EDICIONES COMPLUTENSE

Política y Sociedad
ISSN-e: 1988-3129

MISCELÁNEA

Colombian education policies 2007-2023: Coverage, retention, governance and reform proposals

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https://dx.doi.org/10.5209/poso.98440 Envío 10 octubre 2024 • Aceptación 14 octubre 2025

Abstract: This article aims to analyze the evolution of public policies for basic and secondary education in Colombia (2007–2023) and their effects on local governance, social cohesion, and the indicators of coverage, retention, dropout, and graduation. A qualitative methodology is applied through documentary analysis of official sources, development plans, public policies, and academic literature. The study examines decentralization dynamics, territorial management of educational services, and the impact of policies on key education system indicators. The findings show improvements in coverage and retention in certain regions, but also persistent inequalities linked to municipal certification levels, urban–rural segmentation, and lack of coordination between government levels. Gaps in the implementation of retention policies, weak monitoring tools, and institutional fragmentation are identified. The discussion leads to reform proposals, including early warning systems, unified data platforms, performance- and equity-based funding models, and intersectoral territorial governance strategies. The article concludes that achieving equitable and quality education requires normative reform, the strengthening of local social capital, and sustained, results-oriented investment.
Keywords: admission requirements; dropping out; educational management; public policies; national education systems.

EN Políticas educativas colombianas 2007-2023: cobertura, permanencia, gobernanza y propuestas de reforma

Resumen: El objetivo de este artículo es analizar la evolución de las políticas públicas de educación básica y media en Colombia (2007–2023) y sus efectos en la gobernanza local, la cohesión social y los indicadores de cobertura, permanencia, deserción y graduación. Se emplea una metodología cualitativa de análisis documental centrada en fuentes oficiales, planes de desarrollo, políticas públicas y literatura académica. Se examinan las dinámicas de descentralización, la gestión territorial de los servicios educativos y el impacto de las políticas en los indicadores clave del sistema. Los resultados evidencian avances en cobertura y permanencia en algunas regiones, pero también persistentes desigualdades asociadas al nivel de certificación de los municipios, la segmentación urbana-rural y la falta de articulación entre niveles de gobierno. Se identifican brechas en la implementación de políticas de retención, debilidades en el uso de herramientas de monitoreo y fragmentación institucional. La discusión se orienta a proponer reformas normativas y de gestión, incluyendo sistemas de alerta temprana, plataformas unificadas de datos, modelos de financiación con enfoque diferencial y estrategias de gobernanza territorial intersectorial. Se concluye que, para alcanzar una educación equitativa y de calidad, es necesario reformar el marco normativo, fortalecer el capital social local y garantizar una inversión sostenida orientada a resultados.
Palabras clave: condiciones de admisión; deserción escolar; gestión educativa; políticas públicas; sistema educativo.

Summary: 1. Introduction. 2. Background. 3. Materials and methods. 4. Results. 5. Discussion and conclusions. 6. Bibliography.

Cómo citar: Barragán Moreno, S. P. y Lozano Galindo, O. L. (2026). Colombian education policies 2007-2023: Coverage, retention, governance and reform proposals. *Polít. Soc. (Madr.)* 63(1), https://dx.doi.org/10.5209/poso.98440

1. Introduction

The public formal education service in Colombia is a state-run system established in accordance with the constitutional principles of access, quality, and equity. The national government defines the guidelines and assigns responsibilities for service management at the territorial, departmental, and municipal levels. Additionally, as an active member of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Colombia aligns its education system with the organization's standards. The country is also committed to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), specifically SDG 4, which calls for ensuring inclusive, equitable, and quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all (UNESDOC, 2016).

In this context, the research question guiding this study is: "How has the state management of basic and secondary public education evolved in Colombian municipalities (2007–2023), both in terms of coverage, retention and graduation, and in its impact on local governance and social cohesion?". Accordingly, the unified objective of this article is: "To analyze the evolution of public policies for basic and secondary education in Colombia (2007–2023) and their effects on local governance, social cohesion and the key indicators of coverage, retention, dropout and graduation". To achieve this objective, a public policy and educational management approach was adopted.

Following this introduction, the article presents the background that underpins the research. The subsequent section describes the methodology implemented. Then, the findings from the review of public policies are discussed, supported by bibliographic sources such as related articles and studies by international organizations. Finally, the paper concludes by presenting key findings, limitations, and directions for future research.

2. Background

Over the past three decades, the Colombian regulatory framework —led by the 1991 Political Constitution and the 1994 General Education Law— has shaped public policies aimed at guaranteeing access, retention, and quality in basic and secondary education. These objectives underpin the analysis of official indicators used in this study, including enrollment, coverage, dropout, and graduation.

At the international level, regional guidelines converge on strategies such as extended school time, teacher professionalization, educational inclusion, and the use of digital technologies. Recommendations from organizations such as the OECD and UNESCO serve as comparative references that contextualize Colombia's outcomes and support the reform proposals discussed later in this article.

2.1. Regional comparison. Lessons for the Colombian case

Recent models from Mexico, Argentina, and Brazil provide valuable benchmarks for interpreting Colombia's outcomes and refining its reform proposals. In Mexico, the 2013 educational reform and the subsequent "New Mexican School" (2019) introduced teacher evaluation mechanisms and curricular restructuring aimed at reducing learning gaps and strengthening retention, although resistance from teachers' unions limited their continuity (Sabatier, 2010; Secretaría de Educación Pública, 2013). This case illustrates that performance-based regulatory changes require negotiation mechanisms and pedagogical support systems —both of which remain underdeveloped in Colombia— to ensure sustainability.

In Argentina, compulsory schooling has been expanded alongside targeted inclusion and socio-educational support programs designed to improve retention during critical stages of secondary education (Secretaría de Educación Pública, 2019; Boletín Oficial, 2007). This experience suggests that aligning national funding with provincial implementation can reduce territorial disparities when minimum verifiable standards are enforced —an aspect still weak in Colombia's municipal governance.

Brazil's Plano Nacional de Educação and programs such as Mais Educação have integrated extended school time, tutoring, and complementary activities to enhance quality and reduce dropout in vulnerable contexts (Ministerio de Educación, 2012; Câmara dos Deputados de Educación, 2014). Evidence from Brazil shows that extending instructional time is more effective when combined with infrastructure development and intersectoral coordination (e.g., health, nutrition), supporting Colombia's proposals for territorial committees and integrated data platforms.

Taken together, these cases converge on three key mechanisms that reinforce Colombia's proposed reforms: 1) Professionalization and continuous support for teachers as a prerequisite for implementing new performance metrics (Mexico); 2) National standards with supervised decentralized implementation to reduce heterogeneity (Argentina); and 3) Integrated retention strategies combining extended school time, social services, and pedagogical use of additional time (Brazil). Selective adaptation of these lessons enhances the feasibility of Colombia's regulatory reforms and offers concrete pathways to close the identified coverage and retention gaps.

2.2. Educational context and key indicators in Colombia (2007–2023)

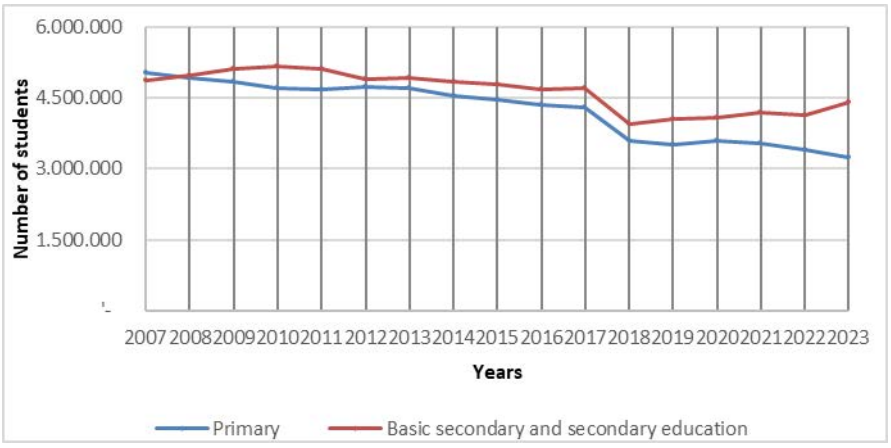
A public education policy approach in Colombia is reflected in studies such as the National Quality of Life Survey (ECV), conducted by the National Administrative Department of Statistics (DANE), which reported that from 2008 to 2018, the average years of schooling for individuals aged five or older was 8.1 years (Secretaría de Educación Básica, 2011), out of a theoretical total of 12 years. According to the OECD, approximately one in five students in Colombia does not continue education after completing primary school (DANE, 2018).

Furthermore, the OECD indicated that the share of individuals aged 15 to 19 who are not enrolled in education in Colombia (36%) is nearly triple the average of other member countries (13%) (OECD, 2016).

Additional factors influencing dropout include level transitions and adverse economic conditions, as well as psychological vulnerabilities such as low self-esteem, feelings of academic failure, and exposure to drugs, crime, and alcohol (Asenjo & Astica, 2013; Román, 2013). These factors are particularly concerning given that education fulfills a key socializing function, provides non-cognitive benefits (e.g., behavioral traits), and generates positive externalities such as greater social returns (Barragán-Moreno & Lozano-Galindo, 2021; Castellar & Uribe, 2004).

Key indicators show that enrollment increased during the 2007–2009 period and declined from 2010 to 2018. This downward trend (Figure 1) corresponds with a decline in the school-age population. Two organizational facts justify distinguishing these periods: (1) the standardization of the Formal Education Census database by DANE in 2004 to comply with Law 115 of 1994, and (2) the establishment of ten-year education plans, with the first implemented in 1996, based on reliable data.

Figure 1. Students enrolled in primary, basic secondary and mid secondary education from 2007 to 2023

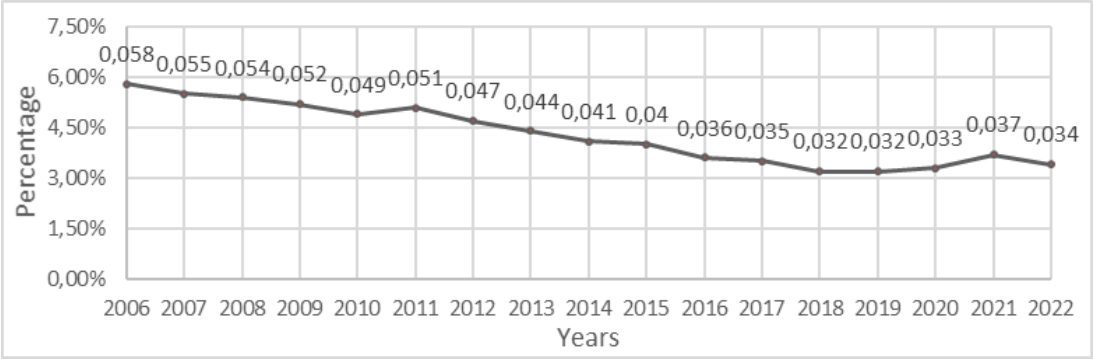


Source: elaborated by the authors based on DANE (2024).

According to the Ministry of National Education, student dropout refers to leaving the school system due to a combination of factors arising from both within the education system and the broader social, familial, and individual context (MEN, 2007a). Contributing factors include the geographic dispersion of educational services, armed conflict, and limited economic resources. Since 2001, efforts have been made to cluster remote schools under unified institutional management to mitigate urban–rural disparities. Additional initiatives include extending the school day to improve performance and reduce teen pregnancy —factors closely linked to dropout— and addressing the economic pressures that force students to leave school for work (Parra, 2022; Elacqua et al., 2012; Guzmán et al., 2021).

Although interannual dropout rates have declined over the past decade (Figure 2), dropout is notably higher at transitions between primary, basic secondary, and mid-secondary education. This is further influenced by Colombia's demographic transition, characterized by declining mortality and fertility rates, population aging, and a reduction in the youth population (Rincón & Espitia, 2021). In essence, the country's birth rate is rapidly reshaping the demographic structure, reducing births and increasing the median age.

Figure 2. Evolution of the official dropout rate in basic education 2006-2022



Source: elaborated by the authors based on DANE (2024).

Official statistics from DANE indicate that from 2012 to 2016, there was a 2.91% decrease in student enrollment in basic education, evidencing a contraction in net coverage (Table 1). A decline was also observed

in other levels, except in secondary education, which grew by 1.82%. These differences reveal a general contraction in coverage across the public basic education system. It is estimated that throughout the 2012–2020 period, at least one million children and adolescents remained outside the system each year.

Gómez et al. (2021) note that school failure affects boys more than girls. Their study also found no evidence linking dropout to municipal spending levels or to patterns of internal migration or displacement. They propose that STEM programs should continue and emphasize the importance of involving more women to close the gender gap.

The outbreak of COVID-19 in March 2020 forced institutions to maintain educational services under social distancing constraints and the closure of physical schools. The pandemic affected 190 countries and 99% of students in low- and middle-income countries (United Nations, 2020), prompting a shift to remote and virtual education. In Colombia, the response varied across regions due to unequal access to technological infrastructure and limited teacher preparedness to provide digital learning (Herrera, 2021).

2.3. Structural gaps and social cohesion

In Colombia, the term "gap" refers to the lack of cohesion or disparities among groups and individuals, which are often linked to geographic and demographic characteristics. Since the mid-twentieth century, both governmental and political leaders have sought to address these disparities through integration and modernization agendas. These agendas aim to reduce the effects of territorial dispersion, disparities in gender access, and shortages of economic, educational, teaching, and technological resources (such as connectivity). Curricula that ignore the narratives, perceptions, and everyday learning of these regions further exacerbate the challenges faced by students —frequently labeled as "others" in a pejorative sense (Triana & Burkart, 2023).

The gap is also widened by a lack of transparency in how public funds are used to improve basic services such as water, sanitation, and education. Furthermore, Colombia's commitments to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 1: poverty eradication; SDG 4: quality education for all) are intended to magnify the impact of investments on sustainable development indicators, improve living standards, and reduce poverty (Takeshima, 2024).

This general overview highlights the urgent need to review Colombian public policies and research experiences related to the management of primary and secondary education services from both national and international perspectives. Such a review will allow for the identification and analysis of key management factors (enrollment, attention, retention, dropout, and graduation) in the Colombian educational system.

3. Materials and methods

3.1. Design and approach

The study was conducted as applied research using a non-experimental design with a descriptive scope. It was grounded in a documentary review and included both qualitative and quantitative measurements.

During the documentary review phase, official documents and academic literature were analyzed, guided by the public policy process framework proposed by Sabatier (2010). Key educational indicators were defined based on the National Educational Indicators Guide published by the Ministry of National Education (MEN, 2014). For quantifying these indicators, microdata from the 2018 National Quality of Life Survey (ECV) and DANE's 2024 EDUC historical series were used, along with findings by Gómez et al. (2021) on demographic factors associated with school dropout. In addition, the territorial analysis relied on the 2017 Municipal Performance Measurement (MDM) report issued by the National Planning Department (DNP), which made it possible to capture the local dynamics of educational management.

3.2. Data sources

3.2.1. Data selection

The choice of data sources was based on their relevance, national coverage, and institutional credibility. First, the National Educational Indicators Guide (MEN, 2014) establishes official metrics for enrollment, dropout, and graduation, ensuring that definitions and calculation methods align with current regulatory standards. Second, microdata from the 2018 National Quality of Life Survey (ECV) and DANE's 2024 EDUC historical series provide high-quality statistical information with comprehensive coverage of households and educational institutions across the country, enabling disaggregated analysis by region and education level.

In addition, findings from academic studies such as Gómez et al. (2021) contribute contextual variables (e.g., demographic and socioeconomic factors) that deepen understanding of the school dropout phenomenon. Finally, international reports from the OECD (2016), UNESCO (2019, 2023), and the guidelines issued by CEPAL offer comparative benchmarks to situate the results within the broader Latin American context and to validate the significance of the trends observed.

2.2.2. Validation of the sources used

To ensure the reliability and validity of the data, a process of documentary and statistical triangulation was implemented. First, rates and trends from DANE were compared with those presented in the 2017 Municipal Performance Measurement (MDM) report by the DNP, confirming the consistency of regional and municipal performance patterns. Second, the conceptual definitions adopted from Sabatier (2010) reinforced the

study's internal consistency by ensuring that the indicators adhered to a robust theoretical framework and remained comparable throughout the analysis.

Third, an integrative literature review (Elacqua et al., 2021) confirmed that the policy analysis approaches used aligned with those documented in comparable contexts of educational decentralization. Finally, comparison with international standards set by the OECD, UNESCO, and CEPAL validated the external relevance of the findings, showing that the trends observed in Colombia are consistent with broader regional and global dynamics in educational policy.

3.3. Research phases

The research was structured into four interrelated phases. In the first phase, indicators for enrollment, retention, dropout, and graduation were identified and operationally defined according to the methodological guidelines of the MEN (2014) and the conceptual framework of Sabatier (2010).

The second phase involved a time-series analysis of DANE data, which made it possible to identify historical trends and inflection points across different educational levels. These trends were also compared with patterns described by Gómez et al. (2021).

In the third phase, an integrative review of literature and education policies was conducted, incorporating the framework developed by Elacqua et al. (2021) on school reorganization and decentralization to interpret the findings within a public management context.

Finally, in the fourth phase, the results were placed in a comparative framework by contrasting them with practices and recommendations from the OECD (2016), UNESCO (2019; 2023), and CEPAL for Latin America.

3.4. Usefulness of the methodology in analyzing the results

The standardized definition of indicators, based on Sabatier (2010) and the MEN's guidelines, ensured conceptual coherence and internal validity in the temporal and territorial comparison of data. The time-series analysis of DANE data provided a solid quantitative diagnosis, accurately identifying changes in access and dropout dynamics across educational levels, and validating the demographic trends identified by Gómez et al. (2021).

The integrative review of public policies, supported by Elacqua et al. (2021), provided the normative framework necessary to interpret the quantitative variations considering the management strategies implemented in Colombia.

Finally, the comparison with OECD, UNESCO, and CEPAL recommendations enriched the analysis by offering international benchmarks that reinforce the improvement proposals and situate the Colombian education system within a global landscape of best practices.

4. Results

All subsystems of the Colombian education system are interconnected, meaning that each component both influences and is influenced by the others. This interdependence defines and constrains the system's behavior, given its dynamic complexity (Barragán, 2017). Such systemic interactions are evident even in the way descriptions, definitions, and responsibilities are distributed across the system's components (Figure 3).

Figure 3. The diagram that guides the presentation of the results

Source: elaborated by the authors using the free template from PresentationGO.com

4.1. Sectoral organization of the education system

The education sector in Colombia operates under a decentralized model intended to guarantee the fundamental right to education for children and youth (MEN, 2009). At the national level, the Ministry of National Education establishes general guidelines. At the regional level, departmental, district, and municipal education secretariats are responsible for administering the service. In non-certified municipalities, responsibilities are shared between the secretariats and the respective department or municipality, with the latter executing part of the service.

At the local level, Educational Institutions (EIs) are the spaces where pedagogical processes are carried out and where efforts to improve educational coverage, quality, and efficiency are implemented (MEN, 2009).

The decentralized educational model has taken decades to show the expected outcomes at the local level. Although it was established in the 1991 Constitution, regulated by the 1994 General Education Law (Congreso de la República de Colombia, 1994a), and reaffirmed by Decree 1075 of 2015 (the Single Regulatory Decree), its effective implementation remains uneven. One reason for this delay is that local institutions generally require greater financial and technical support to achieve their mandates and to make their contributions visible within the framework of their legal responsibilities (Martínez et al., 2016).

4.2. Financing of the Colombian education system

The public education service in Colombia is primarily financed through the General Participation System (GPS). Infrastructure projects are funded, secondly, by royalties from the extraction of mining and energy resources, and thirdly, to a lesser extent, by revenue generated from the state liquor monopoly (Congreso de la República de Colombia, 1991). Radinger et al. (2018) observed that existing funding mechanisms are not aligned with the needs and broad objectives of the public education system. Moreover, declining budgets and the lack of fiscal sustainability across territories hinder efforts to reduce educational disparities. For this reason, it is essential to align public spending with policy priorities to ensure the continuity of implementation.

Financing, program operation, and curriculum design should be focused on promoting technological skills and competencies (Martí & Gaete, 2019). While the education sector is considered a key driver of wealth generation, equity, and social well-being, investment in education must be strategically directed toward transformation and sustainable development, in line with SDG 4. Additionally, the World Economic Forum has recommended closing the gap between Colombia's average expenditure per student at the preschool, primary, and secondary levels and that of OECD countries. While OECD members spend an average of USD 9,168 per student annually, Colombia invests only USD 3,066 (OECD, 2019).

4.3. Administration of the education service

As described in the previous section on system organization, decentralization in Colombia is operationalized through the certification of departments, districts, and municipalities. A municipality is the fundamental territorial unit within Colombia's political–administrative structure. It holds political, fiscal, and administrative autonomy to promote the well-being and quality of life of its population (Congreso de la República de Colombia, 1994b). The 1,102 municipalities are classified based on 1) Their initial capacities; 2) Whether they are certified or non-certified in education; and 3) Their fiscal performance.

4.3.1. Categorization regarding initial capacities

Initial capacities refer to the endogenous and exogenous factors that influence a municipality's ability to manage and deliver results for the population's welfare. These include economic, urban, and resource-related capacities (Departamento Nacional de Planeación, 2017).

Educational outcomes include secondary education coverage, performance on the Saber 11 standardized exams (mathematics and critical reading), and coverage of transition grade as a bridge between preschool and primary education. According to the National Planning Department (DNP), by 2017, all Colombian municipalities exhibited significant lags in education, regardless of their initial capacities (Departamento Nacional de Planeación, 2017).

4.3.2. Categorization regarding certification and non-certification of municipalities in education

Municipalities with more than 100,000 inhabitants are classified as certified; those with fewer inhabitants may obtain certification by meeting specific requirements (MEN, 2004). Non-certified municipalities are responsible for administering and distributing GPS funds allocated for school meals and quality improvement, managing teacher transfers, and providing information to both the corresponding department and the national government (MEN, 2017).

Certified municipalities are responsible not only for the above but also for maintaining and expanding educational coverage, planning and provisioning educational services (from preschool through secondary education), offering technical and administrative support to EIs, managing educational and administrative personnel, financing or co-financing educational projects, maintaining their Municipal Education Information Systems, evaluating performance, and overseeing the provision of education within their jurisdiction (MEN, 2004).

Although certification is the most relevant category for financing and administration under public policy, Moreno and Rojas (2017) concluded that certification status is not a decisive factor: educational coverage and quality are only weakly associated with public management and efficiency in education.

4.3.3. Categorization regarding fiscal performance

Law 1551 of 2012 empowered the General Accounting Office of the Republic to classify municipalities based on their revenue-generating capacity and fiscal sufficiency —that is, their ability to finance operating expenses through unrestricted current income (Congreso de la República de Colombia, 2012).

According to the DNP's Municipal Performance Measurement, some municipalities with high initial capacities also exhibited low fiscal performance. This finding suggests that efficient management of limited resources is not enough to meet the basic needs of the education system (Departamento Nacional de Planeación, 2017). This scenario underscores the value of modeling approaches to better understand the system and its directly and indirectly interacting variables, with the goal of correcting structural lag.

4.3.4. Functions of the educational system by level of government

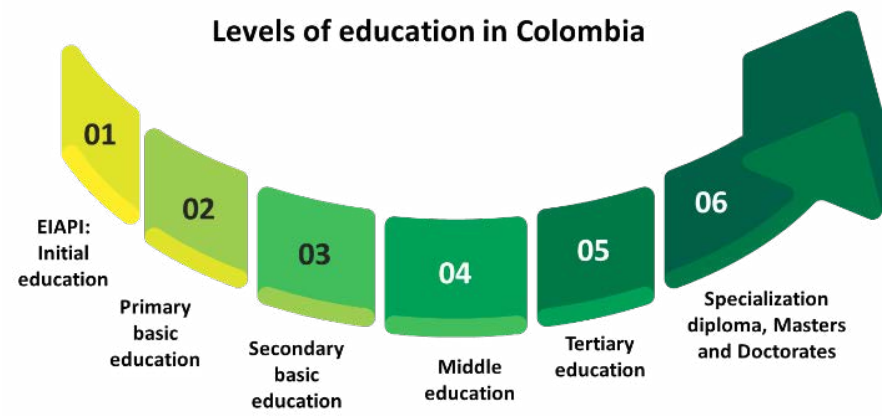
The functions are distributed at different governmental levels in accordance with the definitions of Law 715 of 2001, which attribute powers by law to each one of the state levels. The powers are distinguished and organized regarding the management and distribution of economic resources for the provision of educational services. Thus, the Nation controls, evaluates and regulates the execution of educational services and technically and administratively assists the territorial entities in the management and distribution of resources. The territorial entities direct and execute the physical, human and financial resources dedicated to the coverage and quality goals and the non-certified territorial entities distribute the SGP resources for quality of education and school food programs and co-finance projects for education (MEN, 2009).

4.4. Levels in Colombian formal education

Colombian formal education is organized into the following levels: preschool, basic (comprising five years of primary and four of lower secondary), upper secondary (two years), and tertiary education. This structure is outlined in Article 11 of Law 115 of 1994 (Congreso de la República de Colombia, 1994a) and supported by Decree 1075 of 2015, which regulates the education sector. Figure 3 shows the organization of the system and the transition pathways between levels.

The entire structure corresponds to 15 consecutive academic years and includes flexible education modalities for adults who were excluded from the system, such as accelerated learning, night school, and literacy programs (MEN, 2017). Additionally, all programs and levels must be registered with the Ministry of National Education and comply with the standards and guidelines issued by the MEN.

Figure 4. Organization of educational levels in Colombia



Source: Elaborated by the authors based on OECD (2016) using the free template from PresentationGO.com

4.5. National development plans from 2006 to 2026

The governments, through their National Development Plans (PND), delegate to the Ministry of National Education the responsibility of formulating and implementing the Education Development Plan, which must have a scope of no less than ten years (Congreso de la República de Colombia, 1994b). These plans establish educational guidelines and set specific goals related to enrollment, coverage, retention, quality, and service effectiveness. The achievement and efficiency indicators associated with these plans are calculated using the rates summarized in Table 1.

The following section presents the main results for the achievement and efficiency indicators corresponding to the 2006–2016 Ten-Year Plan known as El Pacto Social [The Social Pact].

Achievement Indicators:

Gross coverage rate: This indicator increased by an average of 10.61 percentage points (p.p.), rising from 68.87% in 2006 to 79.48% in 2016. The improvement is mainly attributed to the implementation of flexible education models for rural populations, which enhanced access to the education system and helped reduce the urban–rural education gap (MEN, 2014). In secondary education, coverage increased by 7.7 p.p. over the decade. As shown in Figure 5, gross coverage exceeded 100% (100.38%), which reflects that the numerator includes not only students of theoretical age but also repeaters and overage students, while the denominator includes only students of theoretical age. This increase may be due to the creation of additional school spaces (MEN, 2007a). The national gross coverage rate declined after 2010, when DANE corrected its overestimation of the school-age population in projections.

Table 1. Educacional indicators

Indicators	Rate	Definition
Achievement	Gross coverage	Ratio of students enrolled in a specific educational level to the total population at the theoretical age for that level.
	Net coverage	Ratio of students attending the appropriate educational level for their age to the total population of that age group.
	Net enrollment by level	Proportion of students of the official entry age for a given level to the total population of that age.
	School attendance	Ratio of students attending a given educational level within the appropriate age range to the total population of the same age range.
	School attendance (5 -17 years)	Ratio of students enrolled at any educational level to the total population eligible to attend that level, within the 5–17 age range.
	Intra-annual dropout	Proportion of students who leave the education system before completing the grade in which they are enrolled.
Efficiency	Overage	Percentage of students enrolled in a grade who are more than two years older than the official age for that grade.
	Repetition	Percentage of students enrolled in the same grade as in the previous school year.

Source: Elaborated by the authors based on MEN (2014).

Net coverage rate: In primary education, 86% of the 9-year-old population that should have been enrolled in Grade 4 in 2006 was served, decreasing slightly to 83.58% in 2016. In secondary education, the 13-year-old population that should have been in Grade 8 was covered by 72% in 2006 and 71.02% in 2016. The 16-year-old population expected to be in Grade 10 had a coverage rate of 36.03% in 2006, increasing to 42.8% in 2016.

School attendance rate (ages 5–17): Attendance increased by 4.6 p.p., from 87.3% in 2005 to 91.9% in 2014. This reflects a rise in the number of children entering the education system, possibly due to service expansion across more regions.

Efficiency Indicators:

Intra-annual dropout rate: This rate decreased across all education levels, directly contributing to improved student continuity. The dropout rate declined by 3.12 p.p. in primary education and by 2.13 p.p. at the national level. In secondary education, the average dropout rate dropped to a decade low of 2.94%, attributed to tuition-free public education programs and flexible schedules.

Overage rate: The proportion of overage students decreased by 2.67 p.p., from 9.88% in 2006 to 7.21% in 2016. This was attributed to flexible scheduling and adult education initiatives.

Reduction in the urban–rural gap: The gap in educational coverage between urban and rural areas decreased from 20.6% in 2006 to 8.63% in 2016. This reduction may be related to regional integration efforts, targeted programs for vulnerable populations, infrastructure improvements, and the implementation of flexible education models.

Education expenditure as a share of GDP: This includes spending at all levels of education —from preschool to tertiary— as well as related auxiliary services and R&D (Comisión Económica para América Latina (CEPAL), n.d.). The indicator averaged 3.23% of GDP over the decade. Although spending did not decline, it remained below the average for the 17 member countries of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean.

In response to the performance of the indicators in Table 1, the Ministry of National Education implemented several strategies to improve access and retention in the education system: free education for all levels (preschool to upper secondary), school transportation, extracurricular programs, and a gradual implementation of a full eight-hour school day. Palacios (2020) identifies extended school hours as a key factor influencing school performance rankings, as it provides more equitable learning opportunities and reduces the vulnerability associated with less school time. Other initiatives included the School Meals Program (PAE) and teacher professionalization programs.

Additional programs aimed at enhancing literacy and learning outcomes included:

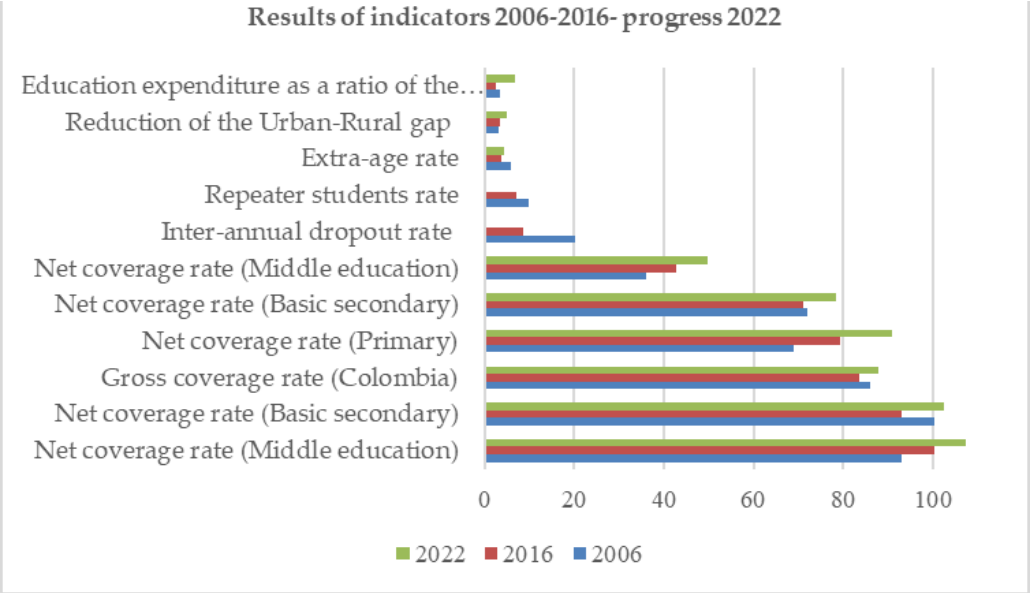
Leer es mi cuento (National Reading and Writing Plan) (Ministerio de Cultura, 2021);

Todos a Aprender (Program for the Transformation of Educational Quality – PTA) (MEN, 2022), focused on strengthening teachers' pedagogical skills;

Bilingualism Program (MEN, 2018); Computadores para Educar (Gobierno Nacional de Colombia, n.d.), which promotes the use of ICTs in teaching and learning. According to Barrios et al. (2021), students who benefited from this program were more likely to access higher education due to improved academic performance and increased access to educational content.

The plan The Path to Quality and Equity: 2016–2022 (MEN, 2017) was based on the outcomes of the 2006–2016 plan (MEN, n.d.). It reinforced goals such as expanding efforts to build citizenship skills; continuing to reduce the urban–rural supply gap; and strengthening the implementation of inclusive education policies. Progress through 2022 is presented in Figure 5.

Figure 5. Results of achievement and efficiency indicators of the education system for 2006-2016 and progress until 2022



Source: Elaborated by the authors based on OECD (2016); MEN (2007b); Comisión Económica para América Latina (CEPAL), n.d.

Further initiatives focused on improving teacher preparation and the relevance of educational content. Pineda (2021) emphasizes the role of teacher leadership development in fostering assertive pedagogical practices. Benavides and Bermeo (2023) highlight the need for peace education initiatives tailored to local contexts, while Hernández et al. (2021) emphasize the role of social representations in understanding others' perspectives and formulating impactful public policies. De Poorter and Aguilar (2020) advocate for incorporating global citizenship education into the curriculum, complementing existing peace and coexistence education initiatives.

Finally, Elacqua et al. (2021) underscore that local autonomy enables better teacher recruitment and student tracking, supporting more targeted interventions. To complete this analysis, subsequent sections will draw on OECD and UNESCO reports to contextualize the Colombian education system.

4.6. International perspective on the Colombian education system

4.6.1. Review of public educational policies by the OECD

The OECD (2016) reviewed Colombia's public education policies in comparison with the best practices of its member countries. This review showed that EIAPI improved infrastructure and guaranteed universal access to support successful transitions to primary education and, in the case of secondary education, to ensure continuity. One of the OECD's recommendations was to enhance the quality and relevance of education to promote universal access and the completion of basic studies. Regarding higher education, the OECD highlighted expanded access, improved quality and relevance of content, and efforts to enhance financing conditions.

In 2018, the OECD also conducted a review of school resources, identifying priorities for optimizing the use of assets in the Colombian school system. It emphasized the importance of including higher education in the analysis, as early childhood and school education compete for resources with goals set for increasing access to higher education (Radinger et al., 2018). The report highlighted that policies, actions and implementations at one level affects others, reinforcing the notion of education as a system of dynamic complexity.

Between 2002 and 2013, the OECD identified several strengths in Colombia:

1. Increased access and participation across levels: preschool enrollment rose from 36% to 45%, which is below the OECD average (84%) but above Turkey (28%). Net enrollment in lower secondary increased from 59% to 70%, and in upper secondary from 30% to 41%.
2. Education expectancy rose by two years, from 11.4 to 13.5 years, compared to the OECD average increase of one year, reaching 16.5 years. Enrollment rates over 90% brought the country closer to universal access and retention in primary education for children aged 7 to 13.
3. The average school attendance rate dropped by half from preschool to secondary levels.
4. Primary school dropout increased from 4% to 9% by 2010, whereas secondary school dropout decreased from 15% in 2005 to 9% in 2013 —lower than Mexico's 13%. However, the secondary education dropout rate remained high, at 4.5% annually, surpassing rates in primary and lower secondary levels (OECD, 2016).

The gap in access and retention between Colombia and OECD countries during 2002–2013 was largely attributed to age-grade mismatch and grade repetition. The report noted that 84% of Colombian primary students were enrolled at the age-appropriate grade, compared to 107% in OECD countries. It clarified that

the gross enrollment rate reflects overall participation at a given level and may exceed 100% due to grade repetition, while the net enrollment rate is always below 100% (OECD, 2016). In 2012, 41% of Colombian 15-year-olds who took the PISA test had repeated at least one grade, compared to the OECD average of 12% —placing Colombia at high risk for dropout due to poor academic performance.

The OECD's main recommendations to address these challenges included:

1. Ensuring budget allocations align with educational goals by enhancing municipal capacities and reforming the transfer-based tax system.
2. Strengthening the organization, capacity, and educational offerings of institutions.
3. Improving teacher qualifications and making teacher assignments more efficient and equitable (Radinger et al., 2018).

4.6.2. Monitoring by UNESCO

UNESCO identified both progress and challenges in Colombia's education system, including internal migration in middle-income countries, displacement in low-income countries —which host 10% of the world's population— and the low educational attainment of refugees, half of whom are under 18 (UNESCO, 2019). It also noted that prior to 2015, projections related to global education and SDG 4 did not consider these dynamics, highlighting the need for new investments to achieve equity, inclusion, and quality education (UNESCO, 2019).

UNESCO recognized Colombia's efforts in supporting internally displaced persons due to armed conflict, as well as in integrating Venezuelan migrants. Migrants also have access to public education services. Internationally, the educational response to migrants and refugees has been enhanced through agreements and recommendations that safeguard the right to education, incorporate their needs, prepare teachers accordingly, and leverage the potential of migrants and displaced populations (UNESCO, 2019).

Additionally, Duraiappah et al. (2021) argued for aligning learning theory with the challenges and needs of contemporary education policy design. They emphasized that teaching is deeply connected to how learning occurs at the brain, behavioral, and environmental levels. From this perspective, they proposed frameworks for what, how, where, and when knowledge should be offered to students.

Based on the preceding findings and in the context of increasing migration, the challenge for 2030 is to ensure that the entire school-age population completes primary and secondary education, with demonstrable outcomes in terms of relevant learning.

5. Discussion and conclusions

This discussion addresses the unified objective of this study: to analyze the evolution of public policies for basic and secondary education in Colombia (2007–2023) and their effects on local governance, social cohesion, and the indicators of coverage, retention, dropout, and graduation. The analysis begins by examining how decentralization dynamics have influenced municipal governance, then reflects —using coverage and retention data— on the degree of social cohesion across territories. Finally, it offers lessons learned and reform proposals aimed at closing the gaps between normative intentions and educational outcomes.

The Colombian education sector follows a decentralized political-administrative structure, formalized through the certification process. This process grants territorial entities the authority to organize, manage, and execute education services autonomously, including budget allocation. However, not all territories meet the requirements for certification. Some, due to their size and economic limitations, must share responsibilities with local governments, restricting their ability to independently manage education-related expenses such as school meals and infrastructure maintenance. This situation highlights the urgent need for greater state presence and financial support to reduce service provision disparities across territorial entities, particularly at the municipal level. Nonetheless, evidence indicates that certified municipalities tend to achieve better educational outcomes, in part because they can hire high-quality teachers and tailor services to local needs —an advantage not always shared by the central government.

The structure of the educational offer, which spans from early childhood to higher education, requires coordination across all levels. Improvements in access and permanence can be fostered through the integrated implementation of free education, school transport, bilingualism, school meals, and teacher training programs. However, this necessitates significant financial investment to overcome urban–rural disparities and to avoid resource competition across education levels. It is essential to ensure continuity in the goals outlined in the Ten-Year Education and Development Plans of successive governments, guaranteeing their execution within scheduled timeframes and budgets, while incorporating results from policy evaluations.

Education plans must rigorously address inclusion, especially for youth under 18 affected by internal migration or forced displacement. UNESCO has identified this as a major challenge for sectoral governance. Overcoming it is vital for achieving equitable, inclusive, and high-quality education.

The COVID-19 pandemic prompted emergency adaptations in education service delivery, including remote modalities (synchronous and asynchronous) supported by ICTs. However, disparities in access to these technologies across regions hindered equal learning opportunities.

Although public investment in education in Colombia has increased annually, it remains significantly below OECD averages. OECD countries invest nearly three times more per student at the preschool, primary, and secondary levels than Colombia. Therefore, a substantial increase in education funding is necessary, as higher investment is associated with improved quality and competitiveness in national and global labor markets. High-quality teachers not only increase enrollment but also boost student academic performance.

Regardless of whether students transition to higher education or directly enter the labor market after secondary school, it is essential to strengthen their reading, writing, and logical-mathematical skills to ensure they graduate with a competitive profile aligned with current societal demands.

One limitation of this study is that the analysis of public policies was conducted through textual and documentary analysis rather than through dynamic modeling techniques that could reveal systemic interactions among policy variables over time. A future direction involves modeling these dynamics within the framework of educational policy articulation. Despite three decades having passed since the enactment of the General Education Law, no structural reforms have been ratified that recognize education as a fundamental right. Such reforms should define the obligations of the State, society, and families as joint guarantors of this right, ensuring universal and lifelong access to education from early childhood to secondary school. This stage is foundational for understanding core concepts and values and for supporting a smooth transition to post-secondary education or early labor market participation. These statutory reforms should aim to reduce inequality rooted in economic, social, emotional, gender, or contextual factors, with the goal of achieving territorial and social equity.

5.1. Public policy implications derived from the findings

The increasing dropout rates observed in certain municipalities reveal persistent gaps in the implementation of retention policies, aligning with the findings of Gómez et al. (2021), who highlight demographic and contextual factors that remain inadequately addressed. Likewise, the disconnect between the Ministry of National Education's (MEN, 2014) definitions and protocols and their application at the municipal level underscores fragmentation in local educational governance, which constrains the ability to implement coherent and context-sensitive interventions across the territory.

This misalignment between levels of government hampers the timely execution of funding mechanisms and support programs for student retention. Elacqua et al. (2021), in their analysis of school reorganization and decentralization processes, similarly emphasize the barriers created by this lack of coordination. From the perspective of Sabatier's public policy framework (2010), the divergence between normative intentions and on-the-ground outcomes is likely to persist in the absence of effective coordination mechanisms and clearly defined accountability structures.

5.2. Impact on governance and social structure

The fragmented implementation of educational policies in Colombia has reinforced unequal power dynamics that undermine local governance and perpetuate social inequities. Although Law 715 of 2001 transferred responsibilities and resources to the municipal level, it failed to establish clear accountability mechanisms or provide incentives for inter-institutional cooperation. As a result, key decisions —such as student seat allocations, teacher hiring, and the provision of psychosocial support— are often made in isolation. This disjointed decision-making process reproduces socioeconomic disparities and limits community involvement in school management.

To illustrate the tangible effects of this fragmentation, data from the Educational Trajectories Observatory of the Ministry of National Education (MEN, 2024) show that the average gap in years of schooling between individuals aged 15 and older in urban centers and those in dispersed rural areas narrowed only slightly, from 3.85 years in 2010 to 3.61 years in 2022. Despite this modest reduction, the figures underscore the persistent nature of territorial educational inequalities. Research by Santos et al. (2023) confirms that in urban areas with populations exceeding 100,000, residents enjoy better living conditions, including greater access to education, higher academic achievement, improved sanitary conditions, and lower unemployment —factors that further exacerbate the divide with rural regions.

Using Sabatier's "policy-coalition" framework, local stakeholders such as municipal authorities, teachers' unions, and community organizations are seen to pursue divergent goals and operate with unequal access to resources, making it difficult to align efforts around shared objectives of equity and quality. In this context, social capital emerges as a critical mechanism to mitigate the shortcomings of formal policy implementation. Social capital, understood as the set of relational resources individuals and communities access through internal bonds ("bonding") and external networks ("bridging"), plays a pivotal role in education. Municipalities with higher dropout rates tend to lack both strong school–family ties and effective connections with external support networks. Expanding access to digital spaces and internet infrastructure can help generate social capital by opening new avenues for connection, collaboration, and information sharing. As Gil de Zúñiga, Mateos, and Inguanzo (2022) observe, these expanded spaces provide opportunities to strengthen retention-oriented networks and foster educational inclusion.

5.3. Concrete reform proposals

1. Implement a national early warning system: Establish a nationwide system to monitor key educational indicators —such as dropout, absenteeism, and academic performance— in real time. This system should trigger immediate intervention protocols in the most vulnerable institutions, drawing on best practices from international experiences.
2. Redesign the educational funding model: Transition to a performance- and equity-based funding scheme in which additional financial resources are allocated to municipalities with persistent coverage and retention gaps. This aligns with OECD (2016) recommendations aimed at promoting targeted investment in underserved areas.

3. Strengthen territorial governance mechanisms: Create inter-administrative committees composed of representatives from the Ministry of National Education (MEN), local education secretariats, and civil society organizations. These bodies should be formally mandated to coordinate policy actions, facilitate data sharing, and conduct local assessments in accordance with CEPAL's guidelines for subnational cooperation.
4. Develop a unified digital educational management platform: Design and implement an integrated digital platform that consolidates statistical data from DANE, monitoring reports from educational institutions, and relevant public policy protocols. This platform would support evidence-based decision-making and advance UNESCO's vision for digital transformation in education systems.
5. Institutionalize periodic policy impact evaluations: Establish specialized units within the MEN responsible for conducting policy impact assessments every two years. These units should be equipped with advanced analytical capabilities —such as the Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP) for prioritizing critical variables— and should be mandated to publish the results for public access.
6. Promote digital inclusion and teacher training in emerging technologies: Expand broadband connectivity and equip schools with reliable digital infrastructure and devices. Launch comprehensive teacher training programs focused on emerging technologies and artificial intelligence to support personalized learning. This initiative, currently prominent in institutional and district forums, should be supported through partnerships with universities and the private sector. It will enable the creation of AI laboratories in schools, digital learning communities, and certifications in hybrid pedagogical methodologies. A regulatory framework should guarantee infrastructure sustainability and periodically assess the impact of training programs on educational outcomes.

5.4. Normative change proposals

1. Amend Law 715 of 2001: Introduce a dedicated chapter on participatory accountability that mandates the creation of school oversight committees with representation from students, teachers, and parents. This reform should also establish sanctions for failing to meet coverage and retention targets, thereby reinforcing local accountability mechanisms.
2. Enact an intersectoral educational governance act: Propose a new statute to institutionalize territorial education committees with a legal mandate to coordinate health, culture, and social welfare policies alongside the MEN and local education secretariats. This integrated governance approach would address the structural causes of student dropout and school abandonment.
3. Issue a community equity regulation: Require the incorporation of social capital and community cohesion indicators into the formulas used for allocating educational resources. Municipalities with lower scores should receive additional incentives, following CEPAL's recommendations for equitable territorial targeting.
4. Update the national participation policy: Amend Decree 1075 of 2015 to ensure the co-creation of local educational plans. This update should include consultation methodologies tailored to Indigenous and Afro-descendant communities, consistent with collective rights standards and UNESCO's 2030 Agenda.
5. Issue a decree to integrate all existing educational databases (DANE, MDM, Secretariat systems) using standardized interoperability protocols and open-access frameworks. This system will support social oversight and enable independent academic research.

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