



FUNDACIÓN  
*Xcalibur*



## Education in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC): situation, gaps and priorities

Study of the education situation in the country, policies, gaps and operational implications for improving and protecting children and young people

Fundación Xcalibur - 2026

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## Country factsheet



### General profile

**Capital:** Kinshasa

**Population:** ~109 million

**Area:** ~2.34 million km<sup>2</sup>

**Official language:** French

**Main national languages:** Lingala, Swahili (Kiswahili), Kikongo (Kongo) and Tshiluba

**Other languages:** The country has very high linguistic diversity, with more than 200 languages.

**Implications for education:** in the early grades, learning is often delivered in national or local languages in many territories, while French becomes the main language of instruction as primary education progresses and, above all, in secondary education.

### Population, structure and development

**Urban population:** ~37%

**Rural population:** ~63%

**Women:** approx. 50%; **men:** approx. 50%

**Median age:** ~16 years

**Life expectancy:** ~62 years

**HDI (Human Development Index):** 0.522 (low)

## Context and education framework

The education system of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) operates in a country of continental scale and high territorial diversity, which shapes **both education supply and demand**. Expanding education coverage has been a sustained priority in recent decades, with a particular emphasis on basic education<sup>1</sup>. In September 2019, the Government introduced **free public primary education** ('gratuité'), officially removing school fees that had for years financed part of schools' day-to-day operations (World Bank, 2021).

The decision was framed as a universal access policy and reshaped the balance between coverage, financing and system quality. While the removal of direct fees in public primary education **contributed to increased enrolment**, it also **eliminated** a major source of operating income. As a result, the reform shifted the challenge from access towards the State's capacity to finance operating costs on a stable basis - teachers, learning materials and maintenance - and to prevent a deterioration in teaching and learning conditions (World Bank, 2021; World Bank, 2024).

In the DRC, primary education is **free and compulsory**, with **statutory entry at age 6** and a duration of six years, **generally covering ages 6-12**.

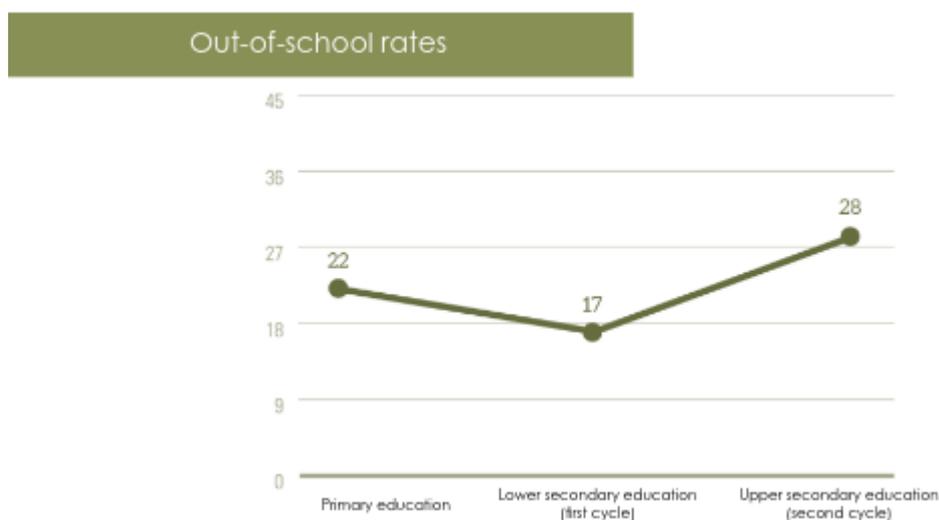
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<sup>1</sup> In this document, basic education refers to primary education and the first cycle of secondary education (lower secondary), in accordance with the ISCED international classification.

## Current education outcomes: access, learning and retention

Despite long-term progress in access to primary education, school exclusion remains high in absolute terms. An estimated **7.6 million children and adolescents aged 5 to 17** are out of school - one of the highest figures in sub-Saharan Africa (UNICEF, 2025). In relative terms, this corresponds to roughly one fifth to one quarter of the school-age population. Over time, the net attendance rate in primary education rose **from 52% (2001) to 78% (2018)**, reflecting gradual expansion prior to the introduction of free primary schooling (UNESCO-UIS, 2024).

In September 2019, the introduction of free public primary education marked a turning point in education policy by reducing direct cost barriers and changing the balance between coverage, financing and quality. However, **available evidence underscores that consolidation depends on the ability to fund school operations** with stable financing and to absorb increased demand without weakening teaching and learning conditions (World Bank, 2021; World Bank, 2024).



UNICEF. (2021). *Data Analysis for Learning and Equity (EAGLE): Education Factsheet - Democratic Republic of the Congo (MICS 2017-18)*. United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF).

From the earliest stages, education trajectories in the DRC are shaped by **late entry** into school and very **low participation in Pre-primary education**. Early childhood education is the most underdeveloped part of the system: **only around 5% of children aged 3 to 5 attend Pre-primary**, which limits readiness for primary education and is associated with more irregular school trajectories from the first grades (UNICEF, 2021).

In **primary education**, these early vulnerabilities are reflected both in **learning** and in **retention**. By the end of this cycle, only **17.6% of pupils achieve reading proficiency** and barely **0.4% reach basic arithmetic competencies**, which indicates that **a significant proportion of children progress through the system** without consolidating foundational skills (UNICEF, 2021). Gender inequalities are already evident at this level: **22% of girls are out of school, compared with 20.9% of boys** (UNICEF, 2021).

In **secondary education**, **learning deficits persist** and **access gaps widen**. In the second year of secondary education, **47% of pupils achieve reading competencies**, while only **4.8% do so in mathematics** (UNICEF, 2021). In terms of access, **exclusion affects 17.4% of girls, compared with 15.7% of boys in lower secondary**, and intensifies in upper secondary, where **32.6% of girls are out of school, compared with 23% of boys** (UNICEF, 2021). These differences are associated with social and economic factors, such as **child marriage**—which affects approximately **29% of girls**—and **child labour**, especially in the most vulnerable households (UNICEF, 2021).

As a result of these accumulated factors, educational trajectories show a progressive loss of pupils as the cycle advances. **According to UNICEF, the completion rate stands at 63% in primary education**, falling to **54% in lower secondary** and reaching only **32% in upper secondary**, which confirms that retention and completion deteriorate cumulatively at levels beyond primary education.

In youth education outcomes, these dynamics translate into persistent gaps. Among young people aged 15 to 24, **the literacy rate is 83% for men, compared with 71% for women**, reflecting the cumulative impact of inequalities across the education trajectory (UNESCO-UIS, 2024).

Finally, across the entire education cycle, **around 20% of children and adolescents aged 5 to 17 have at least one functional difficulty**. When adequate mechanisms for detection and support in school are lacking, these difficulties increase the risk of low attainment, repetition and dropout. Evidence indicates that early schooling facilitates identification and helps reduce their impact on educational trajectories (UNICEF, 2021).

## Education system: governance, financing and provision capacity

- **System determinants (governance and financing):** Public expenditure on education has increased following the introduction of free primary education, but it remains low in relative terms: in 2022 it stood at around **3% of GDP**, compared with a global average above 4% (World Bank, 2024). The structure of the system combines **state schools** with an extensive network of **subsidised faith-based and community schools**, which enables broad territorial coverage, but increases the challenges of regulation, supervision and the harmonisation of standards (UNESCO-IIEP-ICBA, 2024).
- **Provision capacity (infrastructure and teachers):** The country faces a **cumulative deficit** in classrooms, learning materials and qualified staff. The introduction of free primary education increased demand in a context where **physical expansion and the availability of teachers are advancing more slowly than enrolment**. Sector reports describe overcrowded classrooms and high pupil-teacher ratios, especially in rural areas (World Bank, 2021). Teachers' **salaries** have historically depended on **family contributions**; although state compensation mechanisms have been introduced, these do not always cover the **full costs of running schools** (Equal Times, 2021).

## Context and operational barriers: socioeconomics, territory, security/conflict

- **Demand-side barriers and indirect costs:** Although the free public primary education policy introduced in 2019 officially eliminated direct school fees, the **economic burden associated with schooling** persists through **indirect costs** and **informal payments** in certain contexts, disproportionately affecting lower-income households (World Bank, 2021). In practice, the policy reduces a major barrier to enrolment, but does not guarantee regular attendance or continuity: many families continue to face **recurring expenses** that can become unaffordable in contexts of poverty and vulnerability.

These **indirect costs** include, among others, uniforms, school materials, contributions for examinations and transport, as well as expenses related to food and the opportunity cost of caregiving time when children must travel long distances or remain away from home during the school day (UNICEF, 2021; UNICEF, n.d.). In rural or peri-urban contexts, transport and distance increase the total cost, while in areas where educational infrastructure is limited, families tend to assume a larger share of spending on basic inputs. The

available evidence indicates that these costs remain a significant barrier to effective schooling, even under a formal framework of free primary education (UNICEF, n.d.).

In addition, the implementation of free primary education has coexisted with **contributions requested from families** to cover deficits in school operations, such as salary top-ups for teachers, maintenance, security or materials—particularly when public financing arrives late or proves insufficient to meet operational needs (World Bank, 2021). This phenomenon can generate a de facto **“dual system”**: formally free, but with variable costs depending on the territory and the local capacity to sustain school operations. In these cases, the abolition of fees does not fully remove economic barriers; rather, it shifts them towards informal or semi-formal mechanisms that tend to affect the most vulnerable households.

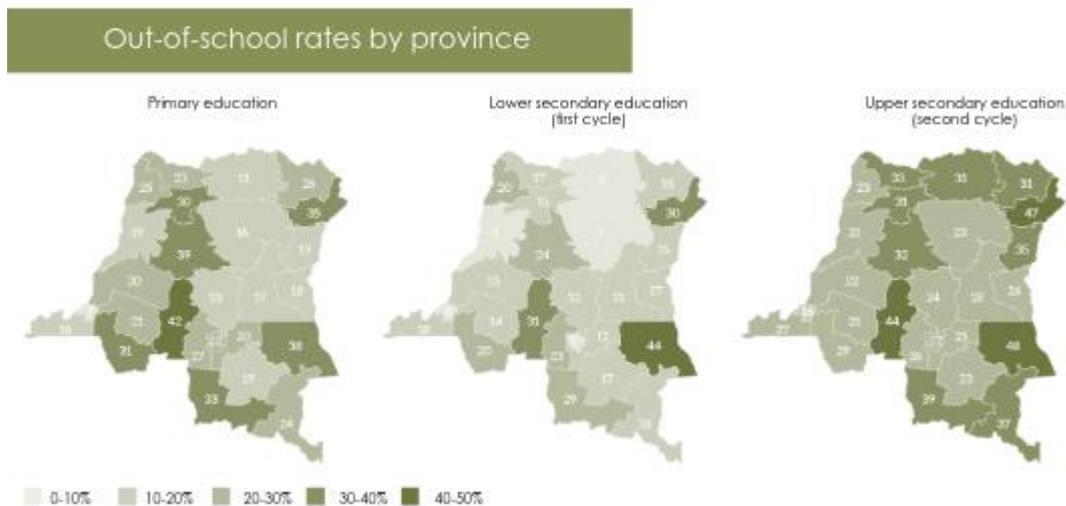
- **Service fragility, connectivity and continuity:** In operational terms, this combination of territorial and security-related constraints affects three critical dimensions of the system: the **effective availability of teachers**, the **continuity of education service delivery**, and **planning capacity**. In hard-to-reach areas, incentives to attract and retain qualified staff are lower, and logistical costs for supervision and ongoing training are higher, which reduces stable teacher presence and weakens pedagogical quality. In contexts of insecurity, moreover, teacher mobility is restricted and turnover increases, which limits curricular continuity and undermines learning progression (UNESCO-IICBA, 2024; UNHCR/Education Cluster RDC, 2025).

Likewise, **displacement and the concentration of populations** in host areas place additional pressure on already overstretched schools: pupil-teacher ratios increase, **the shortage of materials intensifies**, and **the needs for psychosocial support and protection multiply**, all of which have negative impacts on effective instructional time and the likelihood of remaining in school. In these environments, schooling may be maintained formally, but with weakened teaching and learning conditions and more fragile trajectories, especially in transitions to secondary education (OCHA, 2025; UNHCR/Education Cluster RDC, 2025).

## Gaps and most affected population groups

**Territorial disparities** shape access to education, continuity and educational quality in the DRC through three main channels, according to UNESCO in its 2024 report on education in the country:

- **Unequal school provision**
- **Differentiated security contexts**
- **Economic and logistical barriers that vary by territory**



UNICEF. (2021). *Data Analysis for Learning and Equity (EAGLE): Education Factsheet - Democratic Republic of the Congo (MICS 2017-18)*. United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF).

In **urban and better-connected provinces**, education provision tends to be **denser and more diversified**, combining public provision with a significant presence of non-state schools—faith-based, community-run or private. One operational indicator of this greater availability is coverage of early childhood education, which is typically considerably higher in urban areas: in Kinshasa, for example, the Pre-primary attendance rate among children aged 3–4 reaches approximately 18%, compared with levels close to 1% in provinces such as Kasai, Kasai Central, Mongala and Maniema. This gap suggests that the density of early childhood education provision—and, by extension, the availability of related education services—is much higher in the country's main urban hub than in rural or peripheral provinces.

By contrast, in **rural and low-connectivity provinces**, the **lower density of centres and the logistical costs** of provision translate into higher rates of out-of-school children and **more fragile educational trajectories**. These patterns are consistent with a context in which distance to schools, more limited availability of provision—including, for example, pathways into secondary education—and constrained institutional support capacity increase irregular attendance and the risk of disruption, particularly during transitions after primary school. This same territorial pattern is reflected in the provincial distribution of out-of-school children, where a central belt of consistently high rates is observed in large, predominantly rural provinces with weak

infrastructure (Nord-Ubangi, Mongala, Tshuapa and Kasai). In these contexts, the **cost of education provision**—school construction and maintenance, teacher availability and retention, pedagogical supervision and the supply of materials—is **significantly higher**, and physical access to centres may involve **long distances and costly transport**, which reduces regular attendance and increases the likelihood of dropout.

In addition, even within a formal framework of free primary education, **indirect costs** persist—uniforms, transport and informal contributions—which weigh more heavily on poorer households and tend to vary by territory (World Bank, 2021). In addition, **discontinuity in secondary provision** in enclaved territories increases the **risk of being out of school or leaving the system early** as students progress through the cycle (UNICEF, 2021).

## Gaps associated with conflict and displacement in the east

Within this context of structural inequalities, the east of the country represents a case **in which these gaps are particularly pronounced**, driven by the interaction of a context of crisis and displacement. In 2025, the escalation of violence in North Kivu and South Kivu led to the closure of more than 2,500 schools and learning spaces, affecting 795,000 children in those two provinces. The province of Ituri was also included, as it is commonly considered alongside North Kivu and South Kivu in analyses of the eastern region due to its conflict and displacement context; the number of out-of-school children in the east exceeds 1.6 million (OCHA, 2025; UNICEF, 2025). This issue not only affects access, but also the day-to-day functioning of the system: interruptions to the school calendar, displacement of students and teachers, the use of alternative school facilities, and deteriorating security along routes to schools all reduce attendance—even when schools reopen.

In addition, the educational effects of conflict tend to extend beyond the period of closure: the concentration of displaced populations in host areas increases pressure on schools and teachers, raises pupil-classroom ratios and reduces effective instructional time. Added to this is a psychosocial component: **exposure to violence and displacement affects concentration, retention and performance**, increasing the likelihood of repetition and dropout, especially at transition ages into secondary education (UNHCR/Education Cluster RDC, 2025). Overall, this illustrates how territorial inequalities within the education system can be amplified by security crises, generating a simultaneous combination of loss of access, deterioration in quality and increasingly fragile educational trajectories.

In this context, particularly persistent patterns of exclusion can be observed. **Internally displaced children** often face enrolment barriers—documentation requirements and limited places—alongside curricular discontinuity and indirect costs in host communities, as well as overcrowded classrooms (UNHCR/Education Cluster RDC, 2025). In **mining areas**, pressure for early participation in economic activities—often

informal—competes with school attendance and tends to be concentrated among households least able to absorb the indirect costs of schooling; this translates into absenteeism, low attainment and early dropout, particularly during the transition to secondary education (UNICEF, 2021). Finally, **children with disabilities** face physical, pedagogical and social barriers that limit both access and effective learning; where such support is absent, inclusion becomes nominal and results in more fragile trajectories and lower levels of competencies acquired (UNICEF, 2021).

## Recent policies and ongoing dynamics

Beyond the **initial increase in enrolment**, free primary education has reshaped the profile of pupils in primary school by enabling the inclusion of children who were previously out of school or attending intermittently. This can increase the diversity of ages and levels of preparedness within the same grade, particularly in the early years, where foundational competencies are developed. In this context, the importance of complementing free primary education with **pedagogical measures** that respond to differentiated learning needs is highlighted, in order to sustain improvements in outcomes and prevent irregular trajectories from early stages (World Bank, 2021; World Bank, 2024).

At the same time, the reform has expanded the system's needs for **coordination and planning**, requiring financial and administrative mechanisms capable of sustaining school operations consistently.

## Operational implications and priority lines of intervention

### 1) Foundational learning and entry into the system

The available evidence suggests that the first bottleneck in the education system in the DRC lies in **early entry and the consolidation of foundational learning**. Coverage of early childhood education is extremely low—around 5% of children aged 3 to 5—which limits readiness for primary education and reduces early exposure to pre-reading and pre-numeracy skills (UNICEF, 2021). In addition, **late entry into primary school and progression with incomplete learning** contribute to more irregular trajectories from the first grades.

In this context, the policy priority is not only to increase enrolment, but to **ensure that pupils acquire basic competencies** in reading and mathematics in the early years, preventing learning gaps from accumulating. This implies strengthening early childhood education—especially in areas with lower provision—implementing explicit teaching strategies in reading and numeracy in the early grades, and developing support mechanisms for pupils with over-age enrolment or intermittent schooling (UNICEF, 2021).

### 2) Continuity and transitions

A second priority axis is **school retention and the protection of critical transitions**, given the progressive loss of pupils across the cycle, which means the system fails to sustain complete trajectories, particularly at levels beyond primary education. **The completion rate falls from 63% in primary education to 54% in lower secondary and 32% in upper secondary<sup>2</sup>**, confirming that the risk of disruption is concentrated around the transition to secondary education and worsens as indirect costs, distance to schools and pressure for early economic participation increase (UNICEF, 2021).

Consequently, policy measures should focus on ensuring **continuity** at points where trajectories break down—especially the primary-to-secondary transition. This includes strategies to reduce dropout—attendance monitoring, support to vulnerable households, strengthening effective provision in secondary education (territorial availability)—and **second-chance** and reintegration measures for pupils who have interrupted their schooling (UNESCO-UIS, 2024; UNICEF, 2021).

### 3) Equity and targeting

A third axis is the need for an explicit strategy on **equity and targeting**, since gaps by territory, poverty, gender and disability are not marginal: they shape access, learning and retention. The evidence shows that **gender inequalities widen as the education cycle progresses**, with higher relative exclusion of girls in upper secondary education,

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<sup>2</sup> *Methodological note: when interpreting this trend, it should be borne in mind that completion indicators may be derived from different metrics depending on the source. In this article, they are used as a sign of progressive deterioration in retention throughout the cycle (UNESCO-UIS, 2024; UNICEF, 2021).*

and that territorial and socioeconomic gaps emerge from the earliest stages of schooling (UNICEF, 2021). In this context, universal expansion efforts must be combined with targeted interventions in groups and territories at higher risk, particularly at secondary level: targeted support for adolescent girls to sustain school continuity, reducing indirect economic barriers for poorer households, and adapting the school environment for children with functional difficulties where there is evidence that these barriers affect learning and retention (UNICEF, 2021). Likewise, in **provinces affected by crisis and displacement**, equity strategies need to integrate **specific measures** for continuity and education protection to reduce loss of schooling associated with prolonged interruptions (OCHA, 2025; UNHCR/Education Cluster RDC, 2025).

## Conclusion

The Democratic Republic of the Congo has expanded access to education at primary level substantially, with a visible turning point following the introduction of **free primary education in 2019**. This reform **helped to remove a direct barrier to enrolment** and consolidated basic education as a national priority, within a system characterised by high demographic pressure and territorially unequal provision (World Bank, 2021; UNESCO-IICBA, 2024). However, **the current balance shows** that increased enrolment **has not automatically translated into complete education trajectories** or into proportional improvements in learning: **exclusion remains high** in absolute terms, basic competency levels remain very low, and continuity weakens as pupils progress into secondary education (UNICEF, 2021; World Bank, 2024).

In this context, **the system's challenges converge around three closely interrelated fronts**. First, the **persistence of a massive number of children and adolescents out of school** confirms that economic, logistical and territorial barriers continue to limit effective access, especially in rural and low-connectivity provinces. Second, the evidence on **"poverty and learning"** suggests that a significant share of pupils progress without consolidating foundational competencies, increasing the risk of repetition and dropout. Third, **the crisis in the east of the country** intensifies these problems by directly affecting the continuity of education service delivery and generating prolonged interruptions, displacement and school closures that further weaken educational trajectories—even in contexts where enrolment is formally maintained (UNICEF, 2021; OCHA, 2025; UNHCR/Education Cluster RDC, 2025).

Looking ahead to the next policy and cooperation cycle, **the main challenge** no longer lies solely in expanding coverage, but in **strengthening the system's operational capacity** to sustain learning and complete trajectories. This entails prioritising investments in early childhood education and the early grades to **reduce late entry** and accumulated learning gaps; protecting critical transitions into secondary education through **retention strategies and effective expansion of provision** after primary; and **targeting interventions in the most exposed territories and population groups**—adolescent girls, poorer households, children with functional difficulties, and displaced populations—to reduce persistent inequalities (UNICEF, 2021; UNESCO-IICBA, 2024; World Bank, 2024). Overall, the **sustainability** of the free education reform and future progress in the system will depend on its capacity to **turn expanded access into effective learning**, educational continuity and territorial equity, particularly at secondary level.

## What does Fundación Xcalibur do in the country?

Through the Basket4All programme, Fundación Xcalibur seeks to contribute to the holistic development of children and young people in the DRC through three complementary levers: **promoting Pre-primary education, transmitting values and skills through sport, and raising awareness and supporting families to sustain attendance and commitment to schooling.**

At present, the programme works with educational and community teams to **strengthen basic competencies and learning-related factors**—concentration, motor skills, self-confidence and discipline—among young people aged 12 to 16 through the Talent Academy.

To this end, the programme pursues the following objectives, structured into activities:

- **Using sport as a tool for active learning**, through regular socio-sport sessions combined with **awareness-raising modules in schools.**
- Consolidating a **safe and inclusive environment** for girls and adolescents, including specific measures to reduce absenteeism and strengthen school participation through **individual and family follow-up, nutritional support during activities**, and targeted actions on **menstrual hygiene** to reduce barriers to participation and absenteeism.
- **Supporting young people in building their life project**, linking them to training and professional opportunities, especially through pathways connected to sport.

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