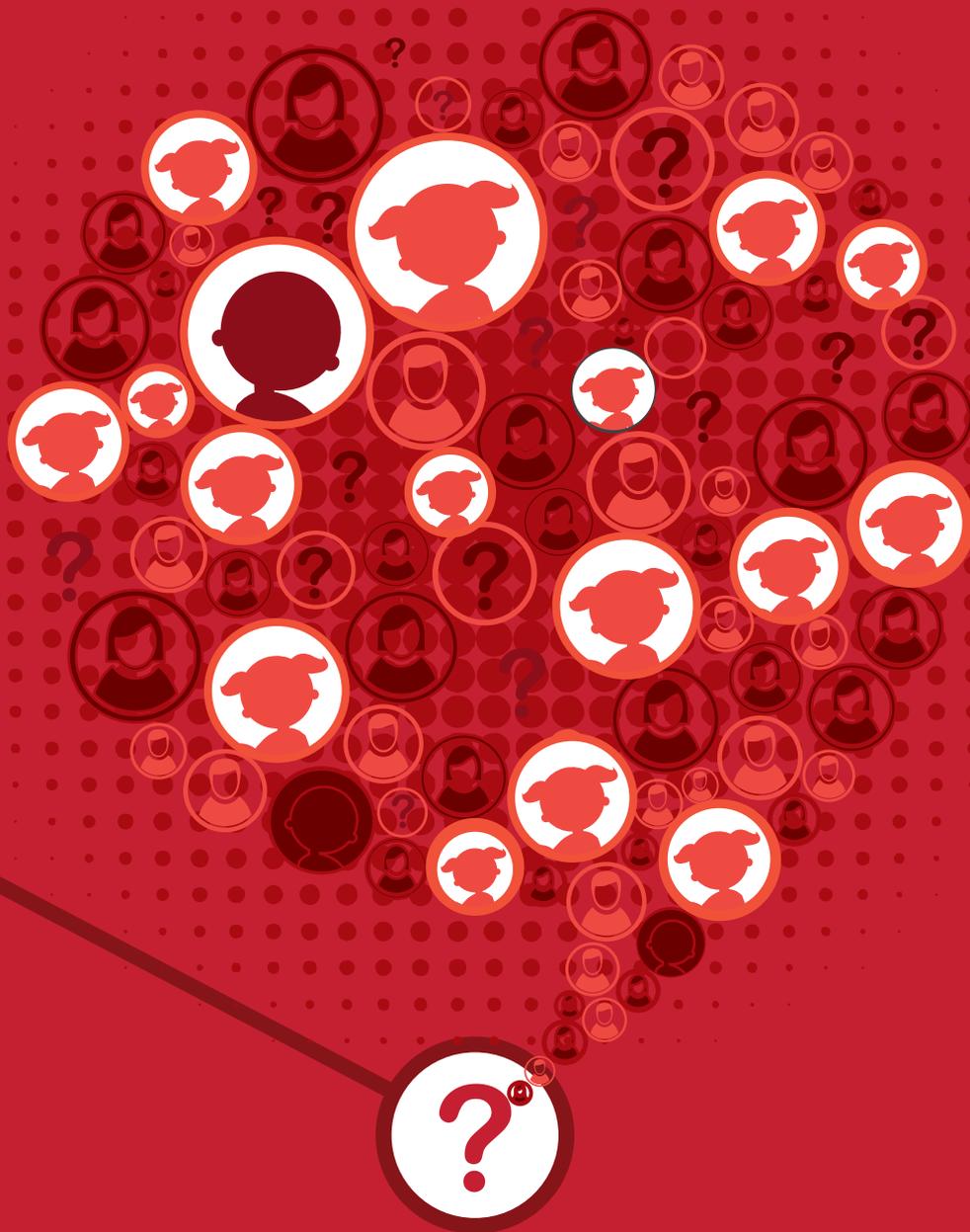


# Pathways to a Better Future:

## A Review of Education for Migrant Children in Thailand





## Migrant Education Sector Review

To understand and address the many challenges in providing a quality education for migrant children in Thailand, World Education and Save the Children have carried out a comprehensive review of the sector. This policy brief presents a summary of some of the key findings and recommendations.

## Migrant Children in Thailand

Thailand has a long history of hosting migrants and refugees from neighboring countries as they flee conflict and extreme poverty. Over the past decade alone, hundreds of thousands of migrant children have accompanied their parents - leaving dire economic situations in Myanmar and other neighboring countries. These workers currently fill key jobs in the agriculture, industrial and services industries, contributing to the Thai economy. Contrary to the common belief that migrant workers are here temporarily, many stay for extended periods of time and bring their children with them. These families reside in Thailand and contribute to the fabric that makes up Thai society.

## Education for Protection and Opportunity

This economic necessity has created a high-risk situation for migrant children who are left outside of the protective

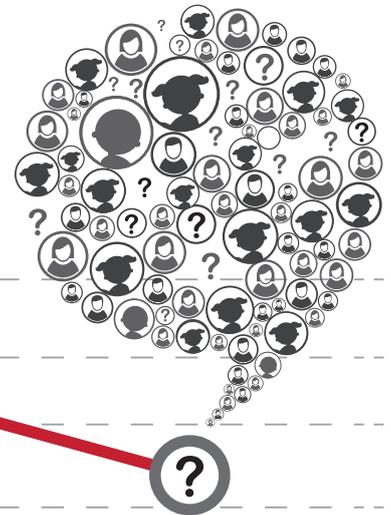
environment of a school community. Children who are not in school are at far greater risk of becoming the victims of traffickers, who subject them to some of the most dangerous work in the construction and sex industries. As Thailand seeks to overcome serious challenges in human trafficking, where migrant children make up the majority of victims, education is an essential strategy for equipping children with the skills and knowledge to protect themselves.

Furthermore, education is a vital way for people to contribute meaningfully to their surrounding communities and a key driver in economic mobility. Literate, skilled and educated migrants are essential not only to a robust and effective Thai economy, but to the greater ASEAN region as well.

## Lack of Data

These factors have increased the demand for accredited education for children who stay in Thailand, as well as viable options for those returning to schools back in Myanmar. However, only migrant children who are registered in school or who have parents that are documented workers are normally counted in official data, leaving undocumented out-of-school migrant children largely invisible.<sup>1</sup>

A fundamental lack of accurate data on migrant children in Thailand makes it harder to understand the full extent of this crisis.



This gap poses significant challenges for both government administrators and service providers in assessing and meeting the demand for quality education. Without this data there is also no accurate understanding of the number, location and needs of migrant children in Thailand.

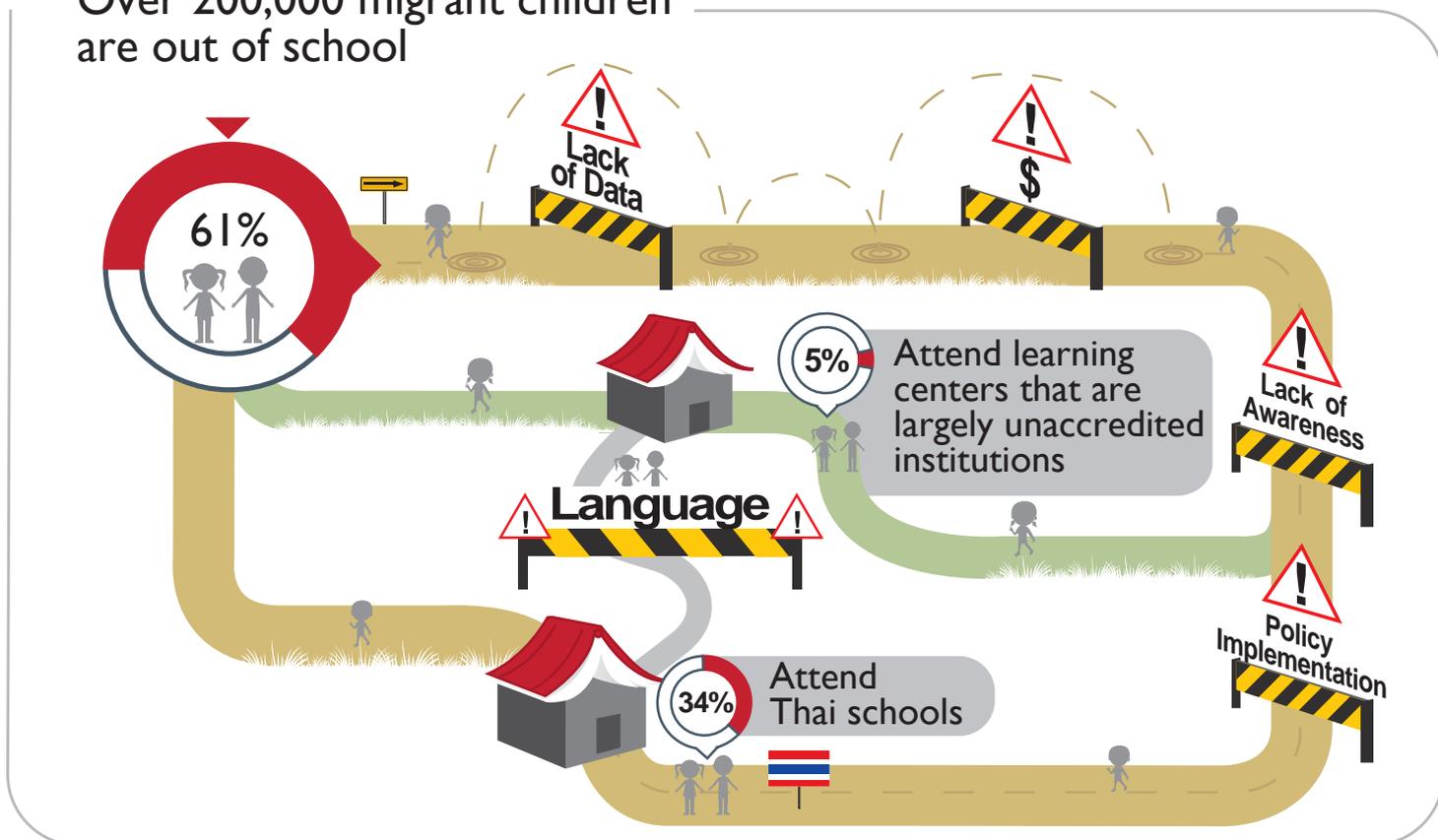
## Education for All

There has been progress: enrollment of migrant children in Thai schools has increased significantly since the 1999 adoption of the Education for All (EFA) policy and a 2005 cabinet resolution. Thai law stipulates that all children, regardless of their nationality or legal status, have the

right to 15 years of free basic education. These policies have allowed the Thai government, international NGOs and aid agencies, together with local community-based organizations, to invest significant resources to provide education for migrant children.

However, despite these efforts, there remains a growing crisis in providing sustainable education options for migrant children. It is estimated that more than 60% of migrant children in Thailand are not attending school. For those in school there are two main options: Learning Centers (LCs) and Thai schools.

Over 200,000 migrant children are out of school



For the 5% of migrant children<sup>2</sup> in learning centers, the quality of education is highly inconsistent, which is compounded by a lack of centralized oversight, financial instability and limited resources. The Thai and Myanmar governments do not formally recognize LCs, with only a few exceptions, and the vast majority of students go through their entire basic education without receiving any accreditation, severely limiting their future education options and job prospects.

While the number of migrant children entering Thai schools has increased, there are still barriers to enrollment and retention of migrant children in these institutions. The

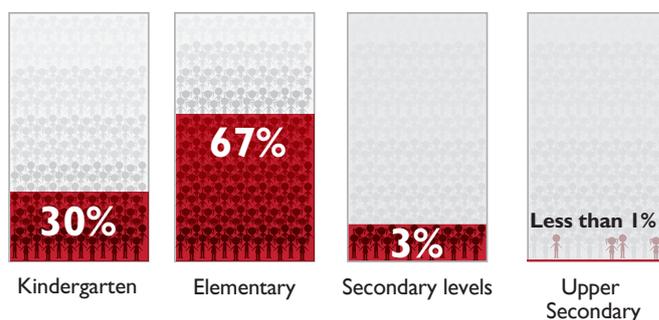
lack of data on migrant children, financial constraints, language barriers, inconsistencies in application of the EFA policy, a lack of awareness of the opportunities for education amongst communities, as well as perceived and real discrimination, are all obstacles that children face when they seek educational opportunities in Thailand.

These factors, along with the challenges experienced by educators to respond to this growing and unique need, make Thai schools an educational pathway that still remains out of reach to many migrant children and their families.

### Drop-out

Our research also suggests that many of those who are making it into school are dropping out. The data on migrant student drop-out is not readily available and appears inconsistent. However, the available government data suggests that more than half - 67% - of migrant children in Thai schools are at the elementary level. Only 3% and 1%, respectively, are reported as enrolled in the lower and upper secondary levels, while 30% are in kindergarten.<sup>3</sup>

### Migrant Children Enrolled in Thai Schools by Level

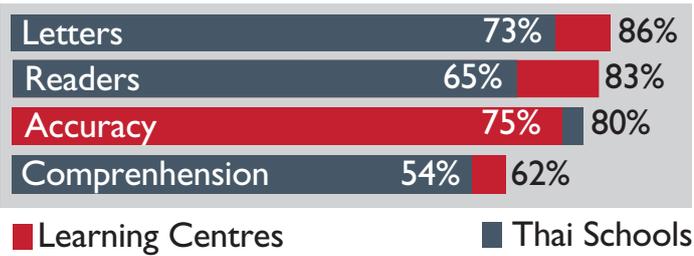


## Language Barriers

Underpinning the challenges in access and retention is each student's ability to read in the language of instruction. If a student does not understand what they are studying, they are unlikely to enroll or stay in school. A reading

assessment conducted as part of this research found that while most children in LCs were able to read a simple text, many children in Thai schools are struggling to read in Thai, particularly those who do not receive adequate preparation or support.

### Migrant Children's Reading Skills in Learning Centers and Thai Schools

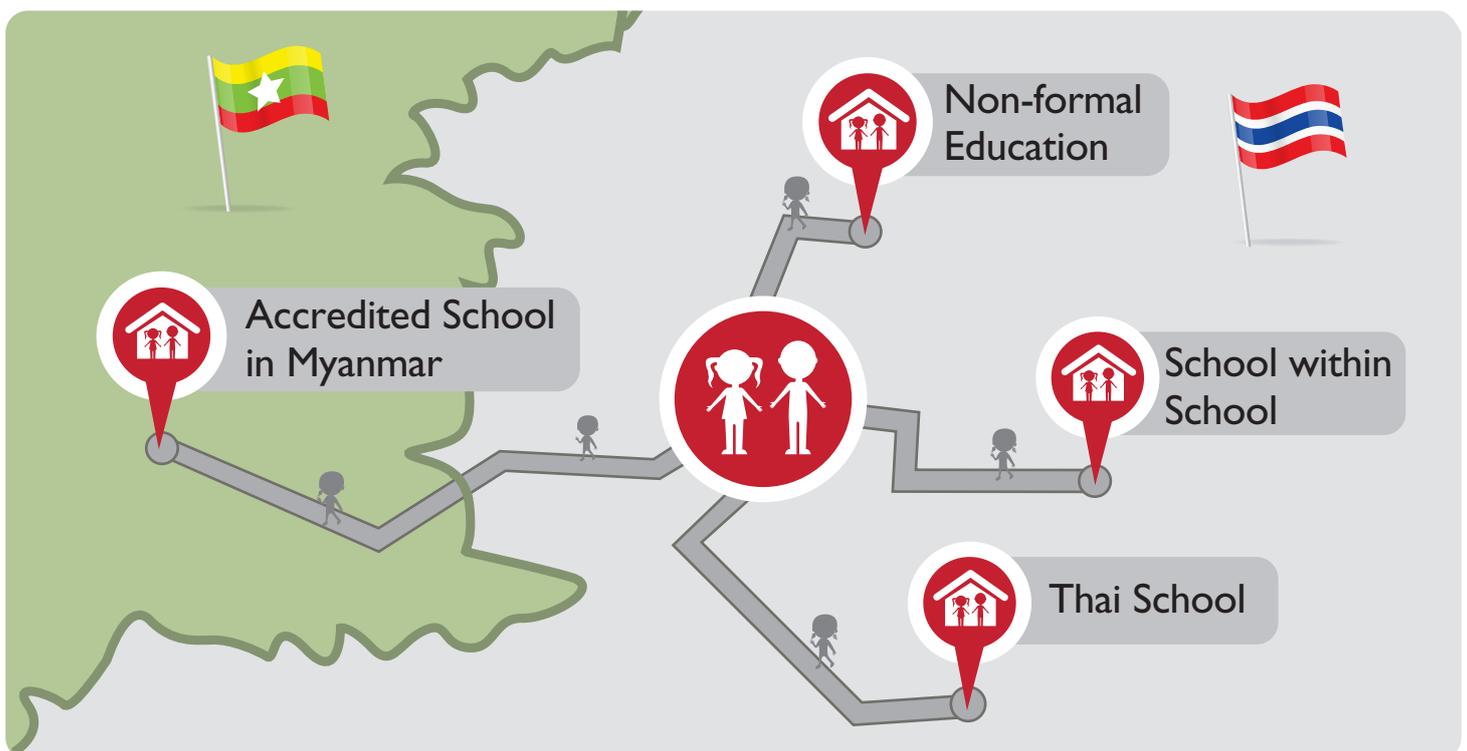


## Accreditation

Our research found that migrant communities place a very high importance on their children receiving an accredited education. A small percentage of migrant students are obtaining an accredited education through Thai schools and,

to a lesser extent, through non-formal education programs and through School within School programs, where children in LCs study Thai curriculum. There are also increasing opportunities for students to access accredited high learning opportunities in Myanmar.

### Accredited Education Options for Migrant Children in Thailand



## What is required for the migrant education sector to scale-up access to quality and accredited education for all migrant children?

To tackle this question we focused on five key areas: access and opportunity, accreditation, sustainability, quality and literacy.

These evidence-based recommendations aim to strengthen education for current and future generations of migrant children living in Thailand, and to prepare them for a possible return to Myanmar.



### Access and Opportunity:

Migrant children not only need to have viable educational options, they also must overcome multiple barriers to enroll and stay in school.

#### Getting migrant children into school and preventing drop-out requires the following:

- **Increased support for the implementation of the Education for All policy:** The Ministry of Education (MoE) must support the integration of migrant children into the Thai school system by actively promoting and continuing support for all children's basic right to 15 years of free education in Thailand. This includes raising awareness at schools so that enrollment procedures and placement policies are being implemented consistently.
- **Gather accurate and current data on migrant children:** This should include mapping of out-of-school children, so that the government and other education providers can respond with increased support and resource allocation in the form of teachers, materials and facilities like classrooms.
- **Increase awareness of educational opportunities amongst migrant students, parents and communities:** Significant proportions of students and parents are unaware of their educational options, as well as policies and important dates regarding registration. Community level efforts, such as workshops, awareness-raising events, and media campaigns, must be made so that parents, and children themselves, are informed. Timely registration will help avoid gaps in funding, reducing the burden placed on Thai schools.
- **Support and scale up initiatives to decrease dropout rates in LCs and Thai schools:** Flexible schedules that allow students to attend school in the evening, on weekends or for particular times of the year need to be introduced. Stay in school initiatives need to be implemented in order to avoid drop out at the elementary and secondary level.

These could include activities that increase the value of education among students and parents, remediation programs for struggling students, as well as vocational training programs alongside formal learning. Enrollment figures indicate that accreditation options at the secondary level may lead to greater survival rates among students in LCs.

- **Increase Thai language preparation and support for migrant students in Thai formal, non-formal and transitional learning:** Results from a literacy assessment indicate that students who receive additional support to study Thai language, or who have the support of a Thai-Burmese bilingual teaching assistant, tend to have higher literacy skills in Thai than those who do not. Thai language support and preparation is also a key indicator of success in transition programs, as well as the Thai NFE program. Students who do not receive this support are likely to suffer academically and drop-out.
- **Support and scale up flexible and non-formal learning models for working and over-age children:** Flexible models of education need to be provided that allow working students to attend school in the evening, on weekends or for particular times of the year to minimize the extent to which school is interrupted for the children of migrant workers. It is also important that viable pathways are offered for over-age students, who are reported to drop-out of primary school at much higher rates.





For the majority of migrant children in Thailand, recognized and accredited education is largely unattainable. The most viable path for accredited learning is studying at a Thai school, yet only 34% of all migrant children are enrolled in these institutions. The vast majority of the 5% of students in LCs are not receiving recognition for what they are learning. Accredited pathways that meet the diverse needs of migrant children are increasing, such as non-formal education programs, the School within School programs where children in LCs study Thai curriculum, and opportunities to sit exams to access higher learning in Myanmar, though these are still small in scale at the moment.

**To give more migrant students the ability to receive an accredited education, action must be taken to:**

- Increase support for students returning to Myanmar: Service providers and LCs should coordinate their efforts to assist in preparing students to sit the matriculation exam and access accredited higher learning opportunities in Myanmar.
- Continue to support and scale up Thai school transition programs that facilitate access to Thai education: Programs should target those currently at the pre-primary and primary level, who are in the greatest position to succeed in Thai schools. All programs should place an emphasis on language preparation to ensure the success of students post-transition.
- Further research and piloting of Thai NFE for special target groups: The Thai NFE program offers an educational pathway for migrant children that needs to be explored and expanded if it matches the needs of students and their families. This offer should be scaled-up and mainstreamed as part of the basic education offer of OBEC schools, or there needs to be a clear referral system and process for schools to refer over-age students to NFE programs. As NFE is scaled-up, it will require extensive funding for teacher salaries, teacher training, and materials.



The education provided to migrant children in Thailand faces numerous threats to sustainability, with limited long-term options for students. LCs rely on donor funding that is rapidly dwindling given the recent political changes inside Myanmar. LCs will continue to play an important role for some communities, but attending a Thai school remains one of the most sustainable pathways for migrant children to receive an accredited education.

**To increase the sustainability of migrant education, policy-makers, NGOs, donors and service providers should:**

- Increase financial sustainability initiatives at LCs: Direct service providers and donors should encourage all funding recipients to have a strategic plan, as well as activities that reduce their dependence on donors. LCs could consider cost sharing initiatives with parents and PTAs, fundraising activities within the community, school businesses, resource sharing, income generation and even the possibility of merging with other LCs.
- Continue subsidizing education for migrant children in Thai schools: Reduced support would see an increase in the dropout rate. Furthermore, the EFA policy should be supported to a greater degree by clarifying the policy among educators. Clear guidelines for its implementation need to be developed and disseminated. Incentive programs could encourage schools to enroll migrant children, such as increased resources or flexibility on national state exams, as mentioned by school directors in this study.



The education provided to migrant children in Thailand varies significantly in quality between LCs and Thai schools, and across institutions. While Thai schools benefit from governance and structure, there remain inconsistencies in enrollment and placement policies at the individual school level. With no centralized governing body and a diversity in education models being implemented, LCs also suffer gaps in quality.

**To increase the quality of education for migrant students, we must:**

- Introduce standards and monitoring of LCs: Donors and education stakeholders should cooperate to develop frameworks for the standardization of management practices within LCs. Cooperation between LCs should be encouraged, and opportunities for LCs to share resources

and increase quality should be scaled-up. Efforts should be made to introduce standardized quality frameworks in all LCS, such as Save the Children's and Quality Learning Environment Framework which is used by governments and NGOs in many countries around the world and could be adapted to the LC context.

- **Continue to support and provide teacher training programs for teachers:** Teacher training and skill development opportunities should be continued and ensured for the future in all LCs. These should be combined with regular and standardized monitoring and evaluation of teachers to ensure quality. Thai school teachers should be provided with opportunities to develop skills relevant to teaching multi-ethnic and linguistic students. Bilingual teaching assistants at the KG and GI level should also be brought into Thai schools with the support of the government or NGOs.
- **Continue and scale-up technical support for LC and Thai school directors:** Directors should receive training and support on management techniques and financial management, particularly in the case of LCs.
- **Further investigate placement policies and overage students:** Greater research should be undertaken to determine the impacts on overage students in Thai schools, and consideration for the widespread introduction of placement tests for advancement should be given. A standardized and common understanding for placement should be agreed upon to ensure consistency.



## Literacy

Reading is the most important foundational skill that enables children to learn and stay in school. Many migrant students in LCs and Thai schools are learning to read, but a significant proportion are struggling and are likely to drop out. Migrant students need language support, especially those not learning in their home language. For some students who do not speak Thai and whose parents plan to return to Myanmar soon, Burmese language programs may be the best option where available.

**To better prepare students to read successfully and with confidence, these are our recommendations:**

- **Provide programs that promote access to books and reading activities outside of school:** The government, schools, NGOs, and other stakeholders working to promote education quality, should consider programs, such as community libraries and book banks, parent and community reading activities, or reading buddy systems, that promote children's access to books and support reading outside of school. There appears to be a particular lack of books in Burmese (and Karen) for students attending LCs, and this should be a particular priority. Given the lower performance of boys in this study, programs should also make specific efforts to ensure boys also receive support outside of school.
- **Develop and scale-up programs to support children's language skills:** While approximately two thirds of migrant children in Thai schools are able to read a basic text, this means that there is still a significant proportion of children who are struggling to read. Karen children attending Burmese LCs are also finding it more difficult to read. This confirms that children studying in a second language require additional support. More investigation is required to understand what type of support is most effective. Some options are second language and school readiness preparation programs and bilingual teaching assistants. For those who are not ready to begin school in Thai, a mother-tongue-based-multilingual-education program may be the best option.
- **Scale-up ECD programs to support strong literacy skills:** The importance of ECD programs for children's learning and development is well known, and the assessment confirms that ECD programs, particularly those in the language of instruction of primary education, are helping students to develop stronger reading skills. The Royal Thai Government (RTG), LCs, and NGOs should scale-up efforts to ensure migrant children have access to quality ECD programs in the language of primary school. There are existing programs in Bangkok and Mae Sot that can provide a reference point for scale-up.
- **Promote reading comprehension:** Lower scores in reading comprehension are often related to instruction and indicate that children are not being effectively taught to read for understanding and meaning. The RTG, schools and organizations working on teacher training should therefore make efforts to ensure that teachers know how to teach children to read, with special focus being paid to teaching reading and writing for meaning and communication. Community based programs which include book sharing should also ensure that those who are sharing books with children emphasize enjoyment, meaning, and communication- the ultimate purposes of reading.

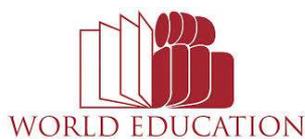
## Conclusion: Pathways to a Better Future are Possible

There is an urgent need to address the lack of quality, accredited education available to the hundreds of thousands of children of migrant workers who live in Thailand. The failure to provide education to these children robs them of both their basic right to go to school, but also of the opportunities that education affords.

The RTG's existing EFA policy provides a sound basis for action, but is not sufficiently well understood by education officials, schools, migrant families or the non-government sector. Greater awareness of the policy framework, together with a commitment to its implementation is crucial. At the same time, this paper recognizes that flexible and non-formal learning models are also needed to increase migrant children's access and opportunity to education, especially working and over-age children.

At the heart of all the educational services that are offered to migrant children must be the provision of quality learning and for the formal recognition of that learning. A greater focus on supporting children to acquire the vital early grade reading skills that provide the foundation for all future learning is also essential.

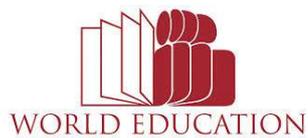
To advance these recommendations, more resources are required, both to secure the future of migrant learning centers and to ensure that migrant children are not prevented from accessing Thai schools due to poverty. Improving educational service provision to migrant children in Thailand is the first and vital step to ensuring they can enjoy their right to education now and have the chance of a better future. We urge all relevant actors to implement the practical recommendations in this review.



World Education has been actively involved in the education services for Myanmar migrant children and youth in Thailand for the past 10 years. World Education has run a wide range of programs in this sector targeting quality of teaching and administration services, non-formal education, psychosocial training, parent and community education and outreach, as well as higher education for adults in teacher training and community development. World Education is committed to supporting partners and implementing programs which reduce barriers to access and increase enrollment into quality, accredited education choices in Thailand.



Save the Children is the world's leading, independent children's rights organisation. We save children's lives. We fight for their rights. We help them fulfil their potential. We work with civil society and government partners to develop and identify innovative solutions to improving education access and quality for the most marginalized and deprived groups. In Thailand we lead a consortium of organisations that provide education in the nine refugee camps on the Thai Burma border which are currently home to over 115,000 refugees and asylum seekers. We also support organisations providing education for the children or migrants in Bangkok and Mae Sot.



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<sup>1</sup> IOM, (2011). Thailand migration report 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Ministry of Interior (MoI). (2014). Summary of Registered Migrant Laborers (One Stop Service) Thailand.. Thailand: Ministry of Interior,  
<sup>3</sup> (OBEC 2013) Online database on The Number of Students in Group G Classification by Level of Education and Area ([http://www.bopp-obec.info/home/?page\\_id=14038](http://www.bopp-obec.info/home/?page_id=14038)) Accessed December 2014, Foundation for Rural Youth (FRY). (2014). Information of Migrant Learning Schools in Thailand. Bangkok: Foundation for Rural Youth.

<sup>3</sup> OBEC (2013) Online database on The Number of Students in Group G Classification by Level of Education and Area ([http://www.bopp-obec.info/home/?page\\_id=14038](http://www.bopp-obec.info/home/?page_id=14038)) Accessed December 2014.