

## BRIEF:

# Access to education within parallel education systems in Myanmar

This brief is based on a rapid review conducted as part of the ERICC Helpdesk. ERICC looks to build a systematic knowledge base of education provision in conflict and protracted crisis.

The rapid review focused on access to education across parallel education systems in the Myanmar context, with particular focus on systems administered by ethnic education administrations. The following brief notes trends in educational access across seven such administrations, highlights gaps in data availability and offers recommendations to support more conflict-sensitive and complexity-aware approaches to evidence generation. It aims to inform ongoing dialogue among education actors working to ensure equitable access to learning opportunities for all children of Myanmar.

## About the ERICC Helpdesk

The ERICC Helpdesk provides an expert, demand-driven, high quality, and agile call-down mechanism for technical assistance to FCDO country offices, implementation partners, and in-country partners. This provides rapid research, evidence synthesis and analysis, and expert advice, as well as the provision of small-scale research linked to program design or evaluation (including replication and implementation science studies). Through this mechanism, we support a strengthened uptake of evidence-based policies and improve value for money in FCDO-supported education programming in key FCDO areas of operation.

This mechanism links to existing and forthcoming FCDO technical assistance resources for education. In addition, with FCDO clients, the Helpdesk seeks to proactively identify areas of interest and collaborate on design and early identification of technical support needs. The Helpdesk roster comprises over 50 highly skilled technical experts and senior researcher specialists from the International Rescue Committee (IRC) and partner organisations, with extensive experience in education in conflict-affected contexts.

## 1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Accurate, timely, and inclusive data is essential for planning, delivering, and monitoring education in settings of conflict and crisis. In Myanmar, protracted armed conflict, environmental shocks and natural disasters, mass displacement, and a multiplicity of sovereignties have created a highly complex education landscape. In this context, data can often be inaccessible, inconsistent, or incomplete. Challenges are further compounded by the politicisation of education, where there may be reluctance to share data or incentive to (mis)use data to project political legitimacy.

Since the February 2021 coup, Myanmar's education sector has experienced deep disruption and transformation, affecting some 13 million children. Enrolment in the Ministry of Education system administered by the State Administration Council<sup>1</sup> (SAC) declined sharply (see Table 1), falling by over 4.1 million compared to pre-pandemic levels. While numbers have gradually risen in subsequent years, by the 2023-24 academic year, enrolment remained 1.89 million students below 2019-20 levels—a 21% decrease.

**Table 1. Student enrolment in education provisions under the Napyitaw Ministry of Education (Central Statistics Organization, 2024)**

	2019-20	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24
<b>Primary</b>	4,847,542	3,051,512	4,686,406	5,020,816
<b>Middle</b>	3,087,770	1,370,620	1,454,980	1,466,726
<b>High</b>	1,040,030	367,086	429,364	592,810
<b>Total</b>	8,975,342	4,789,218	6,570,750	7,080,352

**Note:** Student enrolment figures unavailable for 2020-21 during schools closures due to COVID-19 pandemic

Amid protracted conflict and governance fragmentation, Myanmar's education landscape now comprises a mosaic of actors, administrations, and systems (cf. Salem-Gervais et al., 2024; Rinehart et al., 2024). Parallel education services, both longstanding and newly established, exist as the primary (or preferred) providers in many areas of the country. These include ethnic education departments, monastic and faith-based schools, networks aligned with the National Unity Government (NUG) and localised models operating independently of the SAC Ministry of Education.

This brief synthesises recent enrolment data and stakeholder insights to examine access to education across many of the largest ethnic education administrations. It is meant to complement previous reporting on access to education.<sup>2</sup>

The primary focus of this brief is on parallel education systems operating in predominantly ethnic minority areas. The research draws on direct engagement—including dataset requests and key informant interviews—with education authorities across seven contexts: Karen, Karenni, Mon, Shan, Ta'ang, Kachin, and Chin. It is important to note that these systems are not uniform; curricula, grade structures, policy frameworks, and data practices may differ substantially across administrations.

<sup>1</sup> On 31 July 2005, the SAC was officially dissolved and replaced by the State Security and Peace Commission (SSPC), which has assumed executive, legislative and judicial authority. While framed as an institutional transition, the composition of the SSPC suggests continuity, with five of its 10 members having served on the SAC.

<sup>2</sup> This has included estimates of nearly 360,000 students in over 1,200 monastic schools (Phoo Pwint Wai Thi, 2024).

## Limitations

Several ethnic minority contexts are absent from the research, including Rakhine, Kokang and other parts of Shan. Moreover, the research does not capture community-based, faith-based or civil-society provisions of schooling unless these were included in the datasets provided by the ethnic education administrations.

## 2. FINDINGS

### 2.1 Overall enrolment estimates

Verified data from the 2024-25 academic year indicates that **427,530 children** (see Table 2) were enrolled across **4,410 schools and learning spaces** under ethnic education administrations.

**Table 2. Student enrolment in education provisions under ethnic administrations**

	2022-23			2023-24			2024-25		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
<b>Ta'ang</b>	13,349	14,861	28,210	13,536	14,903	28,439	32,778	37,384	70,162
<b>Karenni</b>	9,449	9,803	19,252	17,382	18,121	35,503	30,193	31,369	61,562
<b>Shan</b>	-	-	3,177	-	-	5,145	3,164	4,115	7,279
<b>Kachin</b>	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	66,790
<b>Karen</b>	51,086	58,227	109,313	58,058	65,273	123,331	66,853	74,431	141,284
<b>Chin</b>	-	-	64,689	-	-	-	31,440	35,834	67,273
<b>Mon</b>	6,112	6,715	12,827	6,494	7,017	13,511	6,290	6,890	13,180
<b>Subtotal</b>	79,996	89,606	237,468	95,470	105,314	205,929	170,718	190,023	427,530

When excluding incomplete samples (e.g., Kachin and Chin), this marks a **70% increase from 2022-23 and a 43% increase from 2023-24**. The most significant growth occurred in Karenni and Ta'ang administrations, in areas where the SAC MoE has no presence following shifts in territorial control.

Representatives from ethnic education administrations report this growth stems from both **increased demand**—as children shift away from SAC MoE schooling due to displacement or local preference—and **expanding supply**, including opening new schools, extending grade levels (e.g. pre-primary and upper secondary), and administrative consolidation. Different factors are also reported to enable or constrain student enrolment (see Box 1).

However, increases in enrolment are not evidence of broader gains in access to education. Instead, it reflects an **internal reallocation** of provision within the education landscape. In other words, it is not that previously out-of-school children are now accessing education, but rather that students previously enrolled in schools administered by the de facto authorities in Naypyitaw (i.e., the SAC MoE) are now enrolled in ethnic education provisions.

### Box 1. Enrolment enablers and constraints

#### What enables enrolments?

- Agility and flexibility in responding to demand, including establishing new learning spaces in host communities for displaced children
- Community engagement and mobilisation, such as those led by local education committees or parent-teacher groups
- Collaboration with local civil society and stakeholders, such as partnerships with ethnic women’s organisations to establish pre-primary education services
- Support for linguistically diverse schools and classrooms, recognising that student populations within a system increasingly reflect multiple ethnic and language groups

#### What constrains enrolments?

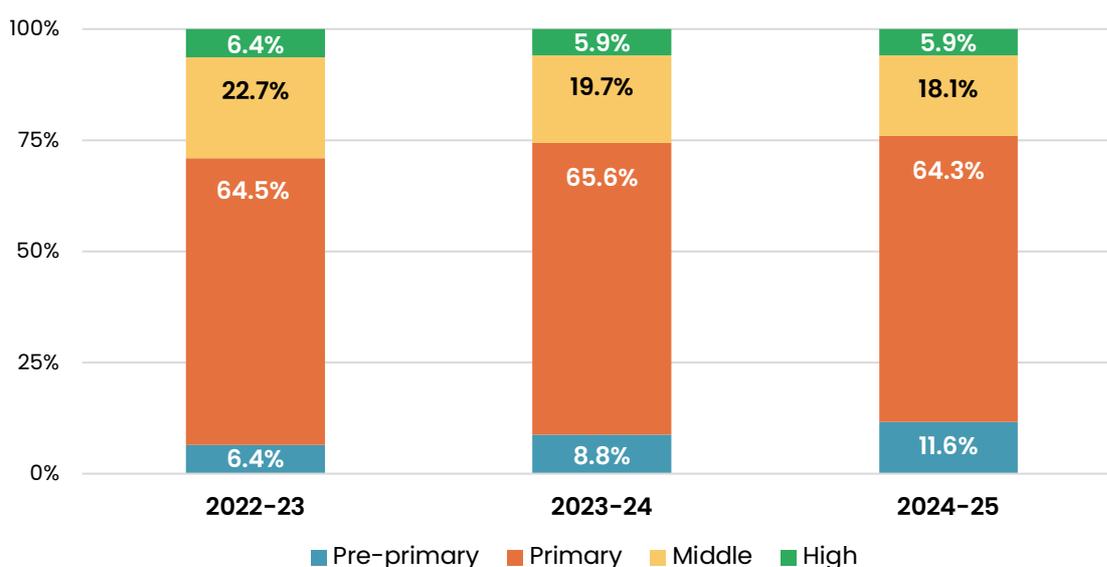
- Insufficient or unstable educational infrastructure, teacher workforce or financial resourcing limits capacity to accommodate new students
- Ongoing airstrikes and resulting displacement disrupts school operations

## 2.2 Enrolment by education level

The data management systems of ethnic education administrations categorise education levels in different ways, and not all systems may include the same grade levels, which complicates aggregation. Enrolment data was disaggregated by education level in the Karenni, Karen, Shan, and Mon contexts (see Figure 1).

Over the last three years, the **primary level reflects the great majority of student enrolment**. This is likely explained by the observation that many children accessing ethnic education reside in rural and remote areas with relatively limited human and material resources to support local middle or high schools. The ability of these children to daily travel to or temporarily relocate to areas with middle or high schools may be constrained by household financial or security concerns.

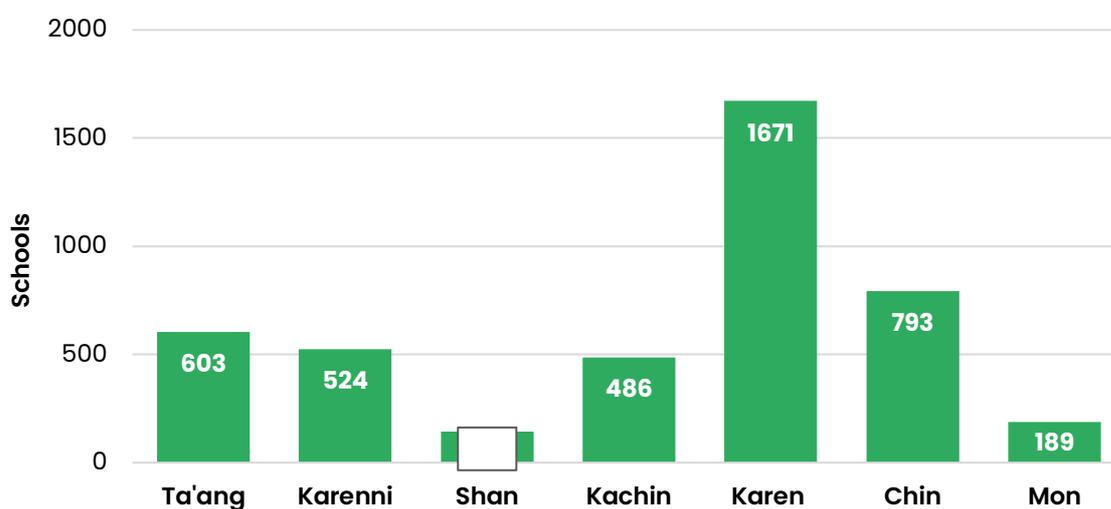
Figure 1. Student enrolment by education level in Karenni, Karen, Shan and Mon administrations



## 2.3 Schools and learning spaces

During the 2024–25 academic year, the seven education administrations supported **4,410 schools and learning spaces** (see Figure 2). Student-to-school ratios varied, with an average of 97 students per school and a range of 137 in Kachin to 50 in Shan.

**Figure 2. Schools and learning spaces supported, 2024–25**



The number of schools supported by each administration has increased over the last three years (see Table 3). Much of the largest growth (i.e., in Karen, Karenni, Shan, and Ta'ang administrations) is likely due to increased territorial control by ethnic armed actors amid ongoing conflict. As territorial control shifts, the catchment of students expands, with communities establishing new schools and/or schools previously under the SAC MoE becoming instead under the ethnic education administration.

Additional factors include:

- Community demand for opening schools providing mother tongue-based education (e.g., in Mon)
- Expansion of pre-primary schooling (e.g., in Mon and Karen)
- Reclassification or administrative consolidation of existing schools (e.g., in Karen)

The total number of schools rose **47.5% (814 new schools)** between 2022 and 2025 in the four contexts with complete data (Karenni, Karen, Mon, and Shan), although the annual growth rate is decreasing.

In contexts experiencing frequent airstrikes and heavy artillery fire from the SAC military, education officials report redirecting resources from establishing new schools to repairing damaged facilities. Larger systems are also seeking more community-based resource mobilisation to reduce dependence on centralised support.

**Table 3. Schools and learning spaces supported, 2022–25**

	Karenni	Shan	Karen	Mon	Chin	Kachin	Ta'ang	Total
<b>2022–23</b>	234	79	1,233	168	785	–	–	2,499
<b>2023–24</b>	361	107	1,467	183	–	–	381	2,499
<b>2024–25</b>	524	144	1,671	189	793	486	603	4,410

## 2.4 Attendance, dropout, and completion

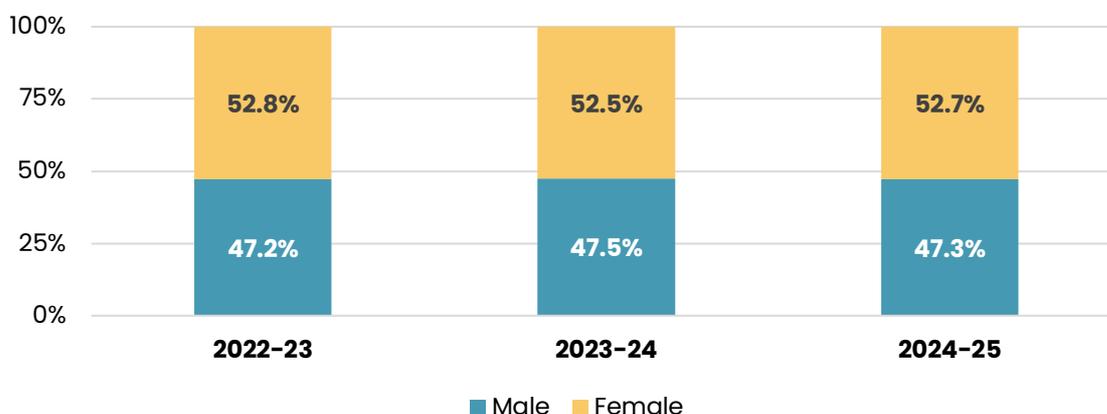
Quantitative data on attendance, dropout and completion was not available. Instead, education officials identified key barriers to continuity, many of which are most significant for adolescents:

- **Insecurity** due to airstrikes and shelling
- **Psycho-social distress** and trauma among learners, resulting in demotivation
- **Household poverty**, leading to children being withdrawn for income generation
- **Lack of accreditation**, hindering transfers across basic education systems and progression to higher education
- **Limited post-primary and post-secondary opportunities**, particularly for rural learners

## 2.5 Disaggregation by gender

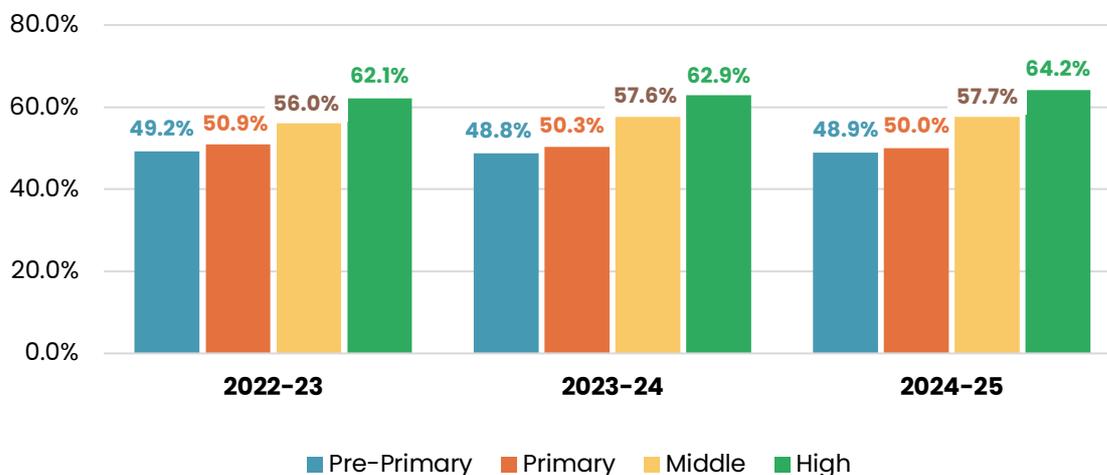
The datasets provided by Karenni, Karen, Mon and Ta'ang administrations were disaggregated by gender and show generally strong **gender parity in overall enrolment** (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Student enrolment by gender, 2022-25



However, when considering education levels (reported only in the Karen, Karenni and Mon datasets), at **growing gender gap in favour of girls** is observed at middle and high school levels (see Figure 4). This is attributed to the increased risk of armed recruitment faced by older boys and economic expectations for boys to contribute income, including through migration.

Figure 4. Percentage of female students by education level, 2022-25



## 2.6 Disaggregation by disability

No administrations provided system-wide, disability-disaggregated data. Nonetheless:

- Some have **piloted the Washington Group Child Functioning Module – Teacher Version (CFM-TV)** in select schools.
  - In Karen, approximately 11% of students face at least one barrier and 2% face multiple barriers.
  - In Mon, approximately 1.05% face at least one barrier.

Education officials recognise identification as a key step toward inclusive planning, but cite several issues:

- **Resource constraints** exacerbated by crisis, both in identification and inclusive education response
- **Concerns of stigma** associated with disability diagnoses
- **Reluctance to diagnose** when appropriate accommodations are unavailable

## 2.7 Out-of-school children

Data on out-of-school children remains largely absent across administrations. Contributing factors include:

- Lack of funding and coordination for evidence generation.
- Conflict-related displacement and access challenges.
- Pre-2021 methods (such as community-led enumeration) have broken down.

Education officials expressed concerns about exclusion and noted strategies to reintegrate learners, including:

- Community awareness campaigns;
- Micro-credit or livelihood support for families.
- Non-formal and vocational programmes; and
- Boarding arrangements for children needing to relocate.

## 3. RECOMMENDATIONS

Education provisions in Myanmar are now facilitated by a plurality of administrations and actors across settings of ongoing conflict, regular disruptions, mass displacement, and shifting territorial control. These conditions make it incredibly difficult to construct a reliable national picture of access to education. Yet, improving the evidence base in ethnic minority areas and across parallel education systems is desired.

The following recommendations build on findings from this brief and broader ERICC research (c.f. Salmon-Letelier & Homonchuk, 2024). They are intended to guide conflict-sensitive, complexity-aware strategies for education data and evidence generation in Myanmar:

### A. Prioritise conflict-sensitive and locally grounded data strategies

1. **Ensure data protection and confidentiality protocols are embedded in evidence generation efforts.** Establish clear agreement on what data is to be shared externally, with whom and for what purpose.

- 2. Acknowledge and respect the diversity of governance arrangements under which many parallel education departments operate.** Strategies must avoid imposing centralized logics in contexts shaped by local autonomy and evolving power dynamics.
- 3. Value localised knowledge and data practices, even if they do not conform to standardized (national) indicators.** Parallel education administrations offer critical insights into non-generalisable, context-specific realities.

## **B. Collaborate with (and invest in) education administrations**

- 4. Co-develop national and subnational data strategies with ethnic education administrations and other parallel providers.** Prioritize ownership, contextual fit, intentional design, long-term sustainability and practical uptake in all joint efforts.
- 5. Recognise that standardisation across systems may not be feasible in the current context.** Education structures, classifications and terminology may differ widely. Flexible approaches to data harmonization are likely required, and externally imposed frameworks should be avoided.
- 6. Invest in the capacities of ethnic education administrations and other parallel providers.** This includes identifying and supporting the financial, technical and human resources needed to enable more comprehensive and granular data collection over time.

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