

# Secondary Education in Cambodia: The Progress of Reform

KAMPUCHEAN ACTION TO PROMOTE EDUCATION

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## **Secondary Education: Progress with Reforming Secondary Education (ABSTRACT)**

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**Article Synopsis:** The present article recounts the development strategies employed by government and development partners to raise educational quality and efficiency in the secondary education sector during the period 1999 to 2016. The chapter describes two educational reform cycles in this regard, where their focus lies, and how they fared in terms of success rates. The first cycle focused primarily on access issues. Though achieving some successes, reforms had stalled by the end of the first decade of the century and net enrollment rates reached a plateau. This stalling out process is described both in terms of structural changes within the education system as well as the acceleration of social and economic changes in Cambodian society. A second reform cycle, catalyzed by the 2013 national election and focusing on educational quality and school governance issues followed the first reform cycle from the middle of the second decade of the century, culminating in a radical experiment to promote Charter Schools, known also as New Generation Schools.

### 3.1 The Past as Prologue

Throughout most of the 1990s, development aid was singularly focused on primary education given the huge number of students enrolled at this education level and the large needs implied across multiple areas including infrastructure, teacher training, and others. Secondary education has historically been the poor cousin of the primary education sector with national resource allocations accounting for only 11.2% of the entire education budget in 2001, compared to 74.4% for primary education (UNESCO, 2008). To be sure, there were 2.2 million children enrolled at primary level at the beginning of the last decade against only 0.34 million at lower secondary school level (EMIS, 2000). Nevertheless, the disparity in resourcing was still very great. A re-ordering of investment priorities, however, began to take shape in 2005 with the advent of the first international aid project focused on secondary education, funded by the World Bank.<sup>1</sup> This was followed by several other large development projects funded by both multi- and bilateral donors including ADB, USAID, and Belgian Aid.

The need for expanded investment in secondary education was first highlighted by policy changes in 1996 that subsumed the lower secondary education cycle (i.e., Grades 7 to 9) within the parameters of what is known as ‘basic education,’ free access to which is guaranteed by Cambodia’s constitution. Many factors figured into the calculus to bring about this policy change including the desire to catch up with Cambodia’s neighbors as well as the considerable empirical evidence that individuals who complete nine years of basic education have improved chances for better health, smaller families, and higher income per capita. Nevertheless, at the beginning of the last decade, the net enrollment rate at lower secondary school level was reported to be only 14% in comparison to 93% at primary level (EMIS, 2002). This dire difference in enrollment highlighted several unique needs in the sector including the paucity of schools, which amplified the daily time to get to and from school as an important impediment to participation. When this disadvantage is added to opportunity and direct educational costs, as well as structural differences in staffing that made it more difficult to recruit, post, and keep teachers at rural secondary schools, even more so in remote locations, it is hardly surprising that the lower secondary enrollment rate was so low.

As the 21<sup>st</sup> Century unfolds, there has been an increasing focus on the need for heightened investment in Cambodia’s secondary education sector and indeed the share of government funding for secondary education has quadrupled since the start of the century (World Bank, 2014). This stems from a number of reasons beyond those mentioned above, perhaps the foremost of which is the observation that Cambodia’s youth population has been exploding. Indeed, Cambodia has one of the most youthful populations in Southeast Asia with an estimated 65% of its population under 30 years old and an estimated 33% between the ages of 15 and 29 (United Nations, 2012). In spite of this preponderance of youthful citizens, however, fewer than 35% of Cambodian adolescents enroll in the secondary education sector each year and only about 6% in technical and vocational training institutions (World Bank, 2012; KAPE, 2014). These numbers suggest that as much as two-thirds of Cambodia’s youth population transitions into the country’s workforce at a very early age and with little in the way of the skills preparation needed for an effective workforce. This largely explains why employers identify ‘analytical’ and ‘decision-making’ skills as among the most wanting among Cambodian workers in skilled and semi-skilled positions (CAMFEBA, 2008). As Cambodia positions itself to better compete with its neighbors under conditions of increased economic integration, these deficiencies will most certainly become more pronounced.

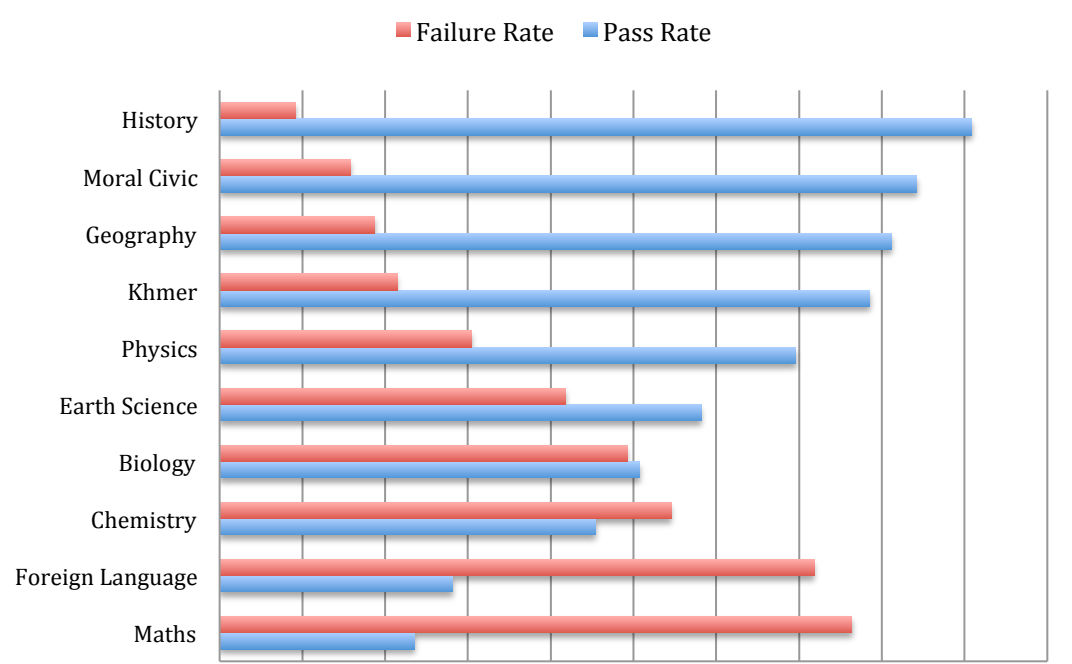
Linked to issues of economic competition, the increasing importance of information and

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<sup>1</sup> Otherwise known as the Cambodia Education Sector Support Project or CESSP. Although this project also included several subcomponents focused on primary education and national capacity-building, the lion’s share of funding was allocated to lower secondary education with funding levels fixed at \$19 million USD in grant funds and \$8 million USD in credits.

technology-based industries has also been an area of growing concern among many of the countries in ASEAN. Cambodia’s performance in the STEM subjects poses serious challenges for the nation’s planners along with its implications for Cambodia’s ability to effectively compete in both the regional and global economy. Observers have noted that even today fewer than 10% of Cambodians study the STEM subjects at tertiary level (Mathew, 2015), which compares with the OECD average of 24.7% (ACOLA, 2013). The problem is highlighted best by the poor scores that Cambodian students register on the National Leaving Examination at Grade 12 where Mathematics, Chemistry, and Biology evinced failure rates of about 50% or more (MoEYS, 2016a). Although a slight improvement from even poorer scores earlier in the present decade, these patterns suggest the urgent need for enhanced investment at all levels but particularly at secondary level where basic STEM skills are formed.

**Figure 3.1: Pass & Failure Rates on Bac II Exam, 2016**



Source: MoEYS, 2016

	Maths	Foreign Language	Chemistry	Biology	Earth Science	Physics	Khmer	Geography	Moral Civic	History
Failure Rate	76.4	71.83	54.59	49.24	41.77	30.4	21.45	18.77	15.78	9.15
Pass Rate	23.6	28.17	45.41	50.76	58.23	69.6	78.55	81.23	84.22	90.85

### 3.2 Early Development Strategies

A growing consensus in government and among development partners emerged at the start of the century to increase investment in the secondary education subsector. Subsequent investments in the sector were guided by the lessons learned during the 1990s, when imbalances in investment in the primary education sector led to stagnation in school participation and flow rates throughout much of this period (Bredenberg & Sao, 2003). In particular, this referred to an overemphasis on ‘supply-side’ investments that focused heavily on inputs, such as infrastructure, teacher education, and policy-driven changes (e.g. certifying primary school teachers to teach at secondary school level) rather than outputs. The First Education Reform Cycle, which began in 2000 refocused investment to include ‘pro-poor’ strategies and ‘demand-side interventions’ such as scholarships, abolition of school fees, and school breakfast programs, among others. Demand-side

strategies are distinguished by their focus on the stimulation of educational demand among service recipients. The success of demand-side strategies, which had had dramatic impact on school participation rates among primary school age children, was not lost upon policy-makers in the design of investment programming at secondary school level. As a result, many of the investment programs that got under way during the early years of the new century often included scholarship provisions to complement what continued to be large investments in infrastructure and other capital expenditures, particularly among those programs funded by the large development banks. These demand-side strategies were often focused on increasing outputs such as participation rates among high-risk demographic groupings such as girls and minority groups.

Early programming in the secondary education sector also focused on several ‘software’ components that included investments in school governance, curricular reforms to increase educational relevance (especially life skills education), and expanding the holistic approach to development expounded in the MoEYS’ Child Friendly School Policy now being applied to lower secondary schools. Child Friendly Schools programming is a global movement supported by UNICEF and others that is designed to refocus educational investment from a uni-dimensional emphasis on ‘school efficiency’ to a more ‘child rights-based’ approach that takes in multiple areas of concern across five key dimensions<sup>2</sup> (i.e., Access, Learning Environments, Health & Safety, Gender, and Stakeholder Engagement) (Bredenberg, 2009). This policy change, though many years in the making, helped to re-structure development aid for both the primary and secondary education sectors into a multi-dimensional framework that focused not only on access issues but educational quality, community engagement, and school governance as well. This approach to investment was particularly attractive to child rights-based agencies such as UNICEF and Save the Children because it was believed that formulating interventions in this way helped refocus development efforts away from the ‘economic efficiency’ models of educational development that are popular with the development banks to a greater focus on children’s rights.

For its part, the MoEYS also sought to accommodate expanded access to secondary education by increasing the number of teachers certified to teach at secondary school level, converting primary schools into basic education schools by allowing them to add Grades 7 to 9 to their facilities, and providing free textbooks to all students engaged in study at lower secondary school level. Restructuring the grade make-up of primary schools was particularly effective at reducing distance as an enrollment impediment. These efforts complemented significant investment in infrastructure to expand the number of secondary schools in the countryside, so reducing travel time between home and school and generally make access easier.

### **3.3 Early Successes under the First Educational Reform Cycle**

The more balanced investment approach for secondary education that comprised both supply and demand-side strategies produced some early successes at the beginning of the century, particularly in the area of educational access (see Table 3.1). For example, supply side interventions such as infrastructure investments over a period of ten years from 2005 to 2015 increased the number of secondary schools nationally by 52%, which helped to address a distance factor that is widely seen as one of the major impediments to secondary school enrollment (e.g., KAPE-SCI, 2012). Most notably in this regard, Net Enrollment Rates increased dramatically from the high teens at the start of the last decade to as high as 35% by 2010, almost doubling in the process. The gender gap in secondary school enrollment also disappeared and actually reversed both at the lower and upper secondary school level. This outcome is very likely due to the profusion of Girls’ Scholarship Programs that have been supported over the last decade both by large development partners such as the World Bank and ADB as well as many smaller NGO programs; the effectiveness of such programs has been empirically validated by several studies over the years (e.g., Collins, 2005; Filmer & Schady, 2006). Impacts in this regard were also demonstrated by a precipitous

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<sup>2</sup> Cambodia has actually developed its Child Friendly School Policy to include a ‘sixth’ dimension that focuses on ‘School Enabling Environments,’ which is a code word for school governance issues.

decline in overage enrollment so that by 2015, only about a quarter of the students enrolled at secondary school level were overage, compared to over 40% in the previous decade. The significance of declines in overage enrollment cannot be understated because of the link between one's age and the opportunity costs associated with secondary education. The older a student becomes, the more likely he or she is foregoing income that could otherwise be earned in the labor market. With a youth unemployment rate of 1.2% that is among the lowest in Southeast Asia (World Development Indicators, 2009), Cambodia demonstrates very high demand for youthful labor. As a result, opportunity costs for education in Cambodia are generally recognized as one of the leading factors that depress enrollment at secondary school level (e.g., Bredenberg & Sao, 2003; UNDP, 2009; KAPE-SCI, 2012). Thus, by decreasing overage enrollment, the government has to some extent also been able to minimize the impacts of opportunity costs on school retention. To be sure, opportunity costs continue to be one of the leading causes that depress participation rates in the subsector. In this respect, opportunity costs have been cited by as many as 23% of secondary schools students as the leading cause for their decision to leave school (e.g., KAPE-SCI, 2012).

Transition rates and enrollment have been an area of mixed success. As primary school enrollment expanded as a result of the same demand-side driven reforms described earlier, there were dire predictions that transition rates would plummet if the capacity of the secondary school sector were not expanded dramatically (e.g., Bredenberg & Sao, 2003). Happily, these predictions did not materialize due to the rapid expansion in sector capacity; thus, the education system has been able to maintain a relatively high transition rate in the 70-80% range with some modest improvement of a few percentage points. This is true both at lower and upper secondary school level though the latter has actually increased somewhat more substantially. Nevertheless, transition has been largely static over the last decade with no dramatic breakouts in magnitude. Similarly, overall enrollment has actually declined slightly at lower secondary school level though increasing significantly at upper secondary level. Enrollment declines in this regard occurred in spite of massive investments in infrastructure that increased the number of secondary schools dramatically, as noted above. To be sure, investments in infrastructure and additional staffing have likely contributed to a major decline of 35% in the Pupil Teacher Ratio between 2005 and 2015.

As a result of early education reforms initiated at the start of the new century, Cambodia's secondary education subsector is much different today than it was at the end of the last century. Secondary schools are more ubiquitous and net enrollment is much higher now than at any other time in the Kingdom's history. The secondary school population is also much more diverse now than it has ever been in the past both in gender terms and the socio-economic make-up of the population

**Table 3.1: Snapshot of Change in Secondary Education in Cambodia, 2005, 2015**

Indicator	2005	2015
Total Enrollment		
• Lower Secondary	588,333	558,464
• Upper Secondary	204,925	266,606
Number of Secondary Schools	1,129	1,714
Net Enrollment Rate		
• Lower Secondary	33.7	--*
• Upper Secondary	12.5	--*
Gross Enrollment Rate		
• Lower Secondary	60.0	53.8
• Upper Secondary	21.2	24.3
Secondary School PTR	31.1	20.2
Student Dropout		
• Lower Secondary	22.8	19.2
• Upper Secondary	15.9	23.8
Gender Parity Index (Enrollment)		
• Lower Secondary	0.81	1.05
• Upper Secondary	0.63	1.01
Transition Rate		
• Lower Secondary	78.7	82.1
• Upper Secondary	66.2	72.4
Overage Enrollment		
• Lower Secondary	43.9	27.7
• Upper Secondary	41.1	23.3
Student Repetition Rates		
• Lower Secondary	2.5	2.2
• Upper Secondary	3.3	3.2
% MoEYS Budget Allocation	11.2%**	44.1%***

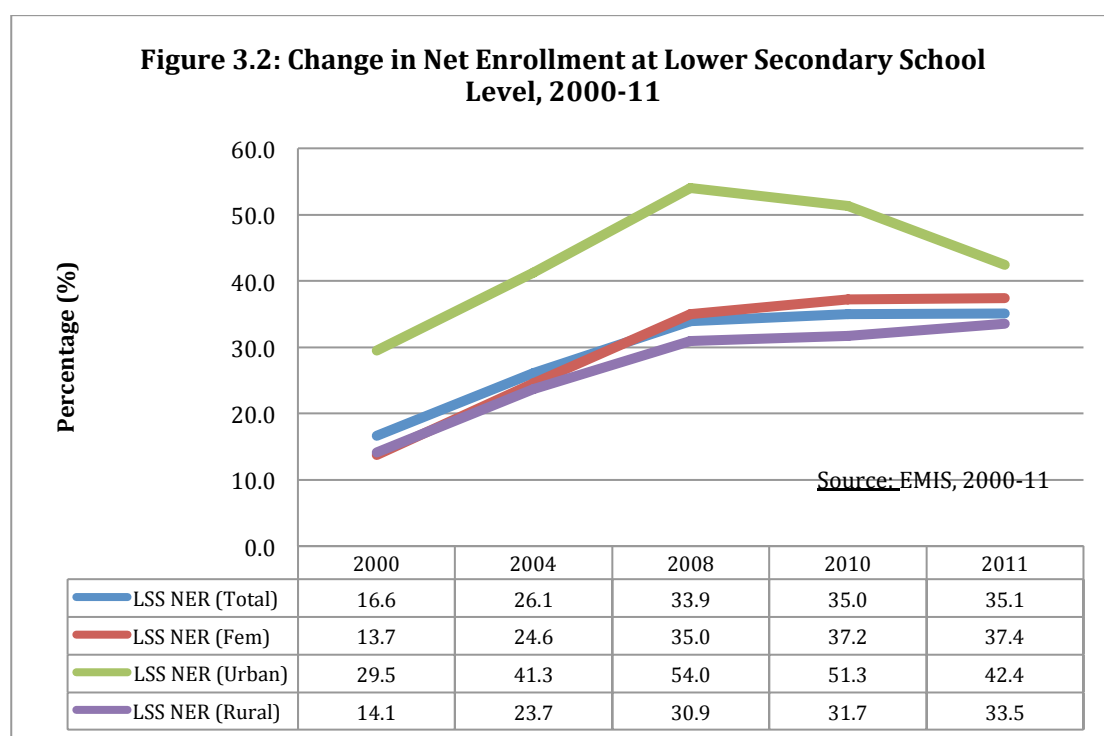
\*MoEYS no longer reports on NER for secondary education; \*\*2001; \*\*\*2014

Source: EMIS, 2005, 2015; World Bank, 2014

(e.g., ESSP, 2002; KAPE, 2003). In this respect, the growth in enrollment has been greatest among those youth in the lower income quintiles of the population and among girls. These successes have been attributed largely to a systematic application of demand-side interventions such as the abolition of official school fees, targeted scholarship support for the poorest members of society and girls, and other interventions that seek to stimulate educational demand.

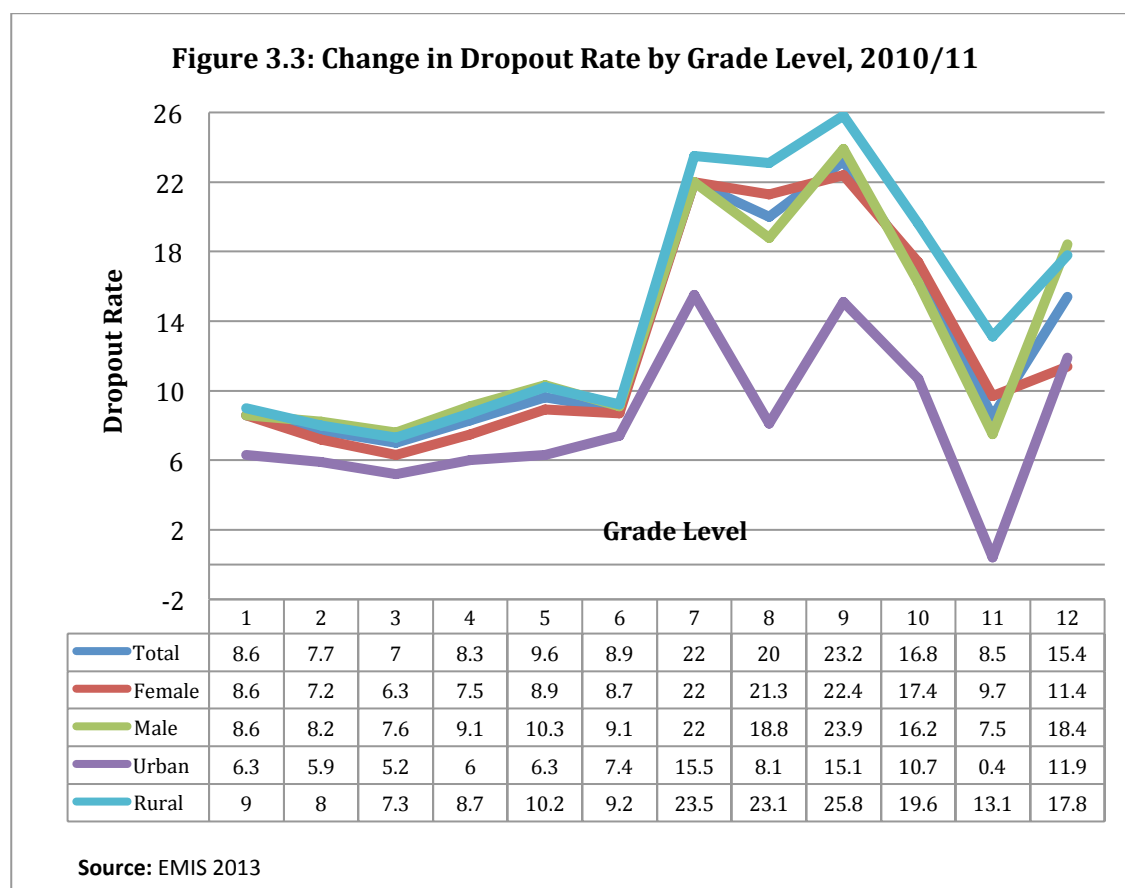
### 3.4 The Limits of Reform and Stalled Progress

As happens with most reform movements, the vigor that generally drives them tends to wane as enthusiasm diminishes and leadership changes at the top occur. The first educational reform cycle has taken a similar trajectory so that by the end of the decade (2010), reforms had clearly stalled. Despite early successes, major improvements in participation rates had run out of steam by 2010. In this respect, improvements in national Net Enrollment Rates at lower secondary school level peaked at around 35% and have never been able to break through a ceiling of 40%, as hoped. Indeed, MoEYS had hoped to achieve 47% NER by 2014 but fell far short of doing so (MoEYS, 2014). Not only are enrollment rates reaching a plateau across all demographic groupings but they are actually beginning a precipitous decline among urban populations (Figure 3.2). This is particularly true of Phnom Penh. If current trends continue, there may actually emerge an ‘urban-rural enrollment gap’ similar to the one that used to exist for gender. These enrollment trends speak to the impact of the rapid proliferation of private schools in urban areas, an issue that will be dealt with in more detail later in this chapter.



One of the performance targets relating to school access where educational reforms have had the least impact concerns school retention. The basic education cycle in Cambodia is characterized by spiking dropout rates that are very pronounced at the secondary school level. Dropout rates seem to peak at the Grade 7, 9, and 12 levels, which are all key transition points between the primary, lower secondary, and upper secondary school sub-cycles (see Figure 3.3). High rates of dropout at the secondary school level have been impervious to change and have hovered around the 20% range for the better part of a decade. Indeed, there has been hardly any change in the magnitude of dropout in the sector during the period 2005 to 2015 and rates have actually increased substantially at the upper secondary school level (see Table 3.1). This situation is surprising given the large investments that have taken place in scholarship support and expanded sec-

ondary school capacity.



A number of factors help to account for the stalled improvement in educational access and retention. These relate largely to the changing economic landscape in Cambodia. In this respect, the rapid proliferation of factories based in the countryside as well as a plantation-based economy focused on sugar cane, cassava, red corn, and rubber seem to be much more of a problem now than in years past, displacing the traditional subsistence rice farming economy, which had contributed to more seasonal patterns of dropout (e.g., ADB, 2012). That is, traditional dropout patterns used to result in students leaving school after the Khmer New Year holiday when the rice-planting season began only to re-enroll again during the following school year. However, with the draw of factory and plantation-based employment, which tends to be year-round, dropout now seems less seasonal than in the past so that students do not leave school and come back later as per the earlier practice but usually leave for good. These new plantations are not small family-run businesses of the traditional variety but rather large enterprises run by huge agro-businesses.

As noted earlier, opportunity costs have always been a major factor accounting for high dropout rates, but it now appears that recent changes in the Cambodian economy such as those described above (e.g., employment opportunities in Thailand, expansion of the plantation economy, etc.) are greatly amplifying its role in depressing school participation rates. The educational impact of these economic changes is also being intensified by the willingness of youth to migrate. Recent studies of migration have noted that 70% of migrants are under 30 and that migratory trends are increasingly characterized by rural-to-rural migration as opposed to rural-to-urban migratory patterns of the last decade (e.g., Supreme National Economic Council, 2008; Ministry of Planning, 2012). Such trends confirm the increased attraction of employment opportunities in Cambodia's growing plantation-based economy as well as those in nearby countries, especially Thailand.

Another important social change in Cambodia that has undermined secondary school enrollment in urban areas concerns the proliferation of private schools. Historically, the private school sector



in Cambodia has only provided educational services to a very small fraction of the population, mainly the wealthiest and most privileged members of Cambodian society. A growing middle class in Cambodia’s urban areas, however, combined with mounting dissatisfaction with the public school system both at primary and secondary school level, has recently resulted in an explosion in the number of private schools with expected impacts on public school enrollment. According to government statistics, there are now 151 private secondary schools nationwide serving a population of 36,926 students. This comprises about 17.8% of the urban secondary school population (EMIS, 2016). The vast majority of these secondary schools enrollments are located in Phnom Penh with 76 private secondary schools or 50% of the total, which attests to the largely urban nature of the private school phenomenon. The emergence of a vibrant private school sector offering educational services to a large segment of the urban population is an unprecedented development in Cambodia’s education system and the public education system has struggled to deal with it, often denying its very existence or increasing scope.

The impact of competition for students between public and private schools in Cambodia has not been well documented but its effect on public school enrollment has been showing up in dramatic declines in national Net Enrollment Rates in urban areas, as noted above. To be sure, the Ministry has started the collection of statistical data on private schools, starting in 2015, which testifies to the observation that these institutions are no longer just serving a small fraction of the population but rather a growing segment of Cambodian families, especially in urban areas. Some recent studies have found that enrollment shifts in Phnom Penh have been dramatic, especially in the wealthier districts of the capital. In this respect, about 15% of the capital’s students are now enrolled in the private sector and in some districts such as Khan 7 Makara, this proportion approaches or even exceeds 50% (e.g., KAPE-SCI, 2014). A sampling of some of the largest secondary schools in Phnom Penh tells the story about trends in enrollment with dramatic declines of 50% or more over the last 15 years. For example, the enrollment at Sisovath HS, Cambodia’s oldest school has dropped by 45% since the year 2005. According to school officials, most of the students leaving the public schools are from the upper income quintiles. Such trends are of great concern because, if unaddressed, they will eventually reduce the public schools to the preserve of the urban poor, thereby greatly exacerbating class differences in Cambodian society.

Public schools are at a great disadvantage with respect to the private sector because of the increasingly common view that there is little or no accountability for the former’s performance (e.g., Bredenberg, 2008). Private schools on the other hand are wedded to a more rationalized resource allocation system that demands high standards of performance from school staff. Private schools that do not perform well face insolvency whereas public schools never close no matter how low their standards of performance. Anecdotal evidence suggests that there is indeed a high rate of closure among many of Phnom Penh’s private schools, which suggests a fierce competition for students. Because private schools generally recruit teachers from the public sector, there is a conventional wisdom that there is little difference in educational quality

**Table 3.2: Contrast in Educational Attainment Level among Public & Private School Teachers**

Education Level	Public School Teachers	Private School Teachers
Primary Level	1.7%	3.7%
Lower Secondary School	25.7%	10.0%
Upper Secondary School	55.8%	37.4%
Graduate	15.9%	44.1%
Post Graduate	1.0%	4.9%
<b>Total</b>	≈ 100%	≈ 100%

Source: EMIS, 2016

between the public and private sector, especially among city education officials. However, it is difficult to make any certain conclusions in this regard because there has been little in the way of empirical investigation of quality differences between the two sectors. Although government statistics do not breakdown private school teachers by subsector, recent reporting indicates that 49% of private school teachers have graduate or post-graduate degrees compared with only 17% of teachers in the public school sector (see Table 3.2) (EMIS, 2016).

The above notwithstanding, the movement of middle class students to the private sector in ever greater numbers does suggest that there are indeed quality differences between public and private schools while small scale attitudinal surveys among school managers, teachers, and students also suggest higher standards of governance in private schools, which promote stronger teacher discipline (KAPE-SCI, 2014). Whether standards of quality in private schools are actually higher or not, the perception appears to be that they are. This suggests that the loss of middle class students to the private sector will continue unabated unless MoEYS can make the public schools more competitive, especially in the inner city areas where the wealthy tend to live.

The above discussion should highlight the mixed nature of success of Cambodia’s first comprehensive educational reform in the secondary education sector. The strategies employed in this respect actually internalized many of the lessons learned from the 1990s including the need for a balanced approach to development that comprised both supply and demand-side inputs. These inputs had major impact on student participation rates; however, these improvements soon reached a plateau due in large part to radical changes in the country’s social and economic context. This refers to an expansion in the factory and plantation-based economy in many provinces, intensified migration, and a burgeoning private school sector in Cambodia’s urban areas. By the end of the first decade of the new century, reforms had largely stalled, setting the stage for a new wave of reforms.

### 3.5 Nemesis: Educational Quality-Focused Programming

Overall, earlier educational reform achievements have largely been limited to changes in school access and even in this area, such achievements appear to have maxed out at current levels, as described above. Although very low rates of secondary school repetition data have been virtually unchanged since 2005 (see Table 3.1), there are many doubts about the veracity of this data given the pervasive practice of student payments to teachers for private classes. These payments are generally seen as *quid pro quo* exchanges in which students are actual-

**Table 3.3: Progression of Bac II Examination Pass Rates, 2013-16**

Year	2013	2014	2015	2016
Bac II Pass Rate	86.8%	40.7%	55.9%	62.2%
Total Sitting Exam	108,288	89,937	83,341	89,661

**Source:** Department of Examinations, MoEYS 2013-16

ly buying their grades (UNDP, 2015). In terms of external assessments of the subsector, there is generally a paucity of systematic data collection on meaningful educational quality indicators. Nevertheless, there is growing evidence that educational standards in the public secondary school sector are low. This conclusion can be inferred from a number of different sources including employer surveys that voice concerns about low levels of critical thinking ability among school graduates (e.g., CAMFEBA, 2008); plummeting pass rates on the *Bac II Examination* at Grade 12 when rigorous standards of invigilation were introduced in 2014 (Department of Examinations, 2013-16; see Table 3.3); and reports of widespread private tutoring that in many cases approximates teacher-mediated extortion (e.g., Brehm & Silova, 2014; UNDP, 2015). As noted above, the latter problem suggests that most students cannot access the full state curriculum unless they pay extra fees to teachers, which hits the poorest students the hardest.

Given the deficits in educational quality recounted above, a number of large-scale educational development projects supported by bilateral donors (e.g., USAID, JICA, etc.) and the development banks were introduced around the start of the second decade of the new century. These projects sought to expand improvements in the sector from a primary focus on school access issues to educational quality concerns. These new projects were characterized by a number of key strategies including enhanced curricular relevance (e.g., life skills education reform); increased focus on science and technology; capacity-building for teachers focusing on inquiry-based learning (especially in the natural sciences) and other new methodologies; school governance enhancement; and the utilization of stakeholder-driven development approaches. The latter approach was particularly innovative and entailed multiple sub-strategies including school self-selection for partic-

ipation in a project; school-based selection of life skills topics based on locally perceived needs (e.g., drug abuse prevention, migration, etc.); and school improvement grant planning based on the use of Activity Menus. The use of Activity Menus sought to help stakeholders identify their own problems and then match interventions from the menu to these problems accordingly. Menu approaches enabled freedom within a fixed structure so that communities with limited exposure to new ways of doing things could experience some ‘pump priming’ in the way that they undertook educational planning. The rationale behind this strategy was to build ownership of programming and by extension long-term sustainability.

Bank-funded programming focused on the development of large resource centers equipped with state-of-the-art science and computer labs as well as libraries and faculty meeting rooms. Resource Center Schools were intended to share their facilities with surrounding secondary schools, following a resource sharing strategy employed under MoEYS’ cluster school policy in the primary school sector. These investments were coupled with massive investments in infrastructure repair and construction as well as the procurement of sophisticated science equipment and supplies to equip lab facilities. Computer lab development embraced new technologies such as ‘thin clients’ to reduce energy consumption, minimize maintenance, and reduce costs.<sup>3</sup> These innovations made computer labs much easier to maintain and sustain. As was the case with bilateral programs, the international banks also provided school grant assistance to build local ownership and enhance curricular relevance.

The quality-focused investments of the new decade were characterized by well thought out strategies that in any professional school environment should have worked. Unfortunately, the verdict on much of this investment is that impacts have been muted at best (e.g., IBEC, 2014). Not surprisingly, the biggest successes have occurred in schools where school governance and leadership were strong. But by and large, investments to raise educational quality have collided with a culture of risk avoidance among school managers and income generation activities among teachers. Various assessments have found that in many cases, lab facilities are underutilized because teachers place a higher priority on their private teaching than they do on their ‘public’ teaching for which they are being paid by government (e.g., MoEYS, 2016b). Similarly, school directors do not wish to come into conflict with their teachers by curtailing their income generation activities, even when these clearly impinge on mandates from government-supported projects.

The emergence of private teaching as a major problem in the secondary education system started many years ago as an unofficial means for teachers to cope with chronically low salaries. Over the years, these practices have become more and more entrenched to the point where in many cases private teaching has now displaced the number of hours that teachers are supposed to spend on their regular classes. Particularly in urban schools, secondary school teachers are now emboldened to actually teach their private classes during working hours and on school premises as a theoretical supplement to public classes. In fact, attendance of these classes is mandatory for a student to pass. Most school directors generally turn a blind eye to these practices to avoid conflict with their teachers, as noted above. Indeed, many school directors are actually complicit with these practices because they organize the wealthiest students into special classes and then take commissions from teachers to get assigned to these classes, since teaching them can be highly lucrative (e.g., MoEYS, 2016c). Ironically, the entrenchment of these behaviors has happened as teacher salaries have actually been increasing dramatically. Not surprisingly, unconditional increments in salary payments have not translated into higher professional standards among teachers or administrators.

In an environment of such low standards of school governance, the introduction of quality-focused programming has met its ‘nemesis’ and it is doubtful that any programming no matter how well thought out can succeed unless governance standards can first be improved. Herein lies

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<sup>3</sup> Thin client labs proved to be a major innovation in computer lab emplacement strategies and were piloted successfully by USAID in 2009 and then subsequently embraced by the Asian Development Bank in the years following.

one of the major lessons learned from quality-focused programming during the last decade, namely that *investment in educational quality interventions cannot succeed without good school governance and professional teacher standards*. This conclusion undercuts an oft-proposed remedy for improving educational quality, which is that Cambodia must increase its budget allocations for the education system to a higher proportion of GDP. While such amplified investment is indeed a ‘necessary’ condition for improvement, it is likely that it will not be ‘sufficient’ by itself to make the difference without major reform in school governance. That is, educational investment without performance accountability cannot succeed.

Poor school governance is a problem that grows mainly out of the politicized nature of Cambodia’s education system in which most school directors hold their posts not because of any special merit but rather because of their seniority and party affiliation. This is not to say that a politically appointed school director cannot be both competent and properly affiliated, only that competence is often not seen as the most relevant criterion for one’s appointment (e.g., Bredenberg, 2008). This situation is highly specific to Cambodia’s culture of ‘patronage networks,’ upon which many Cambodians depend for their economic and social survival. The cultural and political roots of such arrangements make it very difficult to professionalize the education service, which sometimes requires removing individuals due to incompetence, poor leadership, or even corruption. Given the lucrative nature of secondary education service provision, such problems are particularly intractable in many secondary schools. And because school managers are vetted on the basis of their political affiliation and not necessarily any qualities of leadership or professionalism, efforts to mitigate school governance issues by providing school leadership and management training have had very mixed success; indeed, many would argue that such training interventions have only marginal impact on school governance though this remains a favorite strategy of many donors (e.g., IBEC, 2014; KAPE, 2016). In view of this analysis, school governance has become a central focus of new reforms that started in the middle of the present decade (2015).

### 3.6 New Educational Reforms and a Charter School Movement

Continuing deficits in educational quality at secondary school level have created high levels of public dissatisfaction (especially among youth), embodied mainly by middle class flight from the public schools and static net enrollment levels. These trends came together in the 2013 national elections in which the ruling party nearly lost their parliamentary majority. Some observers have attributed the large loss of seats by the ruling party in part to the disaffection of youth who voted in record numbers during the 2013 election (e.g., KAPE-SCI 2012). Winning back the youth vote, therefore, became an important political strategy of the ruling party, thereby making renewed educational reform a key priority.

These events catalyzed a decision at the highest levels to replace the leadership in MoEYS with individuals who are more forward looking; have a higher tolerance for risk-taking; and better understand the needs of a 21<sup>st</sup> Century economy and how the education system should meet these needs. A new Minister took over the MoEYS in 2013 and moved quickly to create and implement the new reform package summarized in Box 3.1. Eventually, the number of measures included in this new Educational Reform Cycle reached 15 discrete points that included support for ‘autonomous public schools’ (also known as New Generation Schools) and teacher career paths, among other things. By 2014, many of these measures were in full swing, initiating a new wave of educational reform in the school system at all levels.

Many of the reforms summarized in Box 3.1 were targeted at the secondary education subsector including examination reform that abolished the *Diplome Examination* at Grade 9 and cleaned up

#### Box 3.1: New Educational Reform Agenda (2014)

1. Strengthen in-depth reform of public finance management
2. Strengthen personnel management
3. Examinations reform
4. Create a think-tank to stimulate educational innovation
5. Reform higher education;
6. Improve educational quality
7. Develop technical & soft skills
8. Reform physical education and sport

the administration of the *Bac II Examination* at Grade 12. The implementation of examination reform at Grade 12 in 2014 illustrated how poorly prepared many students were for the examination, as pass rates dropped by more than 50% when students were no longer allowed to bring cheat sheets into national test sites (see Table 3.3). This outcome also exposed the ineffectiveness of private tutoring when it came to rigorously administered external examinations. The abolition of the external Grade 9 examination also undercut a huge rationale for private tutoring at lower secondary school level, which in turn helped to curtail teachers' ability to extort money from students. Without the need to teach to the test, there is now greater freedom to teach at lower secondary school level in a way that moves away from rote memorization of facts and figures for the examination. In addition, the elimination of the Grade 9 Leaving Exam saved the Ministry many millions of dollars in administration costs, which were then diverted to efforts to raise teachers' salaries.<sup>4</sup> Raising teacher salaries at all levels is another important strategy to bring about educational reform but particularly at secondary school level where MoEYS has historically had little leverage over teachers to curtail their private classes and teach a full complement of weekly hours. In this respect, it should be noted that many secondary school teachers in urban areas are paid a full salary but only work a small fraction of the official hours required, even though they are paid as full-time civil servants.

The current wave of educational reforms has a number of key features that greatly distinguish them from earlier efforts. A key point of contrast in this regard refers to the need to move away from uni-dimensional development models in which all schools are treated as though they are exactly the same. This realization grows out of the muted success of earlier investments aimed at raising educational quality standards that did not take account of the high degree of variability between schools, particularly with respect to issues of school governance. As noted earlier, schools with good governance were more likely to use resources effectively whereas poorly managed schools largely wasted the resources provided to them. Thus, Ministry reformers have realized that it makes no sense to provide investment to schools equally without regard to their standards of internal governance. This realization has led to a greater willingness to introduce 'multiple development tracks' involving differential investment to secondary schools based on their ability to utilize such investment effectively. Such willingness entails many risks in terms of perceptions of fairness and social equity, particularly from the public and development partners who are often wedded to politically correct notions that investment in public education should benefit all students equally. Nevertheless, the willingness of educational leaders in MoEYS who are guiding current reforms to take these risks has opened the door to one of Cambodia's most radical experiments in improving educational quality, namely a homegrown Charter School movement seeking to establish independent public secondary schools that have the independence needed to innovate and raise educational standards.

In the Cambodian context, Charter Schools are commonly known as *New Generation Schools* and are an official part of the new reform agenda of MoEYS.<sup>5</sup> Charter Schools that have in place high standards of governance are eligible for high investment so long as they can maintain their accreditation as New Generation Schools. Strategically, it is believed that more individualized channels of high investment in a few worthy schools today will generate the high quality human resources that will in the future be better able to support an expansion in the quality of educational services to the entire country. Thus, high investment in Charter Schools does in some sense address social equity concerns in the far future but recognizes that there is simply not the human resource base in Cambodia needed to raise standards at all secondary schools at the same time (KAPE, 2014).

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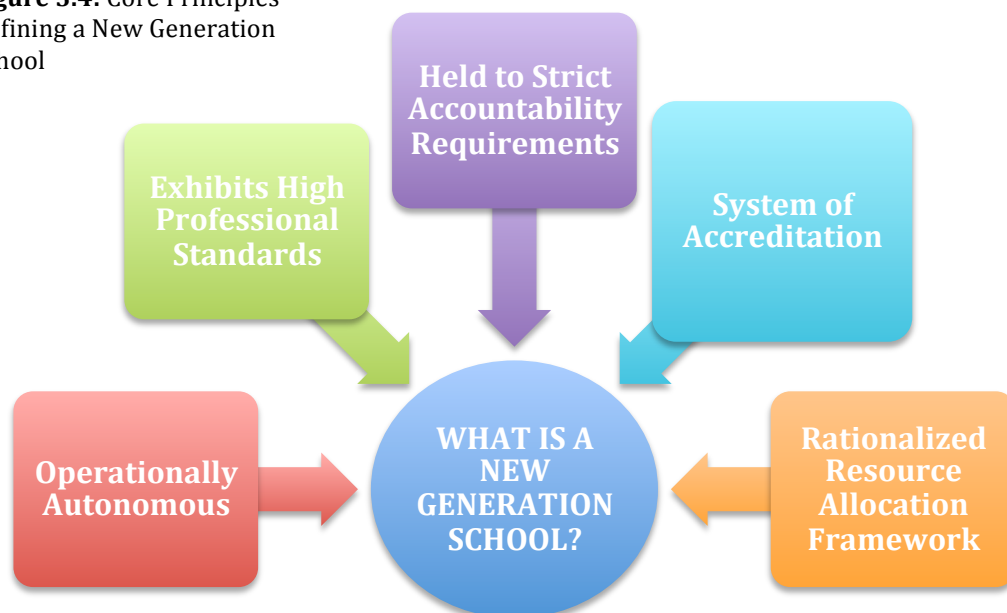
<sup>4</sup> Private conversation with H.E. Dr. Hang Chuon Naron, Minister of Education, Youth, and Sport, 2015.

<sup>5</sup> New Generation Schools are designated as an official Ministry policy measure in 'Point 14' of the new Education Reform Agenda promulgated by the new Minister of Education.

As part of the New Generation School Policy developed by the Ministry in 2016, a *National Oversight Board* was created to approve and monitor the use of funds received from government and other sources to ensure that these investments yield improved student services. Breaking with precedent, the Ministry has contracted the services of a local NGO partner to assist the Board in the development and oversight of New Generation School programming. This is the first time that Ministry has ever used taxpayer receipts to engage a civil society partner to implement its programming. The Board also makes recommendations for continued *accreditation* of each New Generation School. If a school is found to be in non-compliance with key criteria for performance (e.g., no private tutoring, enhanced library services, etc.), it may lose its accreditation. Without continued accreditation, the school will lose its access to special government resources. The composition of the board reflects public-private partnership principles in which there are included members from Non-state Actors and the private sector.

MoEYS has identified *five core principles* that define what a New Generation School is. These principles are illustrated in Figure 3.4 and take in issues of governance, professionalism, autonomy, accreditation, and rationalized resource allocation (MoEYS, 2016d). The core principles underlying a New Generation School relate above all to its *new governance structure*. This structure provides *operational autonomy* to school managers to *innovate* and ensure *high professional standards* at all levels. However, the price of this freedom is that school managers must be held strictly accountable for their performance and teachers must meet high standards of professional behavior. Of particular note in this regard, private tutoring is forbidden and teachers are required to teach the maximum number of hours per week, as normally required under MoEYS policy. Teachers are also required to use technology in their teaching, set professional goals, and attend regular professional development meetings that often entail individualized conferencing. Teachers receive special incentives to supplement their salaries as well as scholarships for professional development opportunities but are vetted at the end of each school year by an accreditation body

**Figure 3.4:** Core Principles  
Defining a New Generation  
School



that may or may not authorize contract extension, based on a review of their performance. To ensure that both school managers and teachers are motivated to meet these new standards, they are competitively recruited by the Oversight Board. Competitive recruitment of school managers and teachers is an unheard of practice that conflicts with the patronage-based system of appointments that generally governs the public education system. In this sense, New Generation Schools have adopted new practices of personnel management in the public sector that are actually more akin to the private sector.

Another defining aspect of a New Generation School is the emplacement of a *rationalized re-*

*source allocation* framework. In a normal public secondary school, parents and students pay large unofficial fees directly to teachers. There is actually significant investment from local communities into public schools but none of this investment adds value to school services because it bypasses the school and flows directly to teachers who are not held accountable for their performance. In a New Generation School, a school must abolish all informal payments but may negotiate voluntary contributions from middle class parents (poor families are exempt), communities, etc. that flow directly into school coffers. Schools are required to use such funds and those from other sources to ensure the delivery of high quality student services, teacher incentives that are linked to performance, and investment in school facilities, among other things. Thus, New Generation Schools in many ways approximate private schools in the way that they allocate resources from all sources to ensure a high standard of services.

Finally, New Generation Schools are defined as ‘schools of choice.’ This means that parents from any part of a province or municipality may enroll their children there if they can pass eligibility criteria (e.g., entrance examination results, literacy tests, etc). Parents may be asked to contribute a voluntary fee to the school in exchange for the abolition for all unofficial fees and maintenance of the school’s accreditation as a New Generation School. According to policy guidelines, this happens in the 4<sup>th</sup> year of implementation conditional on continuing high standards of education and accreditation. Parents who are determined by the school to be of limited means are exempted from such payments. To assist the school in waiving these voluntary fees, MoEYS plans to provide a substitute payment in place of the exempted family using funds from a *Social Equity Fund*. This special fund, to be administered by the Oversight Board, ensures that all social classes have access to New Generation School services.

The governance requirements of the New Generation School system collide with deeply entrenched behavioral patterns of a dysfunctional nature among teachers, school managers, and local educational officials in the public sector. This refers to the politicization of appointments, shadow teaching practices (i.e., private tutoring), and a general lack of accountability. Historically, public schools have never been denied investment due to poor performance nor have teachers or school managers ever been demoted, re-assigned, or sanctioned in any way due to their performance (except in cases of egregiously corrupt behavior or abuse). It is still not certain whether public officials will be able to enforce standards of accreditation and professional behavior as laid out in the New Generation School policy framework released in September 2016 given the strong break with well-established patterns of dysfunction that it implies. As of 2016, three New Generation School sites had been established by MoEYS with five to six more planned over the next two years. There have not yet been many test cases regarding enforcement of performance standards, as the initiative is still quite new. In addition, the teachers working in such schools have been highly compliant with performance expectations given that they are specially recruited based on high levels of motivation to work in a very professional environment with many opportunities for professional development.

To be sure, early efforts to establish an NGS governance model in one of the most corrupt secondary schools in Phnom Penh met with fierce resistance from resident teachers that could only be quelled by firm determination on the part of the most senior management within the Ministry, which was an encouraging display of political will to enforce reform. The Ministry was able to deal with opposition from teachers by establishing what is known as a ‘school within a school’ model in which an oasis of good governance was created within the school with its own managers and externally recruited teachers. Nevertheless, the students who enrolled in classes within this oasis stopped paying for private classes in the normal school, which infuriated their former teachers. Such problems will likely occur in many urban schools where shadow teaching involving significant sums of money is rampant.

The establishment of New Generation Schools follows several possible prototype models including the establishment of an entirely ‘new school’ where one did not previously exist, the estab-

lishment of a ‘school in a school’, and/or ‘whole school’ applications. The establishment of the New Generation School model in a new school is perhaps the easiest prototype to replicate given that new teachers with high motivation who value the professional opportunities offered by a New Generation School environment can be competitively recruited. New Generation Schools that take on a ‘school in a school’ model also have flexibility to recruit teachers from outside of the school. The whole school model that involves the complete conversion of an existing school into a New Generation School offers the most challenges for implementation because the scope for recruiting new teachers and managers externally is highly limited. The replication of a whole school model, therefore, requires careful selection of schools based on the expressed commitment of managers, teachers, and community to work within a good governance milieu that effectively abolishes shadow teaching and other modes of unprofessional behavior. Although MoEYS has so far been successful at creating New Generation School prototypes for each of the contexts described above, it has yet to show that the model can be replicated on a wider scale. This then remains an important future challenge for the expansion of Charter School programming in Cambodia, particularly given the human resource constraints in the education sector.

### **3.7 Future Prospects**

Current educational reforms in the secondary education sector have raised optimism among reform-minded educators and development partners to levels not seen in a long time. To a large extent, this optimism derives from strong new leadership at the highest levels that is at last willing to take major political risks to achieve significant changes in the work culture at many secondary schools. For the first time, current educational reforms are moving beyond access concerns to focus on educational quality and governance issues that will at last bring Cambodia’s secondary education system into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. This is an important change from a previous leadership that looked back to the 1960s as the golden age for which Cambodia’s secondary schools should strive. Current reforms also have a greater air of realism that recognizes the variability among schools, particularly with respect to good governance. This has led to a greater commitment to multiple development tracks of investment, using levels of the quality of governance as a key criterion for high or low investment pathways. These strategic changes have created an operational environment where a Charter School movement can now exist and even thrive should the political will to support change continue into the far future. Even more importantly, MoEYS has made a strategic decision to challenge vested interests both among the bureaucracy and among teachers to bring about much needed change in the way that schools are managed. This courageous decision-making process demonstrates a unique and rarely seen political will to achieve change.

There are concerns, however, that the strong political leadership animating current reforms may not last beyond the next national elections in 2018, which may result in a change of government or a reshuffling of Ministers should the ruling party maintain its grip on power. There is also major opposition to current reforms, particularly from among risk-averse bureaucrats and teachers whose lucrative private classes are now at risk. There is even an apprehension that the mandate for change from the highest levels of government may also whither away when political patronage arrangements that govern school appointments are challenged by decision-making to remove and replace incompetent school directors. Time is on the side of those who wish to maintain the *status quo* and those actors with such vested interests are acutely aware of this. Therefore, there is a willingness to obstruct or slow down reforms until the next change in Ministerial leadership occurs (which they hope will be in 2018) but without doing so in a way that directly challenges the current leadership. Reformers are, therefore, implementing reforms as quickly as they can to ensure that they have some staying power, particularly with the larger public who appear to support the changes that are unfolding. If successful, these efforts could create the political pressure needed to counterbalance more conservative vested interests, which are in favor of preserving the *status quo*. Only time will tell whether the reformers will win their race against time.



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