

# Building skills & agency through secondary education

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# How can secondary education build skills & agency in young people for success in tertiary education and work?

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## Background

Students dropping out of school due to poverty, inaccessibility, and lack of opportunities has been a major concern in education globally. The Global Education Monitoring Report and UNESCO Institute for Statistics reported that in 2021 a total of [244 million children and youth](#) between the ages of 6- 18 years were out of school globally. Nearly 178 million of the out-of-school children and youth drop out at the lower and upper secondary levels. This problem is aggravated in low- and middle-income countries (LMIC). Sub-Saharan Africa has the largest number of children and youth (98 million) excluded from school, and 85 million children experience a similar fate in Central and Southern Asia.

While many students who complete secondary education view tertiary education as the next step in their education journey, a large number of youth in LMICs directly transition to work. According to The [World Youth report](#) (2018) by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, youth in these countries struggle to afford the cost of education, and in many instances are forced to drop out of school to contribute to the family income. The report also observes a difference in the type and availability of employment available to young people in LMICs versus higher income countries. The opportunities in LMICs are predominantly in the informal sector where wages are lower and there is poor job security.

A World Bank development report, [Learning to Realize Education's Promise](#) (2018) highlights that youth are unable to prepare themselves for better employment opportunities as they have inadequate support and lack the educational foundation to help them transition into gainful employment. As a result, millions of students reach adulthood without the requisite skills and support needed to join the workforce. Focused on the Sub-Saharan African context, a [Mastercard report](#) (2019) has identified a lack of information and knowledge for those transitioning from school to work. Added to this are other challenges faced by youth such as access to finance for small businesses, fluency in international and local business language, costs associated with finding jobs, and a lack of trust between employers and job seekers. These challenges are further exacerbated by limiting perceptions around gender, urban-rural divide, and the age at which the person is making the transition to employment.

In addition to the skills needed to successfully join the workforce, career navigation analysis presented by [Unlocking Career Potential](#) (2020) has identified two more pillars for building a career: social capital and occupational identity. The former, driven by relationships and networks, provides young people with exposure, guidance, and an introduction to the world of employment and career. Occupational identity invites attention to self-perceived abilities, interests and preferences, and a sense of belonging to a particular profession. Occupational identity involves discovering one's interests and strengths and not just specific jobs. With limited opportunities, lack of social capital, and inadequate guidance, young people in LMICs can find it very challenging to navigate the transition to work.

For young people in countries affected by emergencies or natural disasters, where only 26.6 per cent reach upper secondary school, the challenges are more heightened ([A Future Stolen: Young and out-of-school](#), 2018). In fragile contexts where conflict is active and trust is absent, accessing secondary school remains a large and unfulfilled promise. Children in such contexts are three times more likely to be out of school and /or experience drop out before completing primary school ([Learning to Realize Education's Promise](#), 2018). The onus of providing safe and reliable education falls on governments, who themselves may not have the adequate resources needed to support children. In such situations non-state organisations become vital partners to bridge the gaps in the public system.



## About this brief

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At the [Global Schools Forum](#) (GSF) our network of 84 organisations (who run and support over 57,000 schools in 55 low- and middle-income countries) continue to navigate the aforementioned challenges around secondary education in their unique contexts. These organisations continuously invest in identifying and implementing programmes and practices that aim to mitigate student dropouts, strengthen teacher capacity, improve readiness for tertiary education or work, curate spaces that help discover agency, and build an environment of collective support.

The practice brief is an outcome of a Community of Practice on secondary education facilitated by GSF for its global network. Both the available literature on this subject, and the experiences shared by the participating members highlighted a need to focus on three urgent areas of intervention:



### **Equitable access**

Ensuring all students have access to secondary education regardless of their socio-economic background.



### **Quality & agency**

Building relevant skills, capacity readiness, and creating support structures for secondary school students who transition to tertiary education or directly to work.



### **Education in conflict**

Meeting urgent community needs while uplifting student growth in contexts where conflict dominates.

GSF recognises that the challenges around secondary education are multi-faceted, requiring both individual and collective interventions by non-state and state actors. This practice brief is an effort to learn from the experiences and insights of six organisations within GSF's community who have shared their context, approach and key learnings in order to benefit other secondary education practitioners.

Each approach shared here is situated within an individual country or community's context and responds to a unique need. However, we believe the approaches and lessons learnt are relevant to all secondary education practitioners who are committed to learn, adapt, and adopt practices for their respective contexts.

# iTeach Schools: Ensuring access & providing holistic support

## About iTeach

India's has approximately 265 million students in school ([UDISE 2021-22](#)). The gross enrolment ratio (GER) in India for grades up to 5 exceeds 104.8%, but significantly drops to 79.6% in grade 9 and further reduces to 57.6% by grade 12. Out of India's youth population (18 to 23 years), only 27.3% enroll in higher education ([AISHE 2020-21](#)).

iTeach Schools provide access to some of the most underserved communities in the city of Pune (Maharashtra, India). In Pune, there are 54 free English-medium pre-primary and primary schools (up to Grade 4 or Grade 7) operated by the Municipal Corporation (the governing body of the city). Once they complete Grade 7, students do not have an option of continuing in a free English-medium school. iTeach serves as a feeder secondary school to students from some of these schools. iTeach operates 9 free English-medium secondary schools (grades 8-10) across Pune serving approximately 2500 students. iTeach also leads a College to Career program that provides support to over 3000 students graduating from Grade 10, with the aim of getting more students into tertiary education and securing their first job.

## iTeach's approach: Ensuring students complete secondary education

iTeach believes that it takes a multi-pronged approach to ensure students enroll in secondary education and then continue schooling till they graduate with adequate skills to thrive in the world of work. The following interventions have helped iTeach ensure 82% of enrolled students continue education post Grade 12, against the national average of 27.4%.

### PARTNERING WITH PRIMARY SCHOOLS

- Ensure all students from identified feeder schools **enroll in iTeach schools**.
- Build **strong relations with the school leaders** of primary schools to ensure a smooth transition.

### HOSTING A BRIDGE YEAR PROGRAMME

- **Remedial programme** of one complete year is offered to students requiring additional academic support as they transition from grade 7 to 8.
- The focus of the **bridge year is on Mathematics, English and one additional language**, that aims to bridge a learning gap of almost 5-6 years.

### PROVIDING HOLISTIC SUPPORT

- **Every student's risk level is assessed** based on parameters including attendance, economic and health situation of the family and the learner, and the investment of the student in school's activities.
- Based on identified risk levels students are provided additional support: the **school social worker** works with critical and high-risk families; the **counselor** tests for learning disabilities and supports through emotional stress, and other issues; the **advisor** works with the student to maintain strong habits, such as attendance and submissions. The **school leader** is the operational head who makes holistic learning possible, frames the entire strategy and develops aligned goals and assessment approaches.

## iTeach's approach: Supporting transition through the College to Career program

iTeach has observed that especially for underserved communities, a holistic program is necessary that supports students from admission to secondary school completion and employment readiness, while being cognisant of the limitations that push students to drop out. Through the College to Career program, iTeach aims to provide 360-degree support to students. This is made possible by adopting a four-pillar approach:

### FOUNDATIONAL

Help students decide '**best-fit**' college with **scholarship options** for students entering senior secondary education (G11-12) and those pursuing tertiary education beyond grade 12.

### CAREER CENTRE

To ensure students are **job-ready**, the career centre provides:

- personalised career counseling
- part-time job and internship opportunities
- skill building workshops including resume writing and preparing for interviews
- one-on-one mentoring with experts in aspired disciplines

### LIFEGUARDING

- Student drop-out is often not an outcome of academic challenge alone. Early marriage, poor economic condition, addiction are some of the reasons students drop out.
- iTeach builds **strong relationship** with key influencers including parents, and offers psychological and well-being support.

### MENTORSHIP & COMMUNITY

- Student alumni community led by graduating grade 10 students, for immediate support to their juniors.
- Introduced **alumni leadership fellowship** which is a peer mentorship program including:
  - meeting with alumni
  - career oriented field trips
  - talks with experts from different walks of life

In the last three years, not a single student has dropped out from iTeach Schools due to financial limitations, 98% of its students have continued their education beyond grade 10, and 82% made their way into tertiary education.



### TAKEAWAY

**It is important to adopt a holistic support model** that helps students from the time of admission into secondary school, until completion of Grade 12. This approach should support students to be ready for a transition into tertiary education or work while **being cognisant of the socio-economic limitations** that make students drop out of education.

When designing support systems for students, the **school leader is the most important driver** who monitors, makes meaning and has unlimited belief in the power of young people.

# Akanksha Foundation: The power of an alumni community

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## **About Akanksha Foundation**

The Akanksha Foundation was founded three decades ago in Maharashtra, India to help build high performing, innovative schools that empower children and youth from underserved communities. It operates 26 no-fee schools from kindergarten to grade 10 that are run collaboratively with municipal corporations in 3 cities in Maharashtra (Mumbai, Pune and Nagpur). Akanksha now supports 13,000 students in its schools and 4,600 alumni. The organisation believes that staying on the path of education is the surest way for alumni to reach their goal of financial independence.

## **Akanksha's approach**

Akanksha Foundation has an alumni team that helps their alumni (students who have graduated Grade 10 from their schools) lead 'empowered lives'. Several initiatives are undertaken to provide equitable experience to support alumni who choose tertiary education or alternate career pathways such as entrepreneurship, social leadership, sports, arts, dance.





## CAREER PROGRAMME

- From grade 9 to completion of tertiary education, students are supported through:
  - aptitude tests
  - **career counseling for students and parents**
  - session with practitioners from various streams of education
  - **financial support**
- 90% of grade 10 students underwent aptitude testing and 80% completed 1:1 career counselling with parents.
- More than 66% alumni chose the stream/ discipline recommended for college.

## CUSTOMISED TRACKS

- Two customised tracks are designed for:
  - **High potential alumni** based on academics and other skills
  - **Alumni in need** based on challenges including absence of family support, learning disabilities, lack of motivation.
- Within each track, specific **partnerships support students.** Today the organisation has 30 active partnerships with colleges, universities and several practitioner organisations.

## COMMUNITY BUILDING

- **A community** is built where alumni can support and mentor each other.
- Alumni have access to a dedicated portal, connect hubs, in-person meets, Whatsapp groups, and other **means to nurture alumni voice.**
- 2022-23 witnessed 45 alumni ambassadors, 2 alumni joining Board of Directors, and 4 leading the alumni program team.

The organisation started tracking school alumni in 2013. Since then, from a total of 2600 alumni from the school model, more than 90% completed grade 12 education, and over 80% enrolled in higher education with a significant majority completing it.



### TAKEAWAY

The key to successfully support students to complete their secondary and tertiary education is: starting **discussions early** from grade 9; **taking parents along**, making them aware of career options and colleges; **offering financial support** through internal and external scholarships; **partnering with universities** and **creating a network of support** for alumni to experience a community.

# PEAS: Building life & livelihood skills

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## About PEAS

Almost 60% of Africa's population is under the age of 25, making [Africa the world's youngest continent](#). According to PEAS, Africa's greatest potential resource is its rapidly expanding youth population. This presents a time-bound opportunity for economic and social transformation if young people are educated and skilled.

PEAS exists to increase access to a quality, sustainable secondary education. It runs one of the largest secondary school networks in Sub-Saharan Africa, serving over 16,000 students (more than 50% of them are girls) across 36 schools in Uganda and Zambia. PEAS also works hand-in-hand with governments in over 250 government schools to enable leaders to drive improvements and inform wider education system enhancements.

PEAS schools enroll poorer students with lower prior attainment and help them make faster learning progress than their peers in other school types. They do this at a lower cost per student than comparison schools, including government schools. It has also been observed that PEAS students' successful transition rate is [19 percentage points higher](#) than those in comparison schools.



## PEAS' approach

### ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT ALONE IS NOT ENOUGH

- PEAS supports students to develop a **universal set of core skills** that are relevant to their context both in and beyond school, including foundational literacy and numeracy, socio-emotional and 21st century work-readiness skills.
- Career guidance and counseling helps students **make informed decisions**. This enables them to successfully transition to upper secondary school, technical and vocational training, and employment or entrepreneurship.

### LIFE & LIVELIHOOD SKILLS PROGRAMME

- The programme is **contextually relevant** and **student centered**. It draws on collaborative learning approaches.
- It is delivered in **weekly 40-minute sessions** supported with teacher guides and student books.
- The topics are connected to **key life-skills themes** including financial literacy, lifelong learning.
- **Sensitive topics on culture, gender and health** are examined and addressed directly, ensuring students learn to stay safe, grow to be strong, healthy and confident adults.

An [external evaluation](#) found that students' life skills were improving in PEAS schools, and a significant correlation between successful transition and higher life skills index scores was observed. Evaluators highlighted that Life Skills were of "great use and importance to students" with 91% of students reporting using these skills to make decisions about their future. Students reported gaining a range of skills during their time in PEAS schools, including communication skills (95.2%), study skills (92.5%), decision-making skills (90.9%), teamwork skills (88.2%) and organisational skills (88%). These are all essential skills for young people as they take their next step beyond secondary education.



### TAKEAWAY

In addition to academic excellence, it is critical to understand what **skills students and their families value**, and **what they need to make informed decisions** for their future. Helping them develop these skills and make a smooth transition can only happen in safe, quality learning environment where young people feel confident and supported.

# BRAC: Empowering young people

## About BRAC

BRAC International works across 10 countries in Africa and Asia. The organisation constantly works towards empowering vulnerable communities in situations of poverty, illiteracy, diseases, and social injustice. BRAC provides tools and skills to help them change their lives. Two interventions by BRAC in Africa have been introduced in this brief: helping adolescent youth develop skills and agency, and enabling a successful transition to alternate pathways post-secondary education.

While Africa is the world's youngest continent, African youth face several barriers such as high unemployment and high rates of poverty. For the 11 million youth joining the workforce annually there are only 3.7 million jobs. 89% of the total employment of Sub-Saharan Africa is constituted of informal employment. The situation is worse for adolescent girls and young women (AGYW) who don't have access to education, jobs or reproductive health services. The rates of early marriage and child pregnancy are very high, limiting girls from attending school and finding employment opportunities.

## BRAC's approach

### EMPOWERMENT & LIVELIHOOD FOR ADOLESCENTS (ELA)

Started in 2006 in Africa the ELA program began in Uganda and expanded to Tanzania, South Sudan, Sierra Leone and Liberia.

- The program empowers adolescents (10-24 years), especially girls, by improving education, health, and economic opportunities. The program aims to **improve their quality of life**, help them take life decisions and transform them into **agents of social change**.
- ELA clubs are **safe spaces** close to the girls' homes where they meet after school 2-3 times a week. They network with other girls and **female mentors** from the community.
- They are provided **critical information** on sexual and reproductive health, gender equality, and empowerment to help them make key life decisions.
- They are taught how to **generate income** and receive training on micro-finance, financial literacy, business planning, budget management, communication, conflict resolution & marketable technical skills and receive access to microfinance to begin their own ventures.
- The **community is involved** and engaged to provide support and to empower the girls.

### MASTERCARD FOUNDATION (MCF) - SCHOLARS PROGRAM

MasterCard Foundation committed funds to BRAC in 2012 under the Scholars program to help 5,000 Ugandan students over an 8-year period to **transition into tertiary education**. Despite the midterm success, many of the scholars failed to get admission into tertiary education and were disqualified. Hence the **intervention pivoted** to support students with technical & vocational education and training (**TVET**) through scholarship.

The program enabled the transition by **providing resources and support** through:

- Career guidance, counselling, and mentoring
- Assistance with scholarships for internship and job opportunities
- Skill training and leadership development
- Ongoing follow-up

The internships at secondary level gave the youth **valuable skills** that added to their work experience and helped them form career goals and understand and explore their interests.

RCTs conducted across several countries in Africa have shown that the ELA programme has had a very high impact in empowering the youth. Girls who were part of this program were more likely to be engaged in income generating activities and have savings. There was also a decrease in teen marriages and pregnancy rates.

Impact evaluation report of the Scholars Program revealed a significant impact of the program in the form of continuation of education, course completion, higher chances of employment with shorter time to employment, increase in ability to do business and increase in monthly income. The youth also developed a positive perception towards TVET and the program impacted their transitions to further education, including transitioning to university, TVET, and employment.



## TAKEAWAY

**Safe spaces for adolescent girls** where requisite life skills and critical awareness is made accessible, significantly contributes to agency development.

Creating **alternate pathways** for students who are unable to transition to higher education, is important and contributes to **building a positive perception** towards vocational education and employment.



# UGEAFI: Linking education to community needs

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## About UGEAFI

UGEAFI works to promote the resiliency of rural and vulnerable communities of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) since 1990 and those of South Sudan since 2022. In DRC, UGEAFI has a pilot school in a remote and landlocked region named Minembwe. It is inhabited by four tribes of 18,000 people. They rely on agriculture and livestock to survive. The community faces shortage of clean water and live in poor hygiene conditions. In addition, Minembwe is affected by cyclical conflicts perpetrated by local armed groups, leading to vulnerable livelihoods.

## UGEAFI's approach

UGEAFI has developed a school-village approach in their pilot school. This is a community-driven initiative that aims to bring together indigenous and student knowledge to confront diverse challenges faced by the community.



## CHOICE OF SUBJECTS

- UGEAFI chose to **teach subjects that are directly aligned with the community's urgent needs**. In addition to Mathematics and Physics, UGEAFI teaches Agriculture, Veterinary and Nursing Sciences.

## FIELD WORK EMBEDDED

- Students frequently **engage with the community** in their village, collaboratively working on several fronts.
- For agriculture, students tackle the issues related to lower productions of common food crops like maize and beans, by **sharing agricultural practices acquired at school**, for example sowing in line instead of the commonly used method of bulk seeding.
- In respect to health issues, **students of nursing sciences intervene**. For instance, when a new vaccine is introduced by the health zone, they help their community to understand its advantages and modalities of intake.

## INCLUSION OF ALL STAKEHOLDERS

- The organisation consciously **engages with different stakeholders holding influence:** community across tribes, traditional leaders, administrative authorities, and local and international humanitarian partners.
- The **misconception of inhibiting school access to girls** is progressively being broken because of the direct benefits visible to the community.
- In a space of active conflict, engaging with the humanitarian principles of **neutrality; do no harm, and impartiality** is key.

The benefits of the school-village approach have been multifold. Parents have found immediate value of secondary schooling; they establish a conducive relationship with their children and are more involved in encouraging them to pursue their studies. Some key [tangible benefits](#) which have been witnessed include, 5,000 farmers introduced to sustainable agricultural practices for higher yield; 45 alumni recruited as nurses in local health centres; and 36 alumni employed in local administration offices in Minembwe.



## TAKEAWAY

When ensuring relevant and quality secondary education is provided in a community that is experiencing conflict, it is essential to **adopt a participatory approach** that involves all stakeholders, **understand the power** held by different groups, and **maintain neutrality** and impartiality while **addressing the most urgent needs** of the community.

# MAIA: Developing female leaders from the community, for the community

## About MAIA

Guatemala has one of the highest levels of gender inequality in the Western Hemisphere. Indigenous people are at least 42% of the Guatemalan population and less than 10% of indigenous girls graduate from high school. Over 50% of indigenous girls become mothers by the age of 20 and nearly two-thirds of Maya women live in poverty.

Launched in 2017, the MAIA Impact School is Central America's only school designed specifically to connect the talents of girls born into situations of quadruple discrimination (poor, rural, female, indigenous) with the opportunities of the 21st century. MAIA serves approximately 300 Girl Pioneers (students at the Impact School) in grades 6-12 and their families each year. Their vision is for a new generation of female leaders who create a more equitable society.

## MAIA's approach

MAIA ensures that all aspects of the Girl Pioneers' life are considered in designing a meaningful learning experience. A holistic set of interventions involve both the girl pioneers and their families.

### IMPULSO YEAR (MOMENTUM YEAR)

- Due to COVID-19, **7th grade students were at 2nd grade** reading levels. The program began to ensure academic preparedness for success in secondary school.
- Year-long **academic levelling program** helped reinforce key areas like reading, language, arts, technology, mathematics and socio-emotional education.

### FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

Families received monthly **home visits from mentors** to focus on key content areas, to keep families informed, help them support their daughters, and work towards a new shared vision.

### QUALITY EDUCATION

- The intervention is focused on rigorous **student-centered academics on foundational skills** and acquiring 21st-century competencies (critical thinking, resilience, growth mindset, vocal empowerment).
- This approach **deviated** from the pedagogy and content of traditional rural schooling.
- The **school's leadership** and faculty mirror the same gender/race as the Girl Pioneers.





## SOCIO-EMOTIONAL MENTORSHIP & VOCAL EMPOWERMENT

- The intervention ensured individual and group mentorship sessions with focus on **essential non-academic content areas** such as leadership development, sexual and reproductive health, civic participation, coping skills, goal setting and communication skills.
- Every class has a mentor who is a **Maya woman** from the same communities as Girl Pioneers.
- Mentors support girl pioneers in **navigating life's challenges**, developing and using their voices, and actively participating in the society.

## LAUNCH YEAR

- The innovative gap-year program was launched to help **create an effective talent pipeline** connecting rural Guatemala with 21st-century employment and higher education opportunities.
- The program provides **hard and soft skills**, intensive workplace English, IT certification training, and 5-month internships in the formal economy.
- It provided information and training needed to **gain access to higher education**, increase access to scholarships and help navigate university entrance exams and admissions.

Families of Girl Pioneers have so far received 1500+ hours of engagement in 2021. MAIA ensured 94% retention rate of their Girl Pioneers, despite the pandemic. The quality education program has over 80% women and over 85% local talent. Girl pioneers have gone on to be part of leadership programs, opened a website to support the community, run programs to help other youth, and have received university scholarships and formal jobs.



### TAKEAWAY

To strengthen girl education in emergency contexts, it is essential to be proximate to the community, and **understand their pain, challenges, hopes, and dreams**. A holistic intervention is required which has **leadership embedded in the community**, who act as role models for others.

# Summary

Each of the six case studies in this brief represent approaches designed and implemented in diverse contexts across low- and middle-income countries. While the communities they serve hold unique strengths and challenges, each one of them is working towards better access to secondary education and developing skills and support systems needed to succeed in tertiary education and work.

Published by UNFPA '[The power of 1.8 billion adolescents, youth, and the transformation of the future](#)' (2014) states, about 90 per cent of the nearly two billion young people in the world today are in the Global South. And as the youth population is growing rapidly, this number will also increase. Considering this context, it is increasingly important to have an active community of secondary education practitioners, who share their experience with each other and with the wider education community.

## THROUGH THE APPROACHES HIGHLIGHTED WITHIN THESE ORGANISATIONS, WE HAVE LEARNED:

- **Adopt a holistic model to support students** from secondary school to their employment, through financial support, counselling, mentoring, alumni network and support, and partnership with universities.
- **Begin discussions about the student's future early** in the secondary education journey and involve parents in the process from the beginning.
- **Understand the skills that students and their families value**, skills that make them employable, and the skills that help students make decisions about their future.
- Especially for young women, **individual needs and challenges need to be considered**. Create safe spaces where they have access to information and where they can voice their views openly.
- In conflict situations, **involve all stakeholders and address the most urgent needs** of the community, led by empathetic local leadership who have faced similar challenges.
- **Schools should be a safe place where a youth's identity and values are cherished**, and they feel proud of where they belong despite their challenges.

This Practice Brief was compiled by Global Schools Forum  
in collaboration with





## About Global Schools Forum

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**Global Schools Forum (GSF) is a collaborative community of non-state organisations working to improve education at scale for underserved communities in low- and middle-income countries.**

**Our network is currently 84 members strong**, each working in partnership with communities and governments in 53+ countries. Our secretariat – spread across 4 continents – has expertise in school leadership, education innovation, and education financing. Our vision is that all children in low- and middle-income countries have equitable and safe access to quality education so they can realise their potential.

### Our Supporters



### Questions?

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If you have questions about this briefing, please write to [ajay.pinjani@globalschoolsforum.org](mailto:ajay.pinjani@globalschoolsforum.org).

