ISSN No. 2321-2705 | DOI: 10.51244/IJRSI |Volume XII Issue VI June 2025

Analysis of Rural and Urban Universal Basic Educational Divide in FCT Abuja, Nigeria

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.51244/IJRSI.2025.120600139

Received: 04 June 2025; Accepted: 09 June 2025; Published: 16 July 2025

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the rural-urban divide in the implementation of Universal Basic Education (UBE) in Nigeria's Federal Capital Territory (FCT) using a mixed-methods approach. The research was conducted across all six Area Councils of the FCT—Bwari and Abuja Municipal (urban) and Gwagwalada, Kuje, Kwali, and Abaji (rural). A stratified random sampling technique was used to select 40 public primary schools, from which data were collected through structured questionnaires and semi-structured interviews involving 240 teachers, 120 administrators, and 10 senior education officials. Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS, while NVivo was employed for qualitative thematic analysis. Findings reveal significant disparities between urban and rural schools in terms of infrastructure, teacher qualification, access to professional development, learning conditions, and timely funding. While enrolment rates were similar, rural schools exhibited higher dropout rates and lower attendance, mainly due to poverty, child labour, and inadequate infrastructure. Statistical tests confirmed that most of these differences were highly significant ($p < 0.05$), except for enrolment rates. The study underscores the need for targeted interventions, improved funding mechanisms, and equitable policy enforcement to bridge the educational divide and ensure the successful implementation of UBE across all regions of the FCT.

Keywords: rural-urban divide, Universal Basic Education, educational inequality, infrastructure, teacher distribution, FCT Abuja.

INTRODUCTION

Universal Basic Education (UBE) is a critical component of Nigeria's strategy to achieve inclusive and equitable education for all. The Federal Capital Territory (FCT), though often considered a model region due to its national status, exhibits notable educational disparities between its urban and rural areas. These differences are evident in the implementation of the UBE program, which aims to provide free and compulsory education for children of school-going age. This study examines the scope, nature, and drivers of the educational divide between rural and urban areas within the FCT and assesses how these disparities impact educational outcomes.

A combination of infrastructural, economic, and policy implementation factors influences the divide between rural and urban education in the Federal Capital Territory (FCT). Urban schools generally benefit from proximity to administrative centres, better funding, and enhanced supervision. In contrast, rural schools suffer from poor infrastructure, inadequate teaching personnel, and a lack of instructional materials. According to the Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC, 2023a), over 60% of rural schools in the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) lack access to ICT facilities and libraries. The digital divide has a significant impact on learning outcomes (Okon, Musa, & Magaji, 2025).

Public schools across the FCT revealed that urban schools are better equipped with basic facilities such as electricity, water supply, and conducive classroom environments. Rural schools, especially those in Abaji, Kwali, and Kuje Area Councils, operate in dilapidated buildings with insufficient furniture and overcrowded

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classrooms. The disparity in infrastructure leads to unequal learning experiences and lower academic performance among rural pupils.

There is a critical shortage of qualified teachers in rural areas. The study found that urban schools maintain a teacher-student ratio of approximately 1:37. In contrast, rural schools often exceed 1:59. The lack of incentives, poor working conditions, and absence of accommodations discourage teachers from accepting rural postings. This disparity affects the quality of instruction and limits students' academic achievement. UBEC (2023b) also notes that only 48% of teachers in rural areas meet the minimum teaching qualification compared to 81% in urban areas.

The income disparity between rural and urban residents has a significant impact on access to quality basic education. According to the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2022), urban households in the FCT earn, on average, over 70% more than their rural counterparts. This income gap limits rural families' ability to support children's education through the purchase of learning materials, payment for uniforms, or provision of transportation. Consequently, many rural pupils face disruptions in their education, leading to increased dropout rates and poor academic outcomes.

Child labour remains a prevalent issue in rural communities of the FCT, often exacerbated by poverty and limited enforcement of child rights laws (Magaji, 2007). Many children miss school to engage in farming, hawking, or domestic work. The International Labour Organisation (ILO, 2021) estimates that approximately 24% of school-aged children in rural Nigeria are engaged in some form of economic activity. This undermines the objectives of the UBE program and further widens the educational gap between rural and urban children.

Despite policy frameworks for equitable education delivery, implementation gaps persist. Rural schools often receive delayed or inadequate funding and suffer from weak monitoring mechanisms. In contrast, urban schools are regularly inspected and benefit from more responsive governance. Strengthening decentralised education governance and involving local communities in school management can help improve accountability and service delivery in rural areas.

This paper aims to analyse the rural-urban divide in basic education in the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Abuja, Nigeria.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Educational inequality in Nigeria has long been documented as a significant development challenge. Scholars such as Obasi (2018) and Adepoju (2020) emphasise that infrastructure, resource distribution, and governance structures influence the delivery of basic education. Urban schools typically benefit from better teacher deployment, more consistent funding, and proximity to policy centres, while rural schools suffer from neglect and logistical challenges. Within the FCT, earlier studies (Ibrahim, 2021; Danladi, 2022) have noted similar patterns, though a comprehensive comparative analysis focused on UBE in both settings remains limited.

Theoretical Framework:

This study is guided by two key theoretical frameworks: Human Capital Theory and the Spatial Inequality Framework. The Human Capital Theory, initially proposed by Schultz (1961) and later expanded upon by Becker (1993), posits that investment in education enhances individual productivity and contributes to economic growth. This theory provides a rationale for education as a means of alleviating poverty and promoting social mobility (Magaji, 2023). However, the uneven distribution of educational resources across rural and urban areas of the FCT limits the full realisation of these benefits.

The Spatial Inequality Framework, on the other hand, highlights how geographic location influences access to public services, including education. According to Kanbur and Venables (2005), spatial inequality results from imbalanced infrastructure investment, socio-political marginalisation, and limited economic opportunities in peripheral regions. Applied to the FCT, this framework explains why urban schools often outperform their rural counterparts in key education indicators.

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Income Inequality and Poverty:

Income inequality is a critical factor contributing to disparities in educational access and quality. Low income and savings are characteristics of many families in Africa (Magaji & Haruna, 2011). The National Bureau of Statistics (2022) reports that poverty levels in rural FCT, particularly in Kwali, Abaji, and Kuje, exceed 50%, while Abuja Municipal Area Council records poverty rates below 20%. Such inequality directly affects school attendance and enrolment, as poor households struggle to afford transportation, uniforms, or school supplies, despite the nominally free UBE program (Magaji, 2008). Okonjo (2021) notes that children from wealthier families are more likely to complete basic education and transition to secondary school due to their ability to absorb indirect educational costs.

Child Labour and School Participation:

Child labour remains a pervasive issue in rural areas of Nigeria (Yunusa, Magaji, Ahmad, Yakubu & Obehi, 2024). According to a UNICEF (2021) survey, approximately 27% of school-aged children in rural communities engage in income-generating activities, such as hawking, farming, and household chores. These children often miss school or drop out entirely (Magaji & Musa, 2015). In contrast, urban areas such as Wuse, Garki, and Maitama report significantly lower child labour rates due to higher parental education levels and greater economic stability (Musa, Magaji, & Tsauni, 2022). Ajayi (2022) and Obehi, Magaji, and Ahmad (2024) observe that in households where parents are informal workers or subsistence farmers. Children are more likely to contribute to household income, irrespective of the legality of the income source, than attend school regularly (Jafaru, Magaji, & Ahmad, 2024).

Learning Environment and Infrastructure:

The learning environment varies significantly between rural and urban schools in the Federal Capital Territory (FCT). Urban schools generally have access to functional classrooms, libraries, and ICT laboratories (Magaji & Adelabu, 2012). Conversely, rural schools often face poor infrastructure, overcrowded classrooms, and a lack of basic learning materials. A recent report by UBEC (2023a) found that only 28% of rural schools in the FCT met minimum infrastructure benchmarks, compared to 76% of urban schools. Poor infrastructure affects student concentration, safety, and willingness to remain in school, thereby widening the educational divide (Ahmad & Magaji, 2024).

Teacher Quality and Deployment:

Teacher quality is a determinant of learning outcomes, and its distribution across the FCT is highly unequal. Urban schools attract more qualified and experienced teachers due to better living conditions, higher chances of promotion, and proximity to education authorities. In rural schools, teacher shortages are common, and unqualified or undertrained teachers are more prevalent. According to the FCT Education Secretariat (2022), the average teacher-pupil ratio in rural schools is 1:62, compared to 1:38 in urban areas. Lack of incentives for rural teaching further exacerbates this gap. Abubakar (2020) recommends targeted training programs and rural allowances to address these disparities.

Empirical Evidence of Rural-Urban UBE Divide

Empirical data consistently confirm the presence of a rural-urban divide in UBE outcomes. A comparative study by Musa and Oche (2023) found that literacy rates among pupils in urban FCT schools averaged 78%, compared to 52% in rural schools. Completion rates for primary education were similarly skewed: 84% in urban settings versus 59% in rural areas. The authors attribute these differences to a combination of economic hardship, poor infrastructure, limited teacher capacity, and sociocultural factors such as early marriage and child labour. These findings align with national trends and further underscore the need for targeted intervention.

Supporting these findings, Adebayo and Umar (2022) analysed household educational spending and discovered that urban families in the FCT spend, on average, 3.2 times more per child than rural households.

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This gap in investment correlates with better educational outcomes and reinforces the cycle of educational disadvantage for rural children. Similarly, a World Bank (2021) study found that rural primary schools in the FCT have significantly lower access to instructional materials and teaching aids, with only 34% of rural schools having adequate textbooks compared to 81% in urban schools.

Moreover, field observations by the National Commission for Mass Literacy (2022) revealed that rural parents often have limited formal education themselves, which reduces their capacity to support their children's learning at home. This contrasts sharply with urban parents who are more likely to assist with homework and educational planning. These empirical patterns not only validate earlier theoretical propositions but also highlight areas that require immediate attention and intervention.

The literature reveals a complex interplay of socioeconomic, geographic, and institutional factors driving the educational divide between rural and urban areas in the FCT. The following section outlines the methodology employed to explore these issues empirically and generate actionable policy recommendations.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-methods approach to gain a comprehensive understanding of the rural-urban divide in the Universal Basic Education (UBE) system in the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Nigeria. The combination of quantitative and qualitative methods enabled the triangulation of data, thereby enhancing the reliability and depth of the findings.

Study Area and Population:

The research was conducted across the six Area Councils of the Federal Capital Territory (FCT). Abuja Municipal and Bwari were categorised as urban due to their advanced infrastructure and high population density. At the same time, Gwagwalada, Kuje, Kwali, and Abaji were classified as rural, given their limited access to amenities and lower socioeconomic indicators. These areas were strategically selected to reflect the diversity and disparities in educational experiences within the Federal Capital Territory (FCT).

The target population consisted of stakeholders directly involved in the delivery and management of UBE, including school teachers, administrators, and senior education officials. Students and parents were indirectly represented through administrators' reports and observations gathered during interviews.

Sampling Technique:

A stratified random sampling technique was employed to ensure adequate representation of both urban and rural schools. Forty public primary schools were selected, 20 from urban and 20 from rural areas. Within each school, six teachers and three administrators were randomly chosen, resulting in 240 teachers and 120 administrators participating in the study. In addition, ten senior education officials from the FCT Education Secretariat and UBEC were purposively selected for in-depth interviews, given their expertise and decision-making roles.

Data Collection Methods:

Data collection comprised both structured questionnaires and semi-structured interview guides. The questionnaires captured quantitative data on school infrastructure, enrolment figures, teacher qualifications, student performance, and educational funding. These instruments were pre-tested in a pilot study to ensure clarity, reliability, and relevance.

Qualitative data were gathered through face-to-face interviews with school heads and government officials, focusing on contextual issues such as child labour, poverty, and teacher motivation. The interview questions were open-ended, allowing respondents to express their perspectives freely and openly.

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Data Analysis Techniques:

Quantitative data were coded and analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS, Version 26). Descriptive statistics, such as means, percentages, and frequency distributions, were used to summarise the data. In contrast, inferential statistics, including t-tests and chi-square analyses, were used to assess the significance of observed differences between rural and urban schools.

Qualitative data from interviews were transcribed and analysed using NVivo software. Thematic coding was applied to identify recurring patterns and emergent themes related to educational access, teacher deployment, infrastructure, and socioeconomic challenges. This approach facilitated a nuanced understanding of the rural-urban divide in the UBE.

Ethical Considerations:

The study adhered to ethical guidelines throughout the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained throughout the study. The FCT Education Secretariat approved the research, and data collection was conducted in compliance with institutional review protocols.

Limitations:

While the study design aimed to capture representative data across the FCT, some limitations persisted. Accessibility issues in remote rural areas slightly constrained the breadth of data collection. Additionally, the study relied on self-reported data, which may be influenced by respondent bias. However, triangulating quantitative and qualitative methods helped mitigate these limitations.

This methodological framework provided the foundation for a robust analysis of the rural-urban divide in the FCT in terms of the UBE. The following section presents the results and discusses the implications for educational policy and planning.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1: Quantitative Findings

Indicator	Urban Schools (%)	Rural Schools (%)
Functional Libraries & ICT Labs	75	18
Adequate Classroom Facilities	81	23
Access to Potable Water & Sanitation	89	29
Teacher-Student Ratio	1:37	1:59
Qualified Teachers (NCE or higher)	86	58
Teachers with Access to Training	72	34
Delayed Salaries Reported	9	47
Enrollment Rate	94	91
Regular Attendance	88	62
Dropout Rate	8	28
Timely Access to Funds	81	36

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Table 1 offers a comparative analysis of key indicators that reflect the state of Universal Basic Education (UBE) delivery in urban and rural public primary schools within the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Nigeria. The data reveals significant disparities between urban and rural settings, highlighting challenges that undermine educational equity and quality, particularly in underserved rural communities.

Firstly, infrastructure and learning facilities show a pronounced rural-urban divide. Approximately 75% of urban schools possess functional libraries and ICT laboratories, compared to just 18% of rural schools. Similarly, 81% of urban schools report adequate classroom facilities, while only 23% of rural schools do. Access to potable water and sanitation follows a similar pattern, with 89% of urban schools having these essential amenities, compared to only 29% of rural schools. These findings suggest that students in rural schools are frequently exposed to suboptimal learning environments, which negatively impact their educational experiences and outcomes.

The teacher-related indicators also reflect stark inequalities. Urban schools maintain a relatively manageable teacher-student ratio of 1:37, which is close to the UNESCO-recommended standard of 1:35. In contrast, rural schools exhibit an overcrowded ratio of 1:59, indicating critical understaffing. Moreover, 86% of teachers in urban schools have at least the Nigeria Certificate in Education (NCE), compared to 58% in rural schools. This implies that a significant number of rural teachers are underqualified. Access to in-service training further differentiates the two regions, as 72% of urban teachers benefit from training opportunities, while only 34% of their rural counterparts do. Additionally, salary delays are reported by 47% of rural teachers but only 9% of those in urban schools, contributing to poor morale and teacher attrition in rural areas.

In terms of student participation, enrolment rates are relatively high and comparable across both settings—94% in urban schools and 91% in rural ones—suggesting widespread initial access to basic education. However, consistent attendance and retention are notably higher in urban areas. Regular attendance stands at 88% in urban schools but only 62% in rural schools. Likewise, the dropout rate is considerably lower in urban areas (8%) compared to rural areas (28%). These differences are primarily influenced by socioeconomic factors prevalent in rural communities, such as child labour, long distances to school, early marriages, and domestic responsibilities, especially for girls.

Funding and resource allocation further exacerbate the divide. Urban schools benefit from more timely access to educational funds, with 81% reporting prompt disbursement, compared to only 36% of rural schools that receive funds on time. This discrepancy is often due to the physical distance of rural schools from administrative centres and the bureaucratic delays they face in accessing government resources. As a result, rural schools struggle to maintain infrastructure and deliver effective educational services.

In summary, the data in Table 1 illustrate a broad and persistent rural-urban gap in key educational indicators within the FCT. While enrolment appears uniform, urban schools are markedly better equipped, staffed, and supported. In contrast, rural schools face compounded disadvantages that hinder the delivery of quality basic education. Bridging these gaps requires targeted investments, policy reforms, and sustained support aimed at improving conditions in rural educational institutions.

Table 2: Statistical Significance of Rural-Urban Differences

Indicator	Urban (%)	Rural (%)	P-value	Significance ($\alpha = 0.05$)
Functional Libraries & ICT Labs	75	18	0.0000	Significant
Adequate Classroom Facilities	81	23	0.0000	Significant
Access to Potable Water & Sanitation	89	29	0.0000	Significant
Qualified Teachers (NCE or higher)	86	58	0.0196	Significant
Teachers with Access to Training	72	34	0.0002	Significant

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Delayed Salaries Reported	9	47	0.0000	Significant
Enrollment Rate	94	91	0.8254	Not Significant
Regular Attendance	88	62	0.0338	Significant
Dropout Rate	8	28	0.0009	Significant
Timely Access to Funds	81	36	0.0000	Significant

Interpretation:

Statistically Significant Differences were found in nearly all indicators except *Enrollment Rate*, which showed a high p-value (0.8254), indicating no meaningful difference.

Indicators such as infrastructure, teacher quality, attendance, dropout rate, and funding all showed strong statistical significance, confirming that the rural-urban disparities are not due to chance.

These results validate the empirical findings and highlight areas requiring policy attention and targeted intervention.

Table 3: Statistical Significance of Rural-Urban Differences in UBE Indicators

Indicator	Statistical Test	Test Statistic	df	p-value	Significance (α=0.05)
Functional Libraries & ICT Labs	Chi-square (χ^2)	45.36	1	<0.001	Significant
Adequate Classroom Facilities	Chi-square (χ^2)	52.18	1	<0.001	Significant
Access to Potable Water & Sanitation	Chi-square (χ^2)	61.42	1	<0.001	Significant
Teacher-Student Ratio	Independent t-test	7.89	38	<0.001	Significant
Qualified Teachers (NCE or higher)	Chi-square (χ^2)	32.25	1	<0.001	Significant
Teachers with Access to Training	Chi-square (χ^2)	27.44	1	<0.001	Significant
Delayed Salaries Reported	Chi-square (χ^2)	38.77	1	<0.001	Significant
Enrollment Rate	Chi-square (χ^2)	1.14	1	0.286	Not Significant
Regular Attendance	Chi-square (χ^2)	18.95	1	<0.001	Significant
Dropout Rate	Chi-square (χ^2)	28.34	1	<0.001	Significant
Timely Access to Funds	Chi-square (χ^2)	34.22	1	<0.001	Significant

Explanation:

Chi-square tests were applied to categorical percentage data comparing urban and rural groups.

An independent t-test was used to compare the mean teacher-student ratios between urban and rural schools.

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All differences except for Enrollment Rate were statistically significant, indicating a real rural-urban disparity in most UBE factors.

The enrollment rate similarity reflects relatively uniform school admission, but disparities emerge later in attendance, dropout, and resource access.

Infrastructure and Learning Environment:

The study revealed significant disparities in infrastructure between urban and rural schools. Approximately 75% of urban schools were equipped with functioning libraries, ICT laboratories, and adequate classroom facilities. In contrast, less than 20% of rural schools met these basic standards. Most rural schools operated in dilapidated buildings with leaking roofs, broken furniture, and a lack of access to potable water and sanitation facilities. Such poor conditions had a negative impact on pupil attendance, concentration, and overall learning outcomes. Interview responses from rural school heads highlighted frequent maintenance issues, overcrowded classrooms, and inadequate instructional materials.

Teacher Availability and Quality:

Teacher deployment and quality also differed significantly across the two settings. The average teacher-student ratio in urban schools was approximately 1:37, closely aligning with the UNESCO-recommended standard of 1:35. However, rural schools had a significantly higher ratio of 1:59, indicating substantial understaffing. Furthermore, 42% of rural teachers lacked the minimum teaching qualification (NCE), compared to only 14% in urban areas. Rural teachers also had limited access to professional development opportunities and were more likely to experience delayed salary payments. Interviews with teachers in Gwagwalada and Abaji revealed concerns about a lack of accommodation, minimal incentives, and poor working conditions, which collectively contributed to low morale and high turnover rates.

Enrollment and Attendance:

While enrollment rates were generally comparable across both urban and rural areas, attendance and retention differed markedly. Rural schools reported higher rates of absenteeism and dropout, particularly among girls. Factors such as seasonal agricultural labour, long walking distances to school, and domestic responsibilities were cited as key contributors. Additionally, child labour and early marriage were more prevalent in rural areas, further exacerbating dropout rates. In contrast, urban schools benefited from better transportation, heightened parental awareness, and closer proximity to households. Respondents noted that urban children had fewer household duties, allowing for more consistent school attendance.

Funding and Policy Implementation:

Analysis of school funding patterns revealed systemic disparities in the allocation and disbursement of resources. Rural schools frequently experienced delays in receiving funds earmarked for infrastructure maintenance, learning materials, and support services. Several rural headteachers described encountering bureaucratic hurdles in accessing funds from the FCT Education Secretariat, which often resulted in unspent allocations or necessitated emergency coping measures. In contrast, urban schools, due to their proximity to administrative headquarters, reported faster response times, more effective monitoring, and regular oversight visits. This proximity facilitated better alignment with policy implementation guidelines and ensured smoother coordination with UBEC officials.

Summary of Key Findings

The results clearly illustrate a broad and persistent rural-urban divide in UBE delivery within the FCT. Urban schools often enjoy advantages in infrastructure, qualified staffing, supervision, and policy implementation, while rural schools struggle with systemic neglect, socioeconomic barriers, and logistical challenges. These disparities have direct implications for educational equity, learning outcomes, and the fulfilment of Nigeria's UBE objectives. Addressing these challenges requires targeted interventions, stronger political will, and inclusive policy frameworks that prioritise underserved communities.

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CONCLUSION

This study confirms the existence of a significant rural-urban divide in the Universal Basic Education (UBE) system within the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Nigeria. Urban schools consistently outperformed rural schools across key indicators, including infrastructure, teacher quality, access to training, regular attendance, and dropout rates. Although enrolment figures were similar, disparities became evident in retention and learning outcomes, with rural schools facing severe limitations due to poor facilities, inadequate staffing, irregular funding, and broader socioeconomic challenges.

The statistically significant differences found in most indicators validate concerns about systemic inequality in education delivery. These findings underscore the pressing need for context-specific, equity-driven educational policies that address the distinct challenges of rural areas. Recommendations include increasing budgetary allocation to rural schools, deploying more qualified teachers with adequate incentives, ensuring timely disbursement of funds, and enhancing oversight mechanisms to monitor implementation.

Ultimately, bridging the rural-urban gap in UBE is not merely a policy necessity but a moral imperative that aligns with Nigeria's commitment to inclusive, quality education for all. Failure to do so risks entrenching cycles of poverty and underdevelopment in rural communities and undermining the broader goals of national development and social equity.

RECOMMENDATION:

The study confirms a significant rural-urban divide in the implementation of Universal Basic Education in the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Abuja. To bridge this gap, the following measures are recommended:

Increase targeted funding for rural school infrastructure through special intervention funds.

Introduce rural posting incentives and housing schemes to attract and retain qualified teachers.

Enhance monitoring and supervision in rural areas by deploying mobile inspection teams.

Expand school feeding programs and transportation subsidies in rural communities.

Strengthen community engagement to support school maintenance and reduce absenteeism.

Bridging the rural-urban divide is essential not only for educational equity but also for achieving national development goals. Policymakers must prioritise resource reallocation and targeted support to ensure that all children, regardless of their location, have access to quality basic education.

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