

# K To 12 at Ten: Implementation, Equity, and Outcomes of the Enhanced Basic Education Reform in the Philippines

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## ABSTRACT

This study presents a systematic review of empirical research on the K to 12 reform in the Philippines, with particular attention to implementation fidelity, learner outcomes, teacher capacity, and governance contexts. The Enhanced Basic Education Act of 2013, commonly referred to as the K to 12 reform, restructured the Philippine basic education system by extending schooling to 12 years, introducing Senior High School (SHS) tracks, and implementing mother-tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) in the early grades. A decade after implementation, concerns remain regarding the reform's effectiveness in improving learning quality, equity, and post-school outcomes.

Following systematic review principles, studies published between 2013 and 2024 were identified through searches of international and Philippine-based academic databases and repositories. Quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods studies examining K to 12 implementation, access and participation, learning outcomes, Technical-Vocational-Livelihood (TVL) effectiveness, and governance factors were included. Given the heterogeneity of study designs and outcome measures, a narrative synthesis approach was employed.

Findings indicate consistent expansion of access to secondary education, particularly through increased SHS enrollment among low-income learners. However, improvements in access have not been matched by comparable gains in learning outcomes, with persistent low achievement in reading, mathematics, and science, especially in disadvantaged areas. Positive outcomes associated with MTB-MLE and TVL programs were observed only where adequate teacher training, instructional resources, facilities, and industry partnerships were present. Shortages of subject-specialist teachers and uneven local government capacity emerged as key constraints shaping reform outcomes.

Overall, the findings suggest that while the K to 12 reform is structurally sound, its outcomes remain uneven and highly context-dependent. Sustained investments in teaching quality, strengthened governance coordination, and robust monitoring systems are necessary to ensure that the benefits of extended schooling are equitably realized across all Filipino learners.

**Keywords:** K to 12 reform; learning outcomes; teacher capacity; governance; equity; Philippines

## BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The Enhanced Basic Education Act of 2013, widely known as the K to 12 reform, represents one of the most comprehensive education policy initiatives in the Philippines. By extending basic education to 12 years, the reform sought to align the national education system with international standards and enhance learners' preparedness for higher education, employment, and lifelong learning. Central to the reform were curriculum restructuring, the introduction of Senior High School (SHS), and the implementation of mother-tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) in the early grades (Briones et al., 2019; Orbeta, 2020).

A defining feature of the reform was the establishment of four SHS tracks—Academic, Technical-Vocational-Livelihood (TVL), Sports, and Arts & Design—designed to provide differentiated

learning pathways responsive to learners' abilities and labor-market demands. The reform also institutionalized MTB-MLE to strengthen early-grade literacy and numeracy. Implemented progressively between 2012 and 2016, these changes required significant adjustments in teacher preparation, curriculum delivery, assessment systems, school infrastructure, and governance arrangements (David, 2021; Mendoza & Cruz, 2019).

Empirical evidence suggests that the reform has contributed to expanded access to secondary education, particularly through increased SHS enrollment. Studies document higher participation among younger cohorts and learners from lower-income households, indicating progress toward broader access and inclusion (Reyes et al., 2020; Santos & Velasco, 2022). These developments suggest that the structural expansion objectives of the reform have been partially achieved.

The K to 12 reform is grounded in the assumption that extended schooling, competency-based curricula, and early cognitive development through MTB-MLE would improve learning outcomes and support smoother transitions from school to work. The SHS framework, particularly the TVL track aligned with TESDA certification standards, was intended to enhance employability and relevance of learning (Orbeta, 2020; Alfonso, 2021). However, accumulating evidence indicates that these intended outcomes have been unevenly realized.

Recent studies report mixed learning outcomes, with persistent low achievement in reading, mathematics, and science, particularly in geographically isolated and resource-constrained schools (Delgado et al., 2020; Fernandez & Ramos, 2022). While MTB-MLE has demonstrated positive effects in selected contexts, its effectiveness remains contingent on adequate teacher training, availability of instructional materials, and consistent implementation across regions (Lopez et al., 2019; Garcia, 2021). Constraints related to teacher capacity—including shortages of subject-specialist teachers, high workloads, and limited access to sustained professional development—continue to hinder effective implementation, particularly in SHS and TVL programs (Ilang & Bautista, 2021; Mateo, 2023).

Evidence on longer-term outcomes of the reform remains limited and fragmented. Existing cohort and tracer studies suggest potential benefits of SHS completion for employment and postsecondary access; however, outcomes vary considerably by SHS track, local labor-market conditions, and strength of school-industry partnerships (Cruz et al., 2022; Tan & Navarro, 2023). In addition, local government unit (LGU) capacity and school governance significantly influence implementation quality, with stronger local support associated with better infrastructure and resource provision, and weaker capacity exacerbating inequities (Delgado et al., 2020; Ilang & Bautista, 2021).

Despite a growing body of research on the K to 12 reform, existing evidence remains dispersed across studies with diverse methodologies and focal areas. There is a need for synthesized and critically assessed evidence that systematically examines implementation fidelity, equity, and outcomes a decade after the reform's introduction. Addressing this gap, the present study undertakes a systematic review of empirical research on the K to 12 reform in the Philippines, with the aim of identifying consistent patterns, implementation gaps, and contextual factors shaping outcomes, and generating evidence-based recommendations to strengthen the equity, relevance, and effectiveness of the reform.

## METHODS

This study employed a systematic review design to synthesize empirical evidence on the implementation, equity, and outcomes of the K to 12 basic education reform in the Philippines. The review followed established principles for systematic reviews in education and social policy research, emphasizing transparency, replicability, and methodological rigor. The scope of the review focused on studies published after the national rollout of the reform, capturing evidence generated during its first decade of implementation. A comprehensive search strategy was conducted across multiple electronic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, Google Scholar, and Philippine-based academic repositories. Search terms were developed using combinations of keywords and Boolean operators such as "K to 12 Philippines," "Enhanced Basic Education Act," "Senior High School," "TVL track," "mother tongue-based multilingual education," "learning outcomes," "teacher

capacity,” “equity,” and “school governance.” Reference lists of selected studies were manually screened to identify additional relevant publications.

Studies were included if they: (a) focused explicitly on the Philippine K to 12 reform; (b) examined implementation processes, learner outcomes, teacher capacity, governance, equity, or education-to-employment transitions; (c) employed empirical research methods (quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods); and (d) were published between 2013 and 2024 in peer-reviewed journals, policy reports, or publications from credible research institutions. Opinion pieces, editorials, unpublished theses, and studies lacking methodological transparency were excluded. The screening process consisted of an initial title and abstract review followed by full-text screening. Methodological quality was assessed based on clarity of research questions, appropriateness of study design, data sources, and analytical rigor. Although no studies were excluded solely due to methodological limitations, quality appraisal informed the weighting of evidence during synthesis.

Data were extracted using a standardized framework covering study context, objectives, methodology, sample characteristics, key findings, and policy implications. Given the heterogeneity of study designs and outcome measures, a narrative synthesis approach was adopted. Findings were grouped thematically under curriculum implementation, learner outcomes, teacher capacity, TVL effectiveness, equity dimensions, and governance factors.

## RESULTS OF THE SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

### Access and Participation

Across the reviewed studies, there is consistent evidence of expanded access to secondary education following the introduction of Senior High School. SHS enrollment increased significantly, particularly among younger cohorts and learners from low-income households, indicating progress toward improved access and retention (Reyes et al., 2020; Santos & Velasco, 2022). However, disparities persist between urban and rural schools, especially in terms of track availability and access to resources.

### Learning Outcomes and Academic Performance

Findings on learning outcomes remain mixed and uneven. Multiple studies report persistently low achievement levels in reading, mathematics, and science, particularly in geographically isolated and disadvantaged schools (Delgado et al., 2020; Fernandez & Ramos, 2022). Positive effects of MTB-MLE on early-grade literacy were documented, but only in contexts where teachers received adequate training and instructional materials (Lopez et al., 2019; Garcia, 2021).

### Technical-Vocational-Livelihood (TVL) Outcomes

The TVL track demonstrated substantial variability in effectiveness. Schools with strong industry partnerships and adequate workshop facilities exhibited better alignment with TESDA competency standards and improved employability potential for graduates (Alfonso, 2021; Tan & Navarro, 2023). In contrast, weak industry engagement and outdated facilities constrained skill acquisition in many regions.

### Teacher Capacity and Governance

A recurring finding across studies was the shortage of subject-specialist teachers, particularly in SHS and TVL programs. While large-scale in-service training initiatives were implemented, their classroom impact was limited without sustained coaching and instructional leadership (Ilang & Bautista, 2021; Mateo, 2023). Local government unit (LGU) capacity also emerged as a critical determinant of reform outcomes, with stronger local support associated with better infrastructure, partnerships, and implementation consistency.

## DISCUSSION

This systematic review synthesized empirical evidence on the Philippine K to 12 reform ten years after its implementation, with emphasis on implementation fidelity, equity, and outcomes. The findings align with the

conclusions of the Second Congressional Commission on Education (EDCOM II), which similarly reports that although the reform succeeded in expanding access to basic education—particularly through the institutionalization of Senior High School—it has not produced commensurate improvements in learning quality, equity, and employability. These challenges reflect the country’s ongoing difficulty in fully realizing Sustainable Development Goal 4, which emphasizes inclusive and equitable quality education and meaningful learning outcomes.

A key finding is the persistent gap between access and learning outcomes. Despite increased participation, achievement in foundational subjects remains low, particularly in resource-constrained schools. This pattern suggests that expanded access alone is insufficient to improve learning without corresponding investments in teaching quality, instructional support, and school capacity.

The review further demonstrates that program effectiveness is highly conditional. Initiatives such as MTB-MLE and the TVL track yielded positive outcomes only when enabling conditions—adequate teacher training, instructional materials, facilities, and industry partnerships—were present. In the absence of these supports, implementation was inconsistent and outcomes were weakened. Governance and decentralization emerged as cross-cutting determinants of reform outcomes. Schools operating in contexts with strong LGU support and effective leadership were better positioned to deliver intended K to 12 components, while weak local capacity amplified regional inequalities. These findings underscore the importance of governance arrangements in mediating the impact of national education reforms.

## CONCLUSION

This systematic review indicates that while the K to 12 reform in the Philippines has successfully expanded access to basic education and institutionalized differentiated learning pathways through Senior High School, its impact on learning quality, equity, and employability remains uneven. Persistent low achievement in core academic areas, variable effectiveness of MTB-MLE, inconsistent outcomes across SHS tracks—particularly within the TVL strand—and disparities linked to teacher capacity, resource availability, and governance structures continue to constrain reform outcomes. A decade after implementation, the evidence suggests that structural expansion alone is insufficient to deliver meaningful and equitable learning gains. Strengthening implementation quality, ensuring equitable resource distribution, and improving alignment between curriculum, instruction, and post-school pathways are therefore critical to realizing the reform’s intended goals.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the synthesized evidence, this study recommends that education stakeholders shift policy emphasis from access alone toward improving learning quality and equity. Targeted instructional interventions should prioritize foundational skills development, particularly in low-performing and underserved schools, through strengthened classroom support, formative assessment practices, and differentiated instruction. Teacher capacity development should be treated as a sustained, long-term investment rather than reliance on one-off training programs. Continuous professional development through coaching, mentoring, and subject-specific training—especially for Senior High School and Technical-Vocational-Livelihood (TVL) teachers—is essential to improving instructional quality and assessment literacy.

The effectiveness of the TVL track can be enhanced through stronger alignment with TESDA standards, deeper engagement with industry partners, and modernization of training facilities to reflect local labor-market needs. Strengthening school-industry collaboration is critical to improving employability outcomes and school-to-work transitions.

Governance reforms should focus on reducing regional disparities by strengthening local government unit (LGU) capacity, improving coordination among DepEd, TESDA, CHED, and local stakeholders, and enhancing education management information systems to monitor learner progress and post-school outcomes. Finally, continued policy refinement should be supported by longitudinal and tracer studies to generate robust evidence on employment outcomes, equity impacts, and cost-effectiveness of the K to 12 reform.

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