Policy Brief

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Students at Panchakanya Girls School, Dhanusha © Nathalie Bertrams/ GAGE 2026. Licensed uner CC by 4.0

Addressing education challenges in Nepal: lessons from the GAGE study for the School Education Sector Plan (SESP)

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Overview

Nepal's Constitution guarantees free basic and secondary education as a fundamental right of Nepali citizens. The United Nations (UN) highlights that education is the basis for guaranteeing the realisation of other rights (UNESCO, 2016). In its call to action to eradicate extreme poverty, protect the planet, and ensure global prosperity and peace by 2030, the UN places ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all as its fourth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG 4).

Nepal has integrated SDG 4 in its Fifteenth Development Plan (2019/20–2023/24) (NPC, 2018)[1] and the Long-Term Vision 2100 (NPC, 2020 and developed federal and localised plans, an SDG education roadmap, localisation guidelines and monitoring frameworks for education indicators. Among these, the School Education Sector Plan (SESP) 2022/23–2031/32 is the country's overarching framework in the education sector designed to achieve the targets of SDG 4.

The government periodically reviews SESP's progress through joint meetings with various stakeholders, including development partners and civil society. While Nepal's education sector has seen good progress over recent years (Centre for Education and Human Resource Development, 2025)[2], several challenges remain in the education sector which hampers adolescents' and young people's education and learning. Existing studies point to poor academic outcomes, unequal quality between private and public schools; and insufficient numbers of trained teachers as some important challenges(Government of Nepal, Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, 2022)[3]. Based on the findings of the GAGE study in Nepal, we discuss challenges that are less highlighted and what SESP could do to address them. After a brief overview of GAGE, the brief presents findings on adolescent enrolment, absenteeism, learning outcomes, school dropout and reasons for this including child marriage and low post-secondary school aspirations, as well child marriage as a barrier to school retention. Following an overview of headline findings for each dimension of education, corresponding lessons and recommendations for the School Education Sector Plan are presented.

1. Government of Nepal, National Planning Commission. (2020). The Fifteenth Plan (Fiscal Year 2019/20–2023/24). Kathmandu, Nepal: National Planning Commission.
2. Centre for Education and Human Resource Development (CEHRD). (2024). Flash I Report 2080 (2023/24). Government of Nepal, Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, Sanothimi, Bhaktapur.
3. Government of Nepal, Ministry of Education, Science and Technology. (2022). School Education Sector Plan 2022–2032. Kathmandu: Ministry of Education, Science and Technology.

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GAGE study overview and design

GAGE is a longitudinal, mixed-methods study primarily funded by UK Aid and other partners. By combining quantitative and qualitative research exploring adolescents' gendered experiences with longitudinal impact evaluations testing programme effectiveness, GAGE explores what types of strategies are most effective in transforming adolescent girls' and boys' lives at specific junctures during the critical second decade of life. The study is being conducted in Nepal and Bangladesh (in South Asia), in Jordan, Lebanon and Palestine (in the Middle East), and in Ethiopia (in Africa).

GAGE methodology in Nepal

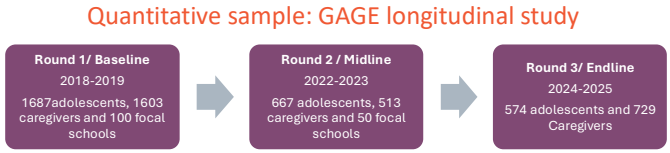
In Nepal, GAGE collected data across three rounds, in 2018 (baseline), 2023 (midline) and 2025 (endline), in Nuwakot and Tanahun districts. Additional research was carried out in Surkhet, Rauthahat and Dhanusha. The research aimed to understand the patterning of young people's education trajectories over time, and what types of interventions and combinations of programming can support adolescent well-being. In addition to longitudinal observational research, the study also included a nested impact evaluation of the Girls' Education Programme (GEP) implemented by Room to Read (R2R). Figures 1 and 2 describe the study design and sample.

The sample comprised control and treatment cohorts of girls and their parents. Surveys were conducted with girls and their guardians and teachers (from both cohorts) at baseline and midline, and with girls and their parents (again from both cohorts) at endline.

Interactive qualitative interviews carried out at midline and endline included in-depth interviews with treatment and control girls, social network mapping, outlier case studies, focus group discussions, and key informant interviews with relevant government and non-government stakeholders, teachers, programme implementers and people participating in programme monitoring. Endline interviews included an additional cohort of boys.

The report begins with a brief overview of the SESP and then describes the five major education-related challenges that emerged from the GAGE study. In each section, we propose actions that the SESP could take to address the respective challenges and support adolescents and young people's pathway through education and learning in order to make a successful transition to young adulthood.

Figure 1: Quantiative data and data collection rounds



Timeline for quantitative research in Nepal

	Round 1/ Baseline	Round 2/ Midline	Round 3/ Endline
Total	3390	1230	1303
Adolescent girls	1687	667	574
Caregivers	1603	513	729
Focal schools	100	50	(Undertook key informant interviews instead to understand context shifts)

Figure 2: Qualitative data and data collection rounds



Details of qualitative tools used and the number of interviews

Round	Qualitative Tools				
	Mini workshop	In-depth interviews	Focus group discussions	Case studies	Key Informant Interviews
Round 1/ Midline	16	24	12	6	10
Round 2/ Endline	8	56	8	6	20



Students at Vyas Samata School, Tanahaun © Nathalie Bertrams/ GAGE 2026. Licensed uner CC by 4.0

Box 1: Nepal's education sector and the SESP

The education system in Nepal is governed by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoEST), and comprises school education, higher education and vocational education. School education is divided into basic education (which includes one year of early childhood education and development/pre-primary education, ECED/PPE), primary education (covering grades 1–8), and secondary education (grades 9–12).

SESP is Nepal's overarching framework in the education sector, designed to achieve the country's long-term vision and objectives on education. The SESP objectives are aligned with SDG 4, and indicators have been designed to monitor progress against SDG targets.

SESP is led by the MoEST at the federal level. The programme serves as the national roadmap for implementing education, and provinces and selected municipalities are supported in drafting their SESP, alongside the federal plan, to ensure that it is firmly rooted in the context and local experiences, practices and needs. SESP draws on the achievements of the previous two national education plans, the School Sector Reform Plan (SSRP) (2009–2016) and the School Sector Development Plan (SSDP) (2016–2023).

The SESP focuses on six core areas that are aligned to SDG 4 while also adapted to the needs of Nepal's education sector: (1) universal access to education; (2) literacy and lifelong learning spanning from early childhood to adulthood; (3) removing gender and other disparities and barriers in access to education; (4) technical and vocational education (TVET); (5) safe and inclusive schools; and (6) qualified teachers and learning quality. In line with this, SESP aims to improve equitable access to quality education, strengthen learning outcomes, modernise the curriculum and pedagogy, enhance teacher quality, improve school governance, and ensure resilient and technology-enabled education systems.



Students during break at Tribhuwan Trishuli Secondary School (the building was washed away by 2026 flood)
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Current challenges in adolescent and young people's education, and lessons for SESP

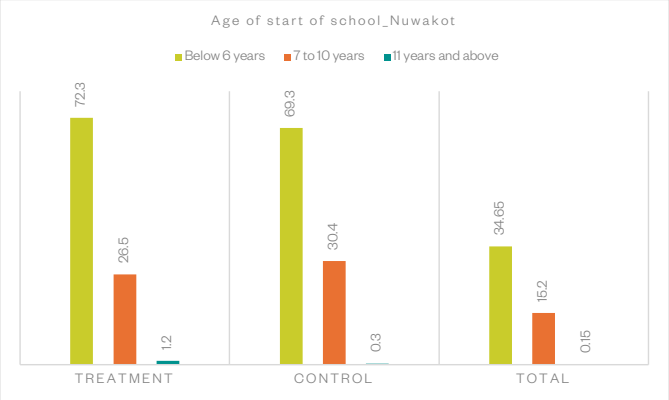
1. Late enrolment

Despite the age of enrolment in grade 1 being 4 years, 1 in 5 survey participants (21%) started school when aged between 7 and 10 years. As we discuss subsequently, this has an impact on early dropout, for girls and boys alike: girls succumb to pressure for marriage, and boys to pressure to earn to contribute to household income, between grades 9 and 12, eventually leading to dropout at these ages.

Lessons and Recommendations for SESP

- Continue current efforts to expand early childhood development (ECD) programming to reach 100% by 2030 and include targets and activities in the plan to monitor ECD-to-school transition. This can be done by close coordination of the existing school management and ECD management committees in the local government's education plans.
- Continue programmes that have helped achieve high school enrolment such as door-to-door campaign, free admission, community-based enrolment campaigns.

Figure 3: Age when first started school



2. Higher rates of absenteeism

The GAGE study finds a persistent lack of motivation to attend school among students as they enter mid- and older adolescence and transition to young adulthood. More than a quarter (26.5%) of girls who had not attended earlier sessions and had completely left formal schooling dropped out because they lacked motivation.

Lack of motivation was mainly attributed to the school environment. Respondents described teachers' unrespectful and demeaning behaviour towards students, carelessness (such as teachers not coming to classes regularly or asking children to go out and play instead of taking classes), ways of teaching, and lack of infrastructure. They also cited the learning environment as being behind their lack of motivation (overcrowded classes, traditional teaching formats, lack of subjects they wanted to study, lack of proper laboratories and computer facilities for computer classes, no extra-curricular learning sessions). For these reasons, adolescents and young people did not see the value of continuing education, believing that coming to school was a waste of time and they were not learning anything.

Lessons and recommendations for SESP

- Leverage school systems and governance to actively monitor teachers' behaviours and invest in training for non-violent pedagogy.
- Make student clubs compulsory and develop them as a complaint-mediating and school accountability entity.
- Expand the definition of corporal punishment in education policies and regulations to explicitly include emotional and psychological violence, humiliating and defamatory practices, and gender-discriminatory and toxic masculinity-related behaviours perpetrated by teachers and other school personnel, and establish clear prevention, reporting, and accountability mechanisms to address such forms of violence in schools. Integrate adolescent development and psychosocial wellbeing into SESP teacher development and school governance programmes by providing regular training and capacity-building for teachers and School Management Committee members on adolescent psychology, learning processes, motivation, school engagement, and psychosocial well-being. Such interventions should aim to create school environments that support adolescents' psycho-social and emotional well-being.
- Establish student welfare units to improve communication between teachers and students and to promote active involvement of students in shaping school governance. This can be achieved through expanding and promoting active participation in student clubs and other networks, supporting adolescents to develop voice and agency.

3. Time poverty resulting in high absenteeism

GAGE findings show that absenteeism was another persistent challenge strongly related to school dropout. In 2018, the average percentage of respondents who missed school in the two weeks preceding the survey was 27%. This figure had increased significantly to 44% at the 2024 survey. This shows that as girls enter mid- and later adolescence, absenteeism becomes pronounced. Household and care work and agricultural work were the main reasons for absenteeism. The same situation also applies to boys. Boys shared that as they become older, they are required to be responsible for agricultural work, supporting home-based business and expected to earn an income or contribute to the family's business activities. Adolescents and young people who have the highest rates of absenteeism also include those whose parent has gone for foreign employment, those with disabled family members, those with sibling care duties, those who have a disabled parent, and adolescents with cognitive challenges.

Findings from the qualitative study show that this is also the stage at which the curriculum becomes vast: covering more subjects, with a lack of linkages to content of earlier grades, and requiring more engagement in education. As they miss lessons for an extended period of time, adolescents fail in exams and eventually drop out.

Lessons and recommendations for SESP

- Acknowledge the root causes of absenteeism and work with parents to address it
- Introduce earning while learning programmes to address family's economic challenges as a reason for absenteeism.
- Support students with special circumstances through localised secondary wraparound support such as community-based free tuitions, exams and reading spaces, and support in homework.

4. Poor Learning Outcomes

The Constitution of Nepal recognises quality education as a fundamental right and places responsibility on the state to ensure educational outcomes that meet national, regional, and international standards. One of the five objectives of the School Education Sector Plan (SESP) is to improve the quality of education, make strong foundational learning and high quality educational achievement.

However, evidence from the GAGE study indicates that learning outcomes among adolescents and young people remain significantly below expected standards. Assessments of literacy, numeracy, and English reading comprehension found that many students were unable to achieve minimum grade-level competencies. Among the 206 participants (out of 574) who were unable to perform division at baseline, 1.5% remained at the beginner level in the ASER mathematics assessment, demonstrating severe learning deficits. Other research which conducted similar assessments in Karnali and Sudurpaschim found that approximately 60% of Grade 10 students performed below the Proficient 1 level, indicating that many adolescents are unable to achieve the minimum competencies expected by the national curriculum.

Findings from GAGE suggest that poor learning outcomes are driven by multiple structural factors, including inadequate physical and educational resources, limited teacher training and motivation, weak engagement of parents and school management committees, insufficient emphasis on quality of learning, and limited awareness of the long-term implications of poor learning outcomes. These challenges are particularly pronounced in government schools.

The increasing use of mobile phones and social media for non-academic purposes has also emerged as a strong factor negatively impacting learning outcomes. GAGE findings indicate that adolescents typically gain access to mobile phones around Grade 8 and primarily use them for recreational purposes, including gaming applications and social media platforms. Teachers and parents reported that such use has contributed to shorter attention spans, distraction, reduced concentration, poorer memory retention, declining academic engagement, behavioural challenges, poor time management, and diminished interest in learning. They also observed behavioural problems, including disobedience, irritability, and disregard for socially expected behaviours. Despite SESP's commitment to promoting effective pedagogical approaches and strengthening teacher competencies, it does not adequately address the growing impact of digital distractions on learning outcomes.

Lessons and Recommendations for SESP

To address declining educational outcomes and strengthen learning achievement, SESP should:

- Prioritise learning outcomes in SESP by establishing measurable targets for improvements in literacy, numeracy, and foundational learning, and aligning resource allocation and programming accordingly.
- Make quality assessment systems explicit within SESP by strengthening assessment frameworks through regular classroom-based, peer-to-peer, and competency-based assessments to monitor student progress against grade-level learning expectations.
- Strengthen duty bearers' accountability by incorporating mechanisms to engage and hold parents, teachers, school management committees, local governments and community stakeholders accountable for educational outcomes.

- Promote student motivation and engagement through targeted programmes that encourage collaborative learning, group work, and academic competitions. This should include changing learning cultures from a school and school based to incorporate community such as establishing cross-school and community-based learning infrastructures and initiatives, such as community homework centres and inter-school academic competitions.
- Invest in continuous teacher professional development through regular training and refresher courses to strengthen subject knowledge and pedagogical skills.
- Expand the use of innovative and contextualised teaching methods, including libraries, locally relevant non-digital learning materials, and practice-based pedagogical approaches, while restricting overreliance on digital technology-based instruction.
- Introduce strict regulations on digital content and usage patterns by students including restrictions on mobile phone use in schools, encouraging the use of non-digital teaching/learning methods and educational resources such as libraries and books, and introducing regulations on digital content and usage patterns to address the educational, psychosocial, and behavioural impacts of excessive social media use.

5. High dropout rates

The levels of schooling girls completed before leaving formal education provide insights into retention thresholds, particularly around the critical transition to upper secondary education. Almost all (99%) of respondents aspired to complete high school. However, as with the national data, where the survival rate for grade 12 is just 42.4%, the survival rate for grade 12 among GAGE respondents was 67%. We also found substantial dropout among boys. Aspirations for university education was substantially lower than for upper secondary, at 76%. This was also true for boys.

There are critical junctures where dropout rates are high: Drop-out rates were high in grade 7 (5.2%), grade 10 (14.25%) and grade 12 (53.5%) indicating barriers remain pronounced at these junctures. By age, dropouts are highest when girls are aged between 16 and 19 years (Figure 4).

Economic reasons, underestimation of the long-term benefits of higher education and associated lack of wiliness to invest time and resources in it, failure in exams, migration for foreign employment, and marriage were the main reasons for dropout. Child and underage marriage without completing secondary education is common in Nepal, and negatively affects the future educational and economic well-being of girls and boys, which, in turn, negatively impacts the other capabilities. Other reasons for dropout include lack of a conducive environment for studying at home due to alcoholism among parents, absence of father/mother or both parents and regular disputes in the family. Issues that did not substantially impact dropout include safety concerns, distance to school, doing paid or household work, and lack of permission from in-laws (all below 2%).

Figure 4: Drop-out rates by age

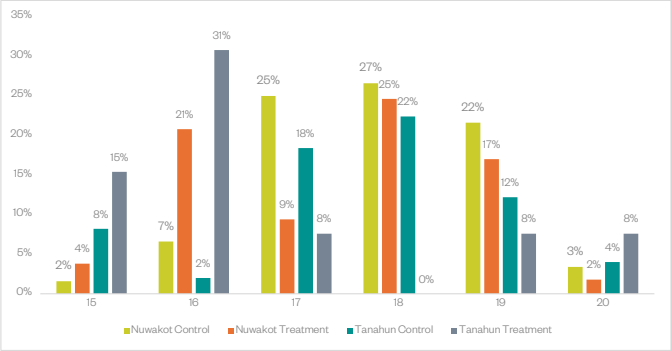
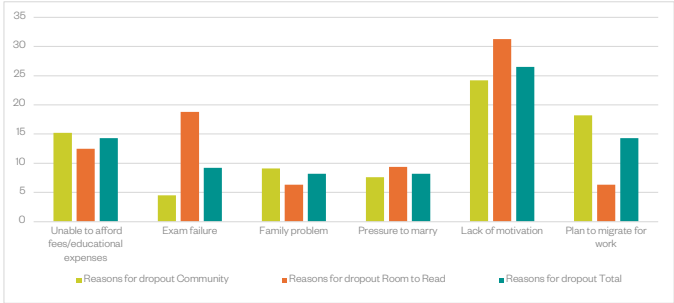


Figure 5: Reasons for drop-out



A significant proportion of girls started school late, when aged between 7 and 10, and so would reach what was considered marriageable age locally when reaching grade 10. This means that girls would have to overcome a strong marriage barrier to reach grade 11 and continue after grade 12. Among married girls, marriage was the main reason for dropout.

Repetition of grades is not common in Nepal. The study finds that 91.5% of girls attended their final schooling level for 1 to 2 years. This suggests they tend to drop out of school altogether rather than repeating grades if they fail one or two times. The same trend was evident among boys.

Lessons and recommendations for SESP.

- Moving beyond the current economic support, which clearly has not been able to cover all students' needs and social norms around contributing economically, particularly for boys, SESP should prioritise linking secondary education with earning opportunities. It should

institutionalise 'earn and learn' programmes across all schools and integrate them into SESP policy frameworks. GAGE has found successful case stories from schools which implemented them. Earn while you learn can be done through school-based internships, age-appropriate entrepreneurship, and other age-appropriate economic activities that provide earning opportunities for mid- to older adolescents and young adults. The GAGE study shows that this should start from grade 8 and continue through to university education. Although expanding secondary education and integrating technical and vocational skills is a key target of SESP, it is not explicit enough to address the needs of adolescents and young adults for linkages between education and employment. SESP needs to address the current disconnect by making these linkages a core area of work. Activities could include apprenticeship programmes and internship placements starting through secondary education, integrating career guidance, labour market information, and counselling into secondary and tertiary education, while continuously emphasising the value of tertiary education.

- SESP could address the issue of low inclination to repeat grades after failing to progress (and high dropout due to failure to progress) by making provisions for immediate re-examinations.
- SESP should make provisions for special learning pathways to cover gaps due to failure through additional wraparound support. Such wraparound support can be done through complementary academic support in schools, such as free, community-based tuition classes (there is particular demand for English, maths, science and Nepali language where it is not the mother tongue), day boarding facilities in school and extra classes for weak students, material support such as provision of study spaces and resources in the community and engagement support such as ensuring strong engagement of parents and local political leaders in academic pursuits of adolescents. This support should target students who have low achievement in such subjects, and those whose parents have limited educational attainment.

6. Early marriage and school dropout

The GAGE study finds that early marriage and school dropout reinforce each other. School- and community-based programmes that promote delaying early marriage have helped support retention in education. Similarly, programmes that support retention have helped to delay early marriage. As noted earlier, marriage is one of the main reasons why adolescents and young adults (girls and boys) drop out of education.

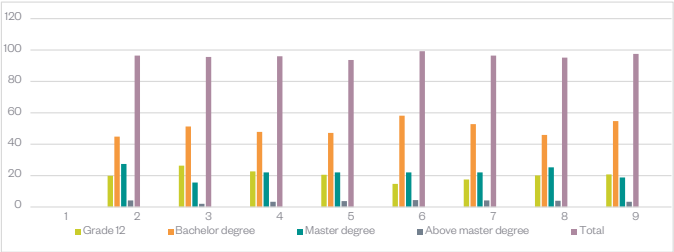
Lessons and recommendations for SESP

- Given the strong association between child marriage and school dropout, SESP should link with programmes preventing child marriage and reinforcing the implementation of existing legal provisions. This includes supporting efforts to uphold the legal minimum age of marriage at 20 years, thereby enabling adolescents to enter tertiary education before marriage or dropping out of education.
- SESP should make life skills and emotional management programmes mandatory for schools. The programmes should have explicit measures to design education systems that strengthen socio-emotional and life skills of adolescents, impart strong civic responsibilities. Existing system can be improved by making life skill programmes such as 'Rupantaran' and 'Girls Empowerment Programmes' universal and compulsory, and tailoring them to include structured sessions on emotional management, comprehensive sexual education, communication negotiation, managing relationships with opposite sex, civic responsibilities, and avoiding early sexual activity.
- Programmes should also explicitly support married adolescents to continue their education after marriage. This can be done through community-based awareness initiatives to address stigma and promote non-discrimination against married students, including support for keeping daughters-in-law in education. In Nepal, the schools and school management committees (SMCs) have proven success in improving primary education enrolment. SESP could build on this by engaging schools and SMCs to actively facilitate the re-enrolment and retention of married girls in secondary and tertiary levels.
- For the mid-term, SESP should create a national-level database to track married adolescents' access to and continuation in education, enabling evidence-based planning and monitoring.

7. Low post-secondary school aspirations

The GAGE study finds that girls have low aspirations for education beyond high school. Although 97% of students aspired to complete high school, this figure drops to 76% for aspirations to a Bachelor's degree and 26% for a Master's degree.

Figure 6: Highest grade aspired



Among the 76% of respondents aspiring for a Bachelor's degree, only 49% believe they are likely to achieve those aspirations. Boys also had similarly low aspirations for higher education. They believed they would be leaving the country to find work abroad, so they can combine earning while studying abroad.

Lessons and recommendations for SESP

- Build aspirations for higher education by conducting targeted interventions to raise awareness (among parents and students) about the importance of higher education.
- Leverage digital technologies to expose adolescents to global learning opportunities and diverse educational pathways.
- Utilise global networks to facilitate virtual exchanges, knowledge-sharing, and exposure to education and career pathways across contexts. Encourage local governments to institutionalise such exchange programmes through partnerships with international institutions and counterparts in other countries.
- Enhance career guidance by providing counselling and information on locally available education and career pathways to build motivation and informed decision-making. Room to Read's career counselling and information sessions can be replicated by other programmes.

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