Culture, there are 123,000 children (one in ten school-age children) living in such circumstances in the Kyrgyz Republic.

More distressingly, the study rarely came across a child who faced only one of these problems. In an alarmingly high percentage of the families visited, the death of one parent led to alcoholism and neglect of the children on the part of the other.

It all started when we lost our father. Now my mom is (an alcoholic). She doesn't have a job and the problem of finding money for basic needs has become a continuous problem. It is very hard for me to concentrate on or even go to school regularly because of the things that I have to do at home and take care of my two little brothers and my younger sister." – Kunduz, age 13

"My father died three years ago and my mother is an alcoholic now. My grandmother doesn't let her come into the house because she is afraid that my mother will steal something to sell at the bazaar to buy vodka. – Denis, age 14

Poverty

The President's Office on Education and Culture has identified 140,000 children who qualify for full or partial fee exemptions due to poverty. In about half of the schools visited, administrators mentioned a special fund administered by the school to assist poor children. When asked about the scope of these programs, administrators reported that 5-10 percent of pupils received support. School directors often estimated, however, that upwards of 30 percent of the pupils should be receiving such assistance.

Poverty is most visible in the lack of adequate shoes and clothing. Although there are no formal school uniforms, poor families often do not have the financial means to purchase the most basic shoes and clothes for their children to attend school. The situation is most acute in winter and especially so in the colder regions of the country.

The clothing situation is so bad here that we have families where three kids wear the same clothes to school when it snows. One comes to the morning shift with the shoes and jacket and then goes home and gives them to his brother who comes to the second shift and then the oldest one wears them in the late afternoon." -- School Director

"Now we don't have any money to send our children to school. They have no clothes to wear, and we have no money to pay for different school fees, like repairs and books. When teachers come to our house asking why our kids are missing school, we tell them, 'what are they going to wear if they have nothing to eat'. – Pupil's mother

For children with poor or inadequate clothing, their poverty translates into shame.

I am very ashamed that I don't have enough clothes. My classmates laugh at me when I go to the blackboard. I have only two worn out shirts and shorts. – Zarina, pupil

There were times when some kids at school used to pick on me and point out that I was wearing clothes that we got from humanitarian help or clothes that my sister wore. I

think that those kids just don't know or they don't understand what kind of conditions me and my family are in. – Nurbek, pupil

A lack of winter clothing not only impacts a child's willingness to attend school but also makes it extremely difficult for the child to concentrate and study, particularly in outlying regions where schools are poorly heated.

Neglect

Administrators and teachers cited a general lack of parental supervision as a primary reason for which children miss school. Depending on the situation, parents may be alcoholics or absent from the home due to work. Such work-related absences can last for weeks or more if the parents have left town to trade in the markets.

In other instances, parents are simply not concerned enough about their children's education to follow up on attendance and progress at school. In this case, administrators say that it becomes easy for children to spend their entire school day with friends in town and lie to their parents about their whereabouts. Children confirmed that it is very easy to skip a day of school, and to the administrators' dismay, parents rarely take the time to verify that their children have actually attended.

School Fees

School fees occupy a central place in conversations with Kyrgyz families. As cited previously, there is a substantial gap between the numbers of families in need of financial assistance and those who actually receive it. Although all of the school directors surveyed claimed that schools exempt the poorest pupils from book rental and repair fees, families with whom interviewers spoke didn't always corroborate this fact. Judging from the abjectness of these families' conditions, they appeared to be convincing candidates for fee waivers. Many plainly said they were in desperate need of such help.

Schools are very expensive nowadays. I have to pay a lot for my two grandchildren; not only do I have to pay for annual school repairs, but also for book rent and many other expenses and not to mention buying clothes at the beginning of the year. For instance, this year I paid around 600 soms (\$16) for each of my grandchildren. – Grandmother and guardian

I can't go to school because I don't have the 20 soms (.50) to rent books from the library. I tried to borrow books from my classmates, but everyone said that they paid for their books and they don't want to share with anyone. – Nurbek, pupil

For those existing at or below the poverty line, parents wonder aloud how they will be able to make school payments next year when the rental fee for books is set to double and

rumors abound of additional “voluntary” education fees that will be demanded of them. Furthermore, they feel for their children, who bear the stigma of poverty when they are visibly absent from the queue of pupils paying for books or school repairs.

We get a fee waiver because we’re poor, but how does that help when my daughter comes home crying and says she doesn’t want to go to school tomorrow because she’s ashamed to be singled out in front of her class because she can’t pay her fees? – Parent

Work

The first manifestation of the problem of family poverty on attendance is the increased work children are required to take on for their families. Most often this work is at home, where children report working between two and five hours per day.

I moved in with my Grandmother a couple of years ago because she needed help running the house. Besides me there are two younger cousins here. I miss school often because basically the entire burden of the house is carried on my shoulders. – Jursun, pupil

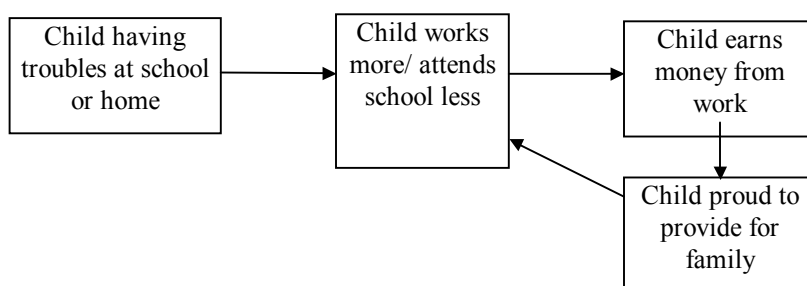
The availability of work is correlated to attendance across regions of the country. As poverty is endemic (and therefore a universal demand exists for supplementary income), it is the availability of work that determines attendance patterns. Dropout rates are highest in the two largest cities of Bishkek and Osh, where work is available for children year-round. In other regions where agriculture is the main employment opportunity, work is available on a seasonal basis. In these agricultural areas, children attend school for part of the year, but miss it in the early fall and late spring in order to work in the fields. For the most part children bring their earnings home to their parents, while keeping a little for themselves.

I make good money working in construction. Most I give to my mom for food and other things, but the rest I keep and spend on myself: clothes, school fees, school supplies, ice cream. – Rafik, correspondence school pupil

Many children mentioned the sense of pride they feel at being able to provide for their families.

I help my family and when I am in difficulties, my family helps me. Unlike my parents who are unemployed, I am able to earn money every day by making bricks. Isn’t it wonderful! – Sanjar, age 12

Such a dynamic produces a self-reinforcing loop that draws the child further away from school.



Illness

Another manifestation of poverty is increased incidence of illness. Most children miss at least a week of school each year due to sickness. Medication is expensive and without the proper drugs, illnesses last longer. For already impoverished families, the costs of illness can be devastating.

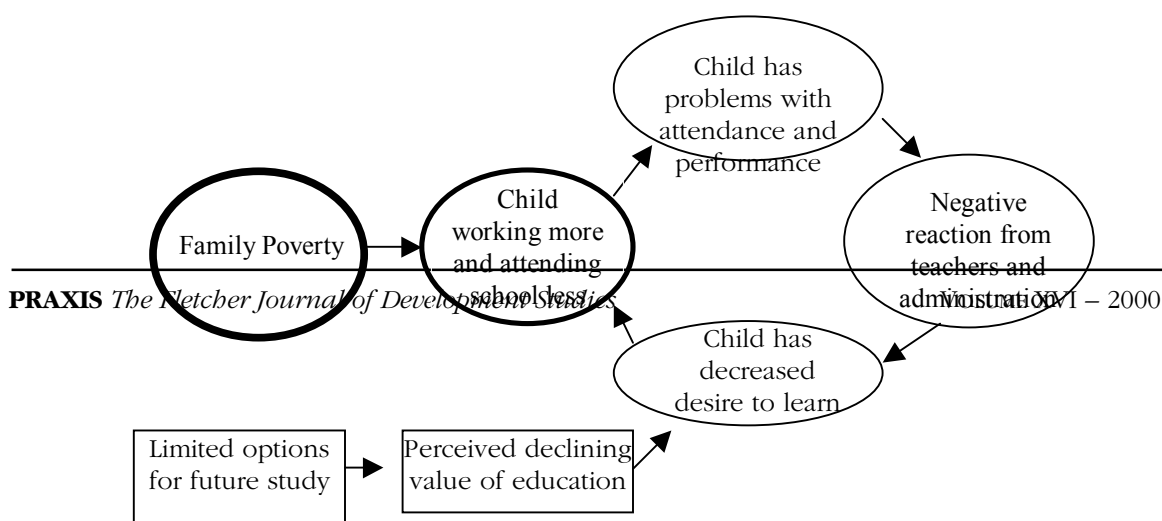
Last year, when our son had a sick stomach, he had to stay in the hospital for 4 months. We had to sell our last sheep. Now we are scared of what's going to happen if somebody gets sick again. – Pupil's mother.

Illness is most acute in the colder regions of the country and disproportionately affects poor families, whose children are more prone to illness due to poor diet and clothing.

This last winter I was sick and had to miss about three weeks of school. I think I got sick because it was cold inside our house. The electricity was cut off for a few hours every day, and besides, we could not pay all of the money that we owed for electricity. -- Erkingul, pupil

School-related factors

This study found that both family- and school-related factors contribute to the determination of attendance levels. The following chart depicts how family-related factors combine with school-related factors to create a negatively reinforcing loop that leads to deteriorating attendance and ultimately to dropout.



As attendance and performance at school suffer, teachers and school administrators react negatively, often using coercive means to return children to school or to improve their study habits. Such efforts in fact decrease the desire to attend, a feeling that is bolstered by a perceived decline in the value of education. The result is that children choose to work with even greater frequency and their attendance is further reduced. From here the reinforcing loop begins again, until they leave school altogether.

The effects of poor attendance and performance

The decision to leave school is made over time. Even when they begin working or family troubles at home become acute, children will continue to attend school as they are able. Inevitably, however, the quality of their learning suffers. Teachers report that declining attendance leads to poor preparation for lessons and incomplete homework. In addition, when children are tired from work or, in cases of extreme poverty, when they come to school hungry, the quality of their learning suffers.

It's impossible to teach kids when they are hungry. They can't concentrate and they immediately forget everything that you teach. – Teacher

I always have a headache due to hunger. Whenever I think about food, I forget about classes. – Dima, pupil

Negative reactions from teachers and administrators and classmates

Although teachers are sensitive to children who are having difficulties with attendance or homework assignments, conflicts are likely to arise when children miss school or arrive unprepared. All too often teachers resort to Soviet-era methods of dealing with delinquency which rely on pressure and threats to bring children back to school.

There are some teachers who can be really mean to you. By the word 'mean' I mean that they beat and insult pupils who are having troubles. One teacher beat up a boy who just came late to class. In most cases it's much better not to go than to come a little bit late or without your homework. – Jursun, pupil

My English teacher taught us nothing and the whole lesson she'd sit there yawning and looking out the window. Sometimes she disappears for the entire period. But she gives us grades according to our social class, I guess. I say that because financially well-supported kids get good grades but kids, like me, from poor families, usually get bad ones. -- Syrgabek, pupil

Teachers that are abusive or incompetent are in the minority, but even one such teacher can propel a child away from school. At each school surveyed it appeared that there was at least one teacher notorious for harsh treatment of the children. At one school in this study, three of the six children interviewed identified conflicts with a single teacher as the main reason they left school.

Children also experience social problems with their peers. The shame attached to the condition of poor clothing or an inability to pay fees deters some children from school. Additional conflicts include bullying. In most schools, children mentioned the presence of bullies and "gangs" of children who harass others. When speaking with non-Kyrgyz minorities, the study also identified incidences of harassment based on ethnicity.

I did not like school because teachers used to humiliate me because they thought that I was a Gypsy, but I am not. I am an Azeri. Besides, my Kyrgyz classmates would bully me. Once one of my classmates punched me. -- Zamira, pupil

Ability Grouping

A common practice at many schools is ability grouping, or streaming. Ability grouping was standard practice in the schools of the former Soviet Union. From the seventh or eighth grade, children were streamed according to their academic ability into tracks that would prepare them for vocational, technical, or higher education. Although vocational and technical education is all but defunct in the Kyrgyz Republic today, the practice of ability grouping remains. For poor and disadvantaged children the policy is particularly harmful.

At school they took all the bad pupils and put us into a separate class. But I am not bad! I am not abnormal! I do not like to be labeled that way. -- Dil'shot, dropout

The chart below shows the number of days missed for three groups of tenth grade pupils studying in a school in Naryn, among the country's poorest regions. Children in class 10A were selected in the seventh grade for their academic ability, while children in 10G were considered the poorest students.

71 Pupils total	1-10 days missed	11-20 days missed	21-30 days missed	30-39 days missed	40+ days missed	Total days missed	% due to illness
10A	19	3				129	13%
10B	10	11	2	1	2	286	67%
10G	4	6	6	3	4	566	36%
	33 (47%)	20 (28%)	8 (11%)	4 (6%)	6 (8%)		

Comparing the advanced group of 10A to the other two groups, the following observations can be made:

- Attendance in 10A is excellent. Whereas pupils in the 10A group missed an average of 7 days of school for the year, the average pupil in the 10G group missed 25.
- Children in 10A are from better-off families. School administrators confirmed that children in the 10G group came from poorer families, in general.
- The “total number of days missed” and the percentage of those “days missed due to sickness” show how poverty, illness and school performance are intricately related. Pupils in the 10B group were five times as likely to be sick as those in the 10A group.

In contrast to the situation presented above, a director in another school where ability grouping had been abandoned made the following comment.

At one time we practiced ability grouping, but then we noticed the poor pupils were doing worse so we stopped. When we did, those poor pupils soon improved. They need to be in class with better pupils. They need to see leaders and examples of who they can be.
– School Director

Today, preschools that had once helped to lessen the disparities in student preparation are rare. As a result, wide differences in readiness are evident among first grade children, and some schools have begun the process of streaming even earlier. The loss of preschools also has resulted in wasted time; schools must use the first month or two of school just to acclimate the children to the school environment.

Whether caused by teachers, school administrators, or other children, a negative school atmosphere decreases children’s desire to attend school. Families balance their desire for education with the costs of obtaining it. For children in poverty whose preparation and performance are hurt by the conditions of their families, the psychological costs of continued attendance in an unsupportive school environment are high. If, in the end, the

costs of attending outweigh the value of education being provided, children will leave school.

Scarcity of options for children who wish to continue their education

The phenomenon of school dropout is well known and studied in the West, where efforts to prevent dropouts are coupled with options for those who have left the formal education system to finish their secondary school degrees. Such options are practically non-existent in the Kyrgyz Republic. Many vocational and technical institutes have closed. Those that have remained open often continue to offer instruction in unnecessary fields such as truck driving or tractor repair. This is due in large part to the lack of teachers available to offer courses more relevant to the emerging market economy such as small business management, computer literacy and foreign language training. On the part of some institute directors, there is a resistance to changing course offerings or modifying curricula. Today, only one or two percent of ninth form finishers choose to attend institutes.

Value of Education

The actual quality of education notwithstanding, parents and children must consider the value of education relative to its opportunity cost. Is school relevant to future employment opportunities? What is the value of education as a good in and of itself?

A common complaint often heard was that education does not matter today. In markets or on farms, people with university degrees work alongside children who have dropped out of school.

Older children lose respect for school because they know they don't need it for their future. They can go off to the bazaar and make money. Like the example they see of their parents. Even people with doctorates are working in the bazaar. – Teacher

I stopped going to school in April. I don't see why I need to go. I am still going to be unemployed. – Ruslan

In general, parents continue to value education. When asked why they choose to keep their children in school despite other economic opportunities and the declining quality of education, they differentiate between getting by and getting ahead. Parents see education as a means to future advancement; if a family is able to survive without the economic input of its children, it will send them to school.

For the most part, children want to receive an education. They dream of pursuing professions in which schooling may help them.

In the not too distant future, I will become a baker. I just have to have math skills to count money and Russian to sell bread in the city. – Lochun, age 13

Children also see school as a place to socialize with their peers. This is particularly true for girls who have more housework chores and therefore less time to play than boys. Although they were split on whether education is necessary for one's future, and while some preferred school to work, few children in our survey had had entirely bad experiences with school and each could name a favorite class or teacher.

The challenge of marginalized groups

Three groups of children experience additional difficulty accessing education. While more research is needed to determine the extent of individual problems, the following sections offer a brief overview of the issues involved.

Children with mental and physical disabilities

Prior to entering the first grade, both physical and intellectual exams are administered to children. In previous years, if these exams indicated that children had a physical or mental disability that put them outside of the capacity of the normal school, they would be referred to an “*internat*” or special boarding school. In the current economy, most of the *internats* have closed. Indeed, few remain outside of the largest cities. In conversations with teachers and school administrators of regular schools, it became clear that today almost no disabled children receive the educational attention they need. Many receive no education at all.

Mentally disabled children who do attend school appear to be enrolling in normal schools. Administrators acknowledge that there are few alternatives to matriculation into regular classes. Additionally, parents prefer normal school for their children as they are wary of the low quality of attention and treatment that their children may receive at an *internat*. However, few teachers in regular schools are trained in special education, which can lead to poor progress. Approximately half of the schools visited identified children who had remained in the same grade for three or four years.

For children with physical disabilities, the situation is even more serious. During the Soviet period the state paid for teachers to visit children in their homes for lessons. Today that support is not provided. What happens to such children today? Administrators shrug their shoulders and reply, “they sit at home.”

Internal migrants and refugees

The children of internal migrants and refugees are also unable to access education. Often, they are denied entrance because they lack residential registration. As in the Soviet system, a permit is required to change the town or state of residence. Typically, schools in areas with high numbers of migrants and refugees are already overcrowded and are reluctant to accept more children, especially those who are not officially registered in their district. Schools also point out that unregistered children are likely to move during the year and take with them the books for which the school is financially responsible. Officially, every school is supposed to enroll such children despite their residential status. It appears, however, that in order to avoid further overcrowding, schools may willfully overlook refugee or migrant children.

It is also true that children of migrants are withheld from school by their parents. Internal migrants, for example, often withhold their children for economic reasons similar to those outlined in the poverty section. In order to avoid school upon moving to a new town, a parent will obtain a letter from the school confirming his or her child's attendance in the coming year. The family then returns to the old school and presents the letter in order to receive the child's school records. Finally, the family refrains from submitting the records to the new school and the child disappears from the record books.

Incomplete schools

A final group that has trouble accessing education is that which attends incomplete schools (grades 1 through 8 or 9) in rural areas. There are more than a hundred such schools in the Kyrgyz Republic today, the majority (approximately 75%) in rural villages. Interview teams visited two such schools and found that very few of the children who finish their village school actually travel to neighboring villages to continue their secondary education, because transportation is either not available or considered dangerous. Additionally, parents complain that the quality of education provided by incomplete schools is often so poor and the preparation provided so limited that their children are unable to matriculate into other schools.

Under-reporting attendance data

Despite the results of this survey and others like it, official statistics continue to support the view that there are only 3,438 (.3 percent of the school-age population) children out-of-school in the Kyrgyz Republic in 1998-99. Even more incredible is the assertion that this number has dropped over the past three years from a high of 16,000 in 1995-96. Why do school attendance figures under-report the true number of dropouts? The research

team examined the daily attendance journals of every school visited. It is in these journals, completed by individual class teachers, where most of the absences are concealed. In interviews, most teachers and administrators denied the deception but some were willing to comment.

It's a big problem. I first started thinking about it when I realized that at my school there were about 200 pupils out of 3000 who were not coming to school. I was interested because there was no official record of these children being out of school. Officially they were all there. They received grades even though they weren't coming to school. --
Former teacher and school deputy director

In the years immediately following the break-up of the Soviet Union, a visible manifestation of the economic disruptions was an increased number of children working and living on the streets. In an effort to cut down on this phenomenon, the parliament passed a law in 1997 extending mandatory attendance from the ninth grade through to the eleventh (final) grade. This law has placed increased pressure on schools to show high attendance rates especially in the later grades, where children are most likely to be missing classes or leaving school altogether.

As a result of the new law, administrative pressure on schools to misrepresent accurate non-attendance figures has increased. It is the first reason cited by school staff for misreporting attendance information.

If teachers have too many absences in their classes, they will get a reprimand. The same goes for the school director and deputy directors. The worst thing that can happen is you could be relieved of your duties. -- School director

Teachers also under-report absences out of a desire not to draw attention to a child who is having problems attending school. They are often sympathetic to the child and family if difficult circumstances are involved.

If we visit a child's home and the family's situation is extremely poor, we usually see what we can do for the family and we don't refer the child (for truancy) to the Inspectorate on Adolescent Affairs. -- School Dept. Director

Sergei's mother was a graduate of this school and he comes a long way to attend here. Even though he missed more than 45 days this year, we won't hold him back. We're afraid that if he has to repeat the grade, then he will stop coming altogether. -- School Director

In the Kyrgyz Republic, children are rarely required to repeat a grade. According to official policy, a child is obliged to repeat a grade if more than 45 days of school have been missed. Repetition, however, can be a source of disgrace for the family as well as a

Conclusions

Problems related to attendance and dropout are increasing in the Kyrgyz Republic. The heart of the problem lies in the continuing collapse of the economic system and its effects on children and their families. As a result of both family- and school-related factors, the number of children leaving school is on the rise. The majority of these children are poor. Because of their poverty, they are not only more likely to drop out of school, but, if they remain in school, to miss more days during the year due to illness, lack of clothing, work and poor supervision. These individual absences are compounded by days on which the school itself is closed for harvesting, lack of heat or other miscellaneous reasons. The effect of these absences on learning is a central area for further research.

For their part, school administrators and teachers are sympathetic to the challenges children face in attending school today, but there are few supportive policies or institutions in place to help children stay in school. In many cases, actions that are taken are counterproductive, and in fact contribute to increased absences and eventual dropping out. Authoritarian truancy measures from the Soviet era, if they were ever appropriate or useful, are not so today. As an employee of the Ministry of Education pointed out, the problem with much of the school environment is that people continue to hold the Soviet mindset, while the reality of the world around them has changed drastically. Until schools adapt to current realities, they will continue to be less relevant to their pupils. Heavy-handed efforts to raise attendance will continue to be unsuccessful.

The problem of dropout and non-attendance cannot be separated from the larger social and economic issues gripping the country. They are not distinct issues despite the similar treatment they receive. Further bureaucratic administrative controls push schools to adopt ineffective coercive measures to force children to return to school or to falsify records and conceal the true extent of the problem. Today schools need to be given increased authority over the control and content of their programs. While responsibilities for school finance have devolved to the local level, the district-level and school administrators ought to have the authority to address newly created problems in innovative ways. The nature of declining attendance varies from community to community and requires different responses. If school systems fail to make the necessary changes to provide quality and relevant schooling, it is the children who ultimately suffer the most.

Notes

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