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EDUCATION FINANCE NETWORK EVIDENCE BRIEF

Faith-Based Schools: Conditions for Success

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Faith-Based Schools: Conditions for Success Evidence Brief

Affordable faith-based schools¹ are an integral part of the nonstate school sector and offer unique opportunities to expand access to education for children in marginalized communities in low- and middle-income countries (LMIC).

Globally, as of 2016, 35.1 million children were enrolled in Catholic primary schools and 20 million in Catholic secondary schools (Wodon 2021). In sub-Saharan Africa in 2014, for example, faith-based schools enrolled 14 percent of all primary school students and 11 percent of secondary school students (Wodon 2014). Types of schools considered “faith-based” are wide-ranging. The literature defines faith-based schools as any school affiliated with a faith-based organization or rooted in faith-based principles (Clarke, Jennings and Shaw 2007; Frame 2020). This broad definition includes sole proprietorships (i.e., community schools operating independently of an overarching religious body but still offering religious teaching as part of the curriculum); chains of schools run by faith-based, nongovernmental organizations; and schools receiving financial or administrative support from a religious institution like the Catholic Church (Parra Osorio and Wodon 2014).²

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¹ Throughout this evidence brief, unless otherwise stated, “faith-based schools” refers only to low-cost, faith-based schools.

² In addition to faith-based schools that operate independently from the government, in some sub-Saharan Africa contexts, schools founded by Catholic missionaries were later converted to public schools when the countries gained independence, although they still identify with faith-based traditions. For the purposes of this brief, “faith-based schools” will refer to nonstate schools rather than to schools that have been converted to public schools (Scheunpflug et al. 2021).

Given this broad definition and their significant share of the current education market, faith-based schools can play a key role in further expanding access to education worldwide. This may be particularly true in areas with disadvantaged students who may otherwise not attend school (Wales et al. 2015). In many contexts, faith-based schools are more accessible to disadvantaged families than public schools, as many of these students live in isolated areas or conflict zones and have no access to public schools (Upadhyay et al. 2018). Furthermore, parents who might otherwise opt not to enroll their children in school may be willing to send them to faith-based schools because they value the religious instruction offered. Despite the importance of faith-based schools in communities with otherwise limited education access, many partnerships between governments and faith-based schools have struggled to strike an appropriate balance between requiring that the schools adhere to government standards and allowing the flexibility to emphasize faith-based values in school environments. Further, while faith-based schools help reach a large base of students who would otherwise not attend school (Wodon 2021), they often face challenges in delivering quality education as they work to balance multiple priorities set by faith-based institutions, government stakeholders, and parents.

This evidence brief reviews existing literature to understand some of the important conditions that enable faith-based schools to improve educational access and deliver quality education as measured by improved learning outcomes. Available evidence points to three conditions important to ensuring that faith-based schools can provide both access and quality. For each condition, a set of key implications for policy makers highlights how governments can best support faith-based schools in achieving these dual educational aims. The brief also includes a case study on a chain of faith-based schools that exemplifies aspects of the three conditions needed to successfully improve students' learning outcomes.

CONDITIONS FOR SUCCESS:

What is necessary to ensure that faith-based schools both improve learning outcomes and increase access for disadvantaged students?



1 Partner with faith-based schools in hard-to-reach communities with limited public school infrastructure.



2 Offer subsidies to encourage faith-based schools to meet government standards for curriculum and quality.



3 Prioritize locally led practices and engagement in providing education.

CONDITION 1: Partner with faith-based schools in hard-to-reach communities with limited public-school infrastructure.

Faith-based schools are often successful at reaching underserved populations, particularly in isolated areas and conflict zones. In many cases, gaps in the geographic distribution of public schools leave many isolated communities without any schools nearby (Wodon 2020a). For example, one study of the San community in Zimbabwe found that in some villages, more than 40 percent of respondents reported traveling more than two hours to reach the nearest primary school (Phiri et al. 2020). Not only do some children lack nearby schools, but many parents in marginalized communities may be hesitant to send their children to local public schools for safety and cultural reasons. This is particularly so in conflict zones, where public schools may pose a safety risk for minority populations, or in marginalized areas, where parents may distrust outside authorities. Research highlights three distinct contexts in which learning depends heavily on faith-based education because authorities struggle to reach the communities with public school options. These include:

- Fragile and conflict-affected areas.** Faith-based schools located in fragile states play an important role when the government's ability to provide education is hindered by conflict, crisis, or resource constraints. One systematic review shows that faith-based schools may even offer a safer alternative than public schools for students in locations where violence is a risk (Upadhyay et al. 2018). In El Salvador, for example, faith-based schools are often the only schools children can access without crossing gang lines. Similarly, in Sierra Leone, faith-based schools were found to be insulated from conflict by their deep roots in community networks (Wodon and Ying 2009; Nishimuko 2009). In some cases, the level of protection provided by faith-based schools may be limited if the schools are not aligned with the aggressor. On the other hand, in regions such as northeast Nigeria, where rebel groups are of Islamic faith, madrasa schools offering Islamic instruction tend to be somewhat insulated from the violence perpetrated by these groups, whereas public schools may be at increased risk (Upadhyay et al. 2018).
- Isolated and marginalized areas with populations wary of government authorities.** Faith-based schools can fill education gaps in marginalized communities, among minority populations, and in hard-to-reach rural areas. Many are sole proprietorships that emerged organically, established by local religious leaders to meet gaps in education provision, and thus because of their religious affiliations are highly trusted by the local population (Bano 2012; Wales et al. 2015). In Pakistan, for example, isolated areas far from the nearest

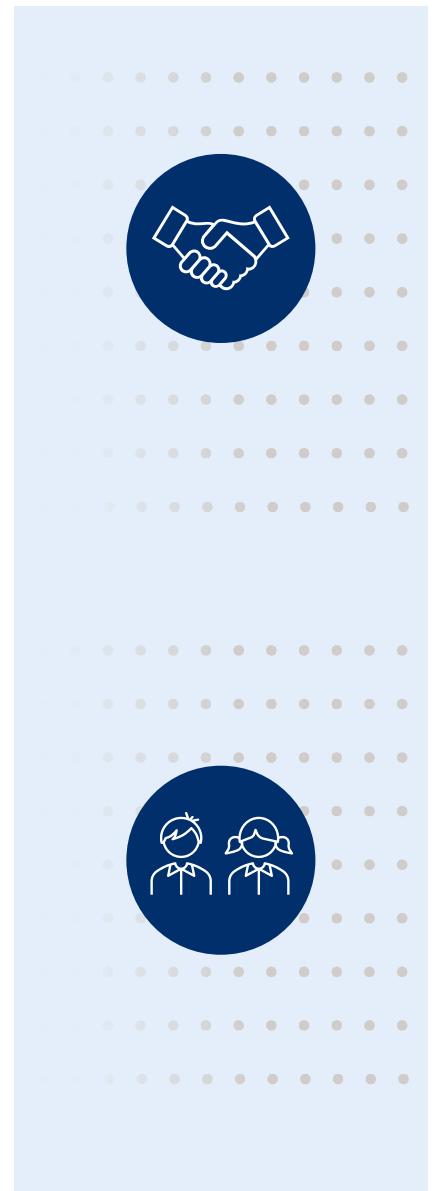
Key Finding:

Faith-based schools may offer a safer alternative than public schools for students in conflict-affected areas.



public school often still have a madrasa school connected to the local mosque (Bano 2012). Where faith-based schools are not grassroots sole proprietorships but rather parts of a larger network, they still often have stated missions to target marginalized populations (Parra Osorio and Wodon 2014). The mission-driven characteristics and funding of many faith-based organizations are part of what enables them to purposely locate in isolated and low-income areas. Faith-based affiliation enables these schools to establish trust in these communities based on their commonly held religious beliefs (Getu 2018).

- Communities with high rates of out-of-school children.** Even in communities that do have access to a nearby public school, faith-based schools often see high levels of enrollment and are effective in preventing dropouts because their religious affiliation appeals strongly to parents. Research highlights that parents who may not otherwise prioritize education, particularly for female students, may be incentivized to keep their children in faith-based schools if they strongly desire that their children receive religious instruction (Wales et al. 2015). This can be an important motivation for parents and is a factor not easily replicated by public schools. In Nigeria, for example, Upadhyay et al. (2018) finds that the importance of learning the Quran was a strong driver for parents in underserved communities to send their children to school. Similarly, in Burkina Faso, when asked why they had selected an Islamic school, 83.9 percent of respondents emphasized the opportunity for their children to receive a religious education, while only 25.8 percent highlighted academic quality, and 12.9 percent cited teacher quality (Wodon 2014).



Implications for policy makers

Prioritize faith-based schools as critical partners in expanding access to harder-to-serve areas. In conflict-affected, isolated, or marginalized areas, governments should assess whether such schools are already serving key community needs and, if so, partner with them rather than attempt to replace or take full ownership of the area's schools. Beyond being accessible in rural locations, faith-based schools also command a level of parental trust and buy-in that public schools may struggle to replicate.

When targeting communities with large numbers of out-of-school children, governments may also want to consider partnering with faith-based schools rather than allocating resources to public school expansion, risking low enrollment rates if public institutions are not trusted or desired by parents. Rather than dedicating resources to building new public schools, **governments can devote resources to actively engaging with faith-based schools.**



As a first step, education ministries can undertake active outreach to faith-based schools and institutions to build relationships and explore tangible methods of partnership, such as providing subsidies (discussed in more detail below). Providing subsidies has the added benefit of ensuring that low-cost, faith-based schools continue to **remain affordable**, as schools are less likely to increase their fees if they receive government support (Wodon 2019).

CONDITION 2: Offer subsidies to encourage faith-based schools to meet government standards for curriculum and quality.

Despite faith-based schools' advantages in accessing hard-to-reach communities, expanding their access to marginalized students does not necessarily translate into better learning outcomes for those students (Wales et al. 2014). For example, one study in sub-Saharan Africa found that faith-based schools performed significantly worse than other nonstate schools and only marginally better than public schools in the same area (Wodon 2020b). Another study in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) found that disadvantaged students in faith-based schools saw lower learning outcomes than those in public schools (Wodon 2017).

Key Finding:

Government subsidies are proven to be an effective incentive for faith-based schools to align with the standardized curriculum.

Learning outcomes are typically measured by how well students perform on national-level tests in standard subjects such as mathematics and reading. Because some faith-based schools focus their teaching on religious instruction, they may not follow the standardized national curriculum, which poses a challenge when trying to hold these schools accountable for improving learning outcomes in literacy and mathematics (Gemignani, Shojo, and Wodon 2014). For example, in many countries, including India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, unregistered community-level madrasas offer only religious content: their students do not have the opportunity to progress through the standard numeracy and literacy curricula (Bano 2011). Further, because faith-based schools may appeal to parents primarily due to their religious orientation rather than the quality of their teaching in other subjects, these schools may continue to satisfy parents even when they do not deliver strong academic results.

In light of these challenges, it is important that governments prioritize improvements to educational quality as a key aim of their partnerships with faith-based schools. To improve learning outcomes for disadvantaged students, faith-based schools must first ensure they teach standardized content and that their teaching aligns with the national curriculum and minimum quality standards. As Bano (2011) highlights, this is particularly important in contexts where informal, unregistered madrasas do not offer the standardized curriculum, and students are thus unable to achieve results in standard content, such as mathematics, to complete national exams, or to continue their education beyond primary school.

Research suggests that one of the most effective ways to improve the quality of the curriculum and teaching in faith-based schools is through government subsidies. Across many contexts, government subsidies are proven to be an effective incentive for getting schools to align with the standardized curriculum and ensuring they meet minimum standards of teaching quality (Bano 2011; Scheunpflug et al. 2021; Lavado et al. 2016). Many examples prove that introducing substantial government subsidies for faith-based schools results in improved access and learning outcomes. For example, the Bangladesh Madrasa reform program successfully improved education quality and expanded education to more than 3.9 million girls in secondary school (Bano 2011). In Rwanda, faith-based schools receive timely state-subsidized teacher salaries, and the national curriculum is planned collaboratively (Scheunpflug et al. 2021). In Peru, Catholic schools receive a government subsidy to cover teacher salaries and materials, and this has led to higher-quality learning environments in these schools by improving teacher motivation and retention and increasing the availability of resources and learning materials (Lavado et al. 2016).

Despite the many examples of successful government use of subsidies to partner with faith-based schools, success is often context-dependent, and challenges persist in certain regions. Research suggests that the successful use of subsidies depends on the quality of the relationship between the state and the religious authorities and the ability of these entities to productively engage with each other. For example, in Bangladesh, the Jamaat-i-Islami (an Islamic political party with a prominent role in Bangladeshi politics) has consistently voiced strong support of the madrasa reform program. The ideological connection between the political party and many madrasa leaders has led to strong buy-in (Bano 2011). In contrast, in Pakistan, many madrasas view the reform programs as being a Western-led initiative backed by foreign governments, and buy-in has consequently been weak, while in India, the minority status of Muslims has meant that madrasas resist relying on the government for support (Bano 2011; Wales et al. 2014). Titeca, De Herdt, and Wagemakers (2013) find similar challenges in the DRC, where the Catholic Church holds a powerful position and is often able to impact state regulation of its schools, rather than vice versa. In the context of the DRC, Titeca, De Herdt, and Wagemakers (2013) also highlight how capable local actors—including both local-level government authorities and local religious leaders—were of critical importance in building a strong relationship between faith-based schools and education ministries at the local level, despite fraught negotiations over higher-level policies.

Implications for policy makers:

Provide subsidies to faith-based schools to encourage alignment with the standardized curriculum and improvements in quality.

To be effective, these subsidies should be substantial enough to incentivize faith-based schools to offer the standardized curriculum as a first step, as well as to make other quality improvements in teaching materials and teacher quality.

Consider history and context at the state and local level. For government subsidies to receive sufficient buy-in, a positive history of relations must be built between the state and religious authorities. In contexts that lack positive engagements between the central government and high-level religious elites, the role of local actors is important in building this trust and partnership from the ground up. Once trust is established, subsidies and other partnerships to improve education quality can be introduced more effectively.

Ensure subsidized schools maintain community trust. In some contexts, such as Uganda, once schools begin receiving subsidies they are termed “government-aided” and thus may lose a level of trust within the marginalized communities they serve if residents are wary of government authorities (Muwagga, Genza, and Ssemulya 2013). In these contexts, for faith-based schools to continue to instill trust, they must remain community-owned and maintain a degree of autonomy from the government.

CONDITION 3: Prioritize community engagement in providing education.

The grassroots nature of faith-based schools is critical to ensuring they remain both sustainable and high quality. The community-centered values of faith-based schools mean that many garner high community buy-in and financial support, which contributes to the schools’ financial sustainability. For example, in Latin America, religious leaders often have authority in communities that helps



Key Finding:

Community engagement in faith-based schools is critical for improving learning outcomes.

them mobilize community resources for the schools (Parra Osorio and Wodon 2014). In Pakistan and Bangladesh, madrasa schools have been able to sustain themselves through a combination of community support, patronage from prominent families or individuals, and contributions from diaspora communities abroad (Bano 2012; Sommers 2012).

In addition to being essential for sustainability, prioritizing community engagement in faith-based schools is also critical to ensuring these schools improve learning outcomes. Research highlights that faith-based schools that are deeply rooted in community networks, traditions, and culture succeed in generating strong community engagement among teachers, parents, and students (Wales et al. 2015; GEM Report 2021/2). Across multiple contexts including Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, and South Asia, numerous global systematic reviews have found that a locally led approach is an important factor that leads to improved learning outcomes (Aslam, Rawal, and Saeed 2017; Wales et al. 2015; Upadhyay et al. 2018). When designing government partnerships, it is thus important that faith-based schools remain locally led, with the freedom to structure their curricula, teaching, and school environments in ways that prioritize faith-based values and content. Research highlights how a school's faith-based connection with its students can also foster a sense of community and normalcy in crisis- and conflict-affected settings, which leads to improved learning (Upadhyay et al. 2018 ; Wales et al. 2015). For example, as Allcott and Ortega (2009) illustrate, Fe y Alegría (FYA) schools across Latin America center around faith-based values and create a strong “family” culture that engages the entire community. As further highlighted in the case-study below, the culture of community engagement in FYA schools has been cited as one key reason for its strong learning-outcome results (Parra Osorio and Wodon 2014).

Case Study: Fe y Alegría (FYA)

The case study of FYA demonstrates how a strong partnership between government and faith-based schools can successfully use government subsidies to expand access while maintaining a locally led approach. FYA was chosen for this case study because it has been the subject of several rigorous evaluations and much research, all of which concluded FYA had achieved results that could be replicated in other regions.

Founded in 1955 in Colombia, FYA is a network of Catholic schools operating in 20 countries throughout Latin America. FYA schools receive government subsidies that cover the full cost of teacher salaries, and they teach the same national curriculum that is taught in public schools. FYA specifically targets low-income communities, and studies have found that FYA schools consistently improve learning outcomes for their students (Allcott and Ortega 2009; Parra Osorio and Wodon 2014). One study found that, in most cases, FYA students performed better than their peers from other schools when controlling for student background (Parra Osorio and Wodon 2014).

The success of FYA schools exemplifies the importance of prioritizing community engagement in education provision. Extensive research and evaluations on FYA point to the schools' whole-of-community engagement as being a key reason for their success. The research also highlights how FYA schools strike an appropriate balance between government regulation regarding quality outcomes and flexibility within individual schools to emphasize community values.



Photo source: Opportunity International

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These two success factors are further explained below:

- 1. Community engagement:** “Family feeling” is a term used by the schools’ own students, teachers, and parents to describe the community-oriented culture of FYA schools. This family culture has been consistently cited as a strong motivator for teachers to engage more with parents and vice-versa and as a motivating factor for students to work hard in school and respect school property (Allcott and Ortega 2009). FYA schools also have Family-School-Community projects, ranging from programs to provide school lunches to training, retreats, cooperatives, and microenterprises, that are entirely community-owned and run by community members in partnership with the school. A paper by González and Arévalo (2005) points to how this project gives community and school members a common goal with a shared vision that motivates all involved. Extensive research on the FYA network has widely credited this approach with the strong learning-outcome results achieved by FYA students (González and Arévalo 2005; Allcott and Ortega 2009; Parra Osorio and Wodon 2014).
- 2. Flexibility within government partnerships:** While FYA receives government subsidies that require schools to teach the national curriculum and abide by government standards, the partnership still allows significant autonomy at the school level (Allcott and Ortega 2009). Schools continue to emphasize faith-based values in curriculum content, teachers are empowered to make decisions around how they structure lessons, and school leaders design hiring practices to include in-person monitoring, individualized feedback, and tailored training for teachers. This school-level autonomy has led to a positive school culture, high teacher satisfaction, and staff with a strong commitment to the school—factors that Allcott and Ortega (2009) cite as leading to improved learning outcomes.



Photo source: Opportunity International



Photo source: Opportunity International

Implications for policymakers

Ensure faith-based schools have freedom to emphasize community values and cultural and religious traditions. This is critical to maintaining community buy-in and leads to improved sustainability and learning outcomes. When implementing reform programs, such as integrating the standardized curriculum into faith-based schools, it is important that governments allow schools to prioritize religious teachings alongside the standardized curriculum and that government regulations do not prevent faith-based schools from devoting significant time to religious instruction along with the standard curriculum.



Photo source: Opportunity International

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About the Education Finance Network

The Education Finance Network convenes diverse education stakeholders with a focus on directing non-state resources toward creating inclusive, high-quality education in low- and middle-income countries globally.

The Network is open to a broad range of organizations, including foundations and family offices, donors, impact investors, practitioner networks and research and advisory orgs. It provides members with opportunities to network, engage the public sector through policy forums, work on technical issues and trends affecting the sector through focused working groups, access members' only research, and participate in professional development.

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