

## Student Empowerment in Schools of Kyrgyzstan

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### Abstract:

Everyone has the right to receive education and should be empowered and guided morally, spiritually, and financially. In this process, parents, schools, and teachers play a crucial role and there should be such an efficient mechanism and system to facilitate this cooperation. However, there are still challenges to overcome such as poor participation of parents in education, poor communications between parents and schools, lack of student incentivization mechanisms on school level, existing classroom level issues that negatively influence student empowerment. This paper discusses these issues based on field research findings conducted in Osh and Talas provinces and offers some suggestions and recommendations which include opinions of experts in the education sector.

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**Keywords:** student empowerment, parents' participation, teachers, quality education, rural schools

### Introduction

It is generally believed that every individual has the right to obtain education regardless of ethnicity, religion, gender, and age and that he/she should be empowered, whether by schools, parents or the public, to improve his/her human potential by acquiring quality education. Students, as the owners of the future, should be guided morally, financially, and spiritually in heading towards this bright future.

Student empowerment in its general meaning ensures that all children have access to education and are motivated and guided through their learning journey within and outside of the education institutions. This includes providing children with necessary learning materials and facilities at the classroom level, teaching major subjects and essential life skills by qualified teachers and are morally guided throughout their schooling years and sharing information about future trends and career opportunities by teachers as well as parents. Looking at the statistics worldwide, 1 out of 5 children (20%) are not enrolled in secondary schools, and that lower secondary school attendance is much higher among rich families (80%) compared to only 46% among poor families<sup>1</sup>. In terms of enrollment, geographical locations of children

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<sup>1</sup> UNICEF, *Data on Secondary Education 2019*: <https://data.unicef.org/topic/education/secondary-education/>

play a role too in which rural children are less likely to attend school than their urban counterparts due to factors such as poverty and lack of student empowerment mechanisms.

The National Strategy of Education Improvement of the Ministry of Education of Kyrgyzstan for 2021-2040<sup>2</sup> has strategic goals to empower youth with a greater focus on girls as well as children with disability to acquire necessary education. This is planned to be achieved by improving the current education system and using modern ICT instruments and innovative psycho-pedagogical approaches. Moreover, the Ministry of Education and/or any other implementing agencies need to take into consideration the following key aspects of student empowerment while designing and implementing programs/projects directed towards student empowerment:

- *Child guidance* – morale, motivation, and discipline of students as well as teachers to ensure that students are morally well prepared and have access to information about tendencies and opportunities in education and further career steps. Students should know what and why they are studying and that cooperation between schools and parents is important in working together to strengthen students' moral values and perspectives on education.
- *Accessibility of education* – students need to have access to proper education before obtaining a job and starting a career. For that, education policies need to include a commitment of a “no child left behind” climate so that education is economically and morally accessible to all.
- *Improved quality of education* – Kyrgyzstan still ranks low in quality of education worldwide and this could be due to its under improved education system and lack of qualified teaching staff. According to research conducted in 2015, only 30% of graduated young specialists obtained employment which is associated with low-quality education in schools as well as in higher education institutions (Ya.kg, 2015). Student empowerment cannot be achieved without quality education.

The purpose of this paper was to examine the level of student empowerment in Kyrgyzstan and identify the roles of stakeholders concerning student empowerment. Specifically, the paper explored the following concerns:

- What is the level of morale and incentives of students to obtain an education? What could motivate students more?
- What is the level of participation of parents in student empowerment?
- Do the school system and program respond to students' needs and the needs of the job industry in general?

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<sup>2</sup> National Strategy of Improving Education Sector for 2021-2040: <https://edu.gov.kg/ru/about/obcuzhdeniya/>, Ministry of Education and Science, Bishkek 2019.

## Methods

Field research was conducted to understand to what extent students are empowered, what mechanisms are in place to incentivize students for learning, what are the challenges and the pushback factors that could be addressed involving the following data collection approaches.

- Survey of school leadership, teaching staff, and parents using a questionnaire
- In-depth interviews with three experts in the education sector; one local expert with more than 10 years of experience, and an international expert from Tanzania, a C4C consultant, who also has very rich experience on systemic issues of schools.
- Focus group discussions involving students in grades of 9-11 in selected schools.

The field research was conducted in 19 schools in the Osh and Talas provinces which represent the southern and northern parts of Kyrgyzstan, respectively. Data were collected from 19 school leaders, 185 teachers, 53 classes of 9-11 grades with about 15-20 children in each class as well as selected parents.

## Selection of Schools

To capture the overall situation in student empowerment in schools, the following categories of schools were selected to represent the diverse settings and characteristics of schools in the Osh and Talas provinces.

- Three suburban schools, 16 rural schools.
- Of the 16 rural schools, four are remote highland schools located at more than 1500 m above sea level and far from the town centre, where living conditions are harsh, infrastructure is poor and vulnerable to natural disasters such as earthquakes, flood, and mudflows.
- Three gymnasium schools which normally accept students from 5<sup>th</sup> grade through competition and educate them till 11<sup>th</sup> grade. The remaining 16 are typical public schools.
- Two Uzbek & two Russian-language based schools, where subjects are taught mainly in these two languages.
- One 9 year-school, whose graduates either choose to continue in another school or a vocational school or decide to migrate to seek employment.

## Results and Discussion

### *Students morale and motivation*

Seventeen of 19 school principals responded that school children at their schools are quite motivated and display a learning culture. According to these school principals, students are always willing to take additional classes, which aim to prepare them for national examinations and that teachers follow education standards while teaching. The two principals who said students have low motivation think that students of the current time easily get distracted by gadgets and computer games. Looking at various studies and experiences of other development agencies, it can be observed that there can be several triggers for distinctions between students who are much more motivated and perform well in comparison with those who are not. One of the factors leading to better performance is the students' early childhood background before entering school. For instance, the research revealed that 95% of respondents (school leaders and teachers) stated that early childhood education has a great impact on children's education. The students who have a pre-school educational background and have learned to read before going to school outperform those who have not (MSDSP KG, 2018). Reading for and with children at pre-school ages as another technique of child empowerment, helps to develop children's critical thinking and communication skills as well as language literacy. In addition, it contributes to improving parent-children relationships and communication (MSDSP KG, 2018). In reading for children, parents' participation is crucial as it is part of their obligation as parents in their respective household settings. All respondents from Russian medium schools represented in both target regions, Osh and Talas, praised their education system and standards and teachers for their students' performance being much higher than schools in rural, mountainous, and Kyrgyz medium schools. Furthermore, two of the 19 schools have the services of Peace Corps<sup>3</sup> volunteers teaching English which provided an additional booster that triggers students to be quite motivated to study.

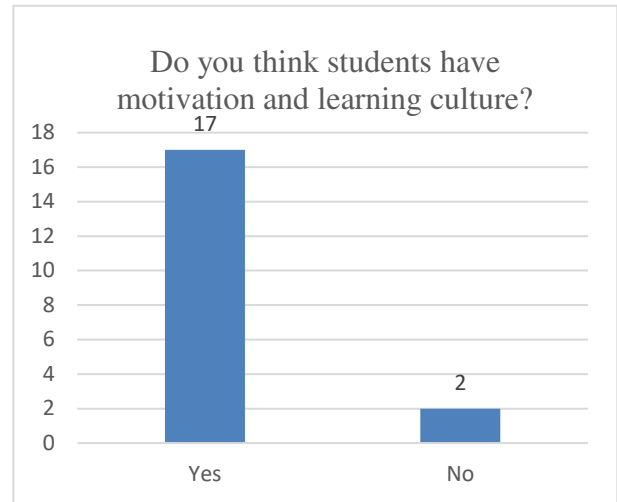


Figure 1: Students motivation and learning culture

Regardless of the level of motivation, school students have chosen the five most preferred professions which they believe can promise a brighter future for them:

- Doctor
- Teacher
- Computer programmer/IT expert
- Lawyer
- Translator

<sup>3</sup> Peace Corps in the Kyrgyz Republic: <https://www.peacecorps.gov/kyrgyz-republic/>

However, slightly more than half of the interviewed school students, mostly from Osh (57%), do not think that their schools are fully capable of preparing or training them for a good career in their adult life after school (Figure 2). They believe that they additionally have to study both inside and outside the school to gain the necessary skills to be able to compete in the job industry or to obtain higher education.

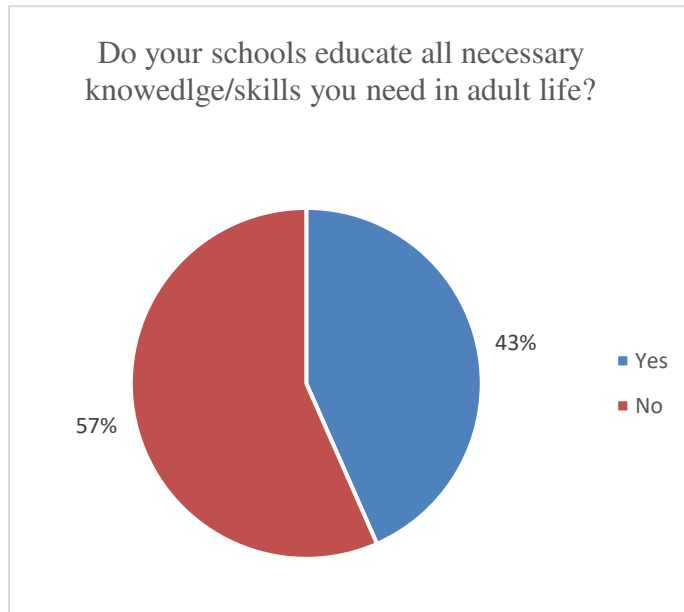


Figure 2: Students' opinions about schools' capacity to provide necessary knowledge/skills

In addition to this, students were found to have poor access to information about career development. Over 60% of students from both oblasts reported that they need career information and guidance whilst studying at school. The majority of schools, especially rural schools are limited to teaching only standard subjects and do not focus on providing necessary skills and career education.

Most students are not clear about their future after graduating from school and they mentioned that schools are missing the following:

- Additional courses in foreign languages.
- Practical courses of labs and handicraft for girls and boys as they are being limited with theory only.
- ICT tools especially modern computers with access to the internet for use in classrooms.

Students also mentioned that extracurricular activities which could motivate going to school and making learning more fun and interesting are lacking in their schools. The main types of societies or student clubs that the school children wish to participate in include:

- Debate clubs for senior grades.
- Intellectual clubs such as quiz classes.
- Healthcare clubs to promote 'healthy school' campaign among students.
- Music, arts, and dance societies.
- Union of history subject students with practical excursions to historical sites.

### ***Parents' participation***

The study revealed that parents have a general understanding of the importance of their role and support in children's education. Parents are involved in their children's education in various ways; they provide moral and financial support and even help with children's homework (Figure 3).

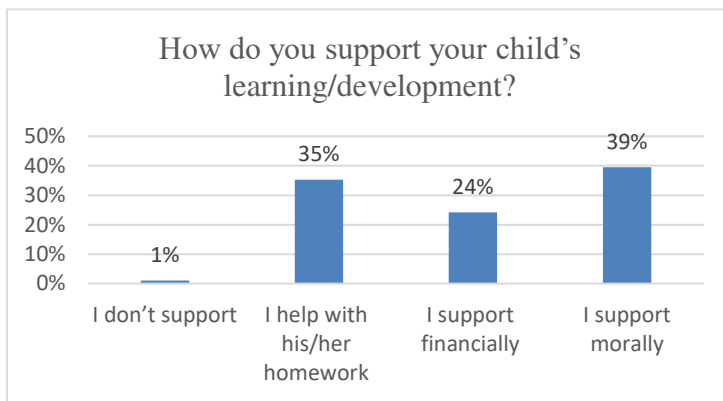


Figure 3: Parental support in children's education

Parents understand and believe that 'going to school' is important for their children. The majority of the respondents strongly want their children to continue obtaining higher education upon graduating from school. Only 1% of the respondents wanted their children to migrate to Russia or any other foreign country for employment purposes rather than receiving education (Figure 4). However, interviewed parents believe that schools are lacking facilities necessary to help empower and provide the best education for their children which include:

- Lack of cameras in classrooms which can ensure transparency and increase accountability of teachers to parents.
- Lack of ICT facilities, up-to-date textbooks, and other necessary resources especially in rural schools.
- Poor conditions in schools throughout the country such as lack of access to clean water and outdoor toilets which can cause infectious diseases among children.
- Lack of qualified teachers on all subjects especially foreign language educators including Russian and English.
- Insufficient practical sessions, laboratory or fieldwork to accompany theoretical classes.
- The large teacher-student ratio in grades/classes with 25-30 students per class especially in urban schools.

Nevertheless, both the interviewed education experts (local and international) provided contradicting views for parents' involvement in their children's education. They thought that parents do not communicate with schools and participate in children's education because of poverty and that they are busy working to earn a living for the family or they do not see the importance of their involvement or feel they are not competent in issues of student empowerment.

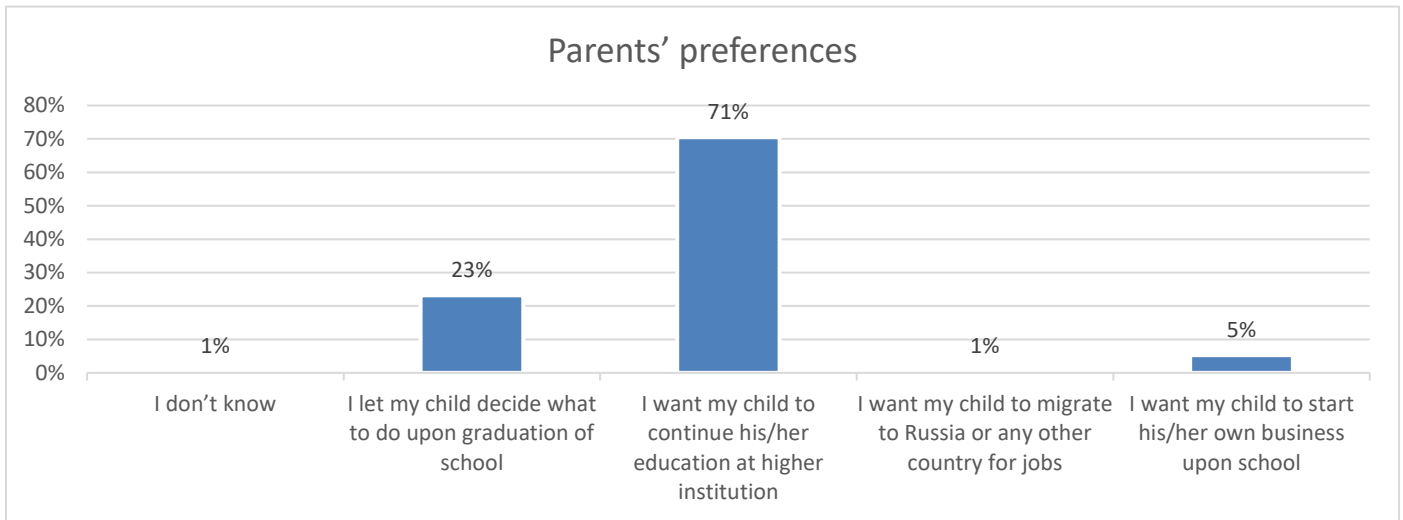


Figure 4: Parents' preferences for their children

The international expert also added that parents lack confidence and trust in schools' commitment and capacity. Another similar research noted that parents as well as the community believe that educating kids is the direct responsibility and only the job of teachers and thus, they avoid helping teachers (Kurmanbaeva & Chynybekova, 2018). Therefore, they have high expectations from teachers/schools instead of perceiving student empowerment as a joint task of all stakeholders including parents.

In terms of communications with schools, 44% of parents reported they attend various schools' events once a month while 26% said they attend every quarter, with very few (18%) are quite active by interacting with schools weekly. Parents from very rural/mountainous areas rarely attend such events for children due to their involvement in daily household activities and simply because of a lack of understanding of their roles. Moreover, communication with parents is still a challenge for the majority of schools in rural areas, where schools think that parents do not understand their roles to support children's education. Rural schools reported that parents are reluctant about engaging in their children's education such as help in reading for/with children, talking and asking how they are doing in school and what problems are being faced (Kurmanbaeva & Chynybekova, 2018).

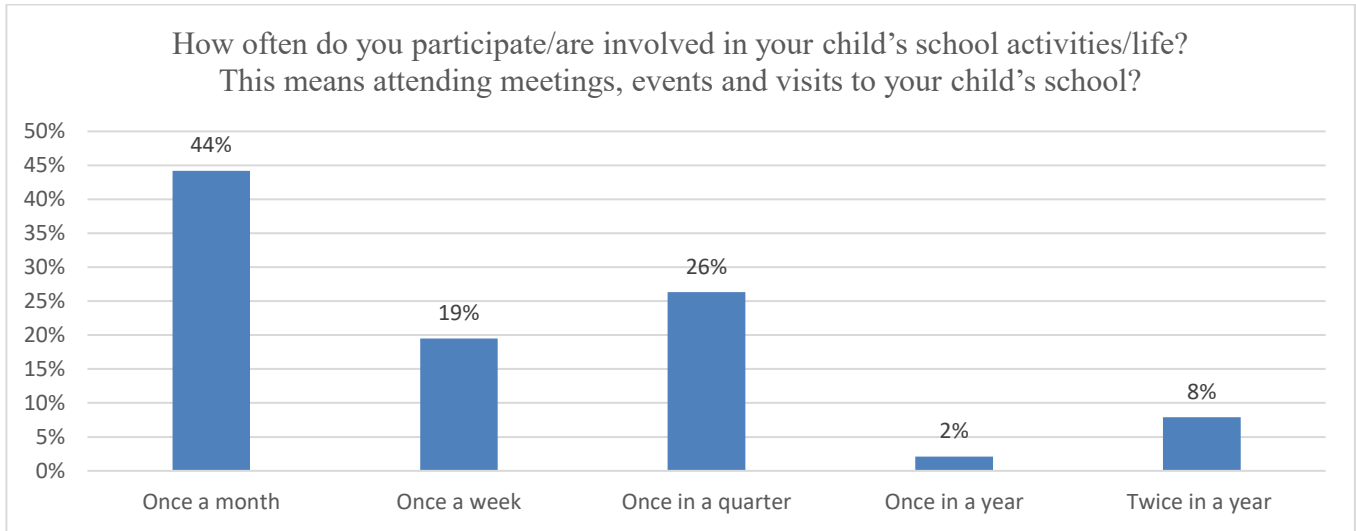


Figure 5: Parents' participation in school activities

An independent education expert with more than 10 years of experience also criticized schools' education strategies, which could have been more responsive and relevant to the current and future economy.

*Teaching in our schools is tied with the curriculum. Children study the subjects some of which they won't need after school at all. Most of the time in school is spent on the academic knowledge and skills. Children often leave schools without the skills that might help them live further, like communication, decision making, prioritizing, setting the goal, make a plan to achieve that goal, speak in a public, express his/her ideas, present to others, choose the right career.*

*Mrs. J.Mamytova, a local education expert*



The local expert also emphasized on 5 top challenges faced by school students that could have long-term consequences (Table 1).

*Table 1: Problems faced by school children and possible consequences*

<b>Problems</b>	<b>Problem description</b>	<b>Consequences</b>
Interference of gadgets	Computer games, phone games, other electronic devices distract students and keep them from reading/learning	Students lose interest in reading, critical thinking, become lazy
Long distances from/to schools in rural areas, the safety of children on the way to school	Due to poor infrastructure, long distances, destroyed or unconstructed bridges and bumpy roads, students face difficulties to get to schools, especially in wintertime and there are no distant learning facilities in schools in case of any emergencies	Children become vulnerable and isolated, have no access to education and be left behind
Overcrowded classes in urban areas	This is the case in urban areas, where population density is high, and schools cannot accommodate all who want to be enrolled. Therefore, high-rated schools are overcrowded with around 30 children in one class.	Increased pressure on teachers, which leads to poorer quality of education
Limited opportunities for extracurricular activities (clubs)	A culture of still prevailing teacher-centered approach left from the Soviet Union does not allow various extracurricular activities that would activate more the learning spirit of students. School children are mostly stuck with indoor classroom subjects.	Slow acceleration for children's motivation for learning
Limited opportunities to develop essential skills (social and life skills)	Most schools are busy with teaching only the required subjects and forget about training children on essential skills such as sociability, life skills, critical thinking, etc).	Education that the schools provide for children might not meet the market/industry needs and students will have limited opportunities for employment

## Student empowerment at the school level

### Classroom level findings

Classrooms are quite packed in surveyed schools with a high proportion of classrooms (89%) having at least 20 students of which 42% have 30 students or more (Figure 6). This number normally diminishes by up to 5 students upon graduating 9<sup>th</sup> grade as 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> grades are not compulsory in the Kyrgyz education system (Ministry of Education of KR, 2019). Overcrowded classes put lots of pressure on teachers. According to teachers, a large classroom size can lead to poor quality education due to the pressure they face. Organization and a small allocation of students per grade/class are crucial for the optimal learning experience.

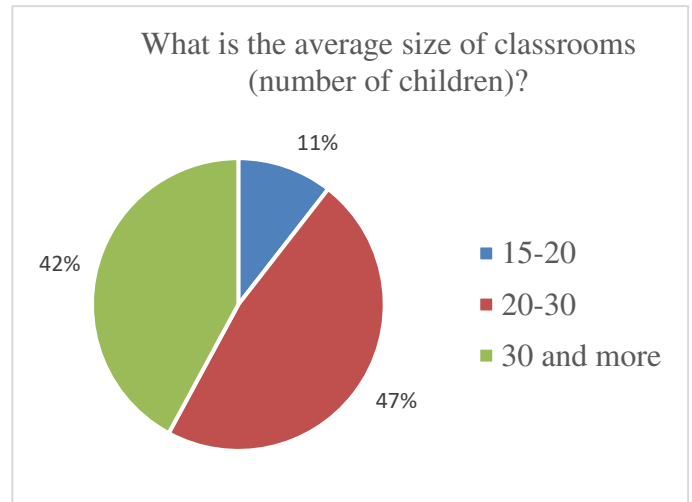


Figure 6: Average size of classes

### Learning environment and facilities

School administration stated that for teachers to teach at their best, the following are necessary:

- Adequate number of qualified teachers
- Classrooms must be equipped with necessary ICT (computers, interactive whiteboards)
- Textbooks and learning materials including teaching resources for children with learning disabilities
- Fully equipped labs for science subjects

The independent local expert who has been observing schools for many years elaborated on several issues as shown in Table 2.

*Table 2: School-related problems in Kyrgyzstan*

<b>Problems</b>	<b>Problem description</b>	<b>Consequences</b>
Shortage or turnover of teachers	Because of the lack of good salary and motivation, teachers seek other job opportunities through which they could earn more. Plus, the prestige of teaching has dropped due to again low salary and thus the number of teachers is diminishing.	Quality of education suffers because some teachers are required to teach subjects that they are not specialized in.
Poor school infrastructure	Due to lack of funding from the government, many schools' infrastructure (building, classrooms, facilities) are in poor condition, especially in rural areas.	School children are at risk of not having a proper learning environment
Limited funding from the government to solve school-related issues	Due to the poor economy of the country, the government has been unable to invest more in schools.	This leads to teachers leaving their jobs, poor learning environment, the school education system remains underdeveloped
Lack of textbooks, ICT tools	Lack of funding has led to a lack of modern textbooks and ICT tools.	Quality of education suffers
Outdated laboratories for science subjects (biology, chemistry, geography)	Most schools, especially the rural ones still use old lab instruments needed for science subjects.	Quality of education suffers

## Conclusion and Recommendations

It is generally believed that students should go to a school that is safe, affordable, physically accessible, inclusive and provides high-quality education needed for a brighter future. Moreover, the research revealed that there are some aspects of schools that students/parents are not satisfied with and needed to be improved for schools to better empower and prepare the next generation, that is well educated and prepared to bring positive changes in their communities. It is still the case that many schools in Kyrgyzstan are still ‘teacher-centered’ and follow rules and values inherited from the Soviet era. Even classroom designs and teaching methods are still as they used to be during Soviet times. Thus, to achieve those aspirations, it is recommended that:

- Schools launch and improve career information among students to have a better understanding of the global and national trends to be prepared for.
- Schools introduce additional lessons/lectures about moral and spiritual values apart from traditional subjects.
- The “Every child is unique’ approach should be introduced to schools with an emphasis on supporting children’s skills and capacities that they are good at. This includes additional targeted courses directed towards strengthening the unique and strong potential of students. For instance, if a student is good at learning languages, then he/she should be grouped with other students with the same interest and must be supported further.
- Both formal and non-formal curriculum as well as syllabus should be ‘student-friendly’ and school system should become ‘student-centered’ which allow students to learn freely and focus on their needs, improve their essential skills such as critical thinking, communications, etc.
- Strengthen collaboration with parents to jointly empower students for education and closely work with those kids who have learning disabilities.

In addition, schools need to be fully prepared and equipped to be able to empower their students, with the following:

- Enabling learning environments (proper classroom equipment and facilities).
- Up-to-date resources (books, textbooks, ICT tools, subject-specific tools, etc).
- Improved capacity of teaching staff and enabling environment for them to improve their competences regularly.
- Close collaborations with parents and the community.
- Student empowerment practices such as professional orientation and guidance for students.
- Strong school leadership that prioritizes all the afore mentioned.

## **Acknowledgement**

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Many thanks to enumerators from Osh and Talas for their great contributions and commitment while collecting data from target schools. They were flexible and greatly responsible for their work. Thanks also to the education experts for agreeing and sharing their life-long experience and thoughts on how to make schools more inclusive and improve quality education so that ‘no child is left behind’ from getting an education.

Finally, many thanks to school leadership, academic staff and senior grades among school children in Osh and Talas for participating in the data collection and helping to have a deeper understanding of the situation in schools in terms of inclusiveness and assessing quality education.

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