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Bringing the School to the Students:  
**Education Provision for Disadvantaged Children  
in the 'District Schools' of Mae Hong Son Province**

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# Transforming a Vision of Quality for the Management of Highlander Schools

The vision of the Office of the Basic Education Commission (OBEC) is to “unlock, change, and widen.” This involves creating equity and fairness for all learners, developing a modern infostructure for effective educational management, and ensuring equal access to modern learning resources and information technology. One important facet of this conceptual framework is the idea of “using area-based practices to improve quality, and innovation to drive success.”

OBEC policy is focused on providing all learners with inclusive, equitable, quality education. This is especially important to those with special needs, including children with disabilities, ethnic minority children, and children living in remote areas. While OBEC’s operations encompass all of Thailand, each area has a unique local context. Therefore, educational personnel working on the classroom, school, educational service area, and provincial levels are key assets in developing quality area-based practices, including the development of models and innovations that are appropriate to the local context.

OBEC appreciates UNICEF Thailand’s support in promoting good practices of education provision in remote areas. This includes the unique partnership with Mae Hong Son Primary Education Service Area Office 1 in developing the ‘District School’ or ‘Highland School’ management model. The practices developed and lessons learned from this experience illustrate how area-based innovations adapted to the local context can drive innovation.


# From Policy to Practice: Area-Based Education Reform

The 'District School' or 'Highland School' model originated with Mae Hong Son Primary Education Service Area Office 1 (Mae Hong Son ESAO 1). In operation since 2005, it is an innovation that effectively applies area-based concepts.

The District School model was developed in response to the provincial context. Due to limited manpower and resources, it was not feasible to build complete schools in some especially small, isolated villages. In addition, the mountainous geography made the commute from students' homes to schools in neighbouring villages very difficult and time consuming. The District School model was thus developed to provide children living in remote areas with the opportunity to access education closer to home, while not creating a large burden for the government. It is a flexible model, well-suited to the local context, and has thus enhanced educational access and reduced educational inequality in Mae Hong Son Province. The integration of local languages into the teaching and learning in the District Schools creates a familiar atmosphere for ethnic minority students, helping them to connect to Thai-language learning.

Mae Hong Son ESAO 1 recognizes that this programme, supported by UNICEF Thailand, increases educational opportunity and can inspire other local education reform efforts. In particular this model opens opportunities for local areas to access financial and technical support. It is important that innovation be in a form that can be adapted to address current and future local challenges. Mae Hong Son ESAO 1 affirms that this is a sustainable model of locally-implemented, child-centred educational administration.





# Executive Summary

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## A unique setting

Mae Hong Son is the least-populated, most-forested, most ethnically diverse, and poorest of Thailand's 76 provinces.<sup>1</sup> Roughly 60 per cent of its 274,322 people come from ethnic minority groups, each with its own unique language and culture.<sup>2</sup> Mountainous terrain makes travel difficult, especially during the monsoon season.

## Low achievement and the language gap

Children in Mae Hong Son are among the lowest performing in the nation – just behind Malay-speaking children in the three southernmost provinces. While the Thai government has made tremendous efforts to enroll ethnic minority children in school, low Thai language abilities are a barrier to learning.

## Small schools and national planning

The Office of the Basic Education Commission (OBEC) oversees 302 primary schools in Mae Hong Son Province, enrolling 20,422 students – meaning that the average primary school serves 65 students.<sup>3</sup>

1 *The Nation*, 2014.

2 UNESCO, 2017.

3 Mae Hong Son Provincial Education Office, 2017.

### **An innovative model**

Since 2005 UNICEF has worked with local education authorities in Mae Hong Son to develop the 'District School' concept, which included research that found at least 1,200 out-of-school children who had not been previously identified. To reach them, existing and newly-opened learning centres were grouped together for administrative purposes into a single, larger 'school'. One District School would thus be composed of multiple 'classrooms' that were many kilometres (and hours of travel) apart, with the school director traveling between them using a vehicle with four-wheel drive. The District School would thus meet Ministry of Education (MOE) enrolment targets, while teachers in the individual 'classrooms' would have more time-on-task as they were supported by an administrative team in the District Centre.

### **Encouraging results**

Since its inception in 2005, thousands of ethnic children have benefited from the District School approach. Key benefits include:

- The number of out-of-school children in ESAO 1 has declined.
- 100 per cent of District School, Grade 6 graduates continue into secondary school.
- Young children remain with their families instead of being sent to boarding schools.
- Students receive more individual attention, due to the low student-teacher ratio.
- Local-contract teachers – who often share the same mother tongue as the children – serve as role models to their students and have a pathway to professional development.
- Lower costs for parents and MOE.

### **Implications**

This report details the history and lessons learned from over a decade of District School experience, which could benefit other small school networks. In addition, this report calls attention to the urgent need to utilize mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) and a special 'Thai for Ethnic Children' curriculum to address the language gap that continues to plague ethnic minority students throughout Thailand.

# Abbreviations and Acronyms

AY	Academic Year
DLTV	Distance Learning Television
EEF	Equitable Education Fund
ESAO	Education Service Area Office
FAL	Foundation for Applied Linguistics
KYDS	Khun Yuam District School
MDS	Muang District School
MOE	Ministry of Education
MTB-MLE	Mother Tongue-based Multilingual Education
OBEC	Office of the Basic Education Commission (under MOE)
ONFEC	Office of the Non-formal Education Commission (now ONIE)
O-NET	Ordinary National Education Test
ONIE	Office of Non-formal and Informal Education
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
PDS	Pai District School
PMPDS	Pang Mapha District School
RILCA	Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia (Mahidol University)
RT	National Literacy Assessment
TPR	Total Physical Response
TEC	Thai for Ethnic Children
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund

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# Mae Hong Son at a Glance

Mae Hong Son Province is home to 274,322 people spread over 12,681 square kilometres of land — 87.2 per cent of which is still covered by forest.<sup>4</sup> Nestled among the tall mountains and deep valleys are hundreds of small villages populated by ethnic minority groups with their own unique languages and cultures. Large ethnic groups include Shan (predominantly in the lowlands and urban areas), Sgaw Karen, Hmong, Lawa, and Lahu.

The province shares a 483-kilometre border with Myanmar. As such it is a gateway for people fleeing Myanmar's many years of ethnic conflict, as well as migrants searching for a better life in Thailand. As of 2018, some 31,400 people were living in four UNHCR-recognized refugee camps in Mae Hong Son Province.<sup>5</sup> There are also many documented and undocumented migrants living outside the camps. Many children are stateless, lacking citizenship in any country. However, the Thai MOE guarantees any child, regardless of citizenship or lack thereof, the right to primary and secondary education in government schools.<sup>6</sup>

Multiple languages, rugged terrain, and poverty combine to make the provision of education challenging. Among the 14 poorest provinces included in UNICEF Thailand's 2015-16 MICS provincial survey, Mae Hong Son has the second-lowest net intake rate in primary education (56.8 per cent), the third-lowest primary completion rate (85.7 per cent), and the lowest secondary school net attendance ratio (61.4 per cent).<sup>7</sup> MOE funds schools on a per-student basis, leaving Mae Hong Son schools (with smaller student bodies) under-resourced, despite a top-up subsidy for small schools of 250 baht/student/semester.

Mae Hong Son Province is composed of seven *amphoe* ('districts'). Education Service Area Office (ESAO) 1 is the local body charged with supervising education in four of those districts (Mae Hong Son Municipality, Pai, Pang Mapha, and Khun Yuam) while the remaining three districts (Mae Sariang, Mae La Noi, and Sop Moei) are under ESAO 2.

4 Mae Hong Son Provincial Education Office, 2017.

5 The Border Consortium, 2019.

6 164,000 migrant children are enrolled in Thai schools, while an additional 200,000 are out-of-school (United Nations, 2019).

7 UNICEF, 2016.

# Programme Origin

## The search for missing students

In 2005, Thai MOE and UNESCO statisticians found a higher than expected number of out-of-school children in Thailand.<sup>8</sup> Many were the children of migrant workers from neighboring countries, while others were from ethnic minority groups who had lived for generations in remote areas of Thailand. Many lacked citizenship in any nation.

Prior to that time, local education authorities in ESAO 1 were confident that they were serving all children. The province had a small population to begin with and, with its remote location and reputation for opium production, had been the focus of many educational innovations run by the Office of the Non-Formal Education Commission, the Border Patrol Police (who also operate schools), various local and international NGOs, and the Royal Projects. Over the years, Mae Hong Son ESAO 1 had set up mother schools and daughter satellite schools; sent 'mountain teachers' on horses and motorcycles to remote villages; established boarding schools; and experimented with solar-powered satellite dishes capable of receiving educational broadcasts from a demonstration classroom in central Thailand. However, as the UNICEF-assisted search for missing out-of-school children commenced, ESAO 1 realized that their previous efforts had bypassed many tiny clusters of houses tucked away in the mountains that were too few in number to meet the Interior Ministry's definition of a village. Here they found over 1,200 out-of-school children who had simply gone uncounted in previous campaigns.<sup>9</sup>

Simultaneously, UNICEF was focusing its efforts on the most disadvantaged and vulnerable children, including those affected by the 2004 tsunami, children in the Deep South, as well as migrant and ethnic minority populations.<sup>10</sup> UNICEF sought to link government resources to local niche needs which might otherwise go unnoticed in national programmes and policies.



8 UNESCO Institute for Statistics and UNICEF, 2005.

9 Pracom, 2018.

10 Wiboonupatum, 2016.

## Inspiration from New Zealand

In 2005, UNICEF took key Mae Hong Son and MOE officials, as well as teachers from small schools, to New Zealand to visit the 'Correspondence School'. Now known as *Te Aho o Te Kura Pounamu*, the Correspondence School was a decentralized education system utilizing multigrade teaching and designed for "the benefit of the most isolated children, for example of lighthouse keepers and remote shepherds living upon small islands or in mountainous districts."<sup>11,12</sup> This experience led to a revelation on the part of ESAO 1 Supervisor Gosol Pracom: previous efforts had been aimed at bringing children to the schools; instead, ESAO 1 needed to bring the schools to children.<sup>13</sup>

The problem was a matter of scale. Local officials knew that OBEC would find it difficult to build and staff more stand-alone schools to serve so few students. The main OBEC mechanism for school budgets is a per-head system, and the smallest of OBEC schools still must have a principal or school director who supervises at least two teachers. ESAO 1 and UNICEF developed an innovative solution: gather the out-of-school children in non-villages into a single 'school' with multiple, geographically-distant 'classrooms'. The new school would thus have more than 100 students. A single commuting school director/principal would oversee the school, with his or her office in the district centre a one- to six-hour drive from each classroom. This new model would be called, 'The District School'.

## From one District School to four

The first District School opened in 2005 with 16 classrooms. Some had previously been stand-alone schools that had closed or were on the verge of closing due to low enrolment. Others had previously been Community Learning Centers under the Office of the Non-Formal Education Commission (ONFEC), which served both adults and children. In places where no educational facilities existed, a new classroom was built by the community with locally-available materials (usually bamboo) and metal roofing provided by UNICEF seed funding.

As time passed, more classrooms were added in increasingly-remote areas, such that in 2013 ESAO 1 decided to divide the 23 classrooms between four schools, along district (known as *amphoe* in Thai) lines. Each of the now four District Schools would have its own administrator, finance assistant, and facilities/equipment caretaker, along with two to three teachers for each classroom. Due to MOE hiring and funding limitations, about half of the teachers were ethnic, young people hired locally by ESAO 1 on one-year contracts with support from UNICEF.



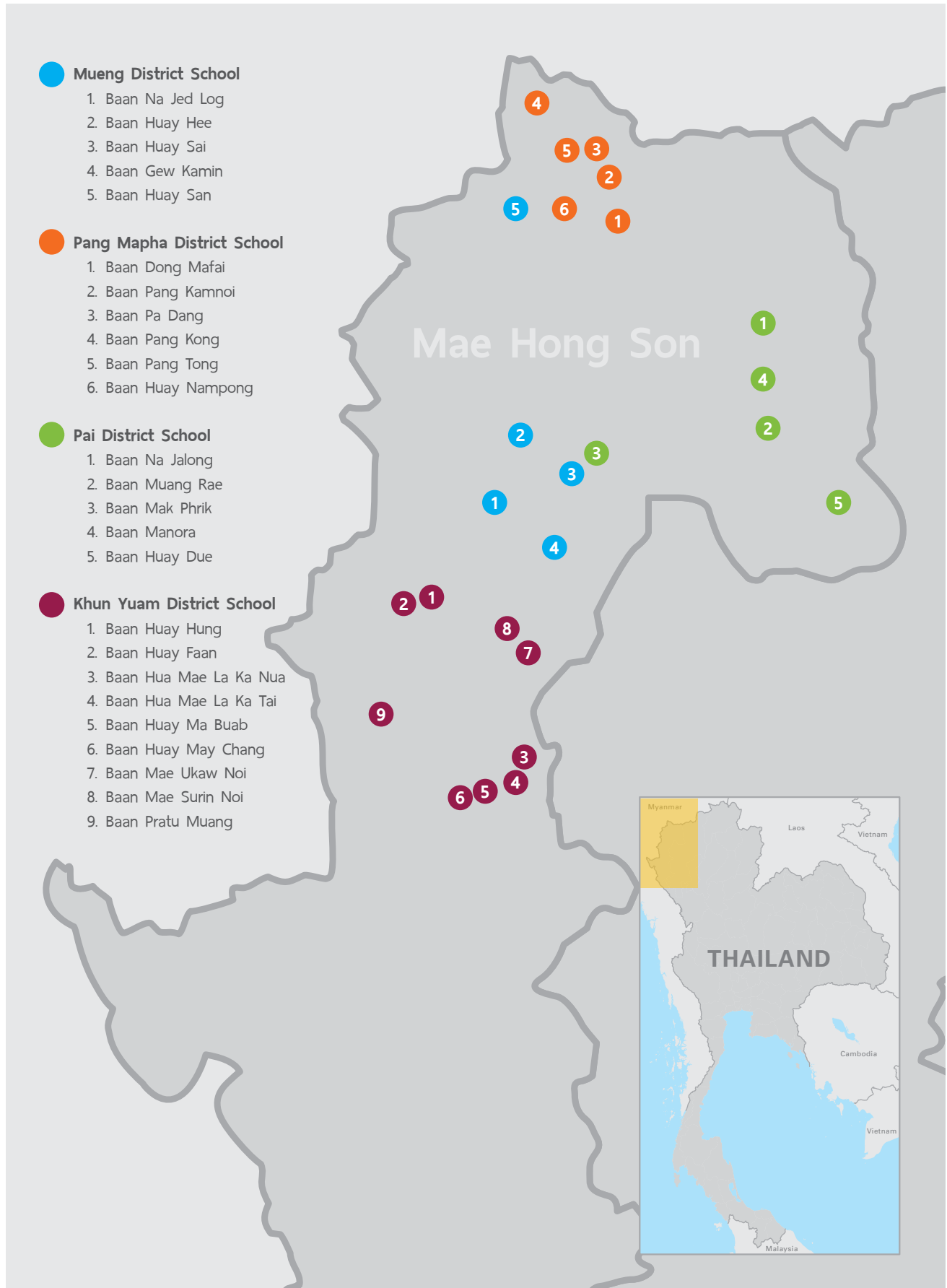
11 Prior to the New Zealand study tour, UNICEF had proposed a pilot project in multigrade teaching for about 1,000 small schools in Mae Hong Son and Nakhon Sawan Provinces. This idea did not come to fruition, as the MOE favored merging small schools (Rangsun, 2019). From New Zealand also came inspiration for teacher resource centres attached to EASOs. This was attempted in Mae Hong Son for several years, after which the decision was made to distribute the assembled resources to the schools, so that teachers could access them more easily.

12 Blundell, 2005.

13 Pracom, 2018.



**Figure 1** District School classrooms in ESAO 1, Mae Hong Son Province



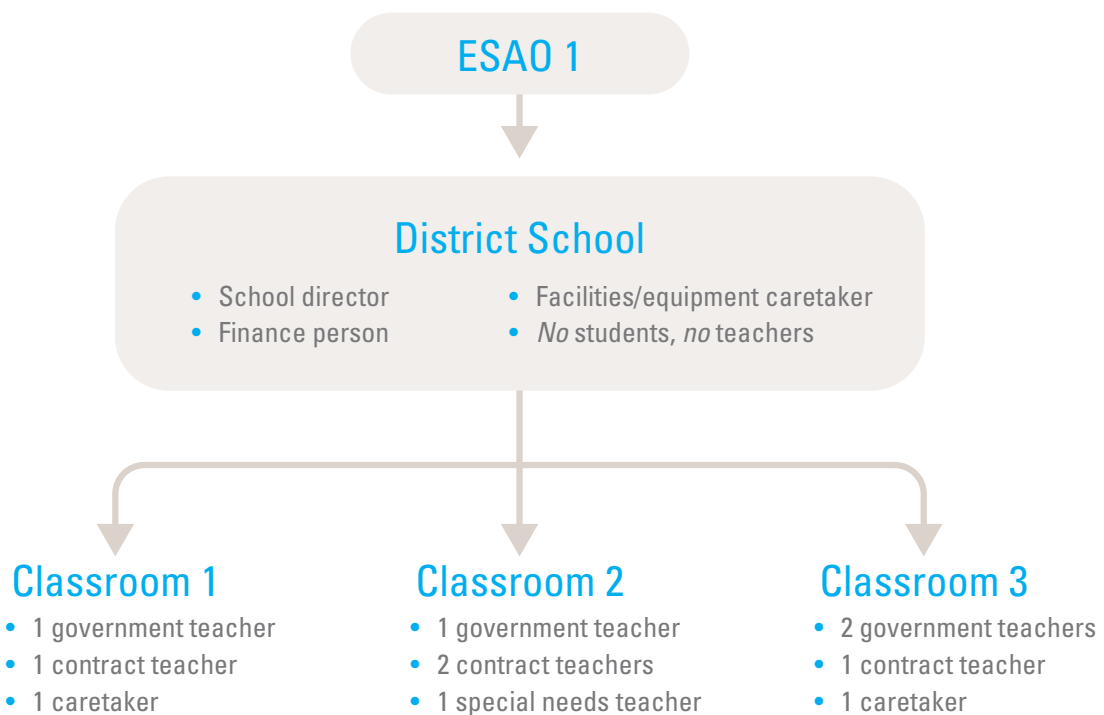
# The District School Model

## A non-centric centre

In the District School model, the core administrative team has its office in the district centre with no teachers or students present. The school director's office is thus more than 20 kilometres from the classrooms, which are separated from each other by many kilometres. The core administrative team regularly visiting the remote classrooms to support the government and locally-hired contract teachers. Children remain in the classrooms through Grade 6, after which they transfer to a secondary school elsewhere in the province.

The District School model is thus distinguished from the more widely-known 'mother-daughter' model, centred around a larger school and the schools it partially supports. In Tak ESAO 2, for example, the 'daughters' are virtually stand-alone schools, with both government and locally-hired teachers. Students typically leave the daughter school in Grade 3 or 4, to study and board at the 'mother' school.<sup>14</sup>

**Figure 2** District School organizational chart (based on MHS ESAO 1)



<sup>14</sup> Baan Maerameng School and its twelve satellites in Tak Province is a good example of the mother-daughter model.

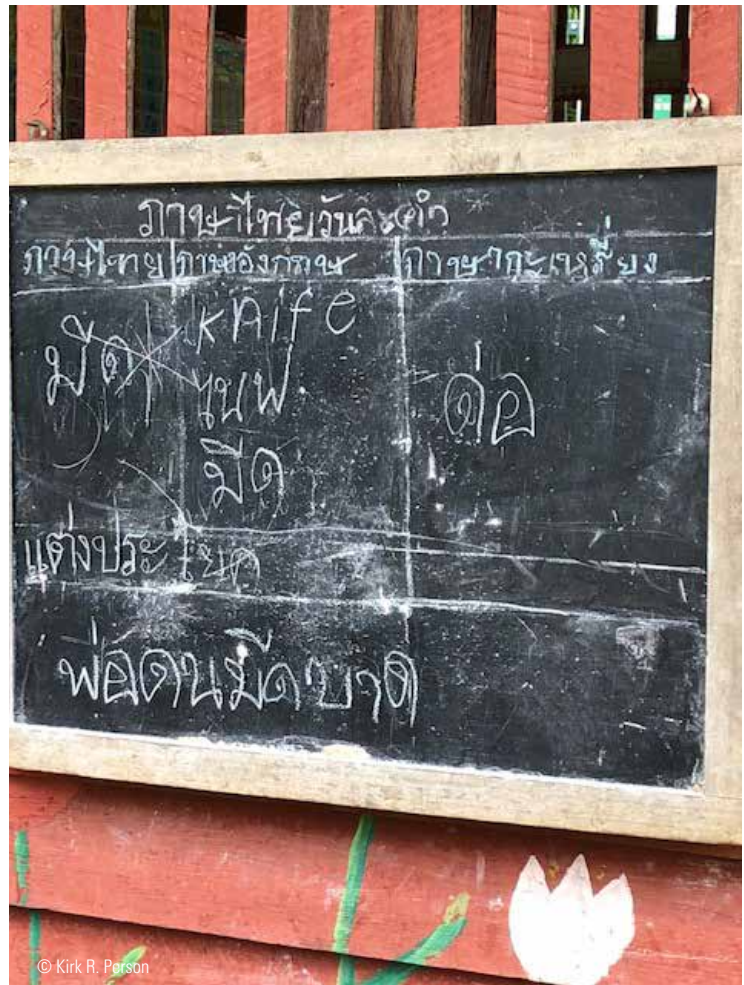
The inclusion of the caretaker role in some District Schools reflects the flexibility of programme implementers. Many children arrive at school with younger siblings strapped to their backs due to the cultural expectation that older children should care for their siblings while their parents are working the fields. Thus minimal local government funding has often been needed to hire a caregiver (often a local mother) for the younger siblings, so the school-aged children can focus on their studies.

## A focus on literacy and numeracy

In terms of academics, the District School approach began with modest goals: teaching basic Thai literacy and numeracy as the foundation for all other learning. Of these two, Thai language was the most important.

However, in this approach, District Schools confronted problems. The Thai language abilities of most students were very low or non-existent. Then, as now, Thailand lacked a pedagogically sound approach to teaching Thai to children who speak other mother tongues. Teachers were expected to innovate and develop their own methods for teaching Thai, uninformed by language-acquisition theories and practices that have been well-established in many other countries for many years.

The existing trend was for teachers who shared the same mother tongue as their students to handle the younger children while native Thai speakers taught their older peers. Some teachers experimented with writing the mother tongue using Thai letters, an effort to help the students make the link between sound and symbol, and how letters combine to make meaningful words — a valid approach that should be further developed. Even today the 'word of the day' in many classrooms is written in Thai and English, accompanied by a Thai alphabet phonetic transcription of the ethnic-language equivalent.



'Word of the day' in Thai, English, and Sgaw Karen written in Thai script

## Materials for early grade reading

Helping students make the connection between reading and meaning is a challenge throughout Mae Hong Son Province.

A group of seven District School teachers was asked what textbooks they found useful in teaching early grade reading. Only one (the sole native Thai speaker in the group) was using the OBEC's standard curriculum, although she often asked older students to explain the lessons in their mother tongue. The other six teachers, all Sgaw Karen, depend on the *Manee* series that was a staple of Thai education in the 1970s and 1980s. The first volume of *Manee* uses words without final consonants, a major issue for Karen children since their mother tongue lacks final consonants (and it is difficult for them to even hear Thai's final consonants). The *Manee* series also has short, easily-decodable stories about children growing up in rural Thailand. By contrast, current OBEC and OBEC-approved Thai-language materials contain phonetically-complex words, extensive information about

consonant classes and tone rules, and very little story reading practice. The Karen teachers occasionally choose lessons from OBEC textbooks to supplement *Manee*, however, they do not follow the OBEC lesson order. It is simply too difficult for Thai language learners.

Several teachers were asked to review a new, early grade reading/writing book produced by a Thai NGO, the Foundation for Applied Linguistics (FAL), for the Thai for Ethnic Children (TEC) component of their MTB-MLE projects elsewhere in the north. The teachers were unanimous in saying that the FAL textbook would be very useful, as it teaches the most frequently-used letters first, and focuses on everyday words that do not have final consonants and can be introduced orally through FAL's Total Physical Response (TPR) guide. In addition, they felt that FAL's easy Thai big books and graded small books featuring illustrations done by ethnic minority artists should be added to UNICEF-Tops' mobile libraries.



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## Curriculum and Training Update

As a result of the preliminary findings of this report, as well as an evaluation of UNICEF's Mobile Library Project in Mae Hong Son and Tak Provinces, UNICEF and FAL organized a three-day curriculum development and Thai for Ethnic Children workshop for Mobile Library staff in late May 2019. The response was overwhelmingly positive, and EASO 1 invited FAL to organize training for all District School teachers in June 2019. This represents a unique opportunity for UNICEF to leverage the lessons learned from its 10-year investment in mother tongue-based education in southern Thailand (UNICEF 2018).

## Multigrade admission and teaching

Due to the limited number of students and teachers, District School classrooms utilize an informal multigrade philosophy, where one teacher is responsible for more than one grade, in both teaching and administration. While 'normal' Thai schools admit new students into every grade every year, some district classrooms open a new grade only every other year. Thus in 2018, some classrooms opened grades 2, 4, and 6 only. In 2019 they will open grades 1, 3, and 5. This is illustrated in the different classroom grade openings for the Pai District School for the 2018-2019 academic year shown in table 1.

Most classrooms have two or three physical rooms, for pre-primary, early-primary and late-primary students. Due to staff limitations, one teacher is always responsible for more than one grade. This is illustrated in table 2, which shows how one teacher in the Baan Manora Classroom in the Pai District School is responsible for K2, K3 and G6, while the other supervises G2 and G4.

**Table 1** Pai District School class offerings, 2018-2019

Classroom	K1	K2	K3	G1	G2	G3	G4	G5	G6
Baan Na Jalong		x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Baan Muang Rae		x			x		x		x
Baan Mak Phrik		x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Baan Manora		x	x		x		x		x
Baan Huay Due		x	x	x	x		x	x	x



**Table 2** Multigrade teaching Baan Manora Classroom, 2018-2019

Grade	Assigned teacher	Specialization
K2	Mr. Kritpas Prodprannam	Social Studies
K3	Mr. Kritpas Prodprannam	Social Studies
G1		
G2	Mr. Suthep Sathert	Physical Education
G3		
G4	Mr. Suthep Sathert	Physical Education
G5		
G6	Mr. Kritpas Prodprannam	Social Studies

Multigrade teaching is the reality in hundreds of small schools in rural Thailand. Nonetheless, the teacher training system does not prepare teachers to teach in multigrade settings. Rather, teachers are expected to develop their own systems of allocating teaching time between different ability groups and asking older or academically stronger children to help their younger or more challenged peers. This is a gap that needs to be addressed.

While ordinary Thai schools are quite rigid in terms of age determining grade, the District School approach offers flexibility in placing a student with the group that most reflects his or her abilities, particularly in relation to Thai-language skills.

## Class size

In the past up to 50 students were permitted in Thailand's pre-primary, primary, and secondary classrooms.<sup>15</sup> In 2015 the MOE announced plans to reduce class size to 40 pupils in secondary classrooms and 30 in pre-primary and primary classrooms.

The District Schools thus stand out on two counts. From the perspective of MOE statisticians, most of the District Schools would appear to have 20 to 30 students per grade, since all the classrooms are combined in reporting. In actuality class sizes are much smaller, as only a few children might be enrolled in each grade at any specific classroom location.

This is illustrated in the enrolment figures from the Khun Yuam District School (KYDS). From an administrative standpoint, this is a single school managed by a single school director with 54 pre-primary and 131 primary students studying in nine classrooms. This yields an average class size of 20.56 pupils. In actuality, however, the class size ranges from one to nine students in each grade of a District School classroom, as shown in table 3:

<sup>15</sup> Bangkok Post, 2015.

**Table 3** Enrolment figures, KYDS

Classroom	Pre-primary			Primary						TOTAL
	K1	K2	K3	G1	G2	G3	G4	G5	G6	
Baan Huay Hung			2		7	5		2		16
Baan Huay Faan		3	1	3	1	1	1	1	1	12
Baan Hua Mae La Ka Nua		3	1	8	3		3	3	1	22
Baan Hua Mae La Ka Tai		1	3	2			2		2	10
Baan Huay Ma Buab		5	7	3	2	1	4	3		25
Baan Huay May Chang		2	4	4	2	1	4		1	18
Baan Mae Ukaw Noi	1	2	2	3		1	1	1	3	14
Baan Mae Surin Noi	4	2	5	5	9	4	4	5	2	40
Baan Pratu Muang		2	4	7	2	3	4	2	4	28
<b>Total</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>185</b>
Students/class (average)	0.6	2.2	3.2	3.9	2.9	1.8	2.6	1.9	1.6	20.56
Students/class (excluding zeros)	2.5	2.5	3.2	4.4	3.7	2.3	2.9	2.4	2	20.56

## Student mother tongues

Students in the District Schools speak a variety of ethnic minority languages, with Sgaw Karen (42.5 per cent) and Shan (15.4 per cent) being the most common mother tongues, followed by Red Lahu, Black Lahu, Northern Thai, Hmong, and Lisu. Only six students identify as native speaker of Thai, as shown in table 4.

However, it would be a mistake to conclude that many different languages are spoken in each classroom. In fact, 13 of the 19 classrooms for which detailed student mother tongue data are available are linguistically homogenous, with 100 per cent of pupils speaking the same mother tongue. In 11 of those 13 classrooms, at least one teacher spoke the same mother tongue as the students (generally Sgaw Karen or Shan). Thus, the District Schools hold great potential as pilot sites for mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) projects similar to those that have already received Thai government and United Nations awards elsewhere in the north and the deep south.

**Table 4 Student mother tongues, AY 2018**

	Total	Per cent
Karen (Sgaw)	194	42.5%
Shan	70	15.4%
Lahu (Red)	62	13.6%
Lahu (Black)	53	11.6%
Northern Thai	35	7.7%
Hmong	31	6.8%
Thai	6	1.3%
Lisu	4	0.9%
Burmese	1	0.2%
	456	100.0%

## Teacher selection, retention, and capacity development

Teacher selection and training has long been a challenge in remote regions. For many years, new government teachers have been required to spend a minimum of two years (recently expanded to four years) in a school of the OBEC's choosing before receiving the right to request a transfer to a different school. Teacher attrition is high. According to several school directors, most government teachers assigned to remote locations either resign before their time is completed or transfer immediately thereafter.<sup>16</sup>

The District School programme exhibited considerable creativity in its early days in hiring and retaining teachers. While there has always been a core group of fully-certified government teachers (mostly Thai native speakers), the District Schools have also employed local ethnic minority people as local contract teachers on annual renewable contracts. These teachers are more familiar with their students' living situations, as they themselves grew up in underdeveloped ethnic hamlets and often experienced great difficulties adjusting to the Thai education system. Within the programme they are often called 'ethnic teachers'. In the early days of the programme, ethnic teachers only needed a high school diploma to be hired. Now, almost all have bachelor's degrees.<sup>17</sup> The ethnic teachers in all four District Schools have served as long or slightly longer than the government teachers.

<sup>16</sup> Government teachers serving in remote areas do receive a 2,000 baht (\$65) per month hardship stipend; it would seem this does not compensate for the loneliness and culture shock often experienced by Thai teachers more accustomed to urban settings.

<sup>17</sup> Local contract teachers throughout rural Thailand typically receive one-third of the salary of a new government teacher with no benefits or raises.

## Teacher Voices

How do District School teachers view their role? To answer that question, a series of focus group discussions and individual interviews were conducted. The largest of these involved 21 teachers from KYDS in a participatory-methods discussion. From this several trends emerged:

- Good things about being a District School teacher included high levels of cooperation and kindness among staff members, the attitude of self-sacrifice embraced by all the teachers, and UNICEF's mobile library programme.
- The teachers unanimously agreed that, if they could change just one thing about their District School, it would be to raise the salaries of local hire contract teachers.
- Problems that most impact teaching and learning include a lack of parental support for children's education, slowed learning due to communication (language) barriers, management of multigrade classrooms, and problems maintaining ICT equipment.
- Key benefits of the District School approach include opening educational opportunities for children in remote areas and improved chances for community development due to the presence of teachers and visitors from outside agencies.
- The teachers are interested in professional development activities to improve their English skills, create improved teaching and learning materials, improve their teaching techniques, improve student outcomes, and improve their computer skills.

### Teacher qualifications

The District Schools cannot be too selective when it comes to teachers; Thailand has long struggled with teacher shortages in rural areas.<sup>18</sup> Although developing Thai literacy skills is one of the prime objectives of the programme, administrators complain that they have very few teachers certified as Thai language specialists in the MOE's classification system. The handful who are Thai specialists are not trained to teach Thai to non-native speakers; few universities offer such preparation and when they do the course is geared toward teaching adult foreigners. Only one Thai university currently offers a course on teaching Thai to ethnic minority children: Yala Rajabhat University in the Deep South.<sup>19</sup>

A large proportion of ethnic teachers are males with a specialty in physical education. This in itself is not surprising; ethnic people are underrepresented in Thai teacher training programmes, precisely because their disadvantaged educational backgrounds make university entrance difficult. Of the various teacher specialties available, physical education is less academically demanding than Thai, mathematics, or science (see Appendix A).

### Teacher mother tongues

Three out of the four District Schools reported the mother tongue of their teachers. Nearly half speak Sgaw Karen as their mother tongue, while one quarter speak Northern Thai (the regional language of wider communication) as their mother tongue. Sadly, there are no Lisu, Red Lahu, or Black Lahu-speaking teachers, as shown below:

<sup>18</sup> Lathapipat, 2018.

<sup>19</sup> Chiang Rai Rajabhat University is currently cooperating with Mahidol University, Yala Rajabhat University, and the Thailand Research Fund to develop a similar teacher training programme.



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**Table 5** Teacher mother tongues, AY 2018

	Teachers	Per cent
Karen (Sgaw)	27	44.3%
Northern Thai	15	24.6%
Shan	12	19.7%
Northeastern Thai	3	4.9%
Thai	2	3.3%
Hmong	2	3.3%
Total	61	100.0%





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### Teacher professional development

The District Schools cooperate with UNICEF and local universities to provide pre-service and in-service training to all teachers. Quarterly meetings give teachers the chance to share experiences with peers, something which researchers say can be the most productive means of teacher professional development.<sup>20</sup> Frequent (at least twice per month) visits by the school director can provide encouragement and opportunities to seek and receive input.

In the early days of the programme, UNICEF and Suan Dusit Rajabhat University partnered to create a pathway through which ethnic teachers could become fully-certified government teachers. Two of the earliest ethnic teachers utilized this opportunity to complete bachelor's degrees in weekend programmes and eventually pass the licensing exam with scores high enough to become full government teachers (see 'Khru Euiw's Story').

Capacity development also extends to the school directors. One director mentioned that learning to drive a four-wheel drive vehicle on treacherous mountain roads trails was a key part of her on-the-job training! School directors also must learn to navigate government and private channels to obtain practical and budgetary assistance (see 'Lessons Learned'). Regular meetings at ESAO 1 facilitate sharing between school directors.

### Community support

Parental support for the District Schools is high. Parents appreciate the fact that the District Schools enable their children to live at home during the primary school years, rather than being placed in costly dormitories in town. Parents happily help with school building and maintenance projects and often bring food to the teachers.

However, efforts to create engaged local school committees have not been as successful as hoped. Several teachers commented that many parents have little or no education themselves and feel that education is best left to the experts — the teachers. Additionally, most parents lack the Thai skills needed to participate in a school committee meeting.

<sup>20</sup> Burns & Lawrie, 2015.

## Khru Euiw's Story

'I was in the first group of District School ethnic teachers when the project started in 2005. I had grown up in a Shan village and only went to school through ninth grade. After that, I worked and earned my Grade 12 certificate by attending non-formal education classes. I had hoped to become an army nurse, but was rejected because I am too short.

'I was very excited to hear about the UNICEF-supported ethnic teacher project. I'd always enjoyed children and wanted to continue my studies. UNICEF gave me the chance to do both!

'My first assignment was to a small Lisu village. Communication with the parents and children was difficult; fortunately, a few of them also spoke Shan. I worked hard to develop relationships, visiting the students in their homes, singing to them, telling them stories. There were about 20 children of all different ages in our classroom, including babies who were being cared for by their older siblings while their parents worked the fields. I mostly looked after the younger ones, while my mentor, a government teacher, taught the older kids. Our goal was to teach basic literacy and numeracy, but they also learned about nutrition, cooking, and hygiene by helping us teachers prepare the free school breakfasts and lunches. We taught them how to wash their clothes, so kids would bring their dirty laundry to class!

'UNICEF and ESAO 1 organized in-service training for us. I think the best thing about the workshops was hearing from other teachers — how they solved problems. ESAO 1 helped us develop lesson plans, but we had to adapt them to our situation — using objects and concepts familiar to the children. We did lots of work on vocabulary, comparing Lisu and Thai words, with lots of motions and pictures.

'Meanwhile, UNICEF and ESAO 1 partnered with the Local Development Administration and Suan Dusit Rajabhat University in Bangkok to offer a special course for 'mountain teachers' like me. It was a lot of work! Every Friday I would finish teaching, then hop on my motorcycle to drive down the mountain for class. This was really hard during the monsoon season! Classmates who worked in schools closer to town did their homework on computers; I had to study by candlelight. Later, solar cells were added to our classroom, but due to the high altitude (over 1,000 metres) they could not produce much electricity. But I persisted, completed my bachelor's degree, and eventually became a fully-qualified government teacher. Now I teach at the school in my home village, so I can take care of my elderly parents.

'I would not be a teacher today if it wasn't for UNICEF. UNICEF gave a dream to this short Shan girl at a time when no one else wanted to hire me. Working with those Lisu children in a bamboo-and-thatch classroom fueled my passion to learn and teach.'





## Information and Communications Technology (ICT) and the District Schools

While ICT is often cited as a potential resource for disadvantaged students in remote areas, the District School experience points to current limitations. For most of the classrooms, internet and mobile phone connections are, at best, undependable. Desktop computers, tablets, televisions, and other electronic devices are easily overwhelmed by the heat and humidity of the tropical forest. While cooperation with the Ministry of Energy and the business sector has resulted in updated solar equipment for many classrooms, days of fog and rain as well as heavy usage can stress even the best battery systems, and repairs can take months. There is no danger of ICT making teachers in Mae Hong Son obsolete!

In recent years the MOE has promoted Distance Learning Television (DLTV) as a virtual requirement for remote schools, investing heavily in satellite systems. While District School teachers generally appreciate this effort, most say that the Thai teachers leading the DLTV lessons (when they can be received) speak too quickly for young, non-Thai speaking, ethnic children to follow. This is ironic as such children are the target audience for the broadcasts. Nonetheless, several teachers say that they regularly download DLTV broadcasts from the internet (when they are in town) to play for the older children. They play the video for a few minutes at a time, stopping frequently to summarize and make sure the children understand. One teacher confessed that he himself has learned a lot from doing this. This teacher-video interaction thus has elements of a scripted lesson of the type used in many African and South Asian settings, but without the script. It is thus an intriguing example of teacher-technology interaction.

The challenges inherent in obtaining and maintaining electronic equipment, as well as difficulties ensuring consistent internet access in these remote areas, demonstrate the need for greater investment in teacher training. ICT solutions may hold theoretical promise, but improving the daily teacher-to-student interaction will yield stronger benefits for children.





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## Student Voices

Seventeen graduates of Pai District School who are now boarding students at Pai Withayakhet School (an urban secondary school of 800 students) shared their experiences. The group included a mix of genders and ethnicities, including Hmong, Sgaw Karen, and Shan.

To brainstorm in a low-anxiety situation, the students were divided into four small groups and asked a series of questions. Answers were written on slips of coloured paper. A representative from each small group then read the answers to the entire group and pasted their slips of paper on a poster at the front of the room. Next, each student received one to three coloured sticker dots (depending on the question) with which they could vote for the answers that most reflected their own perspectives. Notable findings included:

- The advantages of attending a District School included the low cost, being able to live with their families, better classroom organization, and individualized care from teachers.
- The majority of students said that they would still choose a small primary school in their community rather than a larger school in town.
- The disadvantages of attending a District School included the lack of electricity, insufficient materials, fewer friends, a lack of sports equipment, and a lack of computers (although all District Schools now have computers and some form of electricity).
- The most common "first day of primary school emotions" included excitement, fear (of teachers, oversleeping, and corporal punishment), and happiness. The "First day of secondary school emotions" were more positive, led by happiness and excitement, with some fear and shyness in relation to other pupils.
- In primary school the most difficult subjects were English and math, with Thai and science tied for third place. In secondary school, the order of difficulty was science, English, math, and Thai.
- Most of their primary school classmates went on to secondary school.



## Equity and gender

By locating within small hamlets, the classrooms of the District Schools indirectly address gender and equity issues.

For most of these children, the only alternative to the District School would be a long daily commute over treacherous mountain roads or life in a boarding school dorm; both options have their dangers. ESAO 1 officials confirm that past boarding schemes were very traumatic, especially for the early-primary aged children and contributed to parents' reluctance to send their children to school. Additionally, the cultural norms of most of these ethnic minority communities is more accepting of the idea of males venturing outside the community, while expecting females to play traditional roles in the home. It can thus be assumed that the District Schools have had a positive impact in enrolling and keeping girls in school, as evidenced by data showing 314 males and 328 females enrolled in pre-primary and primary in the four District Schools (OBEC 2019).

In addition, with a teaching staff that includes many ethnic female teachers, District School classrooms give girls positive role models in the midst of patriarchal societies.



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- ▲ Students from the widely dispersed District School classrooms come together once or twice each year for athletic and academic activities.



# Learning Outcomes

The main objective of the District Schools is to provide access to education for children in remote areas. The District School model engages children on a daily basis in their home villages. They are thus able to learn in a safe, loving environment, rather than having to live far away in boarding schools or, worse, attend no school at all.

How are the children in the District Schools doing academically? Are they performing on par with their peers in other types of schools elsewhere in Mae Hong Son Province?

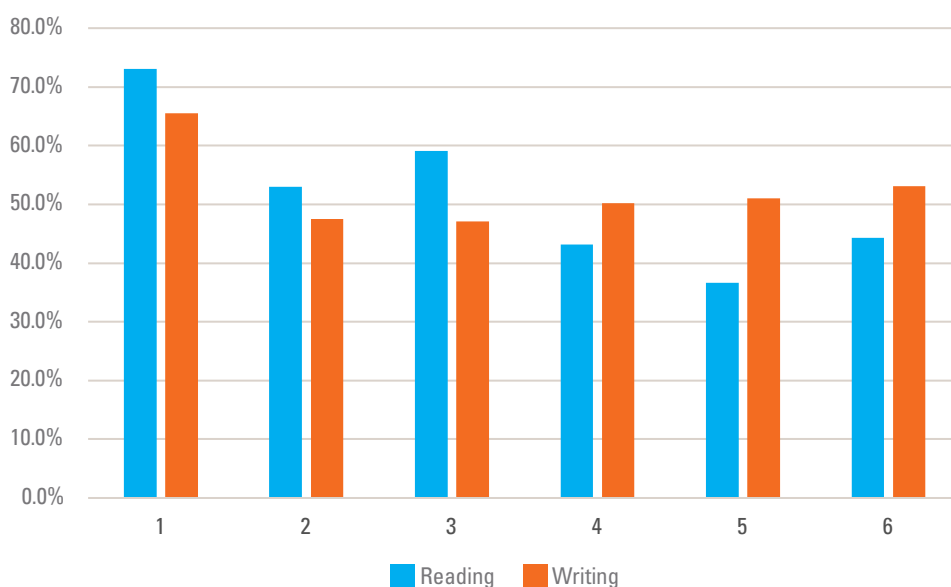
Answering these questions requires looking at two types of national standardized tests: the recently-introduced Thai literacy assessment (RT) for Grade 1 to 6 students, and the Grade 6 Ordinary National Education Test (O-NET) covering Thai language, English, math, and science.

## The National Literacy Assessment (Reading Test: RT)

The RT measures students' Thai reading and writing four times each year to identify at-risk students. The Grade 1 assessment focuses on reading and writing a handful of simple words. In later grades, reading comprehension and creative writing are included.

As shown below, students in the four District Schools performed better on both the reading and writing sections of the RT in Grade 1 than in the subsequent years.

**Figure 3 Performance of District School students in the National Literacy Assessment (RT), by grade**



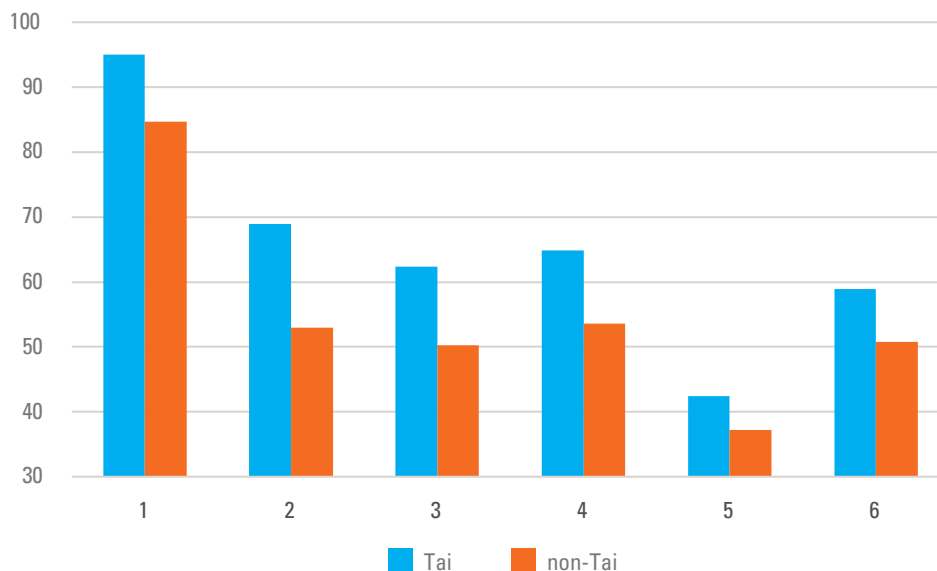
“Reading comprehension is a big problem in throughout this province. For example, children might be able to see the word ‘bird’ and pronounce it correctly, or hear the word ‘bird’ and spell it correctly, but not know what the word ‘bird’ means.”

Education Official, Mae Hong Son Province

Several Mae Hong Son provincial education officials interviewed for this publication said that the same pattern is seen throughout the province: ethnic students perform well on the Grade 1 RT (which focuses on letter identification and word formation), but poorly in the subsequent grades when reading comprehension grows in importance. This relates to the language issue; native Thai speaking-children have a linguistic advantage over ethnic children who speak little or no Thai.

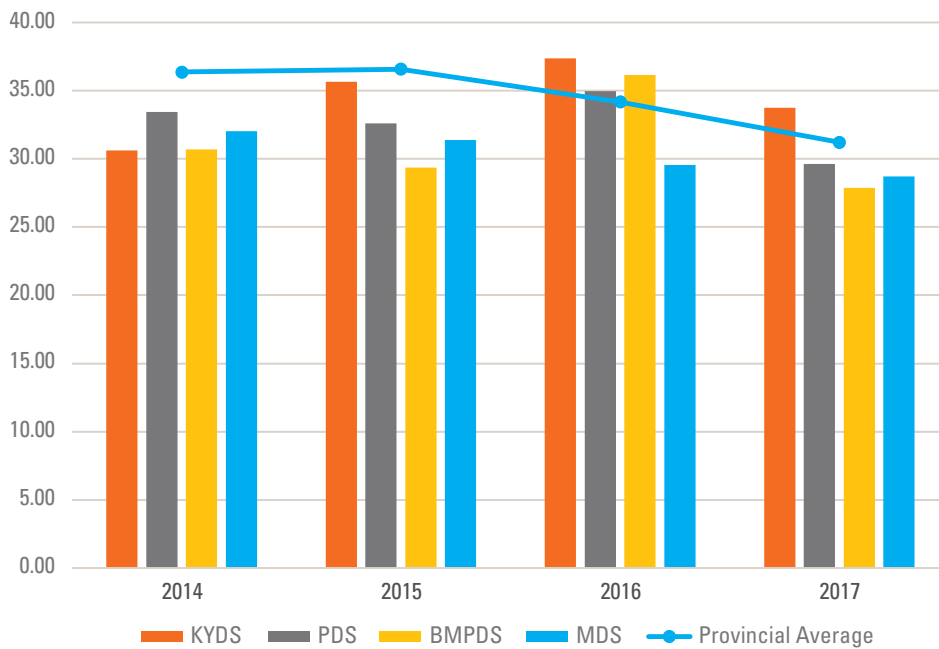
Evidence of the language gap can be seen in the Pai District School, where roughly half of the students are native speakers of Thai or closely related languages in the Tai linguistic family (e.g. Northern Thai, Shan), while the other half speak one of several ethnic languages not related to Thai. As shown below the Tai-speaking children consistently achieve test scores 5 to 16 per cent higher than the non-Tai speakers over all six grades.

**Figure 4** Aggregate literacy assessment scores for G1-6, PDS, by language family



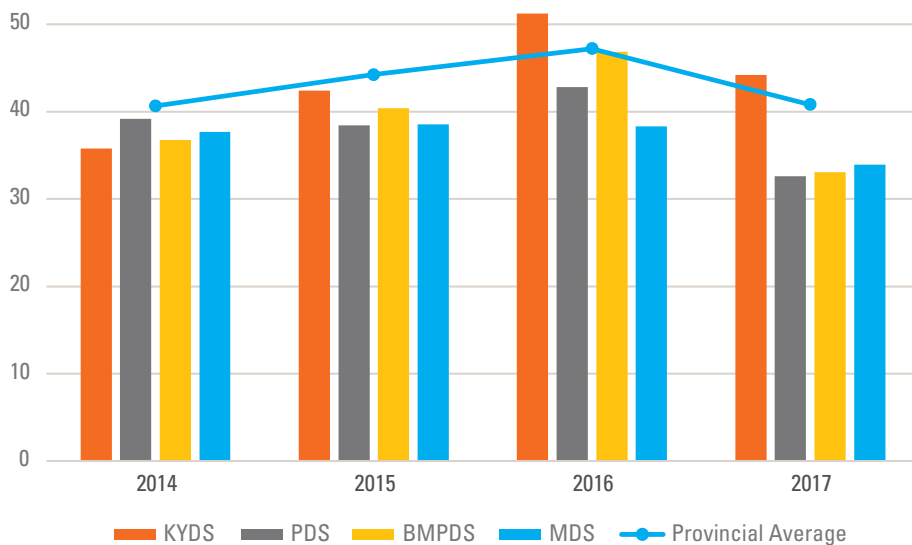


**Figure 6 Combined O-NET scores of District Schools relative to provincial average**



Since 2015, KYDS has posted the highest District School combined O-Net scores. The gap between KYDS and the other District Schools becomes wider when looking at Thai language scores, as in 2016 and 2017 when KYDS students exceeded the provincial Thai language average and approached the national average.<sup>21</sup> This is remarkable given that the provincial average includes many urban Thai-speaking children.

**Figure 7 Thai language O-NET scores of District Schools relative to provincial average**



<sup>21</sup> It should be noted that ESAO 1 also includes many urban children living in cities and towns who speak Thai as their mother tongue.

## Academic Conclusions

The District Schools have succeeded in giving children in remote areas access to education. The low teacher-student ratio ensures that District School pupils receive much more individual attention than their peers in larger schools, such that their academic performance is only slightly below the provincial averages in all subjects. In addition, the District Schools have a 100 per cent pass-through rate to secondary school; a very important accomplishment. ***These facts provide strong evidence to argue that small village schools can provide a level of education comparable to that of larger schools, with less disruption to children who might otherwise be compelled to commute long distances, or worse, be placed in a boarding school at a very young age.***

Nonetheless, the lack of instructional materials and teaching methods appropriate for children who do not speak Thai as their mother tongue limits academic outcomes, both for Thai-language learning and the study of other subjects, particularly in the early-primary grades.

“We focus on teaching them to read and pronounce Thai words and hope that they learn the meaning by themselves someday.”

Education Official, Tak Province

## Why do KYDS students do better at Thai?

KYDS is unique among the District Schools because 64 per cent of teachers speak Sgaw Karen as their mother tongue — as do almost 100 per cent of the students. The teachers can thus use the students' first language as a learning resource. This corroborates international research on the benefits of mother tongue-based instruction, as well as studies in Karen communities in Thailand and Myanmar demonstrating that Karen children in the early primary grades learn the national language better when they have Karen-speaking teachers.<sup>22</sup> In addition, these Karen teachers serve as role models for children who would otherwise never see an ethnic minority person in a professional position.<sup>23</sup> *Using their mother tongue in the classroom helps Karen students learn Thai better!*

22 Sawaengmongkon, 2014; Naw Khu Shee, 2017. The experiences of Karen refugee children resettled in locations as diverse as Melbourne, Australia and Fort Worth, Texas, USA also demonstrate the benefits of Karen speaking teachers (Merlino, 2017).

23 Experience could also be a factor. Teachers in both PDS and KYDS have an average of more than five years of service (with locally hired Sgaw Karen contract teachers serving slightly longer than government teachers), while PMPDS teachers have less experience. Longevity statistics not available for MDS.





# The District Schools in the Thai Public Eye

While the District Schools exist for the sake of marginalized children in Mae Hong Son Province, they have had a wider impact on the Thai public's understanding of the challenges faced by ethnic minority people. This has been done through celebrity visits, corporate and private partnerships, and a variety of media products.

## Celebrity visits

'Friends of UNICEF' — Thai celebrities committed to UNICEF's ideals — periodically visit the District Schools. They draw public attention to the programme, as their travels are recounted on television, YouTube videos, press releases, and social media. These friends help build bridges of empathy that cross social, economic, and ethnic lines. They help other Thais see that they too can make a difference in children's lives.



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- ▶ Thai-Swedish actress Ann Thongprasom visits with children in the early years of the District Schools programme.
- ▶ Singer and actor Pachara Chirathiwa 'Peach' visits a District School classroom.



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## The UNICEF-Tops Mobile Libraries

The District Schools have benefited from a regional Mobile Library initiative, in partnership with UNICEF and Tops Supermarket. The Mobile Libraries are four-wheel drive trucks with an enclosed cab containing shelves full of books. The Mobile Libraries traverse difficult mountain roads before pulling up in front of a classroom and lowering the gangplank for students to enter. Eight mobile library trucks currently serve small schools in Mae Hong Son, Tak, and Loei Provinces.

Each Mobile Library in Mae Hong Son has a driver and an 'animator'. The animators are trained to bring books to life, through puppet shows, acting out stories, colouring contests, and other fun activities. Teachers unanimously agree that the children look forward to Mobile Library visits.

As it expands into other provinces throughout Thailand, the UNICEF -Tops Mobile Library Project is in an excellent position to bring a new world of reading and imagination to thousands of disadvantaged children.<sup>24</sup>

## School supplies and scholarships

The Chindasuk Foundation has partnered with schools in Mae Hong Son and other remote regions to provide school uniforms, shoes, and school supplies to disadvantaged children. In addition, the Foundation has provided scholarships to help many District School Grade 6 graduates with secondary school costs. The Foundation is currently exploring ways to help District School graduates with university or vocational school scholarships.

<sup>24</sup> In early 2019, UNICEF TCO commissioned a study on enhancing the impact of the Mobile Library Programme.





© UNICEF Thailand/Suracheth

## Water for the hills

UNICEF has partnered with Sati, Planet Water, and Thai Metal in bringing water filtration systems to several District School classrooms and their surrounding communities. This has had an impact on student health, as well as the wellbeing of teachers and community members. Clean, reliable water systems are particularly important during the dry months of late winter through early summer, before the monsoon season begins in June.



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# Cost Effectiveness

Under any scenario, the District School model represents a net savings for the MOE, particularly where staff salaries are concerned. This is very important in Thailand, where personnel costs typically account for over half of the national education budget.<sup>25</sup>

If all 27 classrooms part of the ESAO 1 District School system in FY 2019-2020 were administered as stand-alone schools, 27 school directors would be required instead of four. According to statistics provided by ESAO 1, based on the actual salaries of District School Directors and an estimated average salary of small school directors in the area, that amounts to an annual savings of nearly 12 million baht (\$400,000) in school director salaries alone.

## Benefits of the District School Model

- Small teacher/pupil ratio, enabling teachers to give more individual attention to each child.
- Better emotional support for children, as they are able to live with their parents (rather than staying in boarding school dorms, where child protection measures are weak or non-existent).
- More time-on-task for children, as they do not have to commute long distances over sometimes impassible mountain roads to get to school.
- More time-on-task for teachers, as the district school team relieves them of administrative responsibilities.
- Strong community support, as parents donate their labour to maintain facilities and often supply food to teachers.
- No primary school drop-outs.
- 100 per cent of Grade 6 graduates continue into lower-secondary school.
- Lower costs for parents and MOE.

Savings due to teacher salaries are more difficult to determine, as schools in rural Thailand typically have a mixture of different types of teachers, salaried at different levels. The four District Schools employ 36 government teachers, 35 government staff teachers, and 21 local-hire contract teachers, with annual salaries totaling 15.2 million baht (\$490,000). According to a scenario developed by ESAO 1, if the 27 classrooms were administered as stand-alone small schools they would require 59 government teachers with annual salaries totaling 16.5 million baht (\$532,2600).<sup>26</sup> The District Schools thus save as much as 1.3 million baht (\$42,000) on teacher salaries annually.

If all 27 small schools also had a finance assistant and a facility/equipment caretaker, an additional 4.5 million baht (\$145,000) would be needed. However, it is unlikely that all 27 schools would have both of these positions; it is more likely that the director or teachers would have to take on some those duties, with only the larger small schools having caretakers or finance assistants. Still, this would require at least twice as many personnel than under the District Schools — which employ one finance assistant and five facility/equipment caretakers, with annual salaries totaling 1.34 million baht (\$43,000). It is thus not unreasonable to estimate that the District School approach saves at least 1.2 million baht (\$39,000) annually in salaries for those positions.

One area in which the District Schools have required different funding allocations than other small schools relates to travel, teacher morale, and in-service training. The school directors try to visit all the classrooms under their supervision regularly — at least twice per month. To visit all the classrooms under his watch, the Pang Mapha School Director would need to travel 370 kilometres, mostly on unpaved forest roads which can be nearly impassable during the monsoon season. The annual travel budget for all four school directors for 2019-2020 totals 168,000 baht (\$5,400).

<sup>25</sup> In 2015 staff salaries comprised 52.94 per cent of MOE budget (Education Council, MOE, 2558).

<sup>26</sup> Based on ESAO 1 statistics reporting the average monthly salary for government teachers as 23,180 baht.



As District School teachers work in remote areas with very limited resources, quarterly meetings have become important to their professional development and emotional well-being. The budget for these meetings includes teacher travel, meals, lodging (although they often bring blankets and sleep on classroom floors), stationary and other materials, and travel expenses for a guest trainer. Teachers report that the number one benefit of these meetings is the sharing of experiences with their peers. The annual meeting budget for all four District Schools in 2018-2019 was 192,000 baht (\$6,200), meaning that the per-teacher meeting budget is only 2,100 baht (\$68) per year. By comparison, a fully-qualified government teacher can claim up to 10,000 baht (\$320) per year to attend professional development seminars. Seen in this light, the District School staff meetings provide morale-boosting training for much less.<sup>27</sup>

If the special costs for school director travel and teacher meetings are subtracted from the savings on school director, finance assistant, and facility/equipment caretaker salaries (without considering teacher salaries, benefits, or professional development costs) the net savings for the MOE would be 12.84 million baht (\$67,000).

The District School approach also relieves parents of many hidden costs of the free education to which every child in Thailand is legally entitled. According to ESAO 1, parents whose children must study away from home typically spend 800 baht (\$26) per month for lodging in student dormitories and as much as 2,000 baht (\$65) per month in travel costs to bring their children home on the weekends (when most dormitories close). This places a huge financial burden on these subsistence farmers, likely resulting in more out-of-school children. In addition, there are psychosocial costs to children living far from their parents in dormitories with limited child-protection mechanisms.

To conclude, the District School model provides significant savings over comparable small school scenarios, although to work effectively District Schools require non-traditional budgetary line items for director travel and staff meetings. Maintaining and expanding the District School model makes fiscal sense.



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<sup>27</sup> OBEC provides an additional 250 baht/student/semester stipend to small schools. However, the District Schools do not receive this stipend, as they are defined as medium-size schools with enrolments exceeding 120 students.



## From District School to University: Sasithong's Story

'I'm from a small Sgaw Karen village. When I started KYDS, I only knew a few Thai words. Most of the teachers only stayed a few months before moving to better jobs.

'In third grade, Khru (*teacher*) Suthida came to our village. She was Karen like us, so she could explain things in both Karen and Thai, and also talk to the villagers. Now, Khru Suthida has been in our village for more than 10 years, and I still go to her for advice.

'After I finished Grade 6, I wanted to see the world and experience new opportunities, but my parents were poor. KYDS District School Director Pornchai arranged for the Chindasuk Foundation to provide a high-school scholarship for me. Director Pornchai has been the key to my success.

'I wish there was a better way to teach Thai to Karen people. For many years I was not confident in my Thai language abilities and tried to avoid speaking in class. Then, in 10th grade, my friends and I decided we should try to speak Thai more and not worry if people laughed at our accents.

'Now I am in my first year studying education at Mahamakut Lanna University. I want to become an English teacher and return to the mountains, like Khru Suthida.'



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# Looking Back, Looking Forward

## Challenges

The District Schools have faced many obstacles over the years; most of them remain. Key challenges mentioned by teachers and administrators include:

- **Helping MOE officials understand the District School concept.** One often-mentioned example was how, when the MOE allocates teaching equipment, it follows a “one school one item” policy. Thus, if the MOE was giving out television sets to receive educational satellite broadcasts, each school would receive one unit, to be shared among all the classrooms. This presents difficulties for the District Schools, since their classrooms can be 20 or more kilometres apart! Thus, PMPDS with its six geographically-distant classrooms, should receive six televisions instead of one.
- **Having the capacity to submit grant proposals and sign MOUs** with other Thai government agencies, NGOs, foundations, and corporations. For example, KYDS recently signed an MOU with the Thai Ministry of Energy to install more-modern, solar-electricity systems in several remote classrooms.
- **Helping ethnic minority parents see the value of education** for their children. Teachers who speak the parents’ language can help build bridges with families, encouraging greater community support for education.
- **Recruiting and retaining good teachers** able to adapt to difficult living situations and cultural and linguistic divides.
- **Developing materials and teaching practices to help ethnic children learn Thai.** Currently, teachers carry the burden of adapting the standard curriculum to fit their students. The handful of Thai-language curriculums that have been developed for remote schools are very text-oriented and do not develop Thai listening or speaking skills.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>28</sup> The only Thai-language learning materials developed with modern language acquisition principles is the aforementioned Thai for Ethnic Children curriculum developed by RILCA and FAL.



## Lessons learned

Key lessons learned from the District School approach that could be useful for other small schools:

- **Local school autonomy:** Directors of small schools in unique settings need flexibility in determining how best to meet their students' needs.
- **School directors are crucial:** In larger schools, directors are able to focus on administrative tasks while delegating teacher supervision and instructional issues to their assistant director. In small schools in remote areas, school directors must do both, while also providing emotional support to teachers, engaging with donors, and ensuring that their Grade 6 graduates continue on to secondary school.
- **Classrooms per director:** Interviews with District School directors revealed that, ideally, each director should be responsible for four to six classrooms (each of which serves 20 to 40 children).
- **Teacher recruitment:** Ethnic children benefit from having ethnic teachers who can explain things to them and interact with their parents in their mother tongue. This is especially true in early primary.
  - **Integrating local language and culture:** The ethnic arts and local wisdom of a child's home culture (including music, dance, storytelling, crafts, botanical knowledge, etc.) should be seen as resources for learning and celebrated in the classroom.
  - **Passing through to secondary school cannot be taken for granted:** In 2009, only one-third of District School graduates continued on to secondary school (despite government regulations). Now, MOUs with nearby secondary schools guarantee admission for 100 per cent of District School Grade 6 graduates.
  - **Additional support is needed for post-secondary education:** Five District School students are currently enrolled in university programmes; all depended on advice from their District School directors to gain university admission and secure scholarships.
  - **Peer learning for teachers:** Teachers and administrators consistently mentioned interaction with other teachers as key to teacher professional development. ESAOs supervising small schools need to facilitate regular (at least once per term) teacher gatherings to build morale and conduct in-service and peer-based training.

"Children who do not speak Thai as their mother tongue face specific difficulties in learning effectively and can be considered as a group in need of special attention and strategies. On average they are more likely than the general population of children to be excluded from school; they do poorly in national exams and are more likely to drop out of school. New ways to address this language-related disparity must be implemented for Thailand to achieve Sustainable Development Goal #4 - Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all."

Thomas Davin,  
UNICEF Thailand Representative

## Policy links

Recent policy developments reflect the Thai government's growing awareness of the unique needs of ethnic minority children in Thailand's northern and southern borderlands. This is a very good sign.

In May 2018, an act of Parliament created the Equitable Education Fund (EEF).<sup>29</sup> The name is significant; past government efforts defined equity as children having access to the national curriculum taught by centrally-certified teachers. A key goal of the EEF is to address

<sup>29</sup> *The Nation*, 2018b.

the unique needs of marginalized children, rejecting the 'one size fits all' approach to equity. To do this, EEF will focus on small schools whose students, for reasons of geography, cannot be consolidated into larger schools. This will enable these small schools to introduce and sustain innovations more easily than could be done within the national educational bureaucracy. EEF also aims to identify high-school students from remote areas with an interest in becoming teachers. These students would receive scholarships and additional support to help them complete a bachelor's degree, then return to teach in their home village's school. This is wonderful news for Thailand's ethnic minority children!

OBEC's Annual Policy for Fiscal Year 2019 contains many hopeful provisions. Ethnic minority children, children in remote areas and coastal or island-dwelling children are singled out for special focus, as is the "preservation" of local languages. Section 3.2.2.3 promises special budgetary consideration to promote locally-appropriate education. Section 3.2.2.6 commits OBEC to "developing teachers able to teach Thai to children who speak Thai as a second language."<sup>30</sup> The 2019 policy also commits OBEC to follow the recommendations of the Independent Committee for Education Reform (ICER), whose chairperson has voiced strong support for MTB-MLE and other innovative approaches tailored to the needs of ethnic minority children.<sup>31</sup>

The District School system, with its history of employing ethnic minority teachers, its long experience of interacting with ethnic minority children and their parents, and its reputation for 'thinking outside the box' is thus in a unique position to help transform these new funding and policy visions into concrete realities benefiting thousands of disadvantaged children.

**"In all things concerning children the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration."**

Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 3



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<sup>30</sup> Office of the Basic Education Commission, 2019.

<sup>31</sup> Suwanwela, 2018. The Annual Policy for Fiscal Year 2020 contains similar provisions.



## Recommendations

Over the past 14 years, the District School model has proven to be an effective management strategy for small schools in remote regions. The following recommendations are therefore offered for various stakeholders.

### OBEC

- **2019 policy implementation:** In cooperation with the EEF, NGOs/Foundations, and ESAOs serving students in remote areas, create a space for discussion of how the ideals of OBEC's 2019 policy white paper can be actualized at the local level. This should include policies to give greater autonomy to schools to hire and train local teachers from ethnic communities who share the same culture and mother tongue as their students.
- **Multigrade teaching:** Multigrade teaching is a reality in many small schools nationwide; teachers need to be trained in effective multigrade teaching techniques.
- **Prioritize Early Grade Reading:** While the National Literacy Test for Grades 1 to 6 was developed as a diagnostic tool to identify at-risk readers, more needs to be done to encourage early grade reading as the foundation to creative and critical thinking, as well as long-term academic success. This includes developing materials and teacher training.

### ESAO 1

- **MTB-MLE:** Cooperate with external partners to develop and test MTB-MLE in KYDS and similar settings where at least some teachers share the same mother tongue as most students.
- **Thai language teaching:** Cooperate with external partners to adapt, test, and train teachers in the Thai for Ethnic Children curriculum developed by RILCA and FAL.
- **ICT facilitation:** Ensure teachers have access to existing ICT teaching and learning resources, and the professional development opportunities to use them effectively.
- **Secondary school transition:** ESAOs should cooperate with local secondary schools to ensure that all students continue into secondary school.
- **Networking:** Local education authorities can serve as a broker to identify and coordinate opportunities to connect schools with external partners, including training for school directors to develop MOUs, project proposals, etc.
- **Promote a professional learning community:** Encourage peer-to-peer learning and emotional support through regular meetings of teachers working in remote areas.
- **Reading materials development:** UNICEF's Mobile Library Programme has revealed children's great appetite for books. To sustain this interest, children need more graded reading materials, in Thai and ethnic languages, to help them systematically develop strong reading skills. External partners can help.

### External Partners (e.g. NGOs, Foundations, Corporations, Universities)

- **Educational planning:** Partner with OBEC, EEF, ESAO 1, and other like-minded organizations to develop a comprehensive education plan for ESAO 1 that could serve as a model for Mae Hong Son Province (and other ESAOs serving ethnically-diverse student populations).
- **Child wellness and family stability:** As ethnic children from remote areas make their way through the education system, many live in school or private dormitories, with occasional visits home. External partners can work with educators to develop a set of best practices to ensure that these children receive the social support and protection they need.
- **Networking:** Tops Supermarket's partnership with UNICEF on the Mobile Library Project; Sati's cooperation with Planet Water and Thai Metal in bringing water systems to District School classrooms and their surrounding communities; and the Chindasuk Foundation's support for District School, Grade 6 graduates in secondary and tertiary education all demonstrate how collaboration between the private and public sectors can have a huge impact. Enhanced networking can help identify needs and coordinate responses.



## Conclusion

Since 2005, the District Schools in Mae Hong Son have done precisely what they were created to do: bring educational opportunity to some of the most disadvantaged, most easily overlooked children in the Kingdom of Thailand. As a result, thousands of children who otherwise may have fallen through the cracks are now in secondary school or launching out on career paths that would not have been possible without their District School experience. Many have been saved from the perils of human trafficking, child marriages, child labour, and other dangers afflicting ethnic minority youth in southeast Asia.



The District School experience yields important learnings for small schools everywhere. These include lessons on how to navigate the managerial and budgetary requirements of a national education system in such a way as to maximize benefits for marginalized children, as well as the importance of encouraging teachers to see ethnic minority languages and cultures as resources for learning, rather than obstacles. There are lessons about turning trucks into libraries, school directors into telecommuters, disadvantaged youth into teachers, children with no books at home into eager readers. It is about thinking 'outside the box' and implementing flexible policies to reach out to those who might otherwise be forgotten.

ESAO 1 and its partners should be commended for the extraordinary effort they have put into making the dream of "bringing the school to the children" a reality. The Thai MOE is to be complimented on the ethnic child-friendly aspirations of its Fiscal Year 2019 and 2020 Annual Policies. UNICEF and its corporate and celebrity partners have done excellent work in bringing the children of Mae Hong Son to the attention of the nation, challenging stereotypes, and contributing to a more-inclusive vision of what Thailand can be.

Khru Euiw, who started as an ethnic teacher with only a high-school education and is now a fully-certified government teacher, said it best:

"All children are precious. They are like unpolished stones or uncut diamonds waiting for teachers to shape. If we all do our jobs, they will have beautiful lives."

## Appendix A: Academic Specialties of District School Teachers

Academic Specialties	KYDS	PMPDS	MDS	PDS	Total	Per cent
Primary education	7	3	7	4	21	28.8%
Physical education	4	4	2	5	15	20.5%
Pre-primary education	5	3	1	2	11	15.1%
Social Studies	1	2	1	1	5	6.8%
Math		1	0	3	4	5.5%
Computers	2		1	0	3	4.1%
Thai	1		1	1	3	4.1%
English	1		1	0	2	2.7%
Science	2	1			3	4.1%
Agriculture		1	0	0	1	1.4%
Business			1	0	1	1.4%
Special Education			1	0	1	1.4%
Industrial Education				1	1	1.4%
Non-formal Education	1				1	1.4%
Buddhism	1				1	1.4%
Total	25	15	16	17	73	100.0%



## Appendix B: The National Literacy Assessment

National testing conducted in 2013 showed that eight per cent of Grade 3 and four per cent of Grade 6 children in Thai schools were illiterate. This was a shock for a country which had long claimed a 98 per cent or higher national literacy rate. MOE statisticians found that most of the illiterate children were from ethnic minority groups (Khaosod English, 2013). Thus, in 2015, OBEC launched a new national literacy assessment for Grades 1 to 8, with the objective of helping teachers to identify and help weaker students.<sup>32</sup>

Unlike other national tests, the literacy assessment is, in theory, non-competitive. Schools are not to be compared to one another (or to national averages) and test results are not connected to incentives (e.g. promotions, raises) or punishment. The fact that children must be assessed four times per year indicates that OBEC is taking the literacy problem seriously. The areas covered in the assessment, particularly in Grades 7 to 8, point to OBEC efforts to better prepare children for the Grade 9 PISA reading test.<sup>33</sup>

The Grade 1 to 6 evaluation contains two main categories, reading and writing, although the focus of each changes over time. Students are ranked as "very good," "good," "satisfactory," or "needs improvement," as shown in the summary results from KYDS below.<sup>34</sup>

### National literacy evaluation summary results by grade, KYDS (AY 2018)

	Test areaV	Average score	Very good	Good	Satisfactory	Needs improvement
Grade 1	Reading words	81.7%	●			
	Writing dictation	68.6%		●		
Grade 2	Reading aloud	67.9%		●		
	Reading comprehension	47.4%				●
	Writing dictation	58.5%			●	
	Writing from picture	47.3%			●	
Grade 3	Reading aloud	43.9%			●	
	Reading comprehension	28.3%			●	
	Writing dictation	19.2%				●
	Writing story	37.0%			●	

<sup>32</sup> Person, forthcoming.

<sup>33</sup> PISA reading results for Thailand have been very disappointing for many years, suggesting that one-third of Thai 15-year-olds are functionally illiterate. As a result, Thailand may withdraw from PISA (Bangkok Post 2016a, 2018a).

<sup>34</sup> Data extracted from individual student results from each District School on the June 2018 literacy assessment, provided by EASO 1.

	Test areaV	Average score	Very good	Good	Satisfactory	Needs improvement
Grade 4	Reading by Thai principles	40.4%			●	
	Reading comprehension	38.3%			●	
	Writing summaries	56.5%		●		
	Writing imaginative story	53.5%		●		
Grade 5	Reading by Thai principles	46.5%			●	
	Reading comprehension	49.4%			●	
	Writing summaries	63.8%	●			
	Writing imaginative story	65.1%		●		
Grade 6	Reading by Thai principles	40.7%			●	
	Reading comprehension	51.2%		●		
	Writing summaries	61.4%		●		
	Writing essay	58.6%		●		

Attention should be drawn to the scale used to determine the labels ("very good," "good," etc.). For nine of the ten areas in which KYDS students earned "satisfactory" marks, the class scores ranged from 28.3 per cent to 49.4 per cent, meaning that the children were still answering most questions incorrectly. For a Grade 3 reading comprehension score of 28.3 per cent to be labeled "satisfactory" indicates that it is acceptable for the student to *not* understand over 70 per cent of what they are reading. This is not consistent with the literacy assessment's objective of identifying and helping weak students. *Indeed, it may be indicative of deep misunderstandings within the MOE as to the nature of reading and how it can be assessed.*

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