



## Factors Influencing Educational Support Policy Implementation to High School Level Students of Vietnam Minority Groups

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### Abstract

Over the last few years, the act of enhancing education for ethnic minority students has always sparked heated controversy from the central government and local authorities. However, sociological studies still vindicate the existing inequalities related to education among ethnicities. In order to evaluate the process and identify barriers that limit the effectiveness of the aforementioned strategy, in this document, we will inspect and synthesize the academic-support policies for ethnic minority students. Simultaneously, a questionnaire survey participated by 204 ethnic minority students (including day-boarders) was conducted at a high school in Lai Chau province as well as holding in-depth interviews with related ones (students, teachers, commune officials). The final outcome showed that the educational support system for Vietnamese ethnic minority students as a whole and those in Lai Chau, in particular, had many outstanding advantages such as comprehensiveness, systematic trait, and concentration on ethnic specificities, likewise, cooperation among many related parties had been made. This system had brought some beneficial effects in promoting EM students to go to school but failed in motivating commitment and academic success due to a number of barriers such as curriculum, environmental conditions, cultural issues, and job opportunities.

**Keywords:** Educational support strategy, ethnic minority students, Lai Chau.



## 1. Introduction

In Vietnam, reports show that efforts in the current policy have achieved remarkable results, the percentage of ethnic minority students attending school has been maintained and increased remarkably over the years. However, the early dropout phenomenon still occurs at different levels, or even if children go to school, the understanding of educational real purpose is still not high, reflected in the fact that they do not achieve good results at school. In addition, some unappreciated cultural stereotypes such as early marriage, entering the labor force at a young age, and consanguine marriage still exist. So what is preventing the policy from achieving its intended effects in motivating students to go to school?

To answer the above question, this document focuses on two goals. Firstly, rechecking the policies of supporting ethnic minority students going to school, focusing on direct encouraging policies such as tuition fee support, scholarships, enrolment, day-boarding, etc. Indirect support policies like investment in facilities, enhancing teacher's qualities, etc. The second aim is to identify the positive effects of the policy and its implementation along with detecting the barriers that hinder the implementation of the top-down approach in policy that Vietnam is applying. The expected outcome hasn't happened in a specific area, Lai Chau province, which is an extremely difficult economic region.

## 2. Overview of Policies to Support Ethnic Minority Students Going to School

The policy of supporting education for ethnic minorities has been listed in the Constitution of Vietnam throughout the periods (1946, 1959, 1980, 1992, 2013). Having reference to the strategies, besides benefit from general policies for the general education system, ethnic minority students can also acquire a myriad of advantages from a diverse system of specific support policies, such as preferential policies in training processes, recruitment procedure, scholarship policy; tuition fee exemption or reduction; boarding policy for ethnic minority students, etc. Besides, in addition to the government's policies, localities like Lai Chau also have their own policies in supporting ethnic minority students to go to school.

**With regard to the policy of direct support**, only from 2010 up to now, the Government has promulgated 03 Decrees on the policy of tuition fee exemption and reduction, support for study expenses with a gain-and-use mechanism for institutions under the national education system (Decree No. 49/2010/ND-CP dated May 14, 2010; Decree No. 74/2013/ND-CP dated July 15, 2013, amending and supplementing a number of articles of Decree No. 49/2010/ND-CP; and Decree No. 86/2015/ND-CP dated October 2, 2015). Fundamentally, Decree 74 does not change much in comparison with Decree 49 regarding aid policies for ethnic minority children. According to these decrees, ethnic minority students, who mostly live in border areas, highland areas, and areas with exceedingly difficult economic conditions, in addition to the tuition-free policies, also receive supplementary aid for studying costs at the rate of 100,000/student/month and no more than 9 months per academic year.



Furthermore, students from very small ethnic groups also receive special support. Decree No. 57/2017/ND-CP (replacing Decision 2123/QD-TTg of the Prime Minister) stipulating the policy of prioritizing enrolment and academic support for children, pupils from 9 ethnic groups according to Decision No. 2123/QD-TT up to 16 ethnic groups (Cong, Mang, Pu Peo, Si La, Co Lao, Bo Y, La Ha, Ngai, Chut, O Du, Brau, Ro Mam, Lo Lo, Lu, Pe Then, La Hu), out of the prior privilege that ethnic minority students receive, students from these 16 ethnic groups can also get 15 kg extra rice/month/ students (no more than 9 months/school year/student).

Lai Chau province also enacts many specific local policies, including ones to subsidize the cost of meals for part-boarding students at high schools according to Decision 01/2012/QD-UBND, helping in terms of finance for organizational expenses, concentrated on cooking for high school students according to Decree 116/2016/ND-CP from 2.0 to 4.5% of the minimum salary, subsidizing up to 9 months.

**Regarding the indirect support policies**, as stated by the report of the Department of Ethnic Education under the Ministry of Education and Training<sup>1</sup>, in the period 2016-2020, the Ministry of Education and Training has continued to publish various legal documents according to its competence. Accomplishing the legal basis to consolidate and develop the system and scale of boarding schools for ethnic minorities, semi-boarding schools for ethnic minorities, and pre-university schools, to improve high-quality training for human resources from very few ethnic groups.

Besides, The Ministry of Education & Training also enacts many regulations to complete the organizational learning mechanisms for schools that primarily teach ethnic minority students. All the modifications and continuous policy updates since 2010 have proven that helping ethnic minority children approach educational services is the permanent and prior goal of the Vietnamese government in general and of Lai Chau's authority in particular.

In general, the current system of educational support policies for ethnic minority students has met their diverse needs, such as tuition support, study funding, housing regime, training mechanism with priority given to creating favorable conditions for EM students to go to school and well-trained teachers as well as facilities for educational activities. The review of policies shows that the outstanding advantages of these policy systems are reflected in the following points:

1. Policy system towards comprehensive support. The needs/difficulties of ethnic minority students in accessing education services are considered and met in many different ways such as tuition fee exemption and reduction, accommodation support, enrolment support, scholarships.

2. Policies are updated and adjusted continuously over time to ensure a response to changes in practice.

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<sup>1</sup> Source: <https://moet.gov.vn/giaoducquocdan/giao-duc-dan-toc/Pages/Default.aspx?ItemID=6880>



3. Systematic policies with different levels: the tier responds directly to the needs which are directly related to schoolings such as tuition, boarding, and scholarships; and the floor responds indirectly through the construction of schools and school sites; create a mechanism to assign the task of supporting and mobilizing ethnic minority students and their families to send their children to school to the local authority, teachers and village heads.

4. Policies take into accounts specific ethnic and regional factors such as language, culture, and natural-economic-social conditions, so there are specific regulations to meet the needs/problems of some particular groups.

5. Clear policies, with quite effective coordination among different stakeholders, form a support network could encourage EM students to go to school.

Besides, if we look broadly, we can see that the system of educational support policies for ethnic minority students is not developed in isolation but a part of socio-political-economic policies on national unity and socio-economic development. This policy has been expressed not only in the Constitution over the years, but also frequently emphasized in Party congresses, such as the 12th Party Congress, which continued to affirm the unity of the ethnic groups that had had the long-term strategic position in the revolutionary cause of Vietnam<sup>2</sup>. Along with policies to support education, the Vietnamese government has been implementing and promulgating a series of important programs to promote basically comprehensive development of ethnic minority areas, such as: Program 135 on socio-economic development of difficult communes in mountainous and remote areas; Program 134 focuses on a number of policies supporting production land, residential land, housing and domestic water for poor ethnic minority households; Program to support fast and sustainable poverty reduction for 62 poor districts.

### **3. Results of Implementing Policies to Support Ethnic Minority Students in Lai Chau Province**

Lai Chau is one of the keys of 14 provinces in the Northwest Region, with 87% being ethnic minorities. By the end of 2019, the total of Lai Chau population was 463,911 people (ranked 62/63 in the country); Among 20 ethnic groups, of which the Thai ethnic group is about 33.5%, the Mong ethnic group 23.6%, the Dao ethnic group 14.4%, the Kinh ethnic group 11.2%, the Ha Nhi ethnic group 5.6%, and the rest. 11.7% is another ethnic group, in which there are 2 ethnic groups found only in Lai Chau, namely Mang and La Hu. With the characteristics of the majority of the population belonging to ethnic minorities, in addition to implementing the state's books to support ethnic minority students, Lai Chau also has its own policy. Total local budget expenditure for all levels of education has continuously increased over the years. In 2015, spending over 1,917 billion VND, by 2019, the spending level exceeded 2,599 billion VND, of which investment in Kindergarten and Primary School is the most prominent increase, as shown in the chart below.

<sup>2</sup> Source: <https://tuyengiao.vn/nghien-cuu/ly-luan/phan-huy-suc-manh-dai-doan-ket-toan-dan-toc-trong-su-nghiep-xay-dung-va-bao-ve-to-quo-127828>

Source: Annual Summary Report of The Department of Education and Training of Lai Chau Province

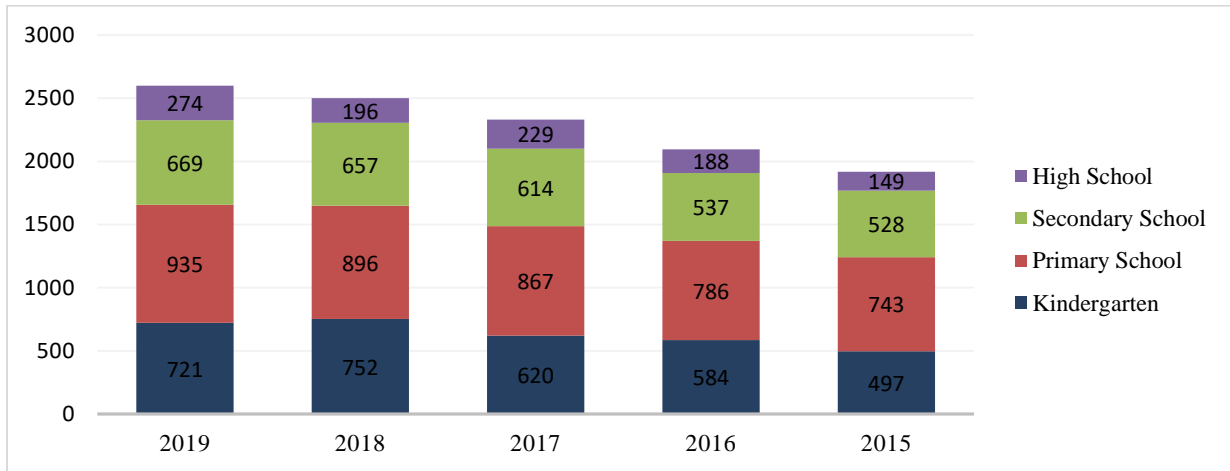


Figure 1: Total budget expenditure of Lai Chau province by education level over the years (Unit: Billion VND)

Source: Annual Summary Report of The Department of Education and Training of Lai Chau Province

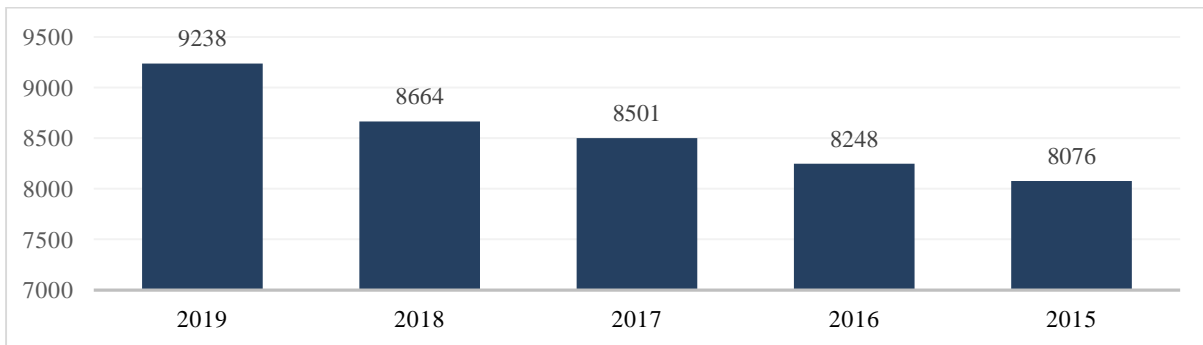


Figure 2: Number of Lai Chau high school students over the years (Unit: person)

Correspondingly, the number of high school students in Lai Chau also continuously increased over the years, from over 8,076 in 2015 to 9,238 in 2019. This is a remarkable result and partly reflects the impact of support policies. The problem often pointed out in mountainous education is the dropout of students after lower secondary school, but this problem tends to decrease, manifested in the increasing number of high school students throughout many years.

Source: Authors' Surveys

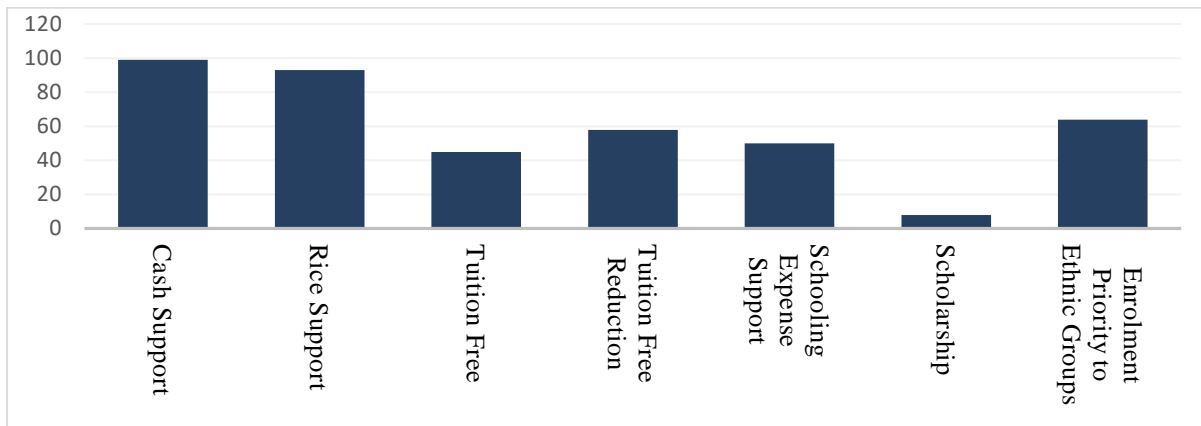


Figure 3: Percentage of ethnic minority students in Lai Chau province receiving benefits (Unit: %)

The benefits are profoundly necessary. When being asked what was important in allowing their children to go to school, responses from students said that the previous advantages had a positive impact on their attendance, as shown in the figure below:

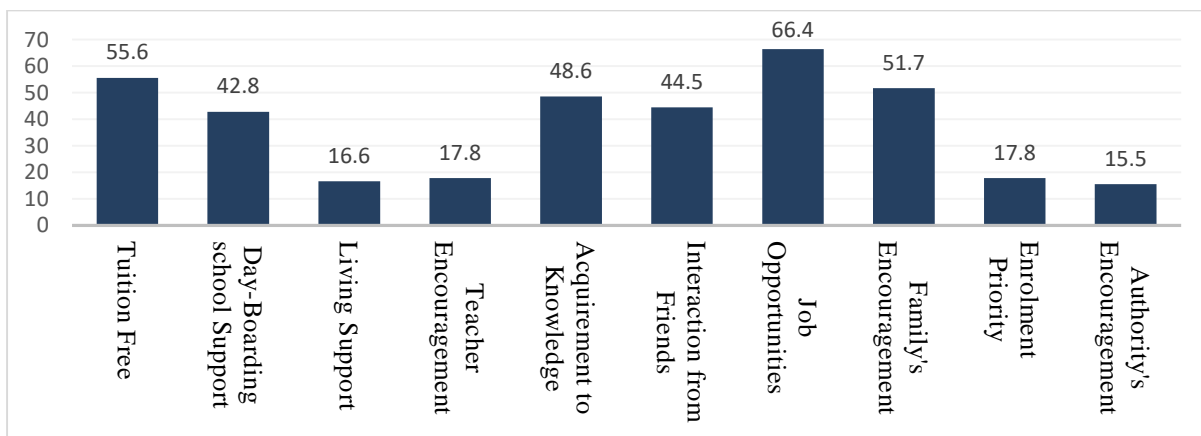


Figure 4: Number of students reported the advantages had a positive impact on their attendance (Unit: student)

From their responses, the reasons why they go to school were practical. Occupations were on top of the list, which accounted for 66.4% of the surveyed students. They assumed that if they got degrees, they would get better job opportunities. Also, according to them, having had their school fees remitted, supports from the family, acquired the necessary knowledge for their life, and been assisted with day-boarding are the other critical reasons they continue going to school. The responses showed that the current measures of encouraging pupils from minority ethnic groups to go to school are correctly and effectively oriented; thus, the results are excellent.

However, the data also shows that even though the policies succeed in getting them to attend school, their study records were not as good as expected and did not prompt their abilities. In Lai Chau province, even though students of the Kinh ethnic group take a small proportion comparing the ethnic minorities, they usually are excellent and intermediate students. In contrast, the ethnic minorities often complete the study year with average or weak results, according to Son La Department of Education and Training’s report.

*Source: Lai Chau Department of Education and Training’s report*

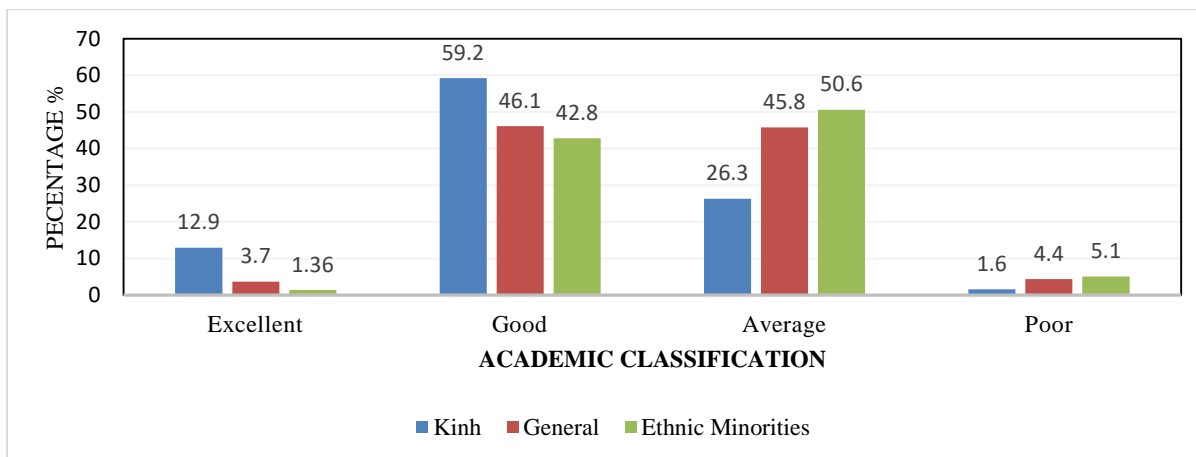


Figure 5: The capacity of Lai Chau high school students in 2018 (Unit: Percentage)

Henceforth, we need to understand why our policies can successfully engage ethnic minorities students with school but can not create a significant impact on them since the students said the current learning program still exist possible downsides.

#### 4. Some Barriers to Education Support Policy for Ethnic Minority Students in Lai Chau

As the flowing figure analyzed, while educational support policies for ethnic minority students (through a specific survey in Lai Chau province), have been invested quite methodically and comprehensively, leading to the relative success in ‘forcing’ children to school. However, statistics also show that ethnic minority students, compared to Kinh students, are not likely to succeed at school. The reason, according to our survey, most likely comes from the design of the current curriculum and the contents of learning in class. It seems that the curriculum which made for the whole country - with a large proportion of Kinh students, does not seem to be suitable for students of other ethnicities, as reflected by themselves.

Source: Authors' surveys, 2020

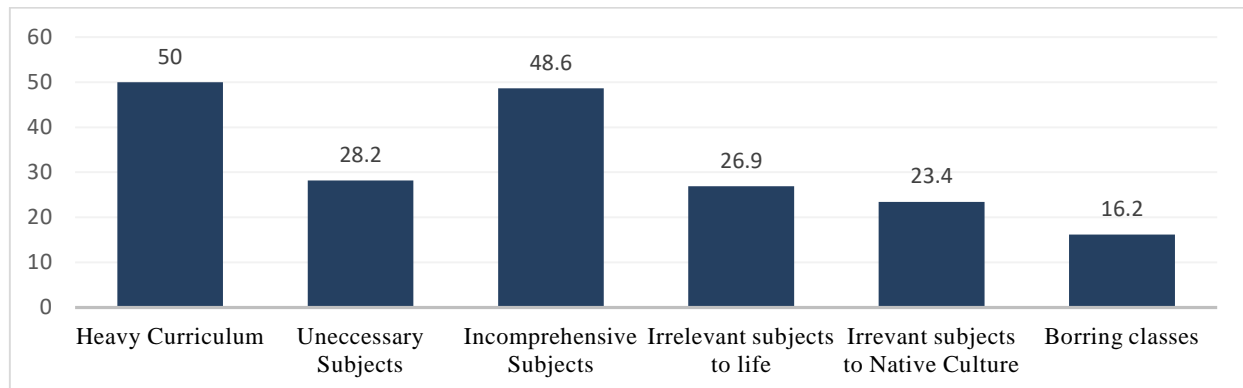


Figure 6: Factors that lead to the discouragement of students to class

Among the reasons why ethnic minority students are not interested in the curriculum, causing too much work and contain some confusing content, are the most mentioned ones. In addition, up to approximately a quarter of the surveyed students said that the curriculum content is not appropriate to the reality in the locality where they live, and also inappropriate to their culture (beliefs, religions, customs, values, etc.) are the factors that hinder them from absorbing the knowledge.

#### 4.1 External Barriers Which Reduce The Effectiveness Of Academic Support For Ethnic Minority Students In Lai Chau Province

##### 4.1.1 Natural and economic conditions

Most of the students who drop out of school midway whose families are involved in difficult economic situations, living in remote areas, and having difficulty in traveling. Environmental conditions - economic difficulties causing boredom, school dropouts in both direct and indirect ways. Directly, this difficulty makes it impossible for families to keep their children in school, even if they receive support for tuition and day boarding school, and even rice, living expenses, from the government.

“Here, houses are scattered, and traveling is also inconvenient. Parents who work from afar, have children that are looked after by grandparents. But grandparents are also old and can't cope with them. Then, in that impoverished family, parents want their children to stay at home to labor. Look, like this house [shows the interviewer a picture of a household], seeing how poor his family is, his parents don't even care about education. The woman in this red shirt is a teacher who engages in a campaign. So does the village, but fails. In addition, the poor have large families, so the older child stops going to school to take care of the younger child” (Village head, male, Dao ethnic, 42 years old).



Besides, poor economic conditions lead to a number of other problems, such as parents' little awareness and needs, making them feel indifferent to their children's school life; parents living in poverty tend to have more children, so they need their older children to drop out of schools to take care of the younger ones.

#### 4.1.2 Culture: customs, perceptions, and living needs

In-depth interviews show that there seems to be a certain cultural difference between ethnic groups related to families' attitudes towards education. It seems that the Hmong are relatively stricter in preserving their culture (beliefs, lifestyles, people-land community cohesion) than some other ethnic groups, and therefore, they are less likely to be open to absorbing and integrating with other cultures and communities, so they are less interested in accessing general education – a system designed for community integrating.

Agreeing with our research through in-depth interviews, the population and housing census also shows that there are quite clear differences between ethnic groups in accessing education services, in which, Mong people have the lowest access to general education compared to other ethnic groups.

And the tendency to 'culture-centric' (living closely with one's ethnic community, limiting integration with popular culture as well as other subcultures), in turn, limits the ability to communicate and their integration with other peoples, and thus further promote their limited integration with mass education.

We send people to houses for the campaign, but they keep their children at home. Not until the kids grow up, did they send them to school. So that the children only know the ethnic language, if they can't speak Kinh, they can't learn anything either, can't get along with their fellows. But the people did not listen. (commune vice chairman, 38 years old, male).

*Source: General Statistics Office (2011)*

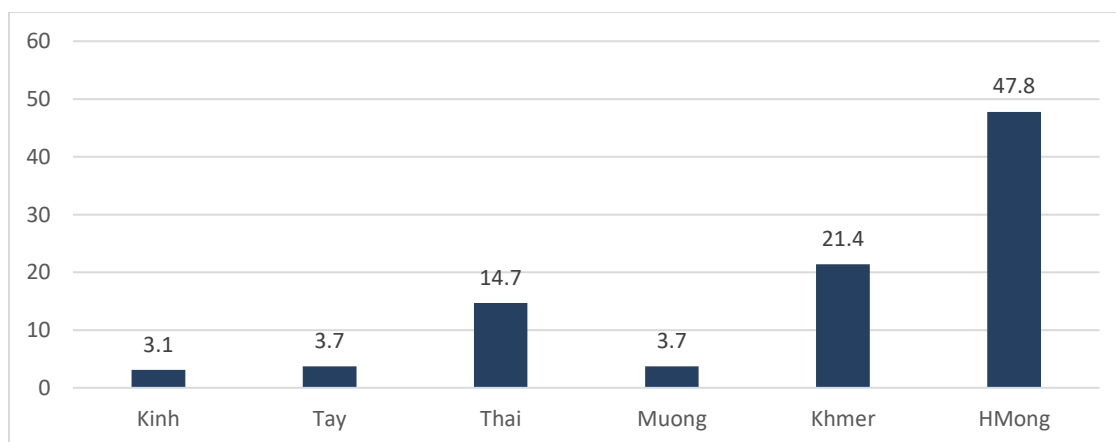


Figure 7: Percentage of out-of-school children under 5 years old, by ethnicity, 2009



### **4.1.3 Jobs and job opportunities**

A reality of mountainous and remote areas like Lai Chau is that job opportunities are very limited. It is difficult for students to finish high school, even after returning home from vocational training, to find a job, which makes learning less meaningful and beneficial. Families, therefore, tend to want their children to leave school early, to have more labor to support them and to embark on traditional farming or forestry.

## **4.2 Some Internal Limitations in The Academic Support Strategies for Ethnic Minority Students in Lai Chau Province**

### **4.2.1 Policy promulgation and policy implementation plan**

The implementation of legal documents, policies on academic support for high school students in ethnic minority areas have been and still have many unreasonable points, overlapping, inconsistency. Problems with preferential policies for ethnic minority students and teachers are still scattered, it is necessary to continue to amend, supplement and integrate policies; Some regulations on supporting ethnic minorities are contradictory and inconsistent with the policy to support the development of mountainous areas, for example, about procedures such as grant aid for meals for day boarders according to Decree No. 116/2016/ND-CP contributes to improving the quality of education, maintaining the number of students in the whole province. However, according to Decision No. 582/QD-TTg of April 28, 2017, on approving the list of underprivileged villages, communes in Region III, Region II, and Region I belong to ethnic minority and mountainous areas. In the 2016-2020 period, in the whole province, there are a number of communes, villages, and hamlets that are out of underprivileged areas, so students with household registration in these communes, villages, and hamlets are no longer entitled to the policies of the Decree No. 116/2016/ND-CP, greatly affecting the mobilization of all students to go to school, and the risk of dropping out is quite large for them.

The identification of localities, such as the identification of extremely difficult communes in ethnic minority and mountainous areas, is not clear and many regulatory documents are leading to different interpretations and applications of beneficiaries and localities.

Policies and laws on the comprehensive development of ethnic minority areas have not been closely linked. Reality proves that, except for natural resources and geographical location, which are environmental factors, the subjective factors that make up the strength or internal force of a nation include financial strength (capital resources) and financial policy), the strength of human resources i.e. the labor force (the number and skills trained), the intellectual strength (the people's intellect and the creative capacity of the ethnic community) and finally, the power of leadership and management of the ethnic community. However, all three factors have not been developed and implemented synchronously between policies, laws on economy and policies, laws on culture, education, social policies, personnel policies, and state management of ethnic affairs. Therefore, the legal system on ethnic minorities has not yet created a legal mechanism to coordinate



and combine investment and development activities in ethnic minority areas in a unified manner, has not yet brought into full play the internal resources of ethnic minorities.

The main development goals of education and training, mainly for ethnic minorities, have not been concretized into national development strategies and plans. Programs, projects, schemes, and policies in recent years still lack stability and long-term characteristics, and lack specific characteristics of regions, ethnic groups, and beneficiaries; lack of cohesion, creating fragmentation; content overlapping, fragmentation, the spread of resources... have not been able to create the overall strength to promote the development of education and training in ethnic minority areas. The formulation of policies often has big goals but the implementation time is not commensurate. The management mechanism for operating policies is asynchronous, the assignment of management and administration of a number of programs and projects has overlapping subjects and locations, duplication of content, leading to difficulties in deploying. There is no awareness and correct conception of institution-builders, leading to the imposition of the policies in the plains and lowlands into mountainous areas, ethnic minority areas, policies, in general, have not been designed to suit the natural characteristics, culture, customs, practices, and language of the people.

#### **4.2.2 Dissemination about the policy**

Disseminating, propagandizing then motivating parents and students to participate in the implementation of academic support strategies for high school students in ethnic minority areas is an important and worthwhile activity for state management agencies and the beneficiaries. However, the process of disseminating and propagandizing education policies is conducted by the provincial Department of Education and Training, based on the annual training plan. The propaganda plans are developed by the media agencies throughout the province, but these methods have not brought the desired potency, as the survey results show. The percentage of students who access the information and the academic support strategies through mass media accounts for a very small portion - only 6.9%, the information channel comes from teachers to students accounted for 91.7% and to students' families is 85.3%. This shows that policy propaganda and dissemination still takes place through communication channels with higher efficiency than through mass media.

#### **4.2.3 Assign and coordinate executing policy**

At times, the coordination between the departments, boards, and branches of the province is irregular, not rigorous, and active in guiding and implementing; the inspection and supervision of the councils at all levels, branches, offices, organizations are inadequate and limited. The concurrent officers that execute policies are few in quantity, still limited in capacity, and not professional. Therefore, the process of both learning and working on organizing and performing encounters many difficulties, which significantly affected the result of the policy.

The apparatus of education management still has many issues, especially the head educational management for ethnic minority students and procedure for making payment for



policies and regimes such as printing applications, photocopying Family Register, certificates, etc., which leads to the costly and complicated procedure in making records.

The coordination mechanism between units in executing educational support for high school students in ethnic minority areas in Lai Chau is not rigorous and thoroughgoing. Many new policies are overlapped, which causes difficulties for units that carry out it and different interpretations in state management units, affecting the interest of students.

#### **4.2.4 Assemble resources in executing policy**

State management of ethnic education has not been paid due attention. The apparatus and staffs of ethnic education in Lai Chau, especially at the Ministry of Education and Training and high schools do not have specialized offices to perform policy work for ethnic minority students, whose schools established the Board of Management for day-boarder students. In addition to teaching to ensure educational quality, this is the cause of overload for teachers. The support for students, who are beneficiaries of welfare is somehow affected.

The physical resources invested in infrastructural development do not correspond to local students' learning needs, the number of classrooms and function rooms are still deficient, the situation of temporarily studying in another place is still happening. The socialization resource assembles insignificantly, which is mainly organizations' individual activities and individuals that assist students in their own programs. Lai Chau province does not have any private educational institution in the whole area.

In fact, the high-school educational quality in ethnic minority areas in Lai Chau is low compared to the whole country. The rate of retention and drop-out is high compared to the national rate, according to the Ministry of Education of Lai Chau report and as analyzed in chapter 3.

Educational infrastructure in Lai Chau has been invested but has not corresponded to actual needs. Until 2019, the whole industry has 6.988 classrooms (the number of permanent and semi-permanent rooms is 6.530; the number of temporary ones is 458). However, the most important thing is that current support policies are focusing on physical support as analyzed. On the one hand, these supports create the motivation that drives students to go to school; on the other hand, its consequences make the “way” become the “purpose”, instead, the physical supports and facilities should only be the way for ethnic minority students to break geographical and economic barriers to get to school, but in reality, it becomes “purpose” for students to go to school. When students go to school for any non-educational purpose, it can bring them difficulty to gain success in their educational goals.



#### **4.2.5 Examine and evaluate the process of executing education policy**

The examination and evaluation of executing educational policies are carried out according to Circular 36/2017/TT-BGDT under the instruction of public organizations in educational institutions. Based on the annual plan, the Ministry of Education and Training cooperates with the Ministry of Finance to inspect and supervise the performance of regimes and policies of each high school in order to look over expenditure activities and the number of beneficiaries of welfare. During the process, problems are often discovered, namely missing individuals, improper payment, incomplete financial documents, etc., The main reason for these are leadership and lack of ability staff...

These reflections from locality show that it can be difficult for educational policies to achieve the expected effect without coordination with other social policies related to educational institutions, which are family and employment labor. Identical to the accompanying by economic-labor development in the locality, so that going to school is motivated by educational benefits itself, not from instrumental supports such as tuition assistance and day-boarding, although these are vital for ethnic minority students to attend school.

### **5. Conclusion**

Through the analysis of the policy system in general also a field survey in a specific area, Lai Chau province in particular, our research shows that the current educational support policies for ethnic minority students are adequately organized. The positive point is that policies are properly adjusted to the needs that beneficiaries need to be supported, policies are inclusive but at the same time have individualization for specific groups, policies have synchronized coordination between many different fields, mobilized the participation of many individuality stakeholders also the policy has been continuously updated over the period.

The implementation of education policy is also impressive. Partly because educational development is referred to as one of the pillars of Vietnam's poverty reduction and social development strategy, moreover since the Vietnamese traditional culture places a high value on education. In addition to central government policies, localities such as Lai Chau province have plans to encourage EM children to attend school.

With such efforts, ethnic minority students' access to education has progressed, albeit not suddenly, but steadily and steadily year after year. However, the particular survey also shows that even though current policies are relatively successful in taking students to schools. As a result of the study, ethnic minority students continue to be on the periphery of educational success compared to Kinh students. Furthermore, their academic performance is significantly lower than that of Kinh students.

From policy analysis and field survey data in Lai Chau, we believe that to promote the effectiveness of educational support policies for ethnic minority students, they will not only come to school. School mechanically but also really receive maximum benefits of the education system, policies need to pay attention. (1) Pay more attention to the cultural characteristics of ethnic groups, to be able to adjust policies suitable for different groups of beneficiaries; (2) Policy should be



developed from a bottom-up approach and should be based on scientific research, especially anthropological research so that suitable adjustments given; (3) policies to support education need to be integrated with policies to create jobs, promote job opportunities after graduation so that learning becomes effective and motivating for families; and (4) further promote propaganda and advocacy to change the perception of the importance of education in general and school attendance in particular for ethnic minorities; and (5) to reduce school boredom and dropout at higher levels, attention is required to promote more preschool and primary education for ethnic minority students.

Keep in mind that our study has some limitations. Firstly, the survey was conducted on a group of high school students who are ethnic minority people who attend school. Once they have passed the threshold of dropping out of secondary school to enter high school, they are very interested in learning and have families who support going to school. Future studies can be more extensive with the dropout group, thus identifying barriers to the better educational support policy scheme for ethnic minority students. Additionally, according to our in-depth interviews, the dropout rate is highest in the middle school group, thus, if we focus on surveying this group will give more in-depth findings on the factors that 'pull' ethnic minority students out of school.

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