

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



Draft #14  
Revised 3 September 2019 (based on 19 August meeting)  
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## Executive Summary

### 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 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>

### An innovative model

Since 2005, UNICEF Thailand has worked with local education authorities in Mae Hong Son to develop the “District School” concept, which included research that found at least 1200 out-of-school children who had not been previously identified. To reach them, existing and newly-opened learning centers were grouped together for administrative purposes into a single, larger “school.” One “District School” would thus be composed of multiple “classrooms” that were many kilometers (and hours of travel) apart, with the school director traveling between them via four-wheel drive. The “District School” would thus meet Ministry of Education (MOE) enrollment targets, while teachers in the individual “classrooms” would have more time-on-task as they were supported by an administrative team in the district center.

### Encouraging results

Since its inception in 2005, thousands of ethnic children have benefitted 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.

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<sup>1</sup> The Nation, 2014

<sup>2</sup> UNESCO, 2017

<sup>3</sup> Mae Hong Son Provincial Education Office, 2017

## Abbreviations and Acronyms

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

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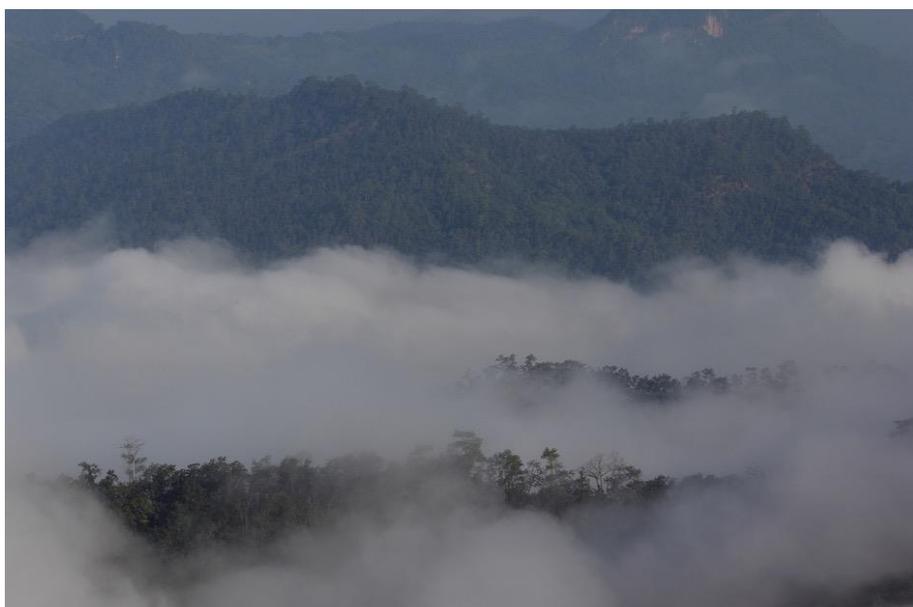


Photo: UNICEF Thailand/Chum. 2009

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## Introduction

### A unique setting

Mae Hong Son is the least populated, most forested, most ethnically diverse, and poorest of Thailand's 76 provinces<sup>4</sup>. Roughly 60 per cent of its 274,322 people come from ethnic minority groups, each with its own unique language and culture.<sup>5</sup> Rugged, mountainous terrain makes travel difficult, especially during the monsoon season. These factors present unique challenges for educators

### Low achievement and the language gap

Children in Mae Hong Son are among the lowest performing in the nation—just behind Malay-speaking children three southernmost provinces. While the Thai government has made tremendous efforts to enroll ethnic minority children in school, the connection between lack of mother tongue instruction to low academic outcomes has received little attention.

### 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>6</sup> This falls short of the MOE's goal of having a minimum of 100 pupils per school.<sup>7</sup>

### An innovative model

Since 2005, UNICEF Thailand has worked with Mae Hong Son Educational Service Area Organization 1 (ESAO 1) to develop the "District School" concept, in response to research which found 1200 out-of-school children in the province. Existing and newly opened learning centers were grouped together for administrative purposes into a single, larger "school." One "District School" would thus be composed of multiple "classrooms" that were many kilometers (and hours of travel) apart from each other, with the school director traveling between them via four-wheel drive. The "District School" would thus meet MOE enrollment targets, while teachers in the individual "classrooms" would have more time on task as they were supported by an administrative team in the district center.

### Encouraging results

Since its inception, **over 100,000 students** have studied in the four "District Schools." The problem of out-of-school children in ESAO 1 has been eliminated, and now 100 per cent of "District School" grade 6 graduates continue into secondary school. Most "District School" graduates say they would still prefer their small District School "classroom" over a larger school in town. Teachers, many of whom share the same ethnic mother tongue as their pupils, report high job satisfaction, despite the inconveniences of working in remote areas.

### Implications

This report details the history and lessons learned from a decade of "District School" experience. The "District School" approach could be adopted for other regions of Thailand and other countries, as education officials in remote areas seek to fulfill the promise of Sustainable Development Goal #4 to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all."

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4 The Nation, 2014

5 UNESCO, 2017

6 Mae Hong Son Provincial Education Office, 2017

7 World Bank, 2015

| [PHOTO: child in ethnic clothing](#)

## Abbreviations and Acronyms

|         |                                                          |
|---------|----------------------------------------------------------|
| DLT     | Distance Learning Technology                             |
| 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                               |
| 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 kilometers of land—87.2 per cent of which is still covered by forest.<sup>8</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-kilometer 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 UNCR-recognized refugee camps in Mae Hong Son Province.<sup>9</sup> There are also many documented and undocumented migrants living outside the camps. Many children are stateless, lacking citizenship in any country. ~~However, the~~ ~~Thankfully, the~~ Thai Ministry of Education guarantees any child, regardless of citizenship or lack thereof, the right to primary and secondary education in government schools.<sup>10</sup>

Multiple languages, rugged terrain and poverty combine to make educational provision challenging. Mae Hong Son has the nation’s 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>11</sup> MOE funds schools on a per-student basis, leaving Mae Hong Son schools with smaller student bodies under-resourced—a ~~fact which the government’s newly formed Equitable Education Fund hopes to address.~~<sup>12</sup> ~~despite a top-up subsidy for small schools of 250/student/semester.~~

Mae Hong Son Province is composed of seven *amphoe* ‘districts.’ ~~Four of these fall under 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, Sop Moei) are under ESAO 2.

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8 Mae Hong Son Provincial Education Office, 2017

9 The Border Consortium, 2019

10 164,000 migrant children are enrolled in Thai schools, while an additional 200,000 are out-of-school (United Nations, 2019).

11 UNICEF, 2016

[12 The Nation, 2018](#)

## Programme Origin

### The search for missing students

In 2005, Thai Ministry of Education ([MOE](#)) and [UNESCO-UNESCO](#) statisticians [were surprised to find that over 400,000 children in Thailand were out of school](#) [found a higher than expected number of out-of-school children in Thailand](#).<sup>13</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-Many](#) lacked citizenship in any nation.

Prior to that time, [local education authorities in](#) ESAO 1 [officials](#) 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 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 has bypassed many tiny clusters of houses—too few in number to meet the Interior Ministry’s definition of a “village”—tucked away in the mountains. Here, they found over 1200 out-of-school children who has simply [been “missed” bygone uncounted in](#) previous campaigns.<sup>14</sup>

Simultaneously, UNICEF Thailand was focusing its efforts on the most disadvantaged and vulnerable children, including those affected by the 2004 tsunami, [the violence in children in](#) the Deep South, and migrant and ethnic minority populations.<sup>15</sup> UNICEF sought to link government resources to local niche needs which might otherwise go unnoticed in national programs and policies.

### 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” this was a decentralized education system utilizing multigrade



<sup>13</sup> UNESCO Institute for Statistics & UNICEF, 2005

<sup>14</sup> Pracom, 2018

<sup>15</sup> Wiboonupatum, 2016

teaching<sup>16</sup> 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>17</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 the children.<sup>18</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’s solution was ingenious: 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 center, a 1-6-hour drive from each “classroom.” This new model would be called, “The District School.”



16 Prior to the New Zealand study tour, UNICEF had proposed a pilot project in multigrade teaching for about 1000 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 centers attached to EASOs. This was tried 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.

17 Blundell, 2005

18 Gosol-Pracom, 2018

### 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 enrollment. Others had previously been Community Learning Centers under the Office of the Non-Formal Education Commission (OFNEC), 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’s seed funding.

As time passed, more “classrooms” were added in increasingly remote areas, such that in 2013 [ESAO 1 decided the decision was made](#) to divide the 22 classrooms between four schools, along district (Thai=*amphoe*) lines. Each of the now four “District Schools” would have its own administrator, finance assistant, and facilities/equipment caretaker, along with 2-3 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.

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

[INSERT MAP HERE](#)

### Teacher pathways

[At the start of the programme, some of the contract teachers had only completed grade 12; university graduates willing to serve in remote areas were very difficult to find. Pre-service and in-service training helped prepare such teachers for their assignments, although in the end most taught as they themselves had been taught as children. Career advancement paths were opened, so that the unlicensed teachers could continue their studies and eventually become fully qualified government teachers.](#)

### Focus on literacy and numeracy

In terms of academics, the “District School” approach began with modest goals: teaching basic Thai literacy and numeracy. The program implementers realized that it was useless to try to teach other subjects, like science and social studies, to children who could not yet understand the Thai language. The focus in the early years was thus on developing basic Thai literacy and numeracy, as the foundation for all other learning. And of these two, Thai language was the most important.

In this, they confronted problems. The Thai language abilities of many of these students were extremely low or non-existent. The ESAO 1 team looked at Thai teaching materials developed by the Office of the Non-Formal Education Commission and others, and briefly considered developing their own curriculum. In the end, however, it was left to the individual teachers to experiment with how to best teach Thai to their pupils. Already, the 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. Even today the “word for the day” in many classrooms is written in Thai and English, accompanied by a Thai alphabet phonetic transcription of the ethnic language equivalent.

PHOTO: Bamboo Classroom Scene

### Khru Euiw's Story [BOX]

Khru ('teacher') Euiw's story is illustrative of the hopes and dreams of the "District School" founders.

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 UNICEF's "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 certified government teacher, taught the older kids. Our goal was to teach them basic literacy and numeracy, but they also learned about nutrition, cooking and hygiene by helping us teachers prepare the free school 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.

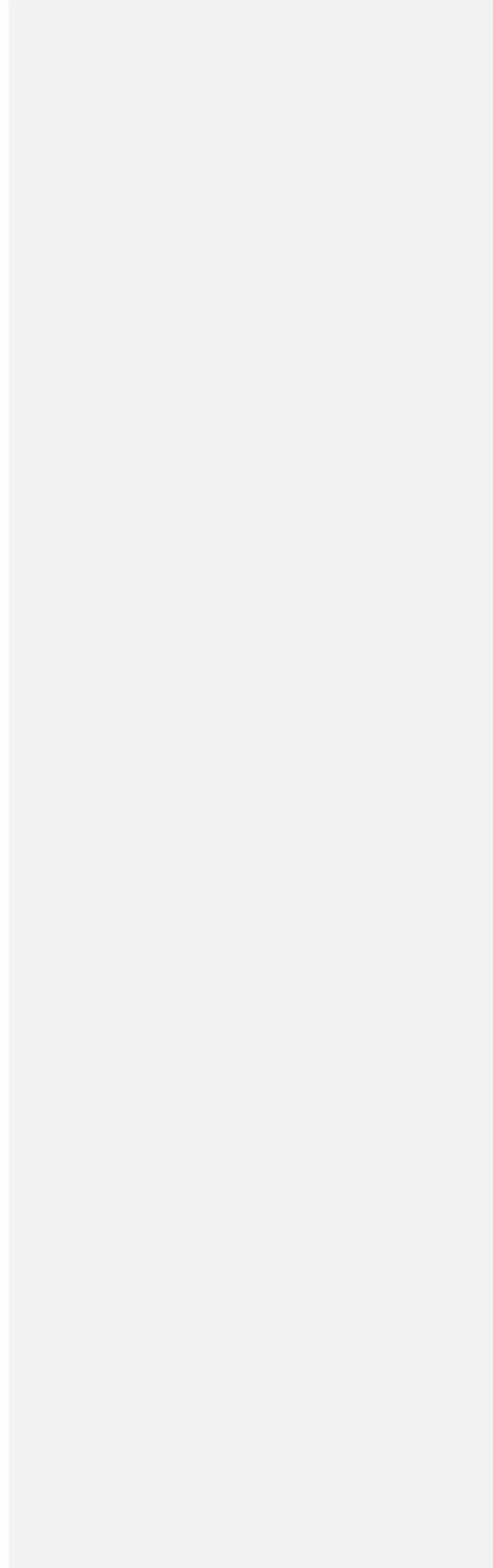
Meanwhile, UNICEF and ESAO 1 partnered with the Local Development Administration and Suan Dusit Rajabhat University to offer a special course for "mountain teachers" like me. It was a lot of work! Every Friday I would finish teaching, then hop on my motorcycle to drive down the mountain for class. This 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 1000 meters) 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.



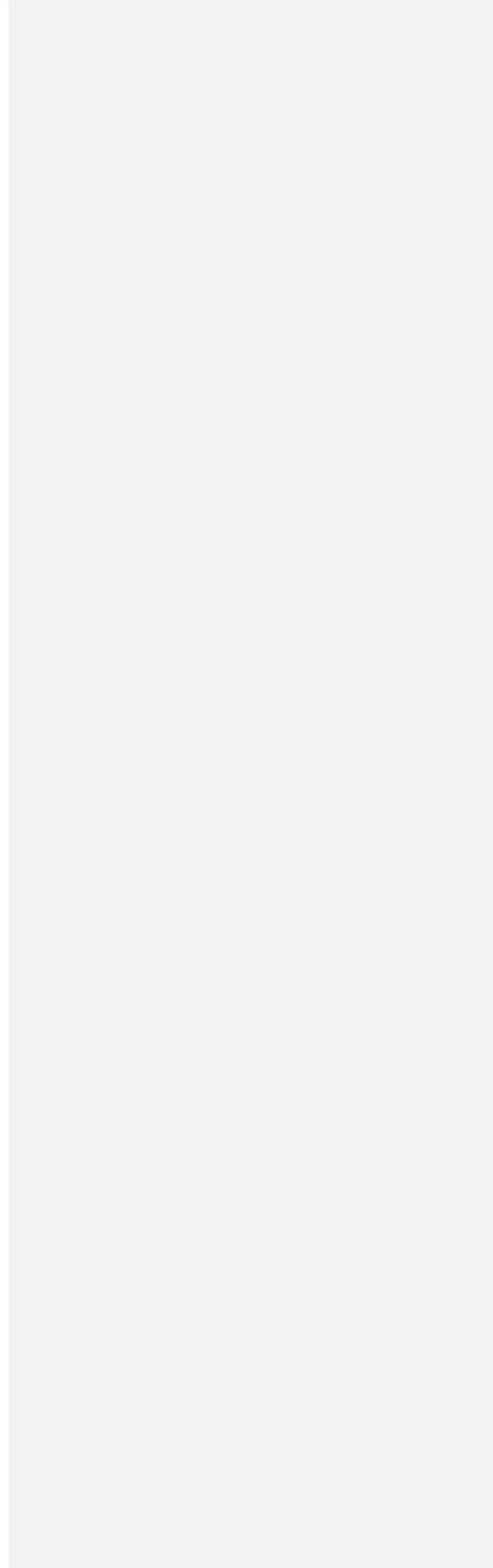
PHOTO: Khruue Euiw with her Lisu students. T Thomas UNICEF 2008

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The "District School" [Model](#) ~~Model~~ Today

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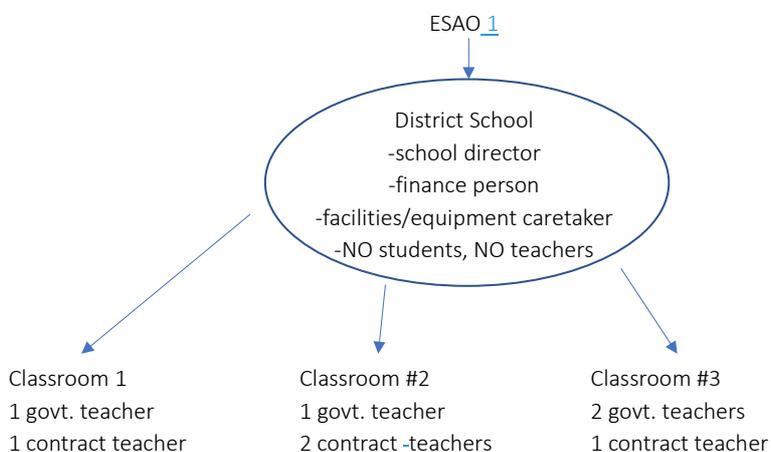


## The "District School" ~~Model~~ Today

### A ~~non~~-centric ~~center~~

In the "District School" model, the core administrative team has its office in the district center, with no teachers or students present. The school director's office is thus 20+ kilometers from the classrooms—which are separated from each other separated by many kilometers. The core administrative team regularly visiting the remote "classrooms" to support the government and local hire contract teachers. Children remain in the "classrooms" through grade 6, after which they transfer to a secondary ~~boarding school~~ school elsewhere in the province.

Figure 224 "District School" organizational chart (~~theoretical~~-based on MHS ESAO 1)



1 ~~babysitter~~caretaker<sup>19</sup>  
~~babysitter~~caretaker

1 special needs teacher 1

The “District School” model is thus distinguished from the more widely-known “Mother-Daughter” model, centered around a larger school and schools it partially supports. In MHS ESAO 2, for example, the “daughters” are virtually stand-alone schools, with a school director

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<sup>19</sup> Many children were arriving at school with younger siblings strapped to their backs—due to the cultural expectation that older children should care for their siblings while the parents were working the fields. Thus minimal local government funding was often sought to hire local mothers as babysitters, so the school-aged children could focus on their studies.

~~and~~ both government and local hire teachers. Students typically leave the daughter school in grade 3 or 4, to study and board at the a larger mother school.<sup>20</sup>

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 the parents were working the fields. Thus minimal local government funding has often needed to be sought to hire a caregiver (often a local mother) for the younger siblings, so the school-aged children can focus on their studies.

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<sup>20</sup> Baan Maerameng School and its twelve satellites in Tak Province is a good example of the mother-daughter model.

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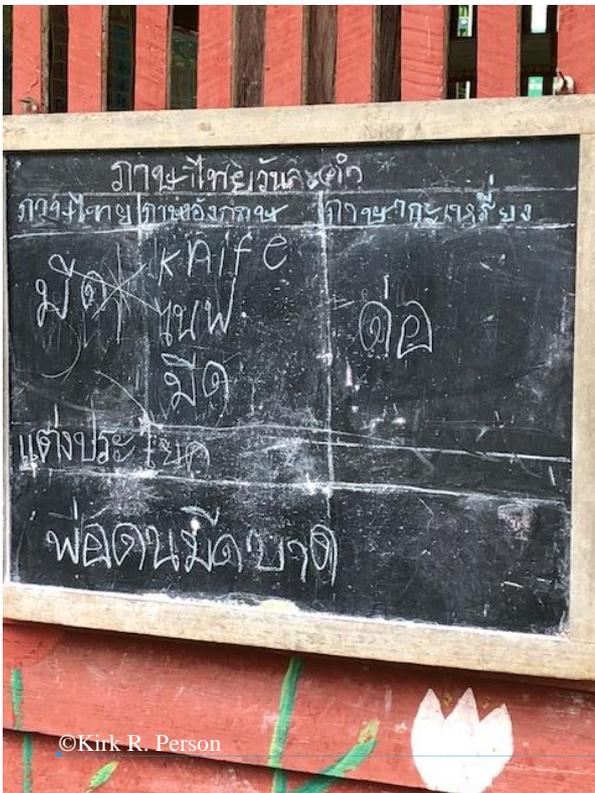
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Figure 2 Typical "Mother School-Daughter School" organizational chart (theoretical, based on MHS ESAO 2)

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. And of these two, Thai language was the most important.

In this, they 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.



Already, the 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 for the day" in many classrooms is written in Thai and English, accompanied by a Thai alphabet phonetic transcription of the ethnic language equivalent.

PHOTO: "Word for the day" in Thai, English, and Sgaw Karen written in Thai script

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©Kirk R. Person

### Materials for early grade reading [BOX]

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 only native Thai speaker in the group—was using the OBEC’s standard curriculum, although she often asks older students to explain the lessons in the mother tongue. The other six teachers, all Sgaw Karen, depend on the *Manee* series that was a staple of Thai education in the ‘70s and ‘80s. 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). Also, the *Manee* series 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 focusses 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 the UNICEF-TOPS mobile libraries.

### **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).

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Photo: Chaiwee Khachonkhunkwamdee 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 admission. 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 2018-19 academic year.

Table 1 Pai District School class offerings, 2018-19

| Classroom      | K1 | K2 | K3 | G1 | G2 | G3 | G4 | G5 | G6 |
|----------------|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|
| Baan Na Jalong | x  | 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  | x  |
| Baan Manora    | x  | x  |    | x  |    |    | x  |    | x  |
| Baan Huay Due  | x  | x  | x  | x  |    |    | x  | x  | x  |

Most “classrooms” have 2-3 physical rooms, for pre-primary, early primary and late primary students. Due to staff limitations, one teacher will be [always](#) responsible for more than one grade. This is illustrated in the teaching responsibility chart below, based on the Baan Manora classroom from the “Pai District School,” in which one teacher is responsible for K2, K3, and G6, while the other supervises G2 and G4:

Table 222 Multigrade teaching in Pai District School, 2018-19

| Grade | Assigned Teacher        | rank    | specialiation      |
|-------|-------------------------|---------|--------------------|
| K2    | Mr. Kritpas Prodprannam | Level 1 | social studies     |
| K3    | Mr. Kritpas Prodprannam | Level 1 | social studies     |
| G1    |                         |         |                    |
| G2    | Mr. Suthep Sathert      | Level 2 | physical education |
| G3    |                         |         |                    |
| G4    | Mr. Suthep Sathert      | Level 2 | physical education |
| G5    |                         |         |                    |
| G6    | Mr. Kritpas Prodprannam | Level 1 | social studies     |

| 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 ~~thus~~ the ~~norm~~ 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 a gap that needs to be addressed. ~~,although most teachers do not recognize the term and have not received specific training for it; rather they 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.~~

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>21</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 20-30 students per grade—

<sup>21</sup> Bangkok Post, 2015

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 enrollment figures from the “Khun Yuam District School” (below). From an administrative standpoint, this is a single school managed by a single school director, enrolling with 54 pre-primary and 131 primary students studying in 9 classrooms, for a total of 18. This yields an average class size of 20.56 pupils. In actuality, however, the class size ranges from 1-9 students in each grade of a “District School” classroom. 5. The total number of grade 1 students stands at 35—slightly above the MOE goal of 30. In actuality, however, most of the grade 1 classes contain as few as 2 and as many as 8 pupils, for an average of 3.9 per class. The other grades have even fewer pupils. The “Khun Yuam District School” thus fulfills the letter and spirit of MOE policy, enrolling over 100 students while maintaining an average class size that, with one exception, is much lower than the target.

Table 3 Enrollment 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>   |
| <b>Students/class (average)</b>         | <b>0.6</b>  | <b>2.2</b> | <b>3.2</b> | <b>3.9</b> | <b>2.9</b> | <b>1.8</b> | <b>2.6</b> | <b>1.9</b> | <b>1.6</b> | <b>20.56</b> |
| <b>Students/class (excluding zeros)</b> | <b>2.5</b>  | <b>2.5</b> | <b>3.2</b> | <b>4.4</b> | <b>3.7</b> | <b>2.3</b> | <b>2.9</b> | <b>2.4</b> | <b>2</b>   | <b>20.56</b> |

#### Student mother tongues-ethnicity

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 the table below. Native speakers of Central and Northern Thai comprise only 10 per cent of the total.

Table 4 Student mother tongues, AY 2018

|              | Total | %     |
|--------------|-------|-------|
| Karen (Sgaw) | 194   | 42.5% |

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|                      |            |               |
|----------------------|------------|---------------|
| <u>Shan</u>          | <u>70</u>  | <u>15.4%</u>  |
| <u>Lahu (Red)</u>    | <u>62</u>  | <u>13.6%</u>  |
| <u>Lahu (Black)</u>  | <u>53</u>  | <u>11.6%</u>  |
| <u>Northern Thai</u> | <u>35</u>  | <u>7.7%</u>   |
| <u>Hmong</u>         | <u>31</u>  | <u>6.8%</u>   |
| <u>Thai</u>          | <u>6</u>   | <u>1.3%</u>   |
| <u>Lisu</u>          | <u>4</u>   | <u>0.9%</u>   |
| <u>Burmese</u>       | <u>1</u>   | <u>0.2%</u>   |
|                      | <u>456</u> | <u>100.0%</u> |

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Table 4 Mother tongue of District School students by grade

|                | G1  | G2 | G3 | G4 | G5 | G6 | Total | %     |
|----------------|-----|----|----|----|----|----|-------|-------|
| Sgaw Karen     | 36  | 44 | 18 | 37 | 30 | 29 | 194   | 42.5% |
| Shan           | 29  | 4  | 3  | 13 | 1  | 20 | 70    | 15.4% |
| Lahu (Red)     | 15  |    | 18 | 15 | 14 | 0  | 62    | 13.6% |
| Lahu (Black)   | 13  | 25 |    | 5  | 5  | 5  | 53    | 11.6% |
| Thai, Northern | 5   | 8  | 5  | 5  | 4  | 8  | 35    | 7.7%  |
| Hmong          | 5   | 9  | 4  | 3  | 4  | 6  | 31    | 6.8%  |
| Thai, Central  |     | 3  |    | 2  |    | 1  | 6     | 1.3%  |
| Lisu           |     | 2  | 1  |    | 1  |    | 4     | 0.9%  |
| Burmese        | 1   |    |    |    |    |    | 1     | 0.2%  |
| Total          | 105 | 97 | 52 | 84 | 64 | 75 | 456   |       |

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However, it would be a mistake to conclude from table 4 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. And 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 of the type that have already received Thai government and United Nations awards elsewhere in the North and Deep South.

## Teacher selection, retention and capacity development

Teacher selection and training has long been a challenge in remote regions. ~~In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Department of Nonformal Education (NFE) cooperated with several Thai government agencies, Thai and foreign universities, and the US Agency for International Development (USAID) to develop the “Hill Areas Education Model.”<sup>22</sup> Also known as the “Ashram approach,” this project sent idealistic Thai young people to faraway villages to conduct holistic development projects centered on education. The Thai media praised these “mountain teachers” for their dedication and self sacrifice.~~

~~Later, elements of the “Hill Areas” approach were utilized by NFE in their community learning centers (which served children as well as adults) and various formal schools, as OBEC and partners like the Thai Border Police expanded education to increasingly remote locations. 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 transfer to a different school. But teacher attrition is high. Most According to several school directors, most government teachers assigned to remote locations either resign before their time is completed or transfer immediately thereafter.<sup>23</sup> OBEC’s “hardship post” stipend of 2000 baht per month (\$65) does not compensate for the loneliness and culture shock often experienced by Thai teachers from more urban settings.~~

The “District School” programme exhibited considerable creativity in its early days to hire and retain 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 ~~are bachelor degree holding licensed teachers~~ have bachelor degrees.<sup>24</sup> The “ethnic teachers” in all four “District Schools” have served as long or slightly longer than the government teachers. who fell short in their efforts to become full government teachers. “Local contract teachers” throughout rural Thailand are typically paid 1/3 as much as new government teachers, with no benefits or raises. Nonetheless, the ethnic teachers in all four “District Schools” have, on average, served as long or slightly longer than the government teachers.

<sup>22</sup> Ministry of Education, 1982

<sup>23</sup> Government teachers serving in remote areas do receive a 2000 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>24</sup> “Local contract teachers” throughout rural Thailand typically receive 1/3 the salary of a new government teacher, with no benefits or raises.

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### Teacher qualifications

The “District Schools” cannot be too selective when it comes to teachers; Thailand has long struggled with teacher shortages in rural area.<sup>25,26</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>27</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 programs, precisely because their disadvantaged educational backgrounds make university entrance difficult. And of the various teacher specialties available, physical education is less academically demanding than Thai, mathematics, or science [\(see appendix \)](#).

### 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 the 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 [\(who currently receive about 1/3 the income of a new government teacher\)](#)
- 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
- [Additional felt needs of the teachers included better materials for teaching language \(Thai and English\) and ICT, as well as more supplementary reading materials and training in a diversity of teaching](#)

Photos: Chaiwee Khachonkhunhwamdee 2018

<sup>25</sup> [Lathapipat, 2018](#)

<sup>26</sup> [Lathapipat, 2018](#)

<sup>27</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 Academic specialties of District School teachers

| KYDS | PMPDS | MDS | PDS | Total | %      |
|------|-------|-----|-----|-------|--------|
| 7    | 3     | 7   | 4   | 21    | 28.8%  |
| 4    | 4     | 2   | 5   | 15    | 20.5%  |
| 5    | 3     | 1   | 2   | 11    | 15.1%  |
| 1    | 2     | 1   | 1   | 5     | 6.8%   |
|      | 1     | 0   | 3   | 4     | 5.5%   |
| 2    |       | 1   | 0   | 3     | 4.1%   |
| 1    |       | 1   | 1   | 3     | 4.1%   |
| 1    |       | 1   | 0   | 2     | 2.7%   |
| 2    | 1     |     |     | 3     | 4.1%   |
|      | 1     | 0   | 0   | 1     | 1.4%   |
|      |       | 1   | 0   | 1     | 1.4%   |
|      |       | 1   | 0   | 1     | 1.4%   |
|      |       |     | 1   | 1     | 1.4%   |
| 1    |       |     |     | 1     | 1.4%   |
| 1    |       |     |     | 1     | 1.4%   |
| 25   | 15    | 16  | 17  | 73    | 100.0% |

Teacher ethnicity/mother tongues

Three out of the four “District Schools” reported the mother tongue of their teachers. Nearly half As shown in figure \_\_, 44.3% 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:

Table 5 Teacher mother tongues, AY 2018

|                          | Teachers  | %             |
|--------------------------|-----------|---------------|
| <u>Karen (Sgaw)</u>      | <u>27</u> | <u>44.3%</u>  |
| <u>Northern Thai</u>     | <u>15</u> | <u>24.6%</u>  |
| <u>Shan</u>              | <u>12</u> | <u>19.7%</u>  |
| <u>Northeastern Thai</u> | <u>3</u>  | <u>4.9%</u>   |
| <u>Thai</u>              | <u>2</u>  | <u>3.3%</u>   |
| <u>Hmong</u>             | <u>2</u>  | <u>3.3%</u>   |
| <u>Total</u>             | <u>61</u> | <u>100.0%</u> |

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32.8% are native speakers of one of the three Thai regional dialects (Northern, Issan, Central) and 19.7% speakers of Shan.<sup>28</sup>

Table 6 Mother tongues of District School teachers (excluding MDS)

|                | KYDS | PMPDS | PDS | Total | %      |
|----------------|------|-------|-----|-------|--------|
| Sgaw Karen     | 16   | 6     | 5   | 27    | 44.3%  |
| Thai, Northern | 4    | 2     | 9   | 15    | 24.6%  |
| Shan           | 2    | 7     | 3   | 12    | 19.7%  |
| Thai, Issan    | 2    | 1     |     | 3     | 4.9%   |
| Hmong          |      |       | 2   | 2     | 3.3%   |
| Thai, Central  | 1    |       | 1   | 2     | 3.3%   |
| Total          | 25   | 16    | 20  | 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, ~~as well as mobile library staff.~~ Quarterly meetings give teachers the chance to share experiences with peers, something which researchers say can be of the most productive means of teacher professional development.<sup>29</sup> Frequent (at least twice per month) visits by the school director provide encouragement and opportunities to seek and receive input.

~~In the early days of the program, UNICEF and Suan Dusit Rajabhat University partnered to create a Historically, there have been~~ pathway through which “ethnic teachers” ~~can could~~ become fully certified government teachers. Two of the earliest “ethnic teachers” utilized this opportunity to complete bachelor degrees in weekend programs and eventually pass the licensing exam with high enough scores 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 on treacherous jungle 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.

<sup>28</sup> Shan is in the same linguistic family as Thai; thus, Shan children face fewer obstacles in learning Thai than Sgaw Karen, Lisu, Hmong or Lahu students (whose mother tongues are from other language families)

<sup>29</sup> Burns & Lawrie, 2015

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Khru Euiw's Story [BOX]

"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 1000 meters) 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."



©UNICEF Thailand/2008/Thomas

Parental support for the “District Schools” is high. The 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.

The “classrooms” also host events designed to heighten parental involvement, although efforts to form created engaged local school committees or parent teacher organizations school committees have not been as successful as hoped. Several teachers commented that many parents have little or no education themselves, and, with few exceptions, are not willing to sacrifice time that could be spent in income-generating activities for such meetings feel that education is best left to the “experts”—the teachers. Too, most parents lack the Thai language skills to interact with Thai teachers participate in a school committee meeting.



Photo: UNICEF Thailand/2009/Chum

Photo—picture of teacher at front of class or sitting with students

### 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 jungle. And 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 and 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 [the Royal Project’s “Distance Learning Technology Television” \(DLTV\)](#) as a virtual requirement for remote schools, investing [millions of baht](#) 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, argue for greater investment in teacher training. IT solutions may hold theoretical promise, but improving the daily teacher-to-student interaction will yield stronger benefits for children.

PHOTO: [Satellite dish or solar panels](#) Kirk R. Person, 2019



## The UNICEF-Tops Mobile Libraries

The “District Schools” have benefitted 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 travel across difficult jungle trails, before pulling up in front of a classroom and lowering the gangplank for students to enter. Currently, seven mobile library trucks serve small schools in Mae Hong Son, Tak, and Loei Provinces.

Each Mobile Library has a driver and an “animator.” The animators are trained to bring books to life, through puppet shows, acting out stories, coloring 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>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> In early 2019, UNICEF TCO commissioned a study on enhancing the impact of the Mobile Library Programme.

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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) were invited to share 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 colored 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 1-3 colored 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.

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Photos Kirk R. Person 2018



### 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 jungle trails 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. Too, the culture of most of these ethnic minority groups is more accepting of the idea of male offspring venturing outside the community, -while expecting females to play traditional roles in the home. It can thus be safely 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.

PHOTO: Ethnic girl, female teacher Kirk R. Person, 2019. Students from the widely dispersed “District School” classrooms come together once or twice each year for athletic and academic activities.



The main objective of the “District Schools” ~~at the start of the programme was to provide~~ [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.

But 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?](#)

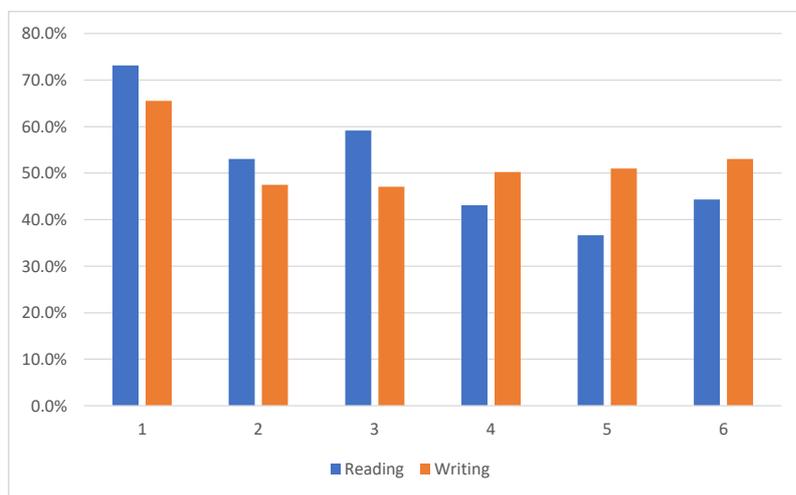
To answer ~~this~~ [these](#) questions we will look at two types of national standardized tests: the recently-introduced ~~quarterly~~ Thai literacy assessment (RT) for ~~all~~ grade 1-6 students, and the grade 6 Ordinary National Education Test (O-NET) covering Thai language, English, math and science.

#### The National Literacy Assessment (RT)

The RT measures students’ Thai reading and writing four times each year, ~~with the intent of identifying at-risk students~~ [to identify at-risk students](#). The grade 1 assessment focusses on reading and writing a handful of simple words. In later grades, reading comprehension and creative writing are included.

[As shown in below, students in the four “District Schools” performed better on both the reading and writing sections the RT in grade one than in the subsequent years.](#)

*Figure 3 Performance of “District School” students on National Literacy Assessment (RT), by grade*



education officials interviewed for this publication said that the same pattern is seen throughout the province: ethnic students perform well on the District School students follow the Mae Hong Son provincial trend of performing well on the grade one assessment RT (which focusses on identification and word formation), but poorly in the subsequent grades when reading comprehension grows in importance thereafter. This unquestionably relates to the language speaking-children in urban areas perform much better on the RT have a linguistic advantage Thai-

“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

## 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 the 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 *(who currently receive about 1/3 the income of a new government teacher)*
- 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
- *Additional felt needs of the teachers included better materials for teaching language (Thai and English) and ICT, as well as more supplementary reading materials and training in a diversity of teaching*

Photos: Chaiwee Khachonkhunkhwandee 2018

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## Learning Access and academic outcomes **Outcomes**

The main objective of the “District Schools” ~~at the start of the programme was to provide~~ 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.

~~The main educational goal has always been to teach Thai literacy. Other subjects are less in focus, especially during the early years.~~

But 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?

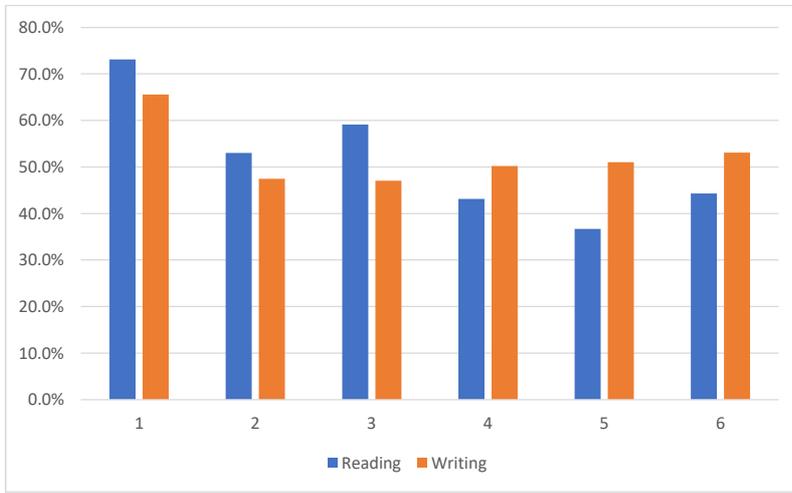
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As shown in below, students in the four “District Schools” performed better on both the reading and writing sections the RT in grade one than in the subsequent years.

*Figure 3 Performance of “District School” students on National Literacy Assessment (RT), by grade*



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 District School students follow the Mae Hong Son provincial trend of performing well on the grade one

“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

assessment (which focusses on letter identification and word formation), but poorly in the subsequent grades when reading comprehension grows in importance thereafter. This the language issue; native Thai speaking-children in urban areas perform much better on 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 (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 5-16 per cent higher than the non-Tai speakers over all six grades.

Indeed, as shown in figure \_\_\_\_\_, Pai District School students who are native speakers of Thai or Thai-related languages (Northern Thai, Shan) consistently perform much better than ethnic language speakers from grade 1-6:

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

The Grade 6 Ordinary National Education Test (O-NET)

All students in Thailand are required to take the Grade 6 Ordinary National Education Test (O-NET). This is a very high-stakes exam; schools are ranked according to their O-NET scores, which impacts teacher and school director promotions. Still, O-NET scores nationwide are depressingly low.

The lowest Grade 6 O-NET scores come from eleven provinces which the National Institute of Educational Testing Services has declared “red zones” (NEITS, 2019). All eleven provinces are home to large populations of rural children who speak ethnic languages as their mother tongue, and thus lag behind in both Thai language and other subjects. It is thus no surprise that Mae Hong Son Province is a “red zone” Mae Hong Son is one of the eleven poorest performing provinces in the nation, designated a “red zone” on the National Institute of Educational Testing Service’s O-NET map.<sup>34</sup>

*Figure 5 “Red zones” of low O-NET achievement (adapted from NIETS, 2019)*



As shown in figure \_\_\_\_, below, O-NET results for students in the “District Schools” are comparable to the provincial average. This indicates that the quality of education being provided through this unique network of small “classrooms” approximates that of larger schools in the region. rank slightly below the ESAO + average which in turn is far below the national average. Still, the “District Schools” are doing better than many other schools in Mae Hong Son; if scores were divided into four “bands,” they would be in the third band.

“One reason that many linguistic and ethnic minority children perform poorly in school is that they are often taught in a language they struggle to understand. Around 221 million children speak a different language at home from the language of instruction in school, limiting their ability to develop foundations for later learning.” UNESCO, Education for All Global Monitoring Report (2010)

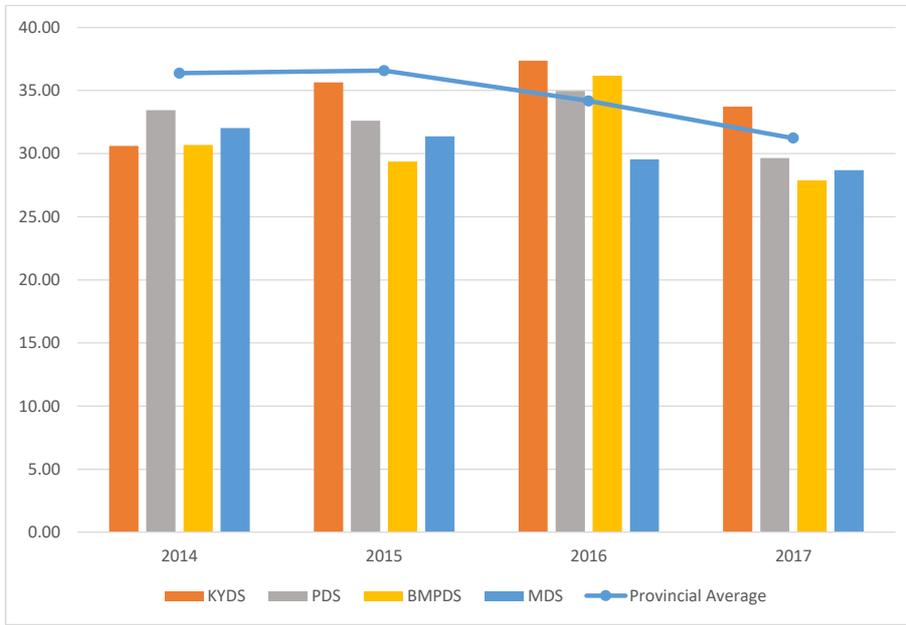
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Figure 6 Combined O-NET scores of “District Schools” relative to provincial average

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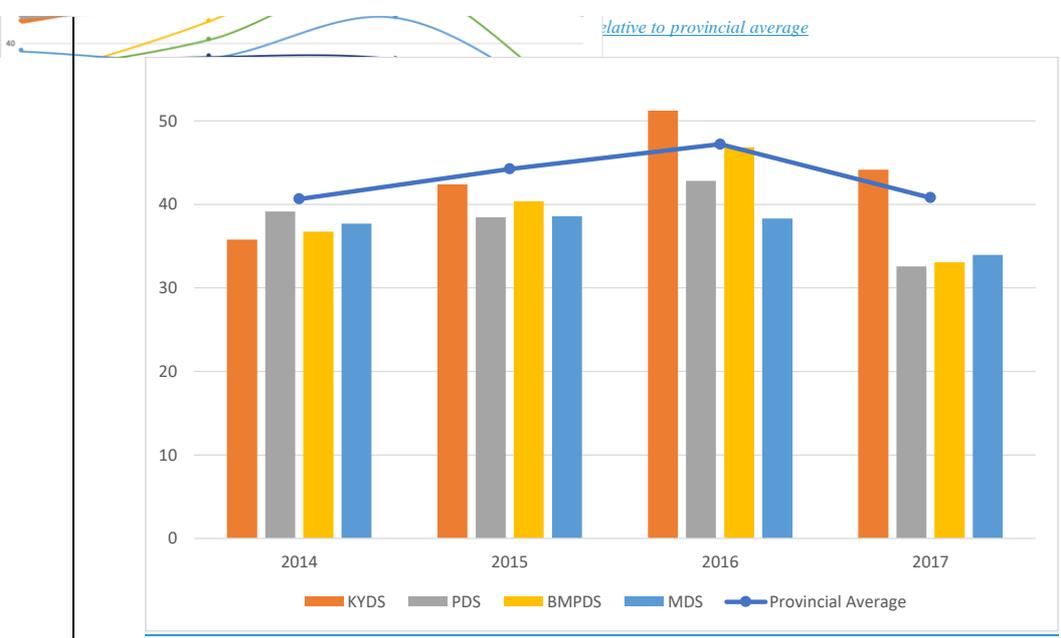
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Since 2015, Here, too, we find an intriguing connection with language. Khun Yuam KYDS is the highest-ranked has posted the highest “District School” combined O-Net scores “District School” in the combined scores shown above. The The gap between KYDS and the other “District Schools” gap becomes even wider when looking at Thai language scores, as in 2016 and 2017 where Khun Yuam KYDS students exceeded the ESAO 1 provincial Thai language average<sup>32</sup> and approached the national average, as shown in figure \_\_\_\_\_. This is remarkable, given that the provincial average includes many urban Thai-speaking children.

<sup>32</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.

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**Why do KYDS students do better at Thai? this?**

~~While more detailed statistical analysis and focused interviews would be required to provide a conclusive answer, one possible factor relates to the mother tongue of the teachers.~~ KYDS is unique

among the "District Schools" in that because 64 per cent of teachers speak Sgaw Karen as their mother tongue—as do almost 100 per cent of the students.

"The level of development of children's mother tongue is a strong predictor of their second language development...Children...with a solid foundation in their mother tongue develop stronger literacy abilities in the school language." Jim Cummins, University of Toronto (2000)

The teachers can thus use the students' first language as a learning resource. This would corroborates international research on the benefits of mother tongue-based instruction, as well as recent 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>33</sup> In addition, these Karen teachers serve as role models for children who would otherwise never see an

<sup>33</sup> Sawaengmongkon, 2014; Naw Khu Shee, (2017 YEAR), SSRU PHD (YEAR) Indeed, 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). (VICTORIAN SCHOOL OF LANGUAGES)

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ethnic minority person in a professional position.<sup>34</sup> *Using their mother tongue in the classroom helps Karen students learn Thai better!*

#### 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

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34 Experience could also be a factor. Teachers in both PDS and KYDS have an average of 5+ 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-~~teacher\_5-~~

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## The “District Schools” in the Thai Public Eye

The “District Schools” and the Thai public eye

### Celebrity visits

~~Several~~ Two “Friends of UNICEF”—Thai celebrities committed to UNICEF’s ideals—have visited 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 ~~by supporting the work of UNICEF and other charitable causes.~~

PHOTO: Thai-Swedish actress Ann Thongprasom visits with children in the early years of the “District School” programme. 2009 Chum UNICEF

PHOTO: Singer and actor Pachara Chirathiwa “Peach” visits a ~~district school~~ “District School” classroom. 2017 Sukhum UNICEF

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<sup>35</sup> In early 2019, UNICEF TCO commissioned a study on enhancing the impact of the Mobile Library Programme.

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### 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.

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### 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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Photo Kirk R. Person, 2018

### Cost effectiveness

Under any scenario, the “District School” model represents a net savings for the Ministry of Education, 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>36</sup>

If all 27 “classrooms” that will be part [of the ESAO 1](#) “District School” system in FY 2019-20 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 jungle 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 labor to maintain facilities and often supply food to teachers
- [No primary school drop-outs](#)
- [100% of grade six 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>37</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

<sup>36</sup> In 2015, staff salaries comprised 52.94 per cent of Ministry of Education budget (Education Council, MOE, 2558).

<sup>37</sup> Based on ESAO 1 statistics reporting the average monthly salary for government teachers as 23,180 baht.

caretakers or finance assistants. Still, this would require at least twice as many personnel that under the “District Schools” — which employ 1 finance assistant and 5 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 kilometers, mostly on unpaved jungle roads which can be nearly impassable during the monsoon season. The annual travel budget for all four school directors for 2019-20 totals 168,000 baht (\$5,400).

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. Budget for these meetings includes teacher travel, meals, lodging (although they often bring blankets and sleep on classroom floors), stationary and other materials, and sometimes an honorarium 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 2018-19 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>38</sup>



PHOTO Chaiwee Khachonkhunkhwamdee 2018

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 Ministry of Education would be 12.84 million baht (\$67,000).

<sup>38</sup> ~~OBEC~~ ~~It should be noted that the OBEC~~ provides an addition 250 baht/student/semester, annual stipend to small schools. However, the “District Schools” do not receive this stipend, as they are defined as “medium size schools” with enrollments exceeding 120 students.

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~~It should also be noted that the~~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 2000 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 non-traditional budgetary line items for director travel and staff meetings are required. Maintaining and expanding the “District School” model makes fiscal sense.

[Photo: UNICEF Thailand/2009/Chum](#)





UNICEF Thailand/2008/Thomas

## Looking Back, Looking Forward

### Challenges

The “District Schools” have faced many [challenges-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 were giving out television sets to receive educational satellite broadcasts, each school would receive one [set/unit](#), to be shared among all the classrooms. This presents difficulties for the “District Schools”, since their “classrooms” can be 20 or more kilometers apart! Thus, [PMPDS Pang Mapha District School](#), 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, [Khun Yuam District School-KYDS](#) recently signed an MOU with the Thai Ministry of [Education Energy](#) to install more modern solar electricity systems in several remote classrooms, [while the Bang Mapha District School partnered with Sati, Planet Water and Thai Metal in bringing water filtration systems to “District School” classrooms and their surrounding communities.](#)
- **Helping ethnic minority parents see the value of education** for their children. [Teachers who speak the parents’ language can help build bridges to family, encouraging greater community support for education.](#)
- **Recruiting and retaining good teachers** able to adapt to difficult living situations [and cross cultural and linguistic divides.](#)
- **Developing materials and teaching practices to help ethnic children learn Thai** [achieve greater success in learning the Thai language. 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>39</sup>

“The purpose of reading is understanding. And understanding is achieved when children make connections between what they read and the knowledge that they already have acquired. Children who have no access to reading materials that build on what they already have acquired whether language, culture or geography, are seriously disadvantaged.” Robert Prouty, World Bank (2009)

Photo: Kirk Person, 2018

<sup>39</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.](#)

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## 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 4-6 “classrooms” (each of which serves 20-40 children)
- **Teacher recruitment:** Ethnic children benefit from having ethnic teachers who can explain things to them and interact with their parents in the 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 and resources for learning and celebrated in the classroom.
- **Pass-Through to secondary school cannot be taken for granted:** In 2009, only 1/3 of



UNICEF Thailand/2008/Thomas

“District School” graduates continued into 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 programs; 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.

## -Policy Links

Recent policy developments reflect OBEC'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 government's long-established Quality Learning Foundation (QLF) was reborn and rebranded as~~ the Equitable Education Fund (EEF), ~~in cooperation with the Global Education Partnership.~~<sup>40</sup> The name ~~change~~ is significant; past government efforts ~~equated educational~~ defined "equality" ~~with all~~ as children having access to the national curriculum taught by centrally certified teachers. A key goal of the EEF is to address the unique needs of ~~specially disadvantaged/marginalized~~ children, rejecting the "one size fits all" ~~presupposition of approach to~~ "equality." To do this, EEF ~~leadership have discussed the will focus~~ on small schools whose students, for reasons of geography, cannot be consolidated ~~need to provide "special protection" to some 3000 "small schools into larger schools."~~ This will enable these ~~small~~ schools to introduce and sustain innovations more easily than could be done within the ~~nationwide-national~~ educational bureaucracy. ~~EEF also aims to identify high school students from remote areas with and 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 school. This could extend to special policies for hiring local teachers who speak the same mother tongue as their pupils.~~ This is wonderful news for Thailand's ethnic minority children!-

OBEC's ~~policy for FY 2019 Annual Policy for Fiscal Year 2019~~ contains many hopeful provisions. ~~In the introduction,~~ 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 ~~in schools serving such children.~~ Section 3.2.2.6 commits OBEC to "developing teachers able to teach Thai to children who speak Thai as a second language."<sup>41</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 mother tongue-based multilingual education and other innovative approaches tailored to the needs of ethnic minority children.<sup>42</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

"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 (UNICEF 2018) One reason that many linguistic and ethnic minority children perform poorly in school is that they

<sup>40</sup> The Nation, 2018<sup>40</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Office of the Basic Education Commission, 2019

<sup>42</sup> Suwanwela, 2018

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“thinking outside the box” is thus in a unique position to help transform these new funding and policy visions into concrete realities benefitting thousands of disadvantaged children.

PHOTO: Teacher at work, or maybe of the MOE

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

- **Expansion:** Study the “District School” model to determine its suitability for other areas of the country, considering the budgetary and management policies needed to achieve success
- **2019 Policy Implementation:** In cooperation with the [Equitable Education Fund](#), NGOs/Foundations, and ESAOs serving students in remote areas, create space for discussion of how the ideals of [the OBEC’s 2019 national policy white paper](#) can be actualized on 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, increase the number of ethnic teachers, and ensure that they are placed in schools where the language skills can be used.](#)
- **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 1-6 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 materials development and teacher training.

“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

### ESAO 1

- **MTB-MLE:** Cooperate with external partners to develop and test mother tongue-based multilingual education in [the Khun Yuam District School](#) 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 [the Foundation for Applied Linguistics and Mahidol University](#)
- **“District School” Expansion:** [As other small stand-alone schools come into the “District School” framework, ensure that school directors are not overburdened with](#)

too many classrooms. **IT Facilitation:** Ensure teachers have access to existing IT resources, and the professional development opportunities to use it 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 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 program 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 (UNICEF, 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 EASOs serving ethnically diverse student populations).
- **Materials Development:** UNICEF's mobile library program 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. **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.
- **Child Protection:** External partners should cooperate with relevant government agencies to improve child protection in boarding school dorms housing upper primary and secondary school students.

Photo: UNICEF Thailand/2015/Suracheth



## 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, [hundreds-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 [doubtless](#) been saved from the perils of human trafficking, child marriages, child labor, and other dangers afflicting ethnic minority youth in Southeast Asia.

The “District School” experience yields important [lessons-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 [are to 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 Ministry of Education is to be complimented on its [new-2019 policy white paper’s](#) ethnic child-friendly [policy aspirations](#). 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.”

[Photo UNICEF Thailand/2015/Suracheth](#)

## Appendix A: Academic Specialties of “District School” Teachers

Table 6 Mother tongues of District School teachers (excluding MDS)

|                      | <u>KYDS</u> | <u>PMPDS</u> | <u>PDS</u> | <u>Total</u> | <u>%</u>      |
|----------------------|-------------|--------------|------------|--------------|---------------|
| <u>Sgaw Karen</u>    | <u>16</u>   | <u>6</u>     | <u>5</u>   | <u>27</u>    | <u>44.3%</u>  |
| <u>Thai Northern</u> | <u>4</u>    | <u>2</u>     | <u>9</u>   | <u>15</u>    | <u>24.6%</u>  |
| <u>Shan</u>          | <u>2</u>    | <u>7</u>     | <u>3</u>   | <u>12</u>    | <u>19.7%</u>  |
| <u>Thai, Issan</u>   | <u>2</u>    | <u>1</u>     |            | <u>3</u>     | <u>4.9%</u>   |
| <u>Hmong</u>         |             |              | <u>2</u>   | <u>2</u>     | <u>3.3%</u>   |
| <u>Thai, Central</u> | <u>1</u>    |              | <u>1</u>   | <u>2</u>     | <u>3.3%</u>   |
| <u>Total</u>         | <u>25</u>   | <u>16</u>    | <u>20</u>  | <u>61</u>    | <u>100.0%</u> |

Table 5 Academic specialties of District School teachers

|                       | <u>KYDS</u> | <u>PMPDS</u> | <u>MDS</u> | <u>PDS</u> | <u>Total</u> | <u>%</u>      |
|-----------------------|-------------|--------------|------------|------------|--------------|---------------|
| <u>primary ed</u>     | <u>7</u>    | <u>3</u>     | <u>7</u>   | <u>4</u>   | <u>21</u>    | <u>28.8%</u>  |
| <u>physical ed</u>    | <u>4</u>    | <u>4</u>     | <u>2</u>   | <u>5</u>   | <u>15</u>    | <u>20.5%</u>  |
| <u>preprimary ed</u>  | <u>5</u>    | <u>3</u>     | <u>1</u>   | <u>2</u>   | <u>11</u>    | <u>15.1%</u>  |
| <u>social studies</u> | <u>1</u>    | <u>2</u>     | <u>1</u>   | <u>1</u>   | <u>5</u>     | <u>6.8%</u>   |
| <u>math</u>           |             | <u>1</u>     | <u>0</u>   | <u>3</u>   | <u>4</u>     | <u>5.5%</u>   |
| <u>computers</u>      | <u>2</u>    |              | <u>1</u>   | <u>0</u>   | <u>3</u>     | <u>4.1%</u>   |
| <u>Thai</u>           | <u>1</u>    |              | <u>1</u>   | <u>1</u>   | <u>3</u>     | <u>4.1%</u>   |
| <u>English</u>        | <u>1</u>    |              | <u>1</u>   | <u>0</u>   | <u>2</u>     | <u>2.7%</u>   |
| <u>science</u>        | <u>2</u>    | <u>1</u>     |            |            | <u>3</u>     | <u>4.1%</u>   |
| <u>agriculture</u>    |             | <u>1</u>     | <u>0</u>   | <u>0</u>   | <u>1</u>     | <u>1.4%</u>   |
| <u>business</u>       |             |              | <u>1</u>   | <u>0</u>   | <u>1</u>     | <u>1.4%</u>   |
| <u>special ed</u>     |             |              | <u>1</u>   | <u>0</u>   | <u>1</u>     | <u>1.4%</u>   |
| <u>industrial ed</u>  |             |              |            | <u>1</u>   | <u>1</u>     | <u>1.4%</u>   |
| <u>non-formal ed</u>  | <u>1</u>    |              |            |            | <u>1</u>     | <u>1.4%</u>   |
| <u>Buddhism</u>       | <u>1</u>    |              |            |            | <u>1</u>     | <u>1.4%</u>   |
| <u>Total</u>          | <u>25</u>   | <u>15</u>    | <u>16</u>  | <u>17</u>  | <u>73</u>    | <u>100.0%</u> |

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## Appendix B: The National Literacy Assessment

National testing conducted in 2013 showed that 8% of grade 3 and 4% 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 1-8, with the objective of helping teachers to identify and help weaker students.<sup>43</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 (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 7-8, point to OBEC efforts to better prepare children for the grade 9 PISA reading test.<sup>44</sup>

The grade 1-6 evaluation contains two main categories, reading and writing, although the focus of each changes over time. Depending on results, students are ranked as “very good,” “good,” “satisfactory” or “needs improvement,” as shown in the summary results from KYDS, below.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Person, forthcoming

<sup>44</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>45</sup> Data extracted from individual student results from each “District School” on the June 2018 literacy assessment, provided by EASO 1.

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