

Strengthening the Right to Free Education

The Issue:

- For millions of children around the world, the cost of schooling remains one of the most significant barriers to education, particularly at the pre-primary and secondary level.
- Approximately 85 percent of children worldwide complete primary school; but less than half complete secondary school or have access to pre-primary education.¹
- Existing international law guarantees children free and compulsory primary education, but the Convention on the Rights of the Child says nothing explicit about early childhood education and does not oblige states to guarantee every child free secondary education.

The Goal:

- To enshrine an explicit right to early childhood care and education, and at least one year of free pre-primary and free secondary education—consistent with the right to free primary education—in an international normative instrument, such as a new optional protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Why this is possible:

- Consensus already exists. All governments have already pledged through the Sustainable Development Goals to provide all children with access to pre-primary and ensure all children complete free secondary education.
- At least 106 countries guarantee at least one year of free pre-primary in their domestic law, and approximately 116 guarantee at least 11 years of free primary and secondary, providing a strong foundation for stronger international standards.
- An optional protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child could strengthen international standards without increasing the reporting burden of member states. Reporting could be integrated into regular reports to the Committee on the Rights of the Child.

The Benefit for Children:

- Stronger international law can accelerate far-reaching changes in national law, policy, and practice and could advance the rights of millions of children.
- Greater access to free education – from pre-primary through secondary – will help reduce poverty and inequalities, contribute to inclusive and sustainable societies, and help children thrive in today's world.
- Education underpins the realization of other children's rights, including their right to health, to an adequate standard of living, and protection from abuse and harm.

¹ UNESCO, Global Education Monitoring Report Summary 2020: Inclusion and Education: All Means All, p 27 <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373721>; UNICEF, A World Ready to Learn: Prioritizing Quality Early Childhood Education, April 2019, p 4. <https://www.unicef.org/media/57926/file/A-world-ready-to-learn-advocacy-brief-2019.pdf>