

21ST CENTURY SKILLS: THE ROLE OF EDUCATION



Class 8 students study together in the computer lab at Marble Quarry Primary School in Kajiado Central on the outskirts of Nairobi, Kenya as part of a girls' education initiative supported by private sector partners Ecobank Foundation, Avanti Communications and Rotary.

GPE/Luis Tato

Children need a broad range of skills including creativity, problem solving and collaboration to enter the modern workforce. Through policy dialogue and advocacy, financing and partnerships with the private and public sectors, the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) supports partner countries to improve learning through education systems that equip young people with the skills they need for the 21st century and a fast-changing economy.

THE CHALLENGE

- ▶ There is a **global learning crisis** exacerbated by the lasting impacts of pandemic-related school closures, climate change, conflict and economic slowdown. The **cost of children not learning** is an estimated **US\$129 billion** a year—roughly 10 percent of global spending on education.
- ▶ Young people aged 15 to 24 are having difficulty entering the workforce, with **youth unemployment rates** close to **30 percent** in lower-income countries.
- ▶ As of 2023, 20 percent of youth worldwide were not in employment, education or training (NEET)—**2 in 3 are young women**.
- ▶ Close to 40 percent of employers report **lacking workers with the skills** they need, and the skills gap between low- and high-income countries is deepening. Employers expect that by 2030, **39 percent** of skills required for jobs today will transform and even become obsolete.
- ▶ In lower-income countries, **educational mismatch** is a problem for **every 2 out of 3 young adult**

workers, meaning their qualifications do not match the job they have. This mismatch is largely driven by workers being undereducated.

THE LEARNING CRISIS



7 IN 10

CHILDREN in low- and middle-income countries cannot read and understand a simple story by age 10.



90%

OF CHILDREN in low-income countries could be left behind by 2030 in terms of achieving even basic secondary-level skills.



\$97 BILLION

The annual gap in education financing to reach Sustainable Development Goal 4 by 2030.

WHY 21ST CENTURY SKILLS MATTER

Also referred to as ‘life skills’ or ‘soft skills,’ **creative thinking, analytical ability, problem solving** and **effective coordination** are vital for the 21st century. Starting with foundational learning, education develops the skills needed to live, learn and work to ensure young people can successfully engage with increasingly complex societies.

Education systems can support countries to navigate a fast-paced, changing and often digitalized economy by **preparing children for an evolving workplace** with the skills to create, innovate and harness employment opportunities. The World Economic Forum’s 2025 Future of Jobs Report cites analytical thinking as the top skill required by employers worldwide, followed by resilience, adaptability, leadership, collaboration, creative thinking and self-awareness. Research has found increasing the socio-emotional skills of girls and young women can also improve their likelihood to seek employment.

We need young people who can think critically, communicate effectively, collaborate with diverse peers, solve complex problems and engage with new technologies. The Education 2030 agenda commits countries to ensuring learners acquire knowledge and skills in areas of sustainable development, human rights, gender equality and global citizenship.

GPE APPROACH

As a partnership and a fund, GPE brings together a unique set of assets, tools and resources to transform education in lower-income countries, fostering economic growth and employment opportunities. Through **global policy dialogue** and **advocacy, financing** and **knowledge investments**, GPE focuses on building quality, inclusive education systems that provide crucial foundational learning skills (literacy, numeracy and socio-emotional) and prepare students for the transition to the world of work.

With private sector partners uniquely placed to identify the skills required in the labor market, GPE also promotes **public-private partnerships** to develop corresponding curricula. This ensures education systems in partner countries equip their students with both foundational knowledge and practical skills to thrive in the workplace:

- ▶ In **Lesotho**, the Chamber of Commerce actively participates in national education sector dialogue as a member of the local education group. Local

private and philanthropic partners also recently provided **over \$3 million** for a Ministry of Education program, unlocking an equivalent amount from the **GPE Multiplier** to reach over **\$6 million** in funding for increasing access to quality education with a focus on gender equality, students with disabilities and 21st century skills.

- ▶ In **Ghana**, a consortium of private and philanthropic partners—the largest public-private partnership on the African continent—along with GPE plans to invest **\$40 million** in foundational learning to make the country an example of prioritizing financial support to education for sustainable development. The consortium is actively engaged in a government-led process to define education priorities for the years ahead. Funding will be used to bring evidence-based foundational learning interventions to scale, including teacher training and the creation of a foundational learning data evidence and research lab within the Ministry of Education.

GPE RESULTS

- ▶ Partner countries are increasingly prioritizing 21st century skills, often with the participation of private sector partners: **20 GPE grants** active in 2024 included a focus on skills that ready students for employment.
- ▶ **Kenya**, in partnership with the LEGO Foundation, the World Bank and GPE, is rolling out a competency-based curriculum for early years that aims to address the mismatch between what is taught in school and the requirements of the labor market. The new curriculum emphasizes active learning, critical thinking and assessing learners on a continuous basis.
- ▶ **El Salvador** has prioritized socio-emotional skills in its new education sector plan to improve the national curriculum and has developed modules currently being used to train teachers on children’s socio-emotional skills. El Salvador has also partnered with ARCEducate to train teachers on promoting student creativity and innovative thinking.
- ▶ Through the **Assessment for Learning (A4L) Initiative** and the **GPE Knowledge and Innovation Exchange (KIX)**, GPE has collaborated with regional networks and partner countries to develop relevant assessment tools and support integrating 21st century skills to match country policy aspirations based on GPE’s [landscape review](#).