POLICY BRIEF

The Capacity Crisis: Expanding Access to Education for Out of School Children in Tak Province

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Thailand faces a demographic watershed moment as it transitions to a **'super-aged society'** (Departmert of Older Persons, 2024) with **over 20%** of its population aged **60+** and projections **reaching 30%** by 2040,

creating urgent labor shortages. Yet the solution to Thailand's shrinking workforce already exists within its borders: there are tens of thousands of migrant young people eager to integrate and contribute to Thai society. This study identified that the migrant population along the Thai-Myanmar border overwhelmingly (87%) desires to enroll into Thai public schools. However, systemic barriers—school capacity constraints, documentation requirements, and financial burdens—currently lock out eligible students. This case study found that 103 of 324 qualified children were denied enrollment due to capacity limitations alone. These young people represent a ready workforce that, with proper education access, will learn Thai, integrate into Thai culture, and help meet the country's growing labor needs. Strategic interventions addressing documentation, transportation, and school capacity could transform these vulnerable young people into the integrated workforce Thailand desperately needs, turning a border challenge into a demographic opportunity.

Introduction

This brief examines opportunities and challenges for expanding educational access in border communities across Tak Province, Thailand. Based on a comprehensive needs assessment of 225 migrant households covering 392 school-aged children, this research identifies critical barriers to enrollment and provides evidence-based recommendations for policy and practice.

In Mae Sot and surrounding districts, approximately 3 in 10 school-aged migrant children are out of school, rising to 5 in 10 in more remote communities like Phop Phra and Mae Ramat districts.
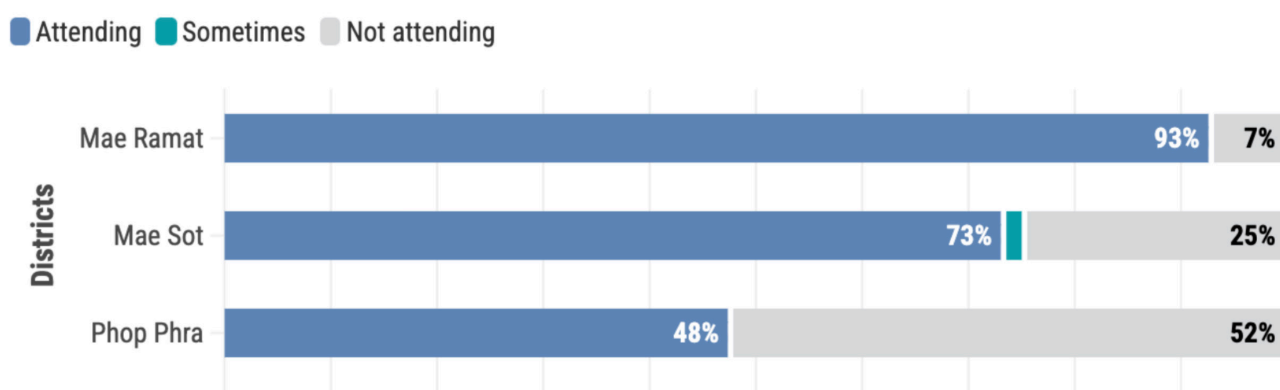

Legend: ■ Attending ■ Sometimes ■ Not attending

Districts	Attending	Sometimes	Not attending
Mae Ramat	93%		7%
Mae Sot	73%		25%
Phop Phra	48%		52%

Figure 1. School-aged OOSC Rate by Location

Educational exclusion in these areas reflects intersecting challenges:

92% of surveyed households citefinancial burdens

44% face documentation barriers

25% struggle with geographic accessibility

Migrant families have increasingly turned to Thai public schools as a viable long-term pathway for their children, intensifying demand on already strained school capacity.

Shifting Educational Preferences

Educational preferences have consolidated dramatically toward Thai public schools. This represents a fundamental shift from findings in our Bridges study (Tyrosvoutis, 2019) where surveyed migrant parents largely saw their children's long-term educational futures back in their home country. Surveyed parents increasingly recognize that early Thai language skills improve long-term educational success and integration prospects. By 2026, the average migrant household plans to enroll two children in Thai public schools, if able: one in primary and one in secondary education. However, current barriers prevent many families from realizing these plans, creating growing gaps between educational aspirations and actual enrollment.

'The Capacity Crisis'

School capacity has emerged as the primary bottleneck limiting enrollment. During 2024-2025, The Inclusive Education Foundation's enrollment team successfully prepared 324 out-of-school children who met all requirements: passing Thai proficiency tests and preparing necessary documentation including translated birth certificates. Despite meeting requirements, 103 children (32%) were denied entry due to school capacity limitations. Our needs assessment identified five communities with particularly acute capacity constraints, collectively representing over 150 waitlisted children and significant out-of-school populations.

Intersecting Barriers to Enrollment

Multiple barriers interact to limit educational access, with statistical analysis revealing their relative impacts on enrollment probability. Documentation status emerges as the single strongest predictor of enrollment, with effects substantially exceeding household income and distance to school. Among surveyed children, 13% have no birth certificate, while 34% possess only Myanmar birth certificates that Thai public schools do not accept without official translation. While Thailand's Education for All (EFA) policy technically permits enrollment of stateless children, in practice birth certificates are often required for enrollment to address student tracking challenges given high family mobility.
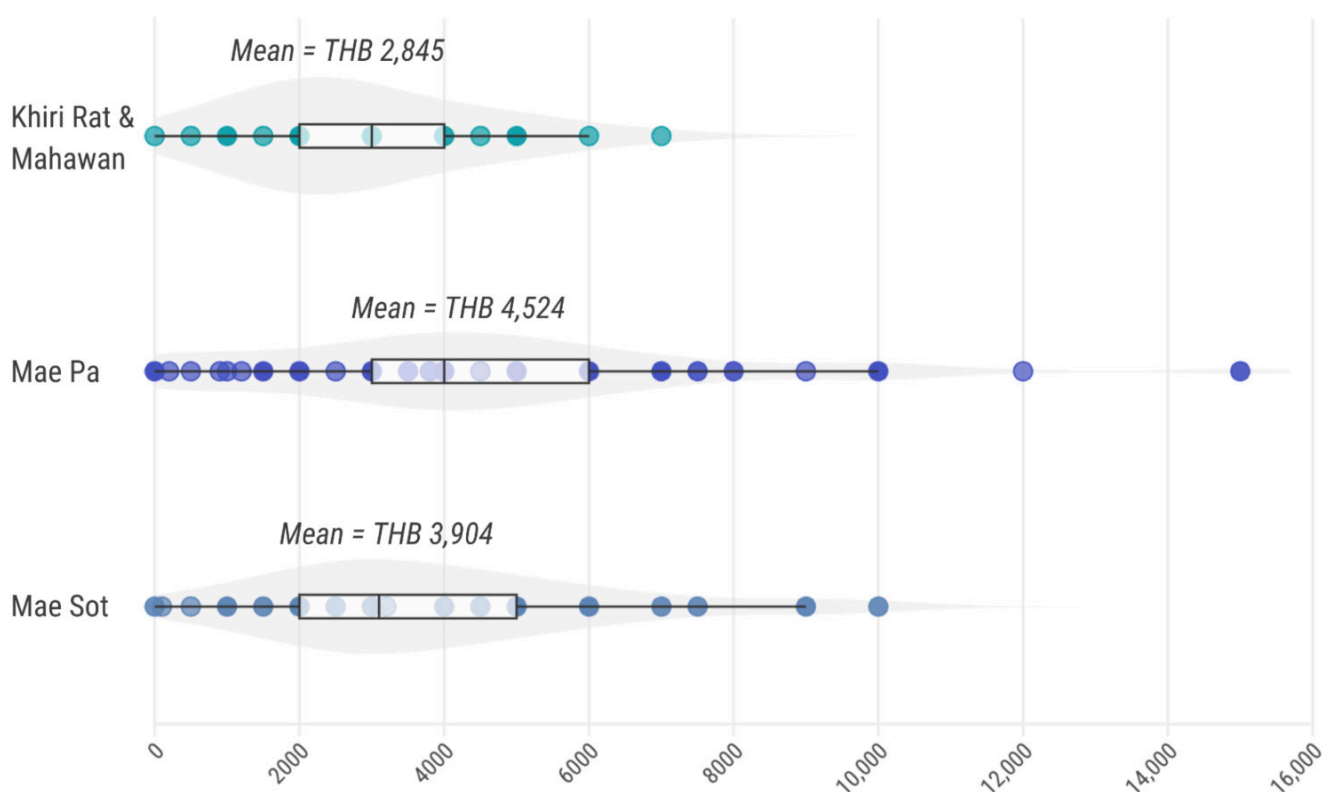

Figure 2. Monthly Migrant Household Income, Grouped by Location

Financial constraints affect 92% of households with out-of-school children. With median monthly household income at THB 3,500, education costs are substantial. Recent estimates place monthly education costs at THB 200-500 per child, representing approximately one month of household income annually per enrolled child. Family composition significantly impacts enrollment decisions, as each additional school-age sibling reduces enrollment odds by approximately 45%. In households with multiple school-age children, families face difficult choices about their children's educational futures. During surveys, researchers documented children as young as 9 years old assuming childcare responsibilities and children as young as 12 leaving school to work, enabling younger siblings' education. Family responsibilities constitute the second most common barrier, reported by 48% of households with out-of-school children.

Age significantly affects enrollment probability, with each three-year increase in age reducing enrollment odds by approximately 50%. This decline accelerates around age 15, when economic pressures and academic challenges combine to push students from formal education. Economic pressures intensify with seasonal agricultural work, where children over 12 can earn THB 200 daily. Harvest cycles for corn, sugarcane, cucumber, and chili create regular attendance disruptions and dropout risks. Gender-disaggregated data reveal distinct vulnerability profiles in educational access. Girls experience structural barriers to timely school entry, while boys face increased dropout risk with age, as enrollment probability decreases more precipitously across standardized age categories (Grunawalt et al., 2025).
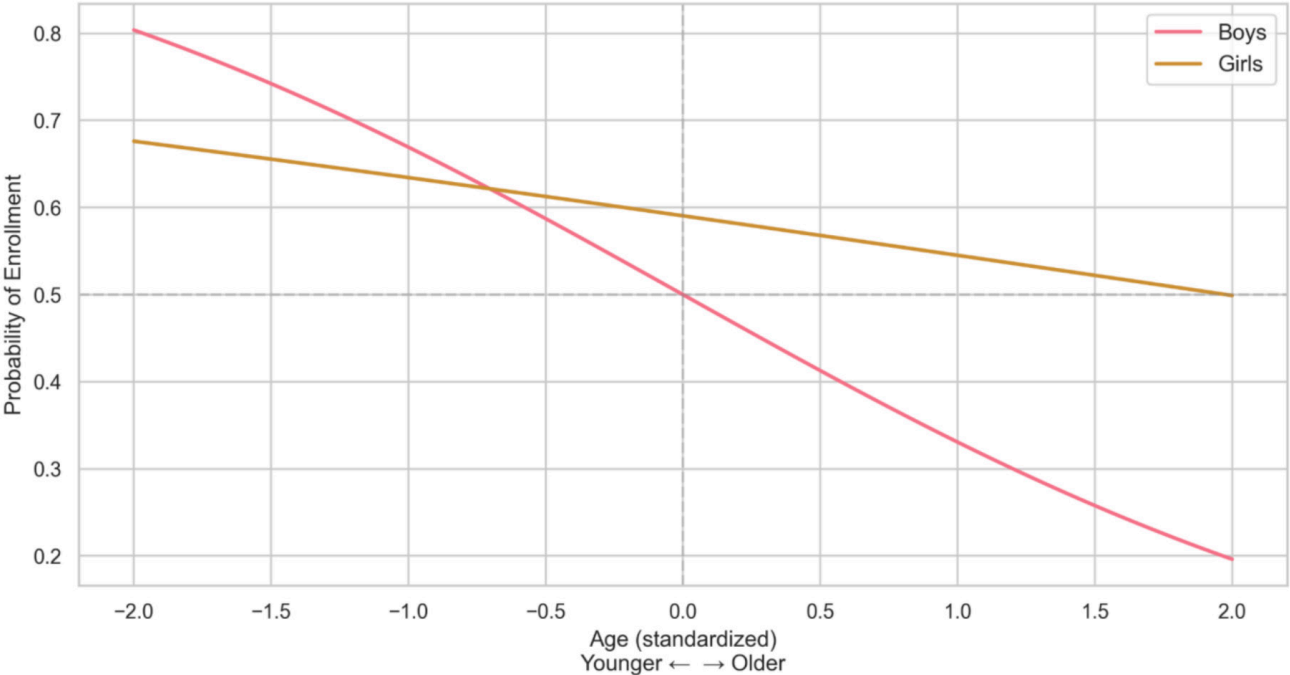

Figure 3. How Age Likely Affects Enrollment Differently for Boys and Girls

Implications for Policy and Practice

Growing demand for Thai public education among migrant families has direct implications for school capacity planning and Thailand's Education for All policy implementation. Current evidence points to 5 priority areas for action:

1. **Streamline Documentation and Enrollment Processes**

Establish a coordination working group of organizations supporting non-Thai child enrollment to liaise with education authorities, provide legal assistance for birth certificate translation, and support community-level enrollment programs.

2. **Invest in Age-Targeted Programs**

Expand free early childhood Thai language programs and develop structured retention programs for students ages 15+ addressing sharp enrollment decline through pathways into non-formal education (NFE) systems.

3. **Provide Household-Level Support and Linkages to National Health Systems**

Implement household-level interventions recognizing total educational burden across all school-age children. Maintain proven wraparound support models combining transportation and financial assistance. This could take the form of basic education 'scholarships' or educational assistance programs. Further advocacy is needed to ensure school-age migrant children have access to health insurance through systems-level promotion that guarantees their enrollment in national school health systems.

4. **Expand and Coordinate Transportation Services**

Explore centralized transportation coordination to improve route efficiency. For existing school transportation programs, restructure fee collection enabling incremental payments rather than annual lump sums and provide subsidies for remote communities facing higher costs.

5. **Strategically Expand School Capacity**

Prioritize school capacity expansion, especially in rural and economically disadvantaged communities with high numbers of waitlisted children and out-of-school populations. A census is needed to determine the number of eligible children out of school on the Thai-Myanmar border.

Further Reading

•	Grunawalt, P., Kanawng Sut Hkawng Naw, Nan Mu Ta Loung, & Eh Htee Hta Hser. (2025). Expanding Access: An Education Needs Assessment of Border Communities in Tak Province, Thailand. The Inclusive Education Foundation. https://www.inedfoundation.org/research-publication/expanding-access%3A

•	Pisith Nasee & Vong-on Phuaphansawat. (2024). Access to Education for Stateless Persons in Thailand. UNICEF and UNHCR. Available upon request.

•	Tin Zar, Castello, I., Grunawalt, P., Chu Wai Wai Zaw, and Tyrosvoutis, G. (2025). Bridging the Digital Divide: A Gender Analysis of English and Digital Literacy Needs Among Adolescents on the Thai-Myanmar Border. English and Digital for Girls Education (EDGE) Scoping Study. British Council, The Inclusive Education Foundation, and Help without Frontiers Thailand Foundation. https://www.inedfoundation.org/research-publication/bridging-the-digital-divide%3A

•	Inkhamchuea et. al. (2024). Realizing Education for All: How bilingual classroom assistants are helping migrant students in Tak Province. The Inclusive Education Foundation. Mae Sot, Thailand. https://www.inedfoundation.org/research-publication/realizing-education-for-all

About this brief