

Demystifying Education Public-Private Partnerships: What Every Policymaker Should Know



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Abstract: This working paper describes the growing influence of public-private partnerships (PPPs) in managing schools in the developing world. Promoted as a market-based reform to address state failure, PPPs often fall short and do more harm than good. This analysis lays out how PPSs are negotiated, what governments should consider before entering PPPs, why many PPPs have not lived up to expectations, what governments may do to extricate themselves from disappointing PPSs, and how other paths to school improvement stand to be much more effective. Among those paths drawn from school systems in Southeast Asia, Africa, and South America are participatory governance, high-quality teacher training, more teacher autonomy, and greater equity in school funding.

NEPC Topic Search Terms (these terms may be used to find this working paper in the NEPC website publication archive): Democracy and Education; Equity and Social Justice; Market-Based School Reforms; Neoliberal Reforms; Privatization; School Commercialism.



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Introduction

Context: Global Education Commitments and Challenges

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 (UNESCO, 2015). However, at the midpoint of the rollout of the SDGs, UNESCO estimated that 250 million children remain out of school and the percentage of trained teachers has remained stagnant since their inception (Global Education Monitoring Report [GEMR], 2023), repeatedly warning about the “global learning crisis” (UNESCO & UNICEF, 2024). Addressing these issues requires substantial investments to improve quality and expand access to higher levels of education, all while ensuring systems become more equitable and inclusive.

Unfortunately, as UNESCO's 2023 Global Education Monitoring Report (GEMR) estimates, the world has an average annual financing gap of USD 97 billion per year for low- and lower-middle-income countries to reach their national SDG4 targets (UNESCO, n.d.). One-sixth of the poorest countries in the world spend more paying back debt to wealthy nations and investors than they spend on children's education (Save the Children, 2022). To fill this spending gap, a growing number of international actors are encouraging governments to turn to the private sector to relieve the burden from and/or help fix failing public school sys-

tems. Powerful development actors like the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and other donors have supported this privatization push as a solution to meeting unmet demand and addressing education quality challenges. This pro-privatization narrative is gaining traction as governments struggle to scale up quality education.¹

Education is a fundamental human right, defined as the “process of developing and training the powers and capabilities of human beings” (Borgohain, 2016, p. 71). As one of the essential rights, the adequate enjoyment of education is a precondition for the realization of numerous other human rights. As a public good, education produces a range of positive externalities, such as contributing to equity in society, serving as a tool of social transformation, and playing an essential role in nation-building. Importantly, ensuring the right to education is one of the core responsibilities of the state, so important that it demands freedom from conflicting commercial interests. According to human rights law, states bear the primary responsibility for education. This is outlined in the *Abidjan Principles on the human rights obligations of states to provide public education and to regulate private involvement in education*, which compile and unpack existing international legal frameworks on the right to education (Abidjan Principles, 2019).

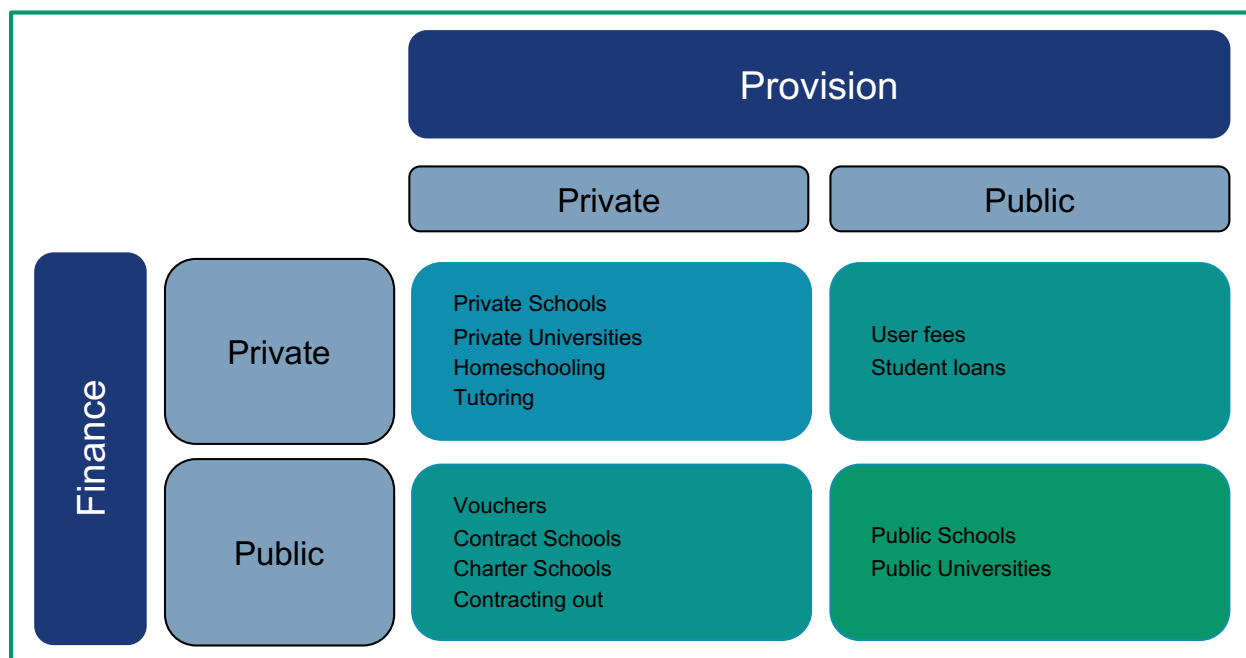
Policymakers find themselves at the forefront of navigating these conflicting approaches between the financial and political pressure to partner with private actors and delivering on the state’s responsibility to provide high-quality public education. Accordingly, this paper critically examines the performance of one prominent manifestation of the trend toward privatization—the growth of Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) in education. This paper provides policymakers with evidence to facilitate informed decision-making regarding their approach to education provision, in particular by decoupling the claims about PPPs from the reality of their implementation.

What are Public-Private Partnerships?

Public-Private Partnerships are long-term contractual arrangements where the private sector provides infrastructure, assets, and/or services traditionally funded and managed directly by governments. PPPs often include some form of risk sharing between the public and private sectors (Lethbridge & Gallop, 2020).

¹ For Liberia, see vignette 2; Pakistan and Uganda, see case studies in section 3; India, see examples in Central Square Foundation (2014); and South Africa’s “Collaboration Schools” in Western Cape Province, see discussion in Equal Education (2016).

Table 1. Financing and provision of services in public-private partnerships



Source: Adapted from Patrinos et al., 2009, p. 3.

While many authors have proposed a range of definitions of PPPs (Jomo et al., 2016), this paper defines PPPs in four parts:

1. Partnership: a partnership underpinned by a common goal and risk sharing.
2. Actors: private/non-state actor(s) contracted to deliver the partnership; Table 1 provides an overview of various forms of education PPPs (Patrinos et al., 2009).
3. Government role: this entity often provides the initial terms for the partnership and frequently some or all of the funding for the partnership.
4. Service: in education, the service takes several forms, including a mix of provision of education, school management, meals, transport, professional services (like teacher training), management, infrastructure, and building maintenance. In policy circles, the term “education PPP” most often refers to private sector partnerships to provide schooling.

Not all partnerships between non-state actors and the government are PPPs. Multi-stakeholder partnerships are collaborative mechanisms that bring together various stakeholders, such as civil society, governments, academia, and the private sector, to work on specific challenges or opportunities (Integrated Water Resources Management, n.d.). Unlike PPPs, these voluntary agreements between stakeholders do not involve the exchange of funds (Stibbe & Prescott, 2016). Table 2 provides the critical elements of education PPPs.

Table 2. Critical Design Elements of Education PPPs

Several key characteristics influence the implementation of PPPs and are crucial to consider when assessing their impact:

- **Structure of the partnership:** PPP structures vary widely, ranging from engagement with private schools to the private management of public schools, voucher systems, and other arrangements. PPPs can include key services such as textbook production, school infrastructure development, technological solutions provision, and educational and administrative software design.
- **Choice of partners:** The selection of partners and their corresponding motives, ethos, and incentives—whether they are religious or non-religious organizations, local or transnational school chains, corporate foundations, or individual providers—significantly shapes the partnership experience.
- **Profit-making incentives:** While education traditionally emphasizes non-profit principles aligned with human rights obligations (GEM Report, 2022), many market-oriented policy advocates argue that profit-making incentivizes schools to enhance efficiency, innovation, and access.
- **Other design elements:** Features such as student selection and levying of top-up fees from students shape student intake and are critical considerations in PPP evaluations.

Institutions in both the global north and south increasingly promote education PPPs. In 2022, education was the fourth largest sector in the EU in terms of value with an aggregate value of EUR 910 million; it was the third largest sector in terms of the number of projects and accounts for 15% of all PPP projects (European Investment Bank, 2023). However, as this document shows, many have critiqued their adoption of PPPs.

Specifically, human rights law clarifies that governments should employ PPPs sparingly, exclusively with private entities that comply with applicable human rights law and standards, and as a time-bound measure to supplement the state's capability to provide free, quality public education (Adamson et al., 2021; Balsera, 2019). In 2015, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education underscored that even when the government collaborates with non-state providers in education, it remains both the guarantor and regulator of the right to education. The state must ensure that these partnerships do not impede access to quality education for all free of cost, regulate and monitor PPPs, and allocate the maximum resources available to the implementation of the right to education (Singh, 2015).

Policymaker Roles Concerning Education PPPs

Given the stipulations of human rights law, policymakers have a particularly critical role in decisions around the adoption and possible implementation of PPPs. This decision is often rendered difficult 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 (Robertson & Verger, 2012). Figure 1 shows the different decision-making responsibilities of policymakers.

What is this report and how can it support policy makers?

Based on the policymaker roles outlined above, this document considers three important scenarios. Because the marketing around PPPs often does not match the reality, this text details these differences. The first scenario pertains to policymakers considering entering into a PPP by critically examining major arguments made by PPP proponents. The second section offers strategies to policymakers to mitigate harm in contexts with problematic education PPPs. The final scenario explores alternatives to PPPs for both groups of policymakers. Table 3 summarizes how this document helps policymakers.

Figure 1. Policymaker Responsibilities Regarding PPPs

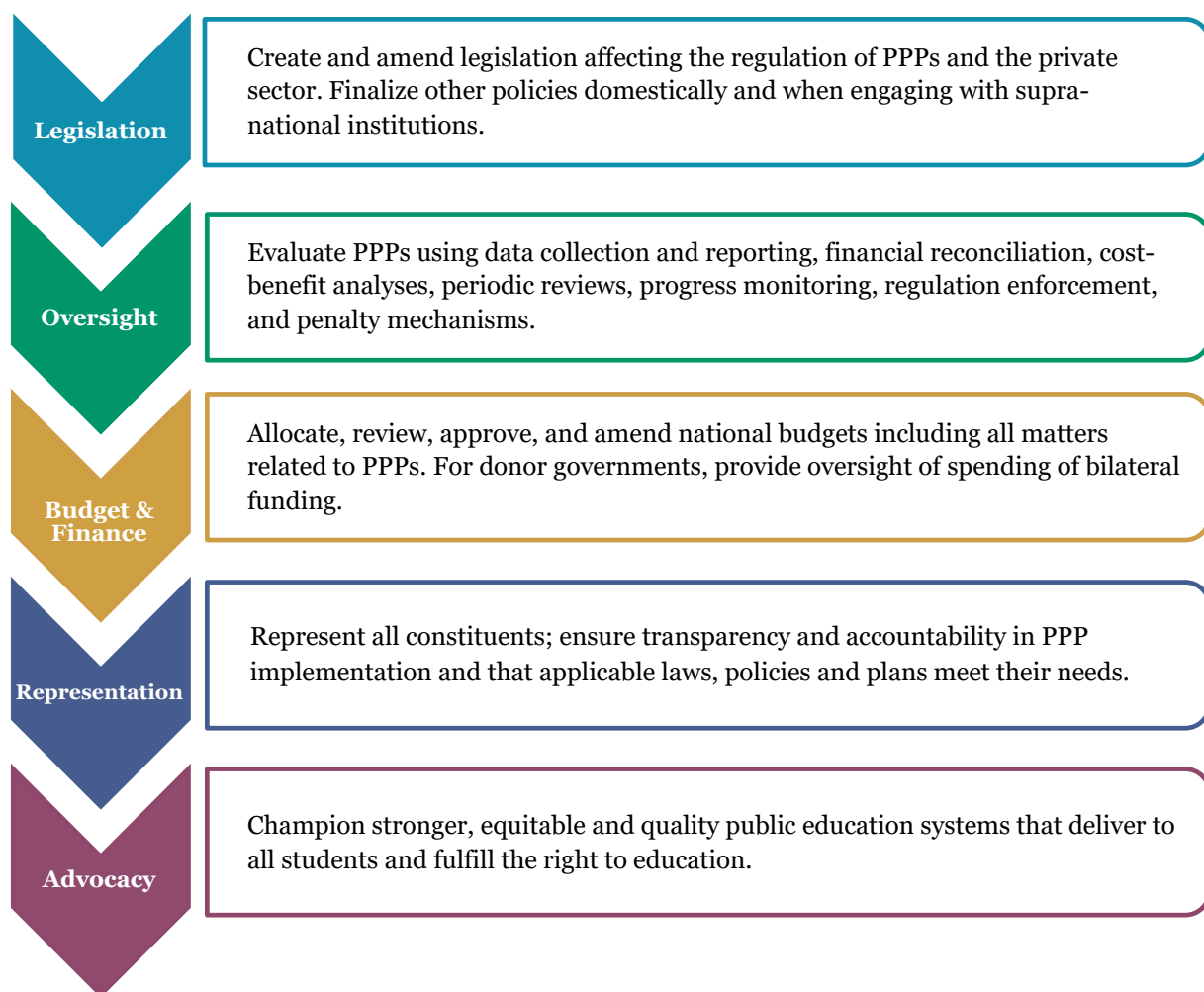


Table 3. How can this guide help policymakers?

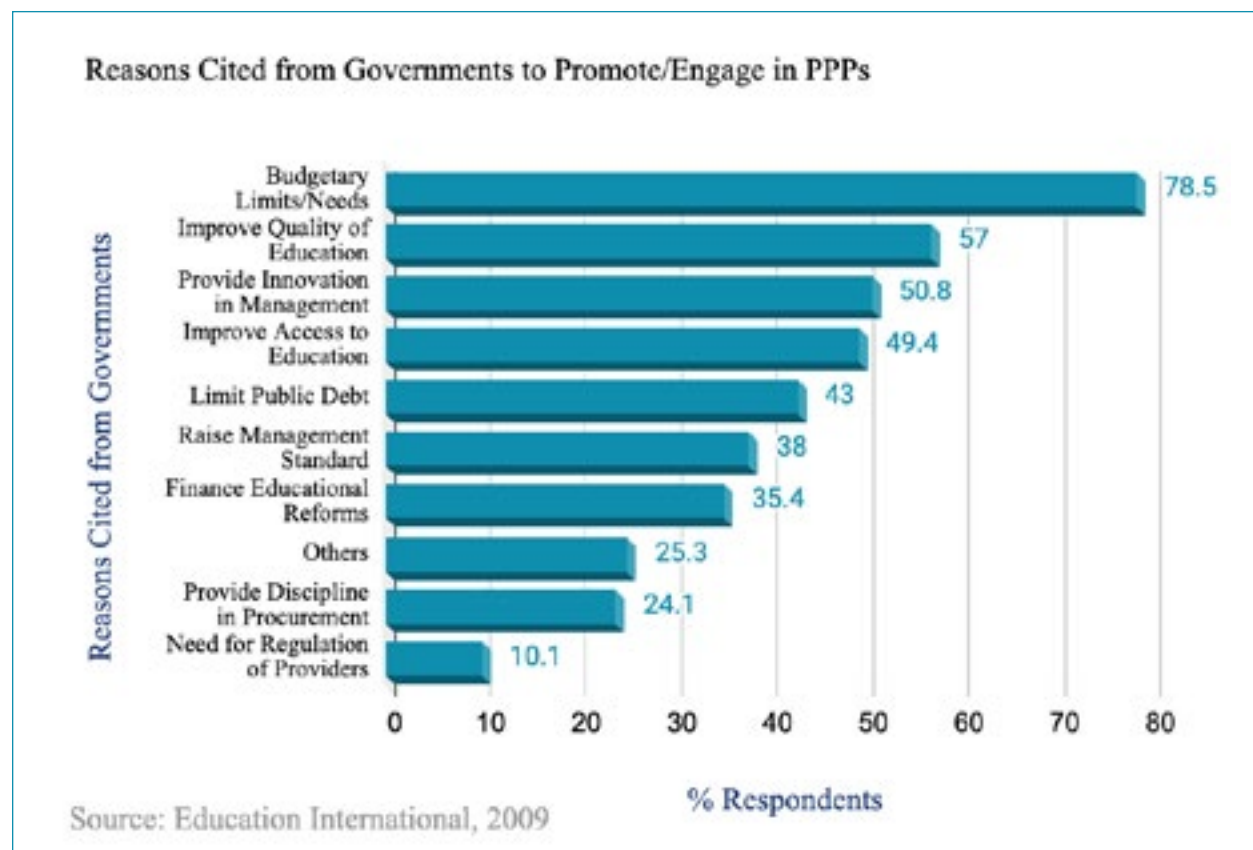
- 1. Enable more informed and strategic decision-making regarding PPPs**, particularly when guaranteeing the right to education, ensuring quality, and promoting social justice. This guide also helps policymakers learn from global experience with PPPs.
- 2. Protect public resources**, enhance cost-effectiveness, and ensure the efficient and sustainable use of public resources to avoid waste and make investments that yield desired outcomes.
- 3. Improve policy implementation** to better achieve educational policy goals, such as improving quality, expanding access, and fostering innovation.
- 4. Avoid public backlash** by addressing challenges to avoid public dissatisfaction, which can have political and social repercussions.
- 5. Improve risk identification and mitigation** to support policymakers in considering the potential risks associated with implementing PPPs and the importance of implementing safeguards and contingency plans to mitigate identified risks.
- 6. Enhance accountability** by holding private partners accountable, ensuring the appropriate use of public funds, and maintaining educational standards.

Scenario 1: Governments considering entering a PPP

What rationales for PPPs do policymakers encounter?

This section enables policymakers to understand the evidence related to the functioning of PPPs before entering into contracts with private actors. Policymaker rationales for entering PPPs vary based on context, the service being delivered by the PPP, and the specific PPP design elements. A survey by Education International presents a global snapshot of government rationales (Figure 2) (Education International, 2009). Governments appear to view education PPPs as a tool to address budgetary constraints, improve the quality of education at scale, and foster management innovation, even when the underlying theory of change that should bring about these outcomes is frequently absent or unknown by policymakers.

Figure 2. Government Reasons for Promoting or Engaging in PPPs



With these priorities in mind, this scenario examines commonly cited rationales in favor of education PPPs and evaluates them using the best available current evidence. As such, policymakers will likely not encounter every argument discussed below. The section begins with a vignette highlighting some of the consequences of an inadequately considered PPP, followed by oft-cited arguments for PPPs and how these arguments can play out in reality.

Vignette 1: PPPs displacing public education in New Orleans

In 2005, Hurricane Katrina ravaged the city of New Orleans, costing lives, destroying property, and displacing many people, most of them low-income people of color. Then U.S. Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, later said that Hurricane Katrina was “the best thing that happened to the education system in New Orleans” (Gabor, 2015, pp. 5-6). Duncan’s statement encapsulates the takeover approach to school reform pursued by the private sector, facilitated by the state through PPPs (usually called charter schools in the United States). Three main lessons emerge from the New Orleans education “experiment” from its origin, process, and results.

First, the takeover of the New Orleans school system did not originate with the hurricane. Before Katrina, Louisiana formed the Recovery School District (RSD), the institutional mechanism used to take over New Orleans schools, to comply with federal U.S. policy that designated “failing” schools based on low test scores under the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act (Ravitch, 2014). Instead of allocating more resources to schools having difficulty closing the achievement gap, NCLB prescribed a punitive model that reduced funding, sanctioned teachers and principals, and, in Louisiana, placed schools in the RSD.

Second, the charter school takeover of New Orleans is undisputed; one charter school principal directly said that they had “stolen” the education system (Adamson et al., 2015). Instead of rebuilding the public education system after Katrina, the state of Louisiana reconstituted almost all schools in New Orleans as PPPs, or charter schools, and terminated thousands of teacher contracts without due process. Importantly, the takeover of the education system in New Orleans symbolizes the general encroachment of private actors on primarily urban schools and reflects larger societal prejudices in the U.S. against primary black and brown students and the marginalization of low socioeconomic status students (Adamson & Galloway, 2019). Figure 3 shows the expansion of PPPs in New Orleans within the larger context of PPPs targeting urban schools (Adamson & Galloway, 2019).

Figure 3. United States Heat Map of Charter Schools (U.S. Version of PPPs)



Source: Adapted from Adamson & Galloway (2019).

Third, charter schools are often funded by a competitive model based on test scores that incentivizes them to improve test scores to gain resources. The real-life ramifications of test-based accountability means that charter schools practice myriad forms of student exclusion based on special education needs, race, and test scores. For instance, while most New Orleans schools reported a similar number of special education students, the highest performing schools, also predominantly white, had high percentages of “gifted and talented” students, while other schools had inversely higher percentages of students with disabilities, who in turn are more expensive to educate (Adamson et al., 2015). Thus, the most expensive, hardest-to-educate students were grouped into schools with the largest percentage of black students. Parents reported being “counseled out,” or told that a school could not serve their child, even though such action by a school is illegal in the United States, as any school receiving public money must educate all students under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

The education situation in New Orleans became so dire after Hurricane Katrina that parents warned researchers that it was “too late” for New Orleans, but that they should caution the rest of the world about the impacts of ceding education provision to the private sector using PPPs (Adamson et al., 2015). For example, while charter schools flew banners of Ivy League colleges on their walls, the average college entrance test score in New Orleans after the charter takeover was insufficient for students to gain admission to the local community college, encapsulating the massive disconnect between the promises of PPPs and their actual outcomes (Adamson et al., 2015).

Argument #1: PPPs are more efficient and save scarce government resources

PPP advocates often claim to bring additional private resources into public services or infrastructure. They argue that if the private sector (using government funding and support) can take over the everyday minutia of running schools, the government can focus on functions where they have a comparative advantage and where they are most needed, such as planning, policy, quality assurance, and curriculum development. Accordingly, the government should focus more on determining outputs and outcomes rather than managing processes, leaving the private sector to run schools. A related financial argument is that if the private sector takes on the responsibility of delivery in hard-to-serve geographies, the government can use their scarce funds elsewhere.

Private sector proponents also claim that their more frugal approach can do more with the same resources, providing greater value for money. Supporters of education PPPs allege that private companies run more “efficiently” than “bureaucratic” governments by streamlining decision-making processes and reducing “red tape” that often accompanies traditional government-led initiatives. For them, private sector involvement can lead to more efficient resource allocation, optimizing resources through cost-effective infrastructure solutions, faster administrative processes and innovative financing mechanisms. In theory, these efficiencies allow PPPs to reach more students with the same level of investment. Furthermore, PPPs offer various alternate or “innovative” financing models, such as build-operate-transfer arrangements, revenue-sharing agreements, or performance-based contracts which make the service appear cheaper.

Finally, private-sector entities, in addition to possessing significant financial resources, supposedly also bring technical expertise and operational capacity that governments can use to accelerate education program implementation. In doing so, they attempt to address a cross-section of needs, such as curriculum development and implementation, technology, teacher training, service delivery, and more. By diversifying funding sources and aligning incentives, these actors claim that PPPs can efficiently use financial resources to maximize educational impact and address the learning crisis.

Reality #1: PPPs have misaligned incentives, cut corners to bring down costs, and risk creating long-term liabilities

While PPPs seem like solutions to budget scarcity, in reality, PPPs are not a panacea for limited budgets because they:

- **have misaligned interests and incentives.** The interests of the public and private parties in the PPP fundamentally differ (Tilak, 2016). The primary goal or motive of private sector partners is typically profit, whereas the public sector's goal is, from a human rights obligation perspective, providing high-quality public education to all students (Abidjan Principles, 2019). As subsequent sections show, this misalignment has myriad downstream consequences, including cost-cutting measures that diminish education quality—such as deploying under qualified education personnel, reducing instructional time, and limiting resources for students—all of which can negatively influence educational outcomes.
- **are often more expensive while undermining fiscal sustainability, particularly when governments ignore or are unaware of their deferred costs and associated fiscal risks.** Evidence regarding PPPs across sectors suggests that they tend to be more expensive than the alternative of public procurement (Jomo et al., 2016). In one estimate, the total transaction costs of all types of PPPs are estimated at 20% of the project value (Hall, 2015). While in the short term, PPPs may appear cheaper than traditional public investment, they may carry fiscal risks and suffer from the same management challenges as traditional public investment (Irwin et al., 2018). In the instance of education PPPs, governments are often forced to absorb responsibilities that are not profitable to the private partner.
- **are difficult and time-consuming to negotiate when protecting the educational interests of students.** PPP contracts are much more complex than direct delivery by the government because they need to address all possible contingencies that they may encounter over the entire duration of the contract. It is particularly difficult to account for anticipation in longer-term PPP arrangements. Furthermore, some kinds of performance are hard to specify within a contract, for example, maintaining good community relations or avoiding public relations blunders (Katz, 2006).
- **often force governments to absorb risk when projects fail.** Managing and operating education systems at full scale is a complex endeavor, and poorly managed PPPs can lead to inefficiencies, cost overruns, and project failures, thus exacerbating

rather than alleviating budgetary pressures (COTAE & GI-ESCR, 2023). When partnerships fail, states have to intervene to fulfill unmet goals and responsibilities, a cost not included in most cost-benefit analyses of PPPs.

- **encourage or permit the private party to cut corners or resort to under-handed means to ensure “efficiency”.** Private providers are incentivized to “cream skim” students with the highest potential learning outcomes and attempt to shift cost-intensive learners to the government to ensure profitability (Baum, 2018). This is particularly, although not exclusively, likely to happen in states with weak regulatory capacities.
- **neglect the full range of costs over the project lifespan.** Hidden or indirect costs such as ongoing maintenance, monitoring, and regulation expenses strain government budgets over time. Lethbridge & Gallop (2020) found that when using a PPP instead of the public sector to fund projects, the public ends up paying significant fees throughout the PPP contract, including substantial interest rates, additional fees, and repayment schedules. This cost accumulation is comparable to buying items using a credit card or taking on student loans. For example, the UK, which has approximately seven hundred PPP-funded projects, faced initial costs of GBP 10.3 billion in 2016 but anticipates paying back an estimated total of GBP 199 billion by the 2040s (Lethbridge & Gallop, 2020).
- **create unsustainable structures:** PPPs can create dependency on external funding and expertise, which is not sustainable. When private partners prematurely exit or funding disappears, PPP initiatives can collapse, leaving education systems worse than before. Furthermore, long-term PPPs often bind governments into long-term contractual arrangements, including spending obligations. Service areas not covered by PPP contracts, and hence without contractual spending obligations, are more likely to suffer budget cuts during fiscal constraints (Hall, 2015).
- **fundamentally still involve direct or indirect payment by taxpayers and/or students.** The government still 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 cost often passes directly to students’ families instead of being paid through public budgets.

At the same time, PPPs do not lower the state’s burden since:

- **entering into a PPP increases the government’s role as the need for capacity** for procurement, monitoring and evaluation, governance, and regulation requires the government to hold the private party accountable for its performance. This means that governments need to fund and staff regulatory mechanisms for PPPs and must intervene if rights are violated.
- **governments have reduced decision-making power in PPPs, and setting up accountability systems is costly and time-consuming.** Entry into PPPs does not end the government’s accountability to the state’s students. Identifying and penal-

izing actors guilty of any violations becomes more difficult, especially when the contract has not adequately addressed the possibilities of failure. With the introduction of the private party, the government tends to have lower decision-making capacity and reduced power to intervene in the administration of a PPP relative to directly administered institutions. The World Bank's World Development Report 2018 concluded 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" (World Bank, 2018, p. 177).

- **the state invests in the infrastructure necessary for the PPP to function.** The government often makes the investments necessary to run the education system and which the private party relies on for the PPP's implementation (e.g. the use of physical infrastructure, or the time of key government personnel). The PPP capitalizes on existing infrastructure, which may not be recognized and therefore acts as an unacknowledged subsidy of the PPP.
- **the politics of PPPs may become challenging.** PPPs, viewed publicly as entities owned by the private party, can see reduced political support (Crawford et al., 2023). Given the issues with effectiveness outlined in this paper and the real challenges with democratic oversight of PPPs, constituencies who see PPPs as impinging on public education may resist them.
- **it might skew government spending priorities.** The introduction of PPP and voucher programs might lead to them receive progressively more funding at the expense of public schools. For example, in the U.S., while Arizona increased its spending on voucher programs by 270% from fiscal year 2008- 2019, the state decreased its per-pupil funding for public education over this period by 5.7% (Abrams & Koutsavlis, 2023).

Lastly, while PPPs may address some of the weaknesses associated with public systems, PPPs might also **bring distinct weaknesses associated with the private sector** (Tilak, 2016). These could include, among other impacts:

- removing social obligations in education such as scholarships for poor students.
- an increase of business management culture in educational institutions at the expense of transformative education.
- declining public accountability due to the need for new PPP accountability structures.

Argument #2: PPPs can reach geographies and students that the state cannot

In fast-growing countries, particularly in the global south, some argue that governments struggle to provide enough schools, so private schools should open to fill that need. Partnering with the latter can help to rapidly scale up education in a context of growing demand from pupils and families—expanding faster than governments can, or choose to, build public

infrastructure. The unique capabilities and resources of private actors can complement government efforts to increase education access to underserved populations, bridge geographical gaps, and create more inclusive learning opportunities for all students.

Reality #2: PPPs harm educational equity and exacerbate inequality

Learners not currently accessing basic education may also need extra support to enroll and remain in school—learning aids for children with disabilities, extra support such as school feeding for those with a development delay due to malnutrition, incentives for girls, etc. Addressing these needs is relatively more expensive and complex since they require coordinated action across multiple sectors. Profit-oriented PPPs have little incentive and capacity to address these student needs. Some PPPs are specifically created to enroll out-of-school children, particularly in areas without adequate availability of government schools (Education Finance Network, 2023). However, the government regulator must monitor implementation to ensure the new facilities do not overwhelmingly serve local elites. Furthermore, private schools are not just disproportionately likely to be established in urban areas, they rely on public infrastructure that tends to concentrate in urban areas to exist; private schools face the same challenges of a lack of infrastructure that public schools do, making it hard to envisage how they are any better placed to help meet the enrolment challenge in rural areas (Walker et al., 2016).

PPPs do not ensure equity because they often:

- **recruit the highest performing and “cheapest to educate” students while discriminating against those with special educational needs.** The efficiencies of scale created by deploying one-size-fits-all models that PPPs try to create are antithetical to the individualized attention required by students with special needs. Most research on education PPPs shows negative equity impacts and increased school segregation, particularly in partnerships with for-profit entities (Verger et al., 2020). For instance, Chile hosts the world’s largest-scale voucher program, which has resulted in high education inequality and segregation with the poorest students generally concentrated in neglected, low-performing government schools (Mizala & Torche, 2010).
- **leave government schools to educate those with the highest educational needs:** When PPP models exclude, “cream skim” the best students, or “counsel out” students with special or additional needs, an even greater proportion of students with high need for differentiated services end up in public institutions. This discrimination then increases pressure on public schools, which, due to the redirection of resources towards PPPs, face increasingly difficult challenges maintaining overall resources and educational quality for their students.
- **do not necessarily bring new students into education, but rather displace students from other schools.** Research from Punjab, Pakistan shows that increased enrolment in a PPP appears to stem from pulling in students from other private schools (Das, 2022); in another instance, establishing a new PPP school reduced neighborhood public school enrolment by 3% (Ansari, 2021). Research in low income

neighborhoods in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, site of the longest voucher program in the U.S., raises similar equity issues (Carnoy et al., 2007).

PPPs exacerbate inequalities based on family income, gender, or ethnic/racial identity

Research suggests that 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” (Baum, 2018, p. 24). This disparity particularly occurs when private schools are permitted to levy tuition fees or other “top up” charges from students, a practice that risks excluding students who cannot afford the extra charges, resulting in self-selection by students, or de facto school selection of students.

Similarly, women and girls have a greater risk of marginalization. Private school fees, even those considered low, tend to restrict girls’ access to schooling as parents often prefer to spend limited funds on boys (Day Ashley et al., 2014; Maitra et al., 2016; Alcott & Rose, 2015). This also applies to PPP schools, particularly those requiring top up fees from parents. One study in Pakistan estimates the out-of-pocket costs in PPP schools to be half the income of a parent living at the poverty line. Further, frequently low salaries and poor working conditions of teachers threaten labor rights, particularly for women, who disproportionately hold teaching jobs in most regions of the world (Malouf-Bous & Farr, 2019).

Private schools are often unaffordable or actively discriminate against students from racialized and other marginalized groups. In the U.S., research finds that charter schools (privately managed, publicly funded schools) have deepened racial segregation (Frankenberg et al., 2010). In India, sending even one child in a family to a private school costs on average 27% and 23.3% of the total income of Scheduled Tribe (India’s Indigenous people) and Scheduled Caste (SC, formerly untouchable castes) households’ income respectively at the secondary level of education; in another study, 37% of SC children faced harassment or abuse by either private school staff or their peers during the pandemic (Taneja & Noopur, 2022). In Uganda, a 2016 study of a PPP found that most schools visited were not physically accessible to children with a disability and that not one of the schools had a single special needs teacher (Initiative for Social and Economic Rights, 2016).

Argument #3: PPPs are innovative and can address the learning crisis

Proponents of PPPs claim that they encourage innovation by “disrupting” the “status quo” of government-funded, maintained, and operated education systems. They claim that education PPPs serve as innovative platforms to combine the strengths of governments, private sector entities, civil society organizations, and communities, which in turn maximizes the benefits of their involvement. Innovation in education PPPs also often occurs through increased technology when partners invest in developing e-learning platforms, digital content, and data analytics tools (Spren & Kamat, 2018).

This issue is particularly important in the current global learning crisis where states have

not guaranteed the right to education and learners are not achieving high enough outcomes. The 2022 Report on Learning Poverty estimated that the situation in low and middle-income countries is even worse than reported before the COVID pandemic, leading some to question whether public education alone can deliver the solution while presenting PPPs as an innovative response to this challenge (World Bank, 2022).

The innovation argument also rests on the premise that PPPs will lead to better learning outcomes overall, based on the idea that private schools tend to outperform government school students (also known as the “private school advantage”). PPPs often incorporate performance-based contracts to incentivize (through a mix of rewards and penalties) different actors—private partners, administrators, teachers, and students—to achieve desired results or outcomes. They also create test-based accountability systems and promote monitoring and evaluation. The underlying premise of these systems is that actors will compete against their prior performance and the performance of others and that accompanying incentives will spur them to deliver an education of a high standard.

Reality #3: PPPs do not necessarily deliver better results; instead, they neglect critical determinants of quality and discourage pedagogic innovation

Overall, the evidence shows that any difference in the quality of education between PPPs and public schools is marginal and often disappears after factoring in the socio-economic background of the pupils. Evidence suggests that:

- **the “private school advantage” does not consistently occur. Private schools do not inevitably perform better than government schools and the difference does not translate to PPP schools.** The World Bank’s World Development Report 2018, “Learning to Realise Education’s Promise,” shows “no consistent evidence” that private schools deliver better learning outcomes and discusses both the potential benefits and risks of the growth in private schooling (World Bank, 2018, p. 176). Moreover, research suggests that the private school advantage has not translated to public-private partnerships, which show limited value in improving quality (Crawford et al., 2023).
- **higher learning outcomes in PPP schools frequently conceal results based on student selection instead of performance.** The previous section addressed the negative equity impacts of PPPs. An analysis of OECD’s Program for International Student Assessment 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” (Baum, 2018, p. 23). Any learning gains also often do not stem from pedagogic innovation, but adoption of organizational strategies, such as longer school days, and instructional practices more oriented toward discipline, ability grouping, and external test preparation (Verger et al., 2020).

- **PPPs privilege short-term goals (like attendance or test scores) or focus on test preparation over the long-term educational needs of students.** The emphasis on short-term targets can force providers to overlook the long-term, systemic changes needed to address deep-rooted issues in the education system, such as improving teacher training, curriculum development, infrastructure, and societal inequities. Addressing these requires more expensive iterative improvement, with possibly less immediate performance “gains,” than PPP accountability systems prefer. At the same time, when the PPP involves test-based accountability, this creates incentives to adopt an instructional approach that supports test prep including teaching to the test and curriculum narrowing.
- **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 (Termes et al., 2015, as cited by Verger & Moschetti, 2017, p. 8). Doing so ignores the critical role teachers play in improving quality (UN, 2024). Expecting teachers in private schools subsidized by the government to work at much lower wages than those paid to their public sector peers creates ethical and legal challenges. Reducing teacher wages disincentivizes good candidates from entering the profession. Teachers in PPPs often receive short-term contractual employment or lose their status as public employees, making it more difficult to protect and improve their pay and working conditions; simultaneously, union organizations are weakened since employees are divided into smaller units with different employers (Hall, 2015). Interestingly, in the UK, while the average pay for teaching staff in academies (a type of PPP) is lower compared to public schools, it is higher for senior management, with some “leaders” of academy trusts receiving sky-high salaries (Smulian, 2019). A recent UK Public Accounts Committee report highlights that tens of millions of public money was used to “prop up” poorly managed academy schools with potentially excessive levels of pay (Public Accounts Committee, 2022).
- **PPPs often do not place sufficient emphasis on teacher training and professional development,** opting instead for increased investments in technology (Spren & Kamat, 2018). Some PPPs even try to “teacher-proof” the curriculum, meaning standardizing curriculum and removing individual teacher input and creativity, as evidenced in the approach of Bridge International Academies, among others, that provide tablets with scripted curricula to teachers in place of training that meets the minimum national standards (Cheramboss, 2021; Oguntinyinbo, 2022; Business Day Nigeria, 2023). Students are therefore taught by unqualified teachers, in opposition to the aims of SDG 4.c.

Furthermore, evidence suggests that PPPs tend to discourage pedagogic innovation because:

- **private providers in PPPs tend to favor traditional education approaches over experimentation** as their innovation often focuses on symbolic aspects—such as school marketing—and management practices, but not necessarily pedagogy and classroom practices (Verger & Moschetti, 2017; Moschetti & Snaider, 2019; Lubienski, 2003). Indeed, their reliance on standardized tests tends to discourage pedagogic

ic innovation, as these tests focus on rote memorisation that precludes instructional creativity helping students develop higher order thinking skills (Darling-Hammond & Adamson, 2014).

- **PPPs’ market logic forces them to maintain a short-term focus**, prioritizing rapid financial returns over longer-term educational outcomes (Adamson & Darling-Hammond, 2016). This can impede innovation as PPPs show reluctance to invest in innovative approaches requiring time to demonstrate effectiveness.
- **PPPs tend to rely on technology as a crutch.** Despite the dependence of PPPs on technology as innovation, governments are beginning to seriously question and limit screen time in schools for students. In the U.S., for instance, screens and social media have become so distracting that politicians of different parties are taking action to address use of social media by children, while the Surgeon General has warned about the impact of mobile phones and social media on young minds (Austin, 2024).

Argument #4: PPPs are rapidly scalable

Proponents of PPPs claim that, because they can theoretically respond more quickly and flexibly than the “slower” public system, they can scale more rapidly. Adopting PPPs can enable governments to bypass existing restrictions—like unionization and “unnecessary restrictions” such as restrictive employment laws—to scale faster. Rapid scaling can also reduce politicization of education or corruption within the public system. The PPP private actors (using public funds) rapidly scale up to meet the growing demand from pupils and families by expanding faster than governments can build public infrastructure.

Reality #4: The quest for rapid scaling creates multiple problems for the education system

PPPs in education have been shown to present several challenges that impede their ability to rapidly scale, including limited initial government capacity, insufficient scaling to target populations, logistical challenges, lack of community involvement and/or community resistance, quality control issues, and teacher workforce readiness.

- **PPP pilots rarely scale.** 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. 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. In addition, scaling too quickly without proper foundations can lead to quality issues and operational failures.
- **PPPs often lack meaningful consultation and ownership from communities.** Communities (parents, learners, teachers, etc.) need involvement as key stakeholders in education decision-making for buy-in and implementation to work (Oakes

et al., 2017). Otherwise, education “reform” risks devolving into churn that stakeholders eventually tune out, preventing opportunities for real educational gains (Tyack & Cuban, 1997). 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 (Adamson et al., 2015).

- **Maintaining quality while scaling is often difficult.** Scaling up quickly can compromise quality without adequate control measures; if private actors prioritize speed over quality, substandard education will result. In education, scaling up requires a large number of qualified teachers and administrative staff. Finding, training, and retaining these skilled personnel, particularly in underserved or remote areas, slows the scaling process for PPPs and governments alike. Thus, in Punjab, Pakistan, increased enrolment in PPP schools was accompanied by a rapid decline in test scores (Crawford & Alam, 2022).

Argument #5: PPPs reflect citizen choice and offer ample space for accountability

Many PPP advocates point out that parents actively choose private schools. They extend this personal choice argument a step further, to present a case for using public funding of private schools to support parental choice. In their view, this helps foster competition between and among schools and drives up standards for all. This argument is based on the idea of the “short route” to accountability that makes schools directly accountable to parents and communities, through market-based competition and school choice mechanisms—whether through a PPP or purely free market approach. In contrast, governments have a long route of accountability to citizens via accountability through elected officials, which weakens the link between providers, students, and families.

Reality #5: PPPs may lead to further privatization and introducing “choice” does not improve accountability

Bringing the element of choice into the education system changes the fundamental role of the state from a policymaker, planner, provider, and financier to that of an enabler/facilitator of private sector markets in education. PPPs may lead to the gradual or rapid shrinking of the state sector and an expansion of the private sector, becoming a step in the direction of the privatization of education.

As Section 3 shows, holding PPPs accountable requires a strong state. In contrast, PPPs are often designed and agreed behind closed doors and without public consultation. For a sound PPP model to work, the prerequisites include a relative sense of equality between the two partners, mutual commitment to agreed objectives, and mutual benefit for the stakeholders involved in the partnership, all of which PPPs often lack (Tilak, 2016). The argument of choice rests on the assumption that parents have (equal) access to information. In reality, parents often lack information or value different aspects of an educational institution from what education policymakers might expect. Significantly, poor parents who may be func-

tionally illiterate (or have limited time) may have limited 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 influence their schools. Choice is limited by:

- **practical constraints** including accessibility (e.g. distance between home and school, availability of transportation), school selection criteria (religious denomination or language of instruction), economic factors (user fees, costs of transportation or other hidden costs) and the impact of disruption on children (loss of peer group or impact on student performance).
- **the lack of agreement about an objective sense of quality.** Fundamentally, the quality of education obtained over a student's educational lifespan is unknowable at the time of admission. Parents often have a variety of reasons for preferring schools, such as their children's peers having the social status to which they aspire, different extracurricular opportunities, specialized programs, etc (Adamson et al., 2015). 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 (World Bank, 2018, p. 177).
- **parents who do not necessarily exercise either "exit" or "voice" if not satisfied.** The 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 (Day Ashley et al., 2014). In particular, the social cost to the child of changing schools makes exiting difficult and makes students "sticky," or less likely to move from an economics perspective. Thus, in India, dissatisfied parents have been shown to stay and engage in bargaining to reduce fees rather than to improve the quality of the school (Srivastava, 2007). 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 (Vyas et al., 2022).

Conclusion for Scenario 1

As the evidence in this section shows and the table below summarizes, education PPPs do not deliver what their proponents claim. Accordingly, governments should think hard before entering PPPs and consider strengthening public systems instead. The next scenario is geared toward policymakers who are already in a PPP, with the aim of minimizing some of the deleterious effects highlighted above.

Figure 4. Summary of Arguments for and Realities of PPPs

Argument	Reality
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?

This section examines experiences of the implementation of PPPs and identifies pitfalls related to their design. 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 (Unterhalter et al., 2020).

Vignette 2: LEAP Liberia and Bridge International Academies

In 2016, the Liberian Ministry of Education announced the intention to outsource all pre-primary and primary schools through a program that came to be called the Liberia Education Advancement Program. This PPP initially aimed to outsource all schools to one private company, Bridge International Academies, eventually reducing the program to a three-year pilot with seven private actors (LEAP) (COTAE & GI-ESCR, 2023). In 2020, the government released the full three-year pilot evaluation which found negligible learning gains. Bridge International had high costs (three times more than spending in government schools), pushed students out en masse to reduce class sizes, had a lower probability of students being enrolled (possibly due to drop-outs attributed to pregnancy), and dismissed half of the incumbent public teachers (Romero & Sandefur, 2019). The independent evaluation report can serve as a good template for undertaking evaluations of other education PPPs. Bridge also resisted government oversight and independent external scrutiny in Liberia (Eurodad, 2022). Despite this, the Liberian government showed limited capacity to incentivize or sanction private providers who were reimbursed directly by third-party philanthropies (Romero & Sandefur, 2019).

1. Address the impact on equity: screening, selecting students, and cream-skimming

PPP delivery must ensure equity, particularly for the most disadvantaged students. However, as discussed in the previous chapter, research on PPPs reports negative effects on equity. Interventions limiting participation to non-profit providers appear to deliver relative to those that permit profit-making (Verger et al., 2020). Some questions to consider while examining an ongoing PPP along this dimension include:

- **Is the PPP permitted to select its students?** Permitting student selection risks incentivizing schools to compete based on intake exclusiveness instead of improving their performance (Lubienski, 2006). Faced with pressure to show results, private partners may compete for students perceived as easier to educate—usually, those from wealthier backgrounds or belonging to certain ethnic, social, or religious groups regarded as desirable. Even when no obvious scope for screening exists, hidden selection practices can emerge such as:

schools implementing very complicated application procedures that only motivated or sufficiently skilled families can navigate, institutions requiring very high levels of parental commitment, the screening of specific families' profiles via marketing, discouraging certain families from applying to the school during interview (by, for instance, alerting families of children with special needs that the school does not have enough support services) or simply by operating only within relatively well-accommodated neighborhoods. (Verger et al., 2020, p. 15)

Furthermore, studies find that educational PPPs involving demand-side funding schemes, such as vouchers, tend to increase educational inequalities and socioeconomic segregation in schools (Verger & Moschetti, 2017).

- **Is the PPP culturally appropriate?** Some questions to answer in this respect include:
 - Are providers sufficiently geographically close to beneficiaries? Are they able to serve the disadvantaged in their context? (Lipcan & MacAuslan, 2022).
 - Are the materials used culturally appropriate? Are they in the students' mother tongue, particularly indigenous languages? Are there any gender/racial/cultural stereotypes being propagated through the curriculum, materials, and classroom practices of the PPP?
- **Are private providers within the PPP permitted to make a profit? How is profiteering addressed?** Allowing for-profit providers to participate in PPP schemes tends to aggravate inequalities (Verger, & Moschetti, 2017). However, caution must be exercised since some studies show that when exposed to market incentives (such as those generated by a voucher funding scheme), both not-for-profit and for-profit actors tend to develop similar competitive and selective practices that undermine educational equity (Moschetti, 2018). Robust mechanisms for auditing schools are critical to identify instances of undue profits.
- **Is the private partner in the PPP allowed to charge any additional fees or obtain other parental contributions?** Even when formal fees are not present—as is the case in some publicly funded PPPs—concerns arise about additional costs. Schools frequently levy significant additional fees and informal charges, as is the case in Argentina, India, Pakistan, and Uganda (Moschetti, 2018; Srivastava & Noronha, 2016; Malouf-Bous & Farr, 2019). Allowing such “top-up” fees risks excluding the poorest and introducing fee regulatory mechanisms is essential in such settings.
- **What systems within the PPP exist to identify and support students from marginalized backgrounds?**
 - Government subsidies to private schools (even when linked to the economic status of the school's student population) often fail to alter the class-based composition of these schools, whose average socioeconomic status remains higher than that of public schools (Verger et al., 2020). Private schools must prepare properly to ensure equity to avoid segregation in educational settings.
 - Teachers should be adequately trained and supported to identify and teach students with disabilities and those requiring additional help. Moreover, systems should be in place to provide psychosocial and economic support to students that would enable student retention until the completion of their education.
 - Proper logistic and infrastructural aspects should be guaranteed to ensure adequate learning, particularly during moments of crisis for students from marginalized communities. The 2023 UNESCO GEM report found that during the COVID pandemic, learners in remote areas lacked resources and experienced connectivity issues contributing to learning difficulties, especially with PPP programs requiring technology access (UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report, 2023). While

private partners might invest in new schools or facilities, they may not address additional logistical challenges such as transportation, safety, and local infrastructure that can limit access for many students.

- Regulators must track instances of explicit discrimination. Exclusion of students does not happen only at the time of admission, but also during the entire academic career of students, also impacting the learning process. Particularly vulnerable groups include persons with disabilities, LGBTQI+ students, and racialized and Indigenous groups among others. Gender also interacts with other forms of exclusion from private schooling, such as poverty and disability, deepening inequality of access. For example, research in Pakistan found that private school enrolment is more likely among boys with disabilities, while girls with disabilities more likely lack access (Rose et al., 2018).
- The language of instruction (which may differ from the mother tongue of Indigenous learners or migrants) and the nature of the curriculum adopted may also result in students being pushed out of school over time. As such, data on student intake and progression by student demographic is necessary for all schools but is particularly critical for PPPs.
- **If the PPP is intended to enhance access, is there a way to capture whether admitted students are displaced from other schools?** Students often simply move from one private school (potentially an informal one) into the PPP school at the start of a new project. Hence, the enrolment figure in the project may not provide a snapshot of the overall increase in enrolment in the locale given that it does not take into consideration the displacement of students from one school type into another.
- **Are these fundamentally the right providers?** Some questions to answer in this respect include:
 - Are providers sufficiently geographically close to beneficiaries for the type of services provided?
 - Can they serve the most disadvantaged in the specific context of their proposed involvement (Lipcan & MacAuslan, 2022)?

2. Keep costs down without cutting corners

From a purely economic perspective, for the PPP to be economically beneficial, it should deliver value for money. This means delivering a better quality of service (without compromising equity) at a lower cost relative to public provision. States need to assess this cost over the PPP's lifetime, taking into account all expenses linked to financing, construction and transactions related to tendering, negotiations, contract management, and monitoring projects among others. It should also adequately capture the risks to be borne by the government in case of project failure. Questions about the impact on quality include:

1. **Do PPP schools adhere to all applicable national/local education laws and**

other formal requirements? This includes standards related to curriculum, quality, teacher qualifications, labor rights, infrastructure and facilities, safety (including disaster risk reduction), fee regulation, parent participation and other dimensions which may be provided for under national and local law.²

2. Does the PPP do enough to support teachers, the most important determinant of quality? The criteria for recruitment of teachers and other staff, their qualifications, their continuous education/training, and the pay process in a PPP need to be laid down and be in line with labor rights. However, research shows that the low-fee sector, for example, consistently relies on unqualified, short-term contract teaching personnel and pays them extremely low wages, sometimes well below the minimum wage (Srivastava, 2013).

3. Is evidence about all the relevant dimensions of the PPP intervention's delivery and impact captured, understood, and acted upon?

- Measures of quality should be comprehensive and go beyond focusing on the attainment of learning outcomes to include a range of outcomes (including access and completion) and capture processes. Critical dimensions are often omitted from data systems. For example, a recent PPP on early childhood education in India failed to capture complete information on enrolment, making it difficult to analyze data on the transition to Grade 1, a stated objective of the PPP (Pichhilli et al., 2022).
- Measures must not only capture average values but be disaggregated to capture the impact on marginalized communities, girls, persons with disability, lower socioeconomic classes, and other relevant categories.
- Data collected needs to be made available to parents (in an appropriate form) and used by teachers and administration to improve teaching and the PPP.
- Evaluations should include a comparison with the public sector to provide a true sense of the PPP's impact, controlling for student characteristics to account for any differences in student intake (family wealth or disability).
- Other questions to ask include attempting to understand whether the positive impact of the intervention is because of the introduction of extra resources relative to public provision or because the PPP school has been able to remove lower-achieving students. Could the same effects have been achieved in the government school if it had access to the same resources?

4. How does the PPP ensure that public schooling is not negatively impacted? Any potential unintended negative impacts on government schools must be captured and addressed. This could include tangible impacts on existing schools (e.g. displacement of students instead of bringing out-of-school children into school) and more systematic impacts (e.g. in terms of the spillover of the private sector's weaknesses into

² For more information on minimum standards, consult Guiding Principle 55 Abidjan Principles (AP) (2019).

public systems identified in PPPs Argument 2 in the previous chapter).

5. **What are some of the considerations to keep in mind in fragile settings?** In areas where public schools are largely absent, as in conflict-affected areas, PPPs could be designed as a step towards building public services by bringing private provision into the fold of state control and moving the responsibility of financing education from the families to the state. In such instances, PPPs must be regularly re-assessed against the capacities of the state and their benefit in realizing the right to education—and stopped when not useful or when the state can do as well or better alone (Aubry, 2016). However, in practice, PPPs are very challenging in fragile settings with the government’s capacity to plan, coordinate, regulate and finance PPP severely constrained; partnerships with NGOs and community schools may be more appropriate than partnerships with low-fee private school chains, educational entrepreneurs, and other types of profit-oriented providers (Verger & Moschetti, 2016).

The following questions help in analyzing the true full cost and risks of PPPs:

1. **Has a proper cost-benefit analysis been done for the PPP? Does it capture the full range of costs to be incurred, particularly across the entire project duration?** PPPs may have high initial transaction or startup costs, including negotiating contracts, conducting feasibility studies, and establishing regulatory frameworks and staffing oversight capacities which would still have to be borne by the government (including staff time of personnel who have less time to support the government system). Look out for hidden or indirect costs such as ongoing maintenance, monitoring, and regulation expenses which may strain government budgets over time. The European Investment Bank found “transaction costs” for PPP deals charged by consultancy firms across sectors have “not received much attention,” yet amount to “well over 10% of total project capital value” (Dudkin & Vålilä, 2005).
2. **Does the risk analysis capture the full range of risks and provide mitigation strategies?** Which risks will the government assume? For example, if private partners fail to deliver—such as private schools that close unexpectedly—or projects do not generate expected benefits, governments, and ultimately the public, may still be liable for payments or losses. For example, in vignette 2, the Liberian authorities were expected to pick up the responsibility of educating students evicted from Bridge Schools in the LEAP schools. PPP contracts must clearly define and factor in different scenarios of reduction in the required level of service over the PPP including both availability and the standard of performance (European Investment Bank, 2020).
3. **How much confidence do states have that PPPs are not misusing funds?** Ensuring financial integrity would require that governments:
 - engage independent evaluators or hire auditors to review and validate financial arrangements and performance outcomes reported by the private partners. This includes the need to respond to the usual challenges with private providers. For example, India has an ongoing challenge with the inadequate regulation of school fees, hence the introduction of publicly subsidized free school seats in private

schools for children from marginalized communities, which, in many instances, appears to have triggered an increase in school fees (Sahai, 2023). Governments should place reports in the public domain to ensure transparency.

- undertake performance audits and independent reviews of PPPs to provide independent verification of the claims made by the private party. 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 (ADB, 2017). As vignette 2 shows, adopting a scientific approach to the evaluation of the PPP (including a control group and controlling for various inputs) provides a more comprehensive picture of the impact of the partnership.
- 4. Is the PPP sustainable?** How would the infrastructure and processes created under the PPP be maintained and by whom? Thus, if the intervention involves software solutions, how would software updates be obtained (and at what costs) and would license fees need to be paid after the end of the PPP? Reliance on private vendors for software, education processes and content can create dependence which can cripple the government's independence. The use of free and open-source software (FOSS) platforms is advisable instead (Kasinathan, 2009).

3. Improve weak accountability

Accountability is closely related to the government's duty to establish policies and practices that safeguard against injustice and abuse of power as well as monitoring the performance of a program for the benefit of society. Strong financial and administrative systems and oversight are needed to implement PPPs. Governments should take steps to improve accountability.

- 1. Introduce clear accountability mechanisms (including performance measures and sanctions for non-performance) that include the responsibilities of both parties.** Some questions to answer include:
- **Does the Memorandum of Understanding pinpoint responsibilities and provide clear penalties for non-delivery?** Vague clauses make it unclear what must be delivered and at what cost. It would be advisable to also highlight the specific accountabilities of relevant officials to avoid subsequent confusion.
 - **Have the government and private actors adequately consulted local communities, the proposed beneficiaries, and other direct stakeholders in PPP interventions, particularly indigenous people, during the project design?** Obtaining free, prior, and informed consent before the start of the project is particularly critical.
 - **Does the government retain the power to suspend or modify the arrangement, at no punitive costs to them or the program in emergencies?** Based on the experience of the COVID pandemic, the project agreement

should give the public sector powers to intervene where academic services are jeopardized or during emergencies.

- **Are there independent regulatory bodies or ombudsmen to oversee PPP implementation and address any power imbalances or grievances?**
- **What steps have been taken to address corruption?** Corruption in education creates risks for PPPs that one must step against. In Florida (U.S.), the state has prosecuted cases of PPP corruption at both the design stage (including over high fees paid to lobbyists in charge of pushing a PPP and questionable loans taken by a charter school with a corresponding illegal fee paid to the school staff) and implementation stage (including over fake invoicing for vouchers assigned to ghost students, overpriced lease payments approved by corrupt school board members, unjustified construction cost overruns, rigged bids for construction materials and equipment, and diverting charter school scholarship money to personal use) (Arcia et al., 2023). In response to corruption, some countries have drafted legislation to regulate PPP contracts across sectors including Colombia, Panama, and Peru. These contracts can prevent the transfer of capital abroad until local obligations have been met to ensure compliance (De Michele et al., 2018). In El Salvador, however, PPP legislation excludes public education and some other sectors with a public function (Martin & Aguilar, 2020). However, the mere existence of legislation may not be enough; officials may not be aware of these provisions. Thus, in Uzbekistan, a study undertaken in partnership with its Anti-Corruption Agency showed that in the preschool sector, 73% of relevant public-sector employees were unaware of the existence of sanctions for violating integrity rules in PPP selection processes (Gafurov & Staishunaite, 2023).

2. Institutionalize clear grievance redress mechanisms to ensure that the state and individual citizens have recourse if their rights are violated. The process must:

- be clearly defined, be transparent, and should not be solely dependent on internal processes provided by the private organization to resolve disputes among teachers, students, and the organization.
- ensure the enforcement of contracts in court and address litigation risk. Governments should consider the financial and opportunity costs of contract enforcement.

3. Ensure adequate capacity to monitor and support the project.

- **Have adequate systems been put in place to oversee the PPP?** It has been pointed out that

from the perspective of the public sector, the delivery of PPPs requires an institutional setup with clear roles and responsibilities across the diverse coordination councils and implementing agencies; (ii) a transparent procurement framework that has the requisite measures needs to be in place

to prevent any corruption and market distortion; (iii) support from an advisory team that has knowledge on how best to structure the deal and bring it to financial closure; (iv) means for raising awareness on the possibility of accessing the PPP pipeline to the potential investors and establishing communication conduits for hearing their concerns and interests; and (v) channels to support the management of any significant social and political risks by communicating the nature and impact of a PPP on average citizens and enabling their ownership of the process... both partners ... need ... the establishment of robust and transparent systems that can be utilized to monitor contract compliance and to assess the quality of performance smoothly and quickly. (Asian Development Bank, 2017, p. 55).

- **Are these structures adequately staffed and otherwise resourced?** The government requires availability of personnel with the skills needed to manage and oversee the range of tasks required. For instance, in Delhi, India, even obtaining recognition of private schools is often delayed; just 60 schools were inspected in 2018 in the state due to capacity constraints in the government with a single inspector (having multiple duties) being responsible for 205 schools (Vyas et al., 2022).
- **What mechanisms are in place to ensure the improvement of individual schools?** Governments must ensure (Education Finance Network, 2023):
 - that the individual PPP schools have school improvement plans.
 - project-level plans are in place for aspects like ongoing teacher training and school leadership professional development, including both pedagogy and equity.
 - mechanisms for third-party monitoring of the functioning of schools, including strengthening social accountability.
 - that clear mechanisms are in place to engage with and solicit feedback from parents.
- **What space exists for parents' and broader citizen voices in PPP design and administration?** PPPs often have inadequate space for parental and citizen participation. Thus, in the UK, the conversion of government schools into academies (a kind of PPP school) has radically reduced the voice of local communities, parents, and staff (Courtney, 2022). It would be important to ensure that:
 - a process is in place to understand the local economic, social and cultural context, build relationships with the community, and engage with local self-governance structures.
 - public consultations and hearings are undertaken to gather input and build consensus on specific PPP proposals and obtain community views about their ongoing implementation.

- specific modalities for citizen participation are built into PPPs. This can include a combination of structural measures (e.g. having a Parent Teacher Association, representation of parents in governance structures of PPPs/private educational institutions) and specific actions (sharing of relevant information, consultations with parents/older students around key decisions affecting them) within the educational settings.
- **How can all PPPs, not just individual projects, be made accountable?**
 - Wider debates on the applicable regulatory framework and negotiations of all the terms of PPP agreements must be public and transparent. This includes any amendments to existing frameworks.
 - Mechanisms for reporting to parliament, parliamentary approval of specific rules for major initiatives, and information sharing and discussion would aid accountability. These could include processes specific to education or across social sectors.

4. Ensure Transparency

PPPs should arise from credible, transparent, and competitive processes in which education officials can select the most suitable partner/s, avoiding bias and corruption. For PPPs to remain consistent with democratic ownership and national development strategies, a high level of transparency and citizen engagement are needed throughout the project lifecycle, particularly for those directly affected. This entails:

- ensuring that 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) are in the public domain.
- having an open information policy.
- establishing and maintaining formal mechanisms for dialogue and supporting the exchange of information and learning.

5. Realign Power Asymmetries

Various stakeholders defend and promote PPPs, each with their perspectives and interests. They may not disclose their agendas and potential conflicts of interest. Some of the stakeholders supporting education PPPs have historically included:

- **Development Finance Institutions (DFIs):** World Bank Group (particularly the World Bank's private sector arm, the International Finance Corporation), the IMF (which looks at PPPs as a mechanism for economic development and improved service

delivery), Regional Development Banks (like the Asian Development Bank, African Development Bank, and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development) which often look at PPPs as a strategy for regional development and economic integration, and some bilateral agencies.

- **private sector:** education companies, service providers, and technology firms may see PPPs as opportunities for business growth and profit. Industry associations and chambers of commerce emphasize the benefits of collaboration and consulting firms deliver advisory services to design, implement and manage PPPs.
- **several philanthropic organizations and NGOs linked to the private sector** have also promoted PPPs as part of their agenda of promoting public and private collaboration in education.

The power equation between the government and the companies or donors backing PPPs is often unequal, making it critical to recognize these dynamics. A policymaker can:

- **build alliances with groups questioning PPPs.** Collaborate with national and international networks and coalitions concerned about the rising growth of the private sector in education to gain support and leverage in negotiations with powerful private entities. Participate in international advocacy efforts calling for accountability of PPP frameworks globally.
- **engage in peer learning with other countries or provinces that have successfully managed power asymmetries in PPPs** to draw lessons and best practices.
- **involve civil society organizations, teacher unions, parent-teacher associations, and community groups** in the decision-making process to amplify diverse voices and counterbalance powerful private interests.
- **use media platforms** to provide a balanced picture of the functioning of PPPs, fostering informed public discourse.

Conclusion for Scenario 2

This section identifies a range of pointers for how policymakers could better use or renegotiate relevant clauses in PPP contracts. In some instances, policymakers may consider exiting a PPP. The existing PPP contract will probably contain clauses specifying what happens if policymakers terminate the project before its scheduled end, and these clauses may require the government to ensure compensation for lenders. The government may need to consult lawyers and other experts.

Policymakers should also 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.

Scenario 3: What policymakers should do instead of PPPs

Public provision offers greater flexibility, control, and effectiveness and should be preferable to PPPs, especially 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 and, crucially, it is possible to develop quality public education everywhere. It identified five examples that provide valuable lessons for strengthening public systems (Avelar & Adamson, 2021).

Figure 5. 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 centred on teachers. This case is focused on how accountability can be framed in a developmental way to foster teacher professionalism, instead of performativity.

Source: Adapted from (Avelar & Adamson, 2021).

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 mobilising and subsidising 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

In conclusion, PPPs in education are frequently promoted as solutions to budget constraints, quality improvement, and innovation within educational systems. However, this policy report highlights significant challenges and pitfalls associated with PPPs. Despite their potential benefits, PPPs 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.

This policy report underscores the need for policymakers to critically evaluate the implementation of PPPs, ensuring robust accountability mechanisms, administrative capacity for contract enforcement, equitable student access, and sustainable financial models. Additionally, it advocates for strengthening public education systems, emphasizing that public provision offers greater control, flexibility, and effectiveness in delivering universal, quality education and fulfilling the right to education for all. The report 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.

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