

Half Left Behind: Policy Pathways to Educational Equity Along the Thai-Myanmar Border

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Abstract

Household survey data indicate 5 in 10 school-aged migrant children in remote Tak Province remain out of school, falling only to 3 in 10 in urban areas — an implementation gap in Thailand's Education for All (EFA) commitments. This study draws on 225 migrant households across 47 community areas in three districts. Although not statistically representative, within-sample consistency across communities supports robust policy-relevant findings.

Mae Sot anchors borderland education landscape restructured since 2021. Prior to Myanmar's political crisis, MLCs and Thai public schools were near-equally preferred, sustained by a memorandum of understanding permitting migrant students to sit Myanmar matriculation examinations. Its dissolution after the 2021 coup removed the primary institutional basis for MLC preference: 87% of surveyed parents indicated preference for Thai public schools. Remaining pathways face viability constraints — MLCs face uncertain accreditation and funding instability; Thai Non-Formal Education and GED programs presuppose self-directed literacy incompatible with younger learners; vocational tracks require documentation most migrant youth lack. This study examines how families navigate contracting options, distinguishing positive preference from forced consolidation to identify unmet demand and evaluate policy adequacy.

Enrollment barriers compound: 34.2% of children hold only Myanmar birth certificates; 13% hold none. Financial pressure affects 92% of out-of-school households, where average monthly income is THB 3,500. Only 19.9% of elementary-aged children live within walking distance of a Thai public school, and each additional school-aged sibling reduces enrollment odds by ~ 45%.

These findings expose a structural paradox. Thailand's EFA commitments remain misaligned with ground-level administrative practice: schools have institutionalized documentation requirements as a locally rational duty-of-care strategy, creating a durable exclusion mechanism that formal policy reform alone cannot resolve. Closing this gap requires cross-sectoral action spanning civil registration, labour governance, and social protection — alongside reframing long-term migrants as rights-bearing residents, not temporary economic contributors.