



CED POLICY BRIEF 2026-1

Bridging the Mathematics Learning Crisis in Philippine Basic Education:

Evidence-Based Policy Directions for Improving Numeracy and Mathematical Proficiency

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KEY POINTS:

- Filipino learners continue to perform among the lowest in mathematics internationally.
- Weak foundational numeracy and persistent learning losses remain major barriers to mathematics achievement.
- Implementation gaps limit the effectiveness of the ARAL Program as a learning recovery initiative.
- Socioeconomic inequality continues to widen mathematics achievement gaps across learners.
- Mathematics-specific teacher development and evidence-based assessment must be strengthened.
- Disaster-resilient learning continuity and recovery systems are essential to minimize future learning losses.
- A National Mathematics Improvement Strategy should integrate recovery, equity, teacher quality, and accountability into a unified policy framework.

Introduction

The ability to think mathematically has become a fundamental competency in the 21st century. Beyond performing numerical computations, mathematics literacy enables individuals to think critically, solve complex problems, make informed decisions, and participate productively in today's data-driven societies. The role of mathematics is also indispensable as it cultivates critical thinking, logical reasoning, problem-solving, and analytical thinking skills—all crucial for keeping pace with technological advancements and dynamic societal changes. Being an interdisciplinary field, mathematics intersects with other disciplines such as in Data Science, Economics, Engineering, Natural Sciences, Computer Science, and Environmental Science, among others. As such, building mathematics competencies ensures that learners can apply mathematical reasoning and skills in academic pursuits, workplace demands, and lifelong learning, which eventually enable them to contribute meaningfully to national development.

In the Philippines, however, mathematics education continues to face significant and persistent challenges. Previous reports from different international large-scale assessments have drawn attention to the country's dismal performance in mathematics. These results have raised serious issues regarding the quality of instruction and the effectiveness of the instructional practices and curriculum implementation within the country's basic education sector.

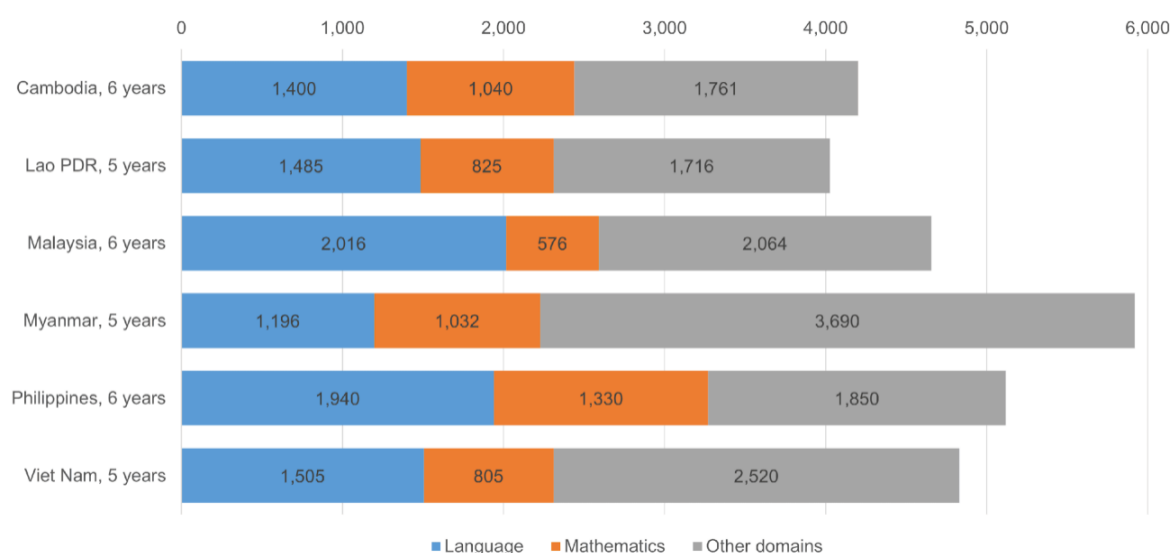
The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), administered by the Organisation

for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), provides one of the most comprehensive measures of a 15-year-old students' ability to apply mathematical knowledge in authentic context rather than merely recalling procedural skills. In PISA 2022, the Philippines recorded an average score of 355, a score substantially below the OECD average of 472. This placed the country sixth from the bottom among the 81 participating countries. The more concerning on this result is that only 16% of Filipino learners attained at least Level 2 proficiency in mathematics. At this level, students can interpret and recognize, without direct instructions, how a simple situation can be represented mathematically. The result only tells us that the majority of Filipino learners struggle with interpreting mathematical information, selecting appropriate solution strategies, and applying mathematics to

everyday situations. In comparison, over 85% of students in Singapore, Macao (China), Japan, Hong Kong, Chinese Taipei, and Estonia performed at this level or above.

Findings from the Southeast Asia Primary Learning Metrics (SEA-PLM) also revealed that Grade 5 Filipino students continue to fall behind most Southeast Asian neighbors in terms of proficiency in mathematics. The 2024 SEA-PLM showed that only 26% of Filipino students demonstrated high proficiency; however, this result makes the country the second worst in the Southeast Asian region, trailing Vietnam (88%), Malaysia (53%), Myanmar (51%), and Cambodia (40%) but ahead of Lao (17%). Report from the UNICEF revealed that the Philippines dedicated more teaching hours in mathematics than the rest of the region; however, this did not translate to an improved mathematical literacy.

Figure 1: Prescribed instruction time in primary education for language, mathematics and other domains, total number of hours, 2024



Source: Ministries of education as reported through the SEA-PLM system-level questionnaire and authors' calculation.

Figure 2: Percentage of Grade 5 children in each mathematics proficiency band, by country and survey year



Source: SEA-PLM 2024 Main Regional Report

Empirical evidence also suggests that mathematics achievement is shaped by multiple factors operating at the learners, teachers, school, and system levels. These include socioeconomic inequality, pedagogical competence and content knowledge of teachers, classroom learning environment, assessment practices, curriculum coherence, and parental support, among others. Consequently, addressing low mathematics performance requires comprehensive policy interventions that recognize the complexity of the learning ecosystem rather than isolated curriculum reforms alone.

This policy brief argues that improving mathematics learning outcomes in Philippine Basic Education demands a shift from fragmented interventions toward an evidence-based strategy that prioritizes foundational numeracy, strengthens quality of instruction, and promotes equitable access to learning opportunities. This policy brief drawn from different studies and reports provides policymakers with practical recommendations for strengthening mathematics education to ensure that every Filipino learner develops the mathematical competencies essential for lifelong learning and meaningful participation in national development.

Current Evidence: What the Latest Research Reveals About the Mathematics Learning Crisis in the Philippines

The consistent low mathematics performance of Filipino learners in national and international assessments is not an isolated outcome of individual student performance but rather of systemic challenges within the Philippine Basic Education system. Aside from the reports of OECD and UNICEF, other research studies revealed that learning difficulties in mathematics usually starts in the early grades, which accumulates over time when not addressed properly and immediately.

a. Persistent Underperformance in International Assessments

One of the most compelling evidence of the country's mathematics learning crisis comes from the result of the 2022 PISA administered by OECD. In the PISA assessment, the mathematics component measures the ability of the learners to use mathematics to solve real-world problem. Meanwhile, the twin goals of mathematics in the basic education levels of the DepEd are critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Nevertheless, the country's score in mathematics has no significant improvement when compared to the 2018 result despite the implementation of the K to 12 curriculum reforms. This stagnation may imply that existing educational reforms have not yet translated into meaningful improvements in students' mathematical competencies.

The Southeast Asia Primary Learning Metrics (SEA-PLM) assessment also revealed that despite the substantial time devoted to mathematics, learning outcomes among Filipino students remain alarmingly low. In fact, the Philippines remains among the lowest-performing countries in Southeast Asia in mathematics. The result of the

assessment underscores the need for sustained learning recovery initiatives.

b. Weak Foundational Numeracy Begins in Primary Education

The Southeast Asia Primary Learning Metrics (SEA-PLM) assessment revealed that low mathematics achievement observed among secondary school learners originates from learning difficulties developed during early years of schooling. The SEA-PLM assessment, which evaluates Grade 5 learners across Southeast Asian countries revealed that many Filipino learners have not yet mastered the foundational numeracy competencies expected at the elementary level. Data from the SEA-PLM 2019 survey revealed that a significant proportion of students had not developed foundational mathematical skills by Grade 5, particularly in areas such as number sense, basic operations, and problem-solving. The lack of these foundational literacy hinders the learners' progress in later grades.

The persistence of weak foundational numeracy becomes concerning as mathematics learning is cumulative. Skills acquired in the early grades are prerequisite for understanding more advanced mathematics concepts. Longitudinal research (Braak, et al., 2022) confirms that early numeracy competencies such as counting, cardinality, magnitude comparison, and pattern recognition are the strongest cognitive predictors of future academic success. Therefore, strengthening foundational mathematics education should be considered one of the highest priorities of the Philippine education policy.

c. Teacher Quality Remains Central to Mathematics Achievement

Teacher effectiveness has a significant effect on students' mathematics achievement as revealed in studies. Example, Ndelale et al (2025) concluded that teacher's instructional strategies can

significantly shape how students learn mathematics. Ladd and Sorensen (2014) further showed that teacher experience influences various educational outcomes, while Hattie et al. (2016) confirmed the crucial role of teacher effectiveness in student learning. Meanwhile, the study of Akturk and Ozturk (2019) indicates that teacher's Technological, Pedagogical, and Content Knowledge serves as a significant and positive predictor of student achievement in mathematics.

The 2024 SEA-PLM result also highlighted the need to strengthen teacher capacity beyond qualifications, with a focus on differentiated learning, inclusive pedagogy, and the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in the classroom.

The National Educators' Academy of the Philippines (NEAP) is responsible for continuing professional development for teachers and school leaders (DepEd, 2019; World Bank, 2022) by offering training that strengthens teachers' pedagogical knowledge and content expertise. Despite a high percentage of Filipino teachers receiving annual in-service training, the quality and relevance of professional development programs are flagged as lacking (EDCOM II, Year 1 Report). A policy note published by the Philippine National Research Center for Teacher Quality in 2017 revealed that a large proportion of DepEd teachers are still poorly prepared to deliver the K to 12 curriculum in mathematics in Grade 6, 8, and 10.

Furthermore, studies have shown that mathematics elementary teachers rely heavily on procedural instruction and rote computation rather than conceptual understanding. Commonly, teachers present the lesson, solve problems, and provide similar problems for the students to answer. For instance, Villon and Balagtas (2023) found that teachers using the Philippine elementary mathematics curriculum utilized long drills and

exercises as preparatory activities in mathematics. While Osmani et al (2021) emphasized that repetition methods, such as drills, are useful in developing students' math skills, Lehtinen et al (2017) argued that that drills often lead to inert routine skills instead of adaptive and flexible number. Lim et al (2012) also emphasized that the routinary use of drills can lead to memorization of the skills. While procedural fluency remains essential, empirical evidence consistently shows that conceptual understanding enables learners to transfer mathematics knowledge to unfamiliar context, thereby improving long-term achievement.

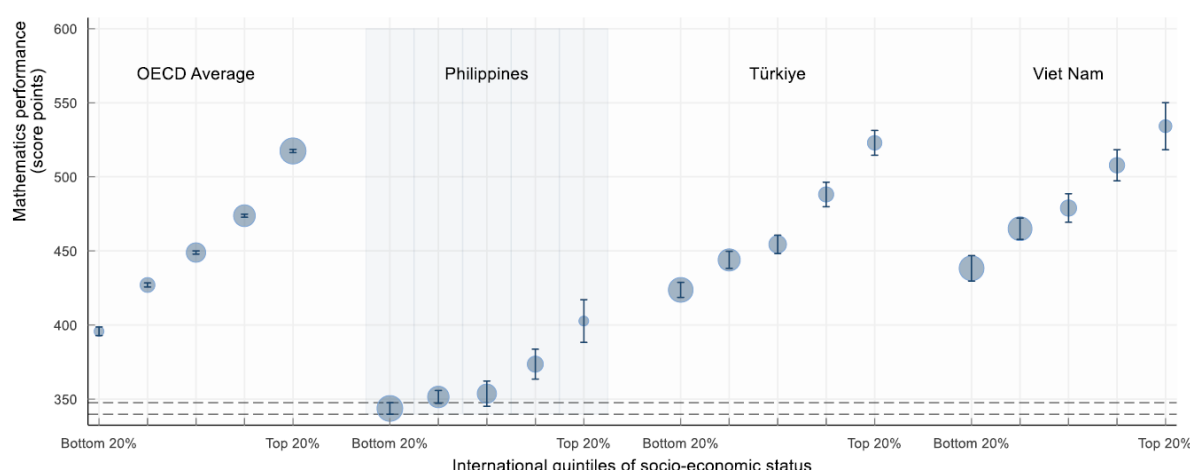
d. Socioeconomic Inequality Continues to Affect Mathematics Achievement

Beyond average scores, PISA revealed that socioeconomic status is a significant predictor of mathematics performance. It accounted for 5% variation in mathematics performance in PISA 2022 in the Philippines (compared to 15% on average across OECD countries). Further examination on the report suggests that 36% of Filipino learners were among the most disadvantaged students who took the PISA test in 2022, yet in Türkiye and Vietnam, students of the same socioeconomic background tend to score significantly higher. Such disparities indicate that educational inequity remains a significant barrier to improving mathematics learning outcomes.

The SEA-PLM 2024 result also revealed that socioeconomic status remains the strongest predictor of achievement with gaps equivalent to up to two years of schooling. This was corroborated by the study of Mousse et al (2026) which affirmed that mathematical achievement is shaped by socioeconomic level.

The study highlighted the need for policies that combine household-level

Figure 3: Mean performance in mathematics, by international quintiles of socio-economic status



Source: PISA 2022 Results (Philippines)

support such as scholarship, cash transfer, and school feeding, alongside structural reforms in public education financing and teacher development.

Meanwhile, the EDCOM II Year 1 report stressed that the development of programs and the allocation of resources in the Basic Education sector remain centrally managed. It also documented that public schools' Maintenance and Other Operating Expenses (MOOE) are calculated based on the number of learners, classrooms, and teachers; whereas, other crucial factors, such as socioeconomic composition of the students, are not considered.

e. Assessment Data Remain Underutilized for Instructional Improvement

Recent reforms have emphasized competency-based assessment and formative evaluation. Example, the National Achievement Test (NAT) is the DepEd's primary large-scale assessment. This measures the learners' attainment of curriculum standards. The Early Language, Literacy, and Numeracy Assessment (ELLNA) is also administered among Grade 3 learners. This assessment measures the foundational literacy and

numeracy of the learners after the early grades. Nevertheless, evidence suggests that classroom assessment practices remain predominantly summative, with limited use of national assessment data to personalize instruction and diagnose misconceptions. The EDCOM II's Year One report emphasizes an overabundance of assessments at various levels. A key issue is the limited access to the results of these national system assessments prompting local stakeholders to develop and administer their own tools, which in turn, creates redundancies and inconsistencies. Teachers report that the proliferation of assessment tasks consumes instructional time with little benefit for instructional practice, primarily because critical assessment data remain inaccessible to those who need them most (EDCOM II, Year Two Report).

In contrast to the Philippines, Vietnam has established a robust assessment system that is effectively used to inform educational interventions, as highlighted in EDCOM II Year Two Report. It can be noted that Vietnam outperformed Philippines in mathematics of the 2022 PISA and 2024 SEA-PLM. Although Vietnam operates under a highly centralized political system, Local Government Units (LGUs) play a key role in ensuring that schools are adequately

supported and achieve better assessment outcomes. This accountability is reinforced by a strong assessment culture, with high-stakes examinations at the end of lower secondary education guiding students' progression to upper secondary school.

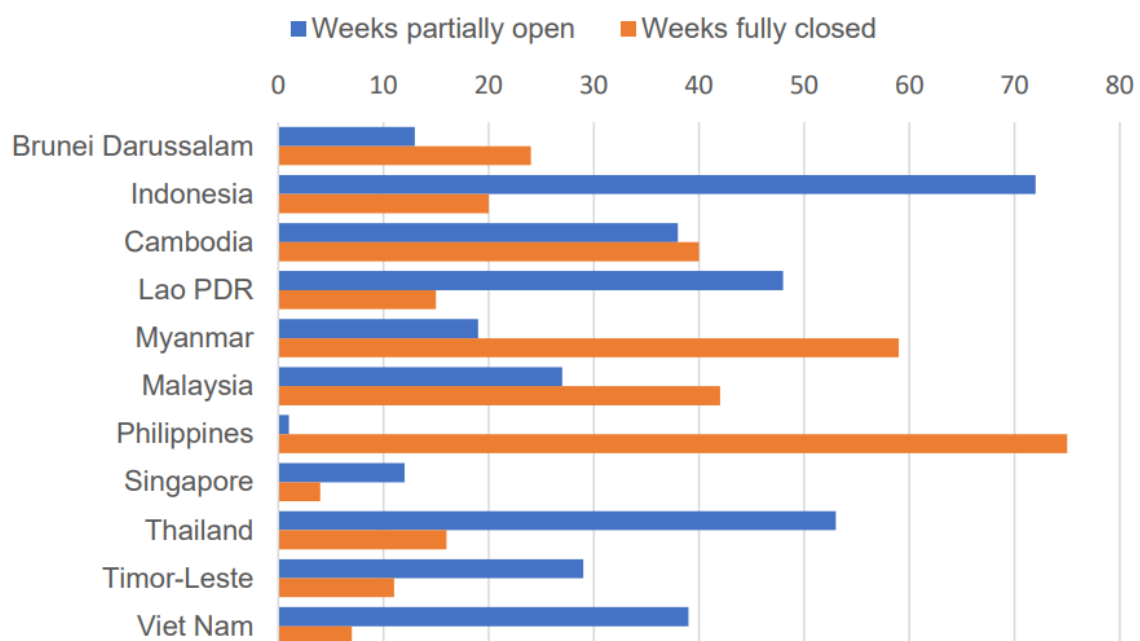
f. Learning Losses Persist due to Educational Disruptions

Educational disruptions brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a substantial learning loss among Filipino learners. National and international assessments have exposed that many students are performing below the expected proficiency levels, with learning gaps widening among disadvantaged students. In comparison with some Southeast Asian countries, the Philippines experienced the longest duration of complete school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic with more than 75 weeks of fully closed schools. This prolonged interruption of face-to-face classes in the Philippines likely intensified learning losses and widened educational disparities.

On the other hand, the SEA-PLM 2024 report points climate change to have an impact on educational system across Southeast Asia. In the SEA-PLM participating countries, Cambodia, Philippines, and Vietnam are among the most affected by climate-related educational disruptions. These disruptions are caused by strong typhoons, heatwaves, and other natural disasters, including strong earthquakes and volcanic eruptions that frequently led to the suspension of face-to-face classes.

As a response, government across the Southeast Asian countries have invested in climate-resilient school infrastructures, early warning systems, and emergency preparedness training for students and teachers. Many countries have also integrated environmental and climate-resilient education into their primary education curriculum to prepare students with knowledge and skills to understand, adapt to, and mitigate the effects of climate change.

Figure 4: Duration of School Closures during COVID-19 (Q1 2020 to Q1 2022)



Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics. (2022). *Global monitoring of school closures caused by COVID-19*. <https://covid19.uis.unesco.org/global-monitoring-school-closures-covid19/country-dashboard/>

Implications of the Evidence

Collectively, the evidence demonstrates that the mathematics learning crisis in the Philippines cannot be attributed to a single factor only. Instead, it reflects the interaction of weak foundational numeracy, persistent socioeconomic inequities, limited instructional capacity, insufficient use of assessment data, and learning losses resulting from prolonged educational disruptions.

The persistence of these challenges despite ongoing reforms suggests that incremental improvements alone are unlikely to produce substantial gains in mathematics achievement. Instead, policymakers must adopt a comprehensive system approach that simultaneously strengthens early mathematics education, teacher quality, curriculum implementation, equitable resource allocation, and evidence-based instructional decision-making.

Without decisive policy action, the country risks producing successive generations of learners who lack the mathematical competencies required for higher education, meaningful employment, technological innovation, and active participation in an increasingly knowledge-based economy.

Policy Recommendations

The persistent decline in the mathematics achievements among the Filipino learners calls for a comprehensive and coordinated national response that extends beyond isolated interventions. The evidence presented in this brief suggests that improving mathematics outcomes requires simultaneous investment in foundational learning, professional development, curriculum implementation, assessment system, and educational equity.

Prioritize Foundational Numeracy in the Early Grades

Competencies developed from kindergarten to Grade 3 serve as a foundation for all subsequent mathematical learning. Learners who fail to master basic number concepts, arithmetic operations, and mathematical reasoning during the early years rarely catch up without systemic intervention.

The Department of Education may institutionalize a National Foundational Numeracy Program that complements existing strategies. This program may include:

- Standardized diagnostic assessments administered at the beginning and end of the school year.
- Structured remediation programs for learners identified at risk.
- Provision of instructional materials emphasizing conceptual understanding.
- Implementation of learner-centered instructional approaches that promote the construction of knowledge rather than mere rote computation.

Strengthen Mathematics Teacher Quality Through Specialized Professional Development

Teacher expertise is linked to student achievement in mathematics. Although teachers regularly participate in professional development activities, existing programs are often general in nature and provide limited opportunities to deepen mathematics-specific pedagogical knowledge.

DepEd, in collaboration with Teacher Education Institutions and professional organizations, may establish a national mathematics professional development framework that includes:

- Annual mathematics-specific professional development programs
- Lesson study and collaborative learning communities
- Instructional coaching by mathematics master teachers
- Mentoring programs for beginning mathematics teachers
- Continuous training on conceptual teaching, problem-based learning, and differentiated instruction.

Professional development must be sustained, classroom-based, and directly linked to improvements in instructional practices rather than relying solely on one-time seminars.

Transform Assessment Results into a Tool for Learning

Assessment should not be used solely to evaluate student achievement. Instead, assessment should be used to improve instruction. Current classroom practices remain heavily dependent on summative examinations.

The DepEd may strengthen assessment literacy by:

- Institutionalizing diagnostic mathematics assessments by grade levels
- Developing digital assessment dashboards that provide real-time learner performance data
- Providing national assessment results to the local level as basis for program development
- Aligning classroom assessments with competencies measured in international large-scale assessments such as PISA and SEA-PLM.

Mitigate the Effects of Socioeconomic Disadvantage on Mathematics Learning

Research consistently identifies socioeconomic status as a significant predictor of mathematics achievement.

The persistence of learning gaps indicates that improving mathematics performance requires more than instructional reforms. Policies must also address the broader socioeconomic barriers that impede learning.

As such, DepEd, in collaboration with Local Government Units, Social Welfare agencies, may implement targeted interventions that reduce the educational consequences of socioeconomic disadvantage. Specifically, policymakers may:

- Prioritize mathematics intervention program in schools serving high-poverty communities
- Provide additional manipulatives, instructional materials, and digital learning resources to disadvantaged schools
- Provide funding support for school feeding programs that support learner readiness and cognitive development
- Expand community-based learning support initiatives that engage parents in numeracy development
- Adopt equity-based funding mechanisms that allocate resources according to learner needs rather than uniform distribution formulas

Accelerate Mathematics Learning Recovery Through Targeted Remediation and Continuous Support

Although schools have resumed face-to-face classes, evidence indicates that mathematics learning losses resulting from prolonged disruptions continue to affect learners. To accelerate mathematics learning recovery, the DepEd is currently implementing the Academic Recovery and Accessible Learning (ARAL) program. DepEd Order No. 064, s. 2025 outlined the guidelines for the ARAL program which highlights that the program complements, rather than replaces, daily teaching-learning processes. The program

It provides additional support to bridge significant learning gaps rather than replace existing classroom-based intervention strategies. However, challenges arise during the implementation of the program. For instance, Baluyot (2026) documented common challenges such as the focus of the program which is more on reading comprehension yet some students were only beginning to recognize letters, lack of budget from the program implementors, lack of teachers to handle the tutees, behavior of students in participating classroom tasks, teachers' burnout and heavy workloads.

To maximize the impact of the ARAL program, including interventions following classroom disruptions, DepEd should:

- Ensure that adequate fundings are allocated to support school-levels implementation expenses.
- Expand the mathematics tutor workforce by mobilizing pre-service teachers from Teacher Education Institutions and trained community volunteers.
- Reduce teacher workload during ARAL implementation by recognizing ARAL teaching as official teaching load, if provision of service credits and honoraria are not possible.
- Institutionalize disaster-responsive mathematics recovery plans that can be immediately activated following class suspensions caused by typhoons, floods, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, armed conflict, or other emergencies.
- Prioritize high-risk schools in recovery funding.
- Strengthen community-based learning networks by collaborating with LGUs, barangays, TEIs, NGOs, and community volunteers to establish neighborhood learning hubs that can continue

mathematics tutoring when regular classes are interrupted.

Implementation Considerations

The successful implementation of the recommendations presented in this policy brief requires coordinated efforts among national government agencies, Local Government Units (LGUs), schools, Teacher Education Institutions (TEIs), and other educational stakeholders. While the recommended policy actions are grounded on empirical evidence, their effectiveness will depend on adequate funding, institutional capacity, stakeholders' commitment, and continuous monitoring.

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