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Rural Schools in Georgia

Devising Education Policy for a Depopulating Countryside

Policy paper

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Contents

GeoWel
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Table of Figures

GeoWel
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Executive Summary

The education sector in Georgia has taken significant strides in recent years, but still faces a number of challenges at a system-wide level. Georgia's rural schools in particular face a suite of more acute and interconnected problems. The issues faced by the education system in Georgia's countryside are often hard to disentangle, first from each other, and secondly, from the general socio-economic and demographic realities of the country.

First, demographic trends in Georgia in recent decades have led to vast under-population in most rural schools. On average, a rural school serves just 37% of its enrollment capacity, meaning that the average rural school is about two thirds empty.[1] In 249 rural schools there are ten or fewer students, and 17 schools have only one pupil.[2] Cases when there is not a single student on a given grade level are routine, and this is why a number of schools have combined classes, so-called class-compacts, when students, in grades 1 through 4, study in a single room with a single teacher.

Second, schools in villages are inferior to urban ones from the infrastructural point of view. To analyze the infrastructural conditions of schools, we reviewed and aggregated data collected in 2018 and 2019 with detailed studies of each of Georgia's 2,233 public schools, provided to us by ESIDA. Of the 276 schools that are listed as being in "replacement condition" in that database, meaning it is unfeasible to repair the school and a new building will have to be built, over 94%, or all but 16, are rural.

Third, with the outflow of population from rural areas, a trend that began following the collapse of the Soviet Union and continues today, schools face increasing challenges recruiting new, qualified teachers. Often, the whole teaching faculty of a school have been working there for over 20 years. For example, during the course of this research, when holding a focus group with the staff of a school in mountainous Adjara, all but one of the teachers had been employed there since the 1980s.[3]

This connects with performance – village schools have consistently underperformed their urban counterparts in all of the general performance metric studies undertaken in recent years. Programme for International Assessment (PISA) and Trends in International Mathematics & Science Study (TIMSS) scores in Georgia show considerably lower results for rural students[4]. Only around 10% of students in rural areas

[1] Public school infrastructure assessment database 2018-2019 collated by GeoWel based on data provided by ESIDA

[2] Mikheil Svanidze. 2021. School report: what Georgia's missing in its education reforms OpenDemocracy. https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/school-report-what-georgias-missing-in-its-education-reforms/ (Last accessed August 17, 2021)

[3] Focus group with Public School A, (rural), July 27 2021.

[4] GeoWel Research (2019), *Educating Georgia: an overview of Georgia's General Education system and a consideration of opportunities and challenges*. https://geowel.org/en/educating-georgia-key-findings/ (Reviewed August 16, 2021)

do well enough in school leaving exams to qualify for state financial support for university, compared to 27% in Tbilisi.[5]

Finally, schools in villages in Georgia are often the only sources of formal employment for many locals. In this regard, schools are one of the only durable sources of village social life, monthly income and general social activity. Closing some of the almost empty schools and sending the pupils to fill up other local schools, a process known as consolidation, while plausible rationally, is questionable socio-politically.[6]

This also means that policy on education vis-à-vis rural schools is always a part of general rural/urban policy, be it revitalization of rural areas, agriculture, larger scale infrastructure development (roads, natural gas access) or creating new employment opportunities country-wide to accommodate urbanization etc.

There is much the educational authorities can and should do to tackle the problems facing rural schools. In areas where it is relatively cheap to do so all schools should be linked to the natural gas network. Making relatively inexpensive repairs to water systems will make a considerable impact on children's and teacher's conditions. Where possible, other services such as adult education and cultural activities should be incorporated into underused village schools, giving them extra functionality. Also, closing down some rural schools has to be an option in cases where schools are, at the same time, small, in bad infrastructural condition and are likely to be used by fewer and fewer children in the future.

Methodology

The research for this policy paper was part of a year of research that has been conducted by GeoWel, as part of the US State Department financed Education Advocacy Project. This, in turn, followed on the research done in 2018 and 2019 for McClain Action for Children (MAC). The current project conducted extensive desk and field research within the project.

Desk research involved analysis of secondary data provided by the government, international organizations and local researchers. We analyzed quantitative data provided by:

- The National Statistics Office of Georgia (GeoStat)
- The Education Management Information System (EMIS)
- The Education and Science Infrastructure Development Agency (ESIDA)

Government data included, and was not limited to, the number and status of schools, students, teachers, teacher qualification, school location and infrastructure, etc.

We also reviewed data and analysis provided by the major international assessment surveys that Georgia has undertaken in recent years. This included:

[5] Burduli, Tamar. 2021. Digital Divide: How the Pandemic Has Exposed Inequalities in the Georgian Education System. Civil Georgia. https://civil.ge/archives/416960 (Last accessed August 17, 2021)

[6] Ibid and Mikheil Svanidze. 2021. School report: what Georgia's missing in its education reforms OpenDemocracy. https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/school-report-what-georgias-missing-in-its-education-reforms/ (Last accessed August 17, 2021)

- Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2009, 2015 and 2018 – focusing on student performance in reading, maths and sciences;
- Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) 2013 and 2018 – a survey of teachers focusing on working conditions and learning environments; Teacher Education and
- Development Study in Mathematics (TEDS-M) 2008 – a study of how teachers are prepared to teach mathematics in primary and lower secondary school.

We also reviewed the National Assessment of Georgian as a Second Language 2016, conducted by NAEC, reports by the Georgian Human Rights Ombudsman and research and analysis reports by local researchers and experts. We also referred to our 160-page research report from 2019, which comprehensively reviewed the Georgian education system.[7] In addition, we extensively reviewed and analyzed ordinances of the government of Georgia and the Minister of Education and Science regarding school funding, teacher remuneration and career entry/development.

Another extensive trove of data that was processed by GeoWel was the public school infrastructure assessment data for individual public schools that GeoWel received from ESIDA in 2019. Within the Education Advocacy Project, we were able to scrape the 2,233 individual excel spreadsheets and create a single database of public school infrastructure and analyze the collated data. Moreover, GeoWel created a publicly available interactive map of these schools, available in English and in Georgian at https://geowel.org/en/public-school-map/.

In addition to detailed desk research, we conducted considerable field research. This included:

- 50 online focus groups with parents and teachers of the 300 schools with the poorest infrastructure condition in the 2018-2019 Public school infrastructure assessment database.
- 24 online focus groups with public school teachers and parents representing various schools throughout Georgia – 113 participants in total
- 58 phone interviews and follow-up interviews with public school teachers and parents, experts and government representatives.

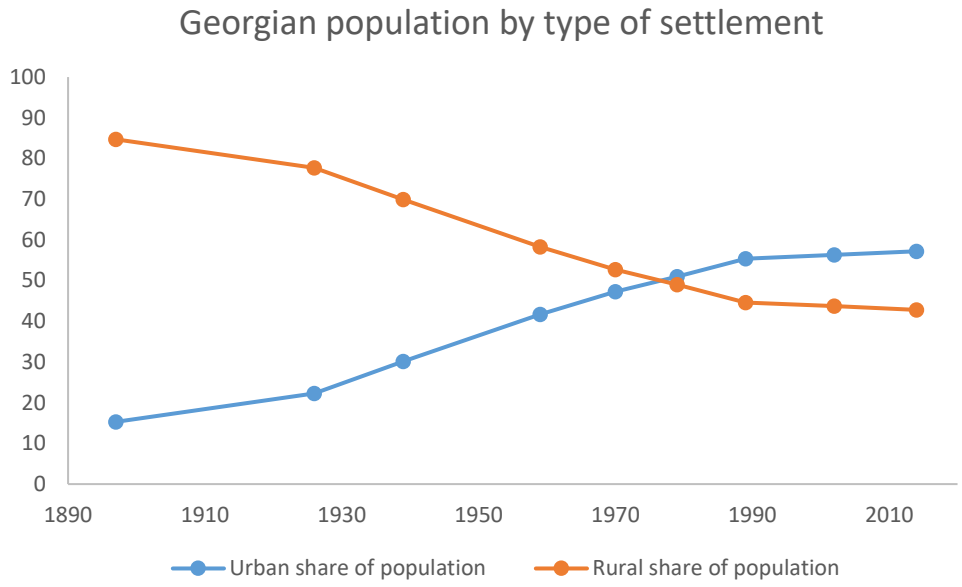
The fieldwork took place between February-September 2021. The sampling was designed to include as many rural and disadvantaged communities as possible, including ethnic minority settlements.

The impact of Georgia's demographics on its schools

Georgia urbanized rapidly throughout the 20th century (see Figure 1). While at the turn of the 20th century, Georgian villages had five times the population of its cities, by the time of the 1979 census the urban population had surpassed the rural.

[7] https://geowel.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/GeoWel-Education-Report-for-MAC-Final.pdf

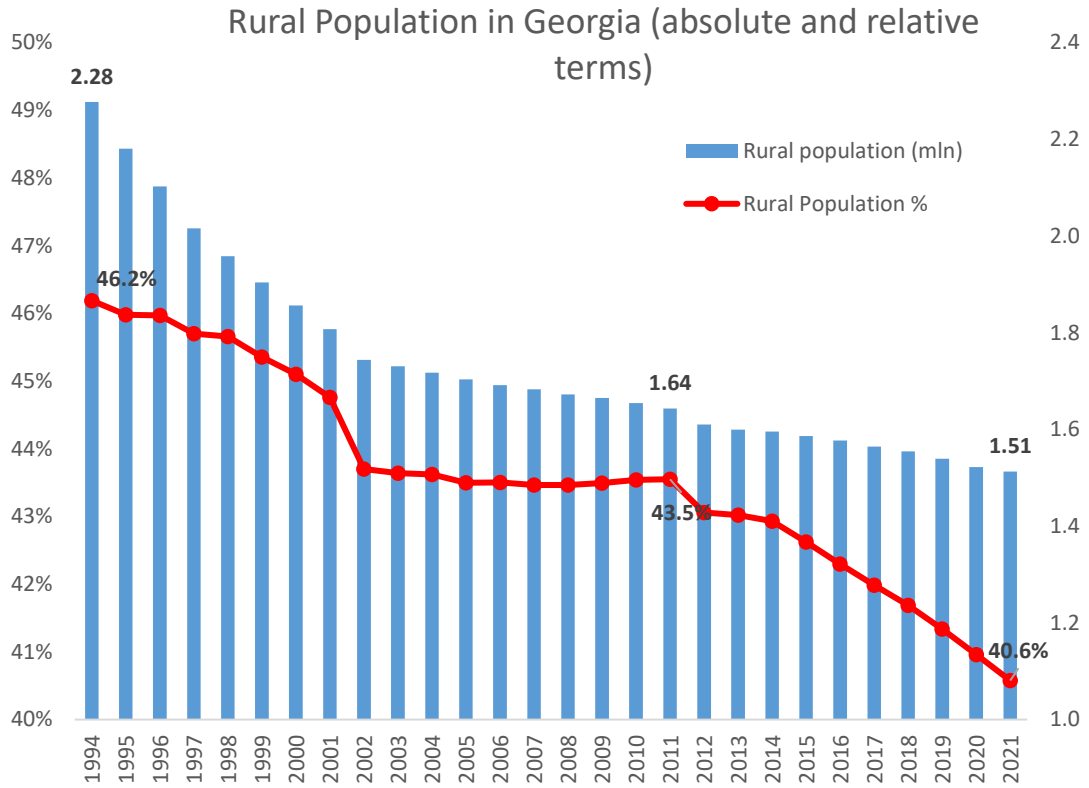
Figure 1: Georgian population ratio by type of settlement



Source: Censuses of Georgia (initially as a part of Russian Empire and USSR) from 1897 until 2014.

Following Georgia's independence from the Soviet Union in 1991 the urbanization trend continued. This time, however, Georgian villages started to lose population both in absolute and relative terms (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Rural population in Georgia, post-independence



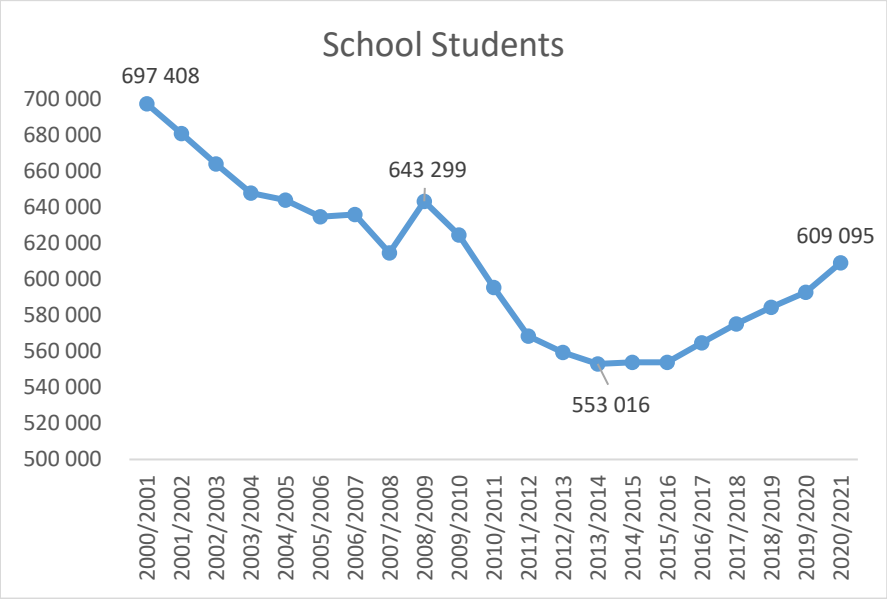
Source: GeoStat

The relative loss accelerated after 2013/2014. This was due to a combination of factors: the lack of jobs in villages; more economic activity large cities, particularly Tbilisi and Batumi; and Georgian villagers moving directly to other countries for seasonal and/or permanent jobs. As a result, Georgian's rural population has decreased by about 700,000 since 1994. Most of those moving away from rural areas are younger people, leaving rural areas older. Indeed, in the last most detailed census, conducted in 2014, Georgia as a whole had an average age of 38.1, but in Tbilisi, home of around 30% of its citizens, the average age was lower, 36.3. It was significantly higher in more rural areas of Georgia: Racha-Lechkhumi and Kvemo Svaneti (48.2), Guria (41.8), Samegrelo and Zemo Svaneti (40.8) and Imereti (40.1).[8]

The number of students in Georgia's schools have, unsurprisingly, largely followed the same trend (see Figure 3): in the years 2013-15, schools educated 80% of the students they did at the turn of the 21st century, and whatever growth was seen after that was a function of the growth of the population in urban areas (see figures 7 and 8 for comparison).

[8] 2014 Census of Georgia (summary). P8. http://census.ge/files/results/Census%20Release_GEO.pdf (last accessed August 18, 2021)

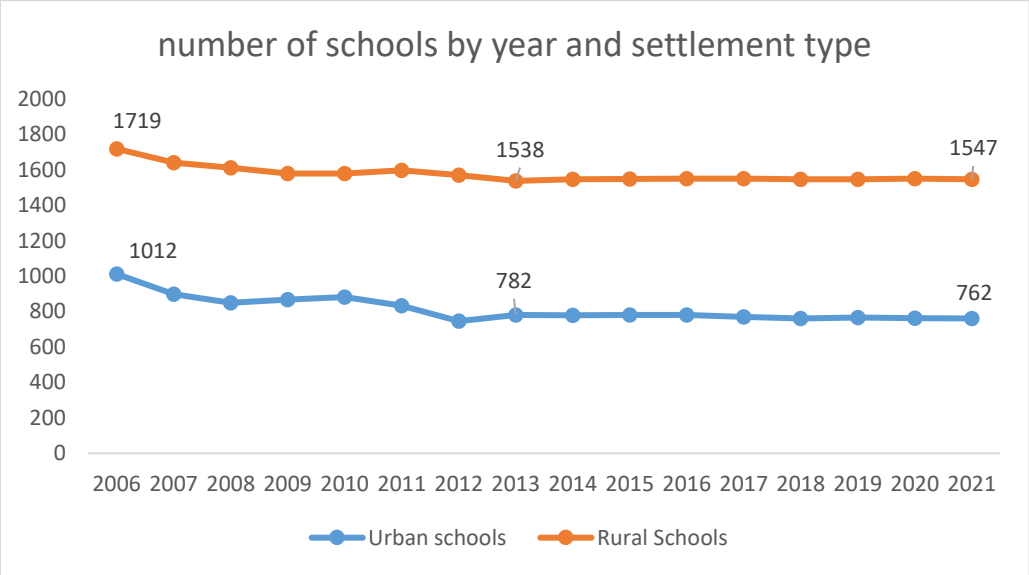
Figure 3: School Students by year



Source: GeoStat

This means that the countryside in Georgia has a small and decreasing number of people in general, and is especially lacking in young and economically active people. One would think that this would lead to closing or uniting many schools in rural areas, particularly after the more marked decrease during the last 7-8 years, but this has not been the case. The number of schools, which did decrease somewhat in the 2000s, has stayed remarkably steady in the last decade (See Figure 4). This means that there has been an effort aimed at keeping schools open regardless of the number of students in them: indeed, over the last eight years, Georgian cities lost 20 schools, while Georgian villages gained nine.

Figure 4: Schools by year and settlement type



Source: GeoStat

Of those schools that closed in the late 2000s, some were cases of a physical school being closed. Others, as some experts have suggested, were administrative changes and actually just involved consolidating more than one physical school under a single administrative umbrella.[9]

One way or another, rural emptying has, if anything, only accelerated in the recent decade, and keeping all rural schools open means that each of them will have a decreasing number of students year by year, barring unforeseen demographic changes, and the situation will eventually become unsustainable, with a large number of teachers teaching an ever-shrinking number of students. The topic of student loss has been one of the most important issues raised in combined focus groups, with teachers, administrative personnel, and parents, in the most infrastructurally disadvantaged rural schools. Even when asked about the most significant infrastructural problem, local school employees pointed to the loss of students as more pressing a concern than crumbling buildings, lack of ICT technology or teaching materials. We asked questions about the number of students these schools have lost (or gained) through last years, and many respondents stated their school population has halved in the last decade and is only around one third of what it was at the time of the fall of the Soviet Union[10].

"Right now we have 27 students, and migration is prevalent among young people, many go to Batumi, they work and eat there, there are jobs there, or go to Turkey for work at construction sites. There were over 100 students at one time."[11] This was a sentiment repeated in many focus groups, where some

[9] GeoWel Research (2019), *Educating Georgia: an overview of Georgia's General Education system and a consideration of opportunities and challenges*. https://geowel.org/en/educating-georgia-key-findings/ (Reviewed August 16, 2021)
[10] Number of Focus Groups with 50 most infrasatructurally disadvantaged schools
[11] Focus group with Public School B (rural)

teachers feel like they are on borrowed time and in constant fear of getting "consolidated," a euphemism for closed[12].

Structure of Schools in Georgia

The structure of schools in Georgia, in a nutshell can be termed as large, often overcrowded schools in Tbilisi, smaller schools in the regional centers, towns and big villages, and extremely small, almost empty schools in remote rural areas.

Figure 5: Breakdown of schools and students by region, 2019

Region	Number of students	% of total students	N of schools	Average school size
Tbilisi	**212 425**	34%	288	697
Imereti	**78 682**	13%	395	193
Kvemo Kartli	**72 311**	12%	267	260
Adjara	**61 273**	10%	255	226
Samegrelo Zemo Svaneti	**44 691**	7%	262	166
Kakheti	**44 343**	7%	193	220
Shida Kartli	**38 502**	6%	171	220
Samtskhe-Javakheti	**24 695**	4%	206	118
Guria	**14 371**	2%	101	140
Mtskheta-Mtianeti	**12 491**	2%	86	139
Racha-Lechkhumi and Kvemo Svaneti	**2 939**	1%	68	43
Abkhazia[13]	**2 372**	0.3%	13	164
Total	**609 095**	100%	2 305	253

Source: Education Management Information System (EMIS)

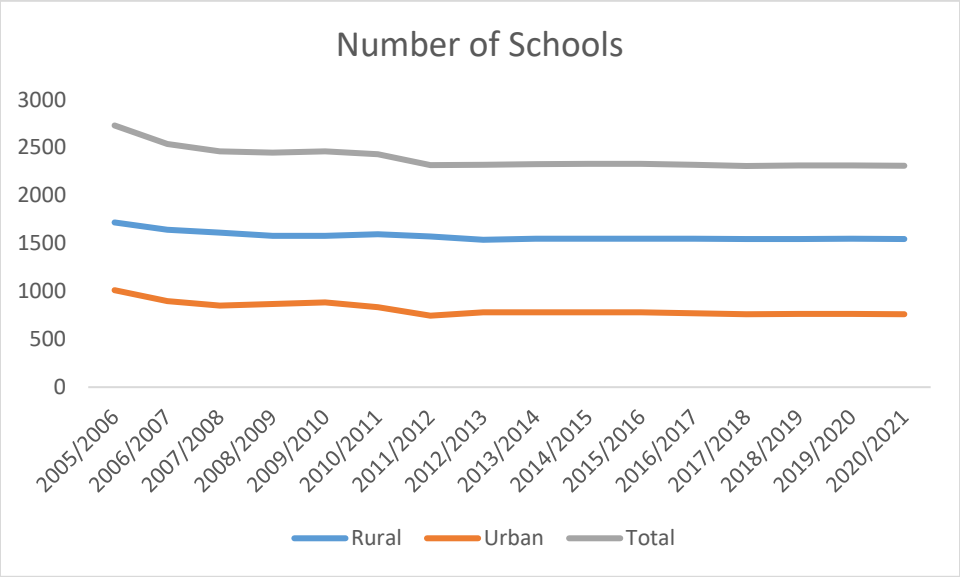
One would expect, since Tbilisi represents about 1/3 of the population of the country, it also represents about 1/3 of the student population – or slightly more, considering that the capital's population is younger

[12] Focus group with Public School C

[13] These schools are administratively from Abkhazian Autonomous Republic but are physically located in cities around Georgia (Zugdidi, Senaki, Kutaisi, Tbilisi), not in Abkhazia. They are in areas of high concentration of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs).

on average than the country. These students go to schools which are, on average, 4 times bigger than schools outside of Tbilisi.[14]

Figure 6: Number of Schools by rural/urban breakdown

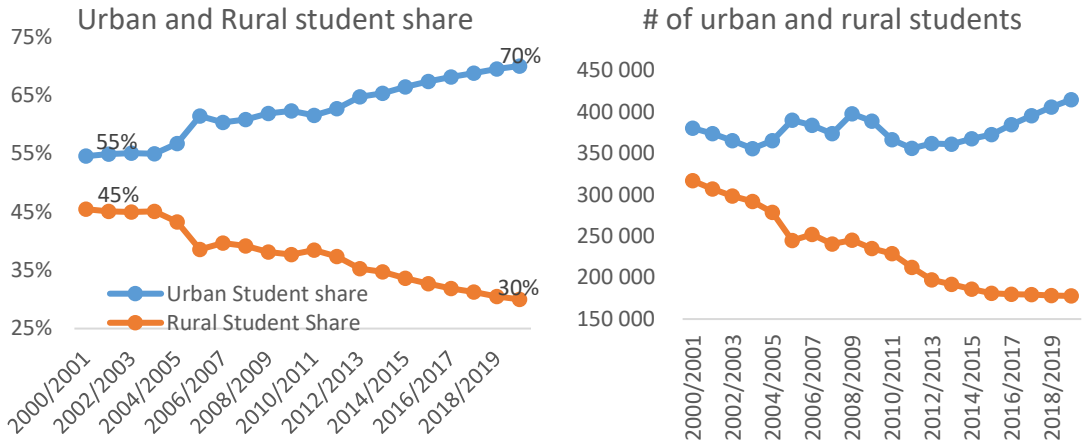


Source: GeoStat

At the same time, as one can see in figure above, the number of schools in rural and urban Georgia have been changing in a similar pattern, not parallel to population change – there was a school decrease (consolidation and bureaucratic change) throughout Georgia in the latter part of the 2000s, while the number of schools remained steady in the last decade, after the change of the government in 2012. This meant that, due to migration to urban areas, particularly Tbilisi, schools in the capital (and, to a lesser degree, in other urban areas) have been growing in size, while the number of students on average has been decreasing in the rest of Georgia. As visible in the figure below, the share of rural schools has been rising as the relative rural population is falling.

[14] GeoWel Research (2019), *Educating Georgia: an overview of Georgia's General Education system and a consideration of opportunities and challenges*. https://geowel.org/en/educating-georgia-key-findings/ (Reviewed August 16, 2021)

Figure 7: Share of school students by settlement



Source: GeoStat

If we use three categories of Tbilisi, larger and smaller urban areas and rural schools, then the country roughly divides into three similar sized blocks with 1/3 of the student in Tbilisi, 1/3 for Urban non-Tbilisi and 1/3 for rural15.

Schools in Georgia are divided in 3 main categories – primary, elementary and secondary. Primary schools deliver education to grades 1-6 only. From there, students move on to study in either elementary or secondary schools. Elementary schools (საბაზო or basic schools in Georgian language) provide grades 1 through 9 – which is the legal minimum for compulsory education in Georgia. Finally, secondary schools have 12 full years of education, from grades 1 through 12.

Figure 8: Structure of Georgian schools by type[16]

Type of Education	School type	Grades	Ages
Primary Education (დაწყებითი განათლება)	Primary School (დაწყებითი სკოლა)	1-6	6-11
Lower Secondary Education (საბაზო განათლება)	Elementary School (საბაზო სკოლა)	1-9	6-13
Upper Secondary Education (ზოგადი განათლება)	Secondary School (საშუალო სკოლა)	1-12	6-17

Looking at schools from the rural/urban perspective, the vast majority of schools in urban areas are secondary, while one in every three in rural areas are either primary or elementary. Overall, almost 3 in 4

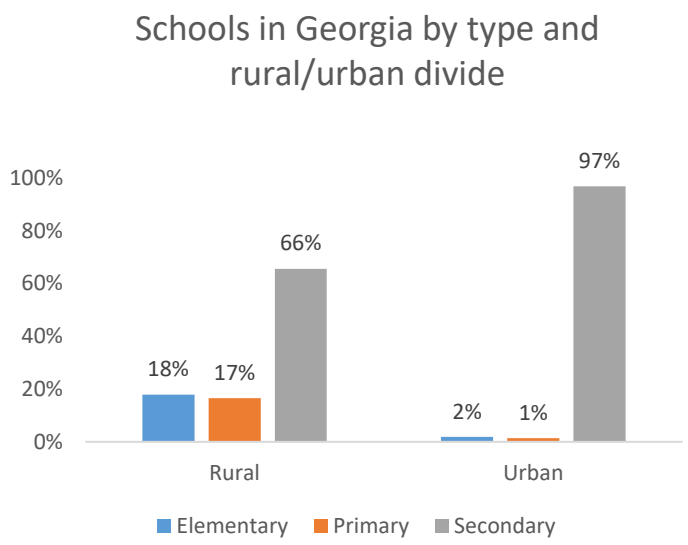
[15] Ibid.

[16] There were a small and decreasing number of public schools in Georgia that offer education only to grades 7-12 or 10-12. These are mostly specialized schools (e.g. mathematics schools or music schools). Total number of such schools in 2021 was five.

of Georgia's schools provide education for all 12 grades[17]. However, only 2 in 3 do so in village schools, where rest of the institutions are either elementary or primary (see figure 10). These elementary and particularly primary schools are often ones with the smallest numbers of students, often less than ten, and in many cases have combined classes for different grade levels due to the lack of students.

It should be noted that there has been no consensus internationally over the issue of closing down or uniting small rural schools, even ones where several grades are taught together. In the mid 20th century in the developed world the number of single-teacher schools was reduced through the practice of bussing. However, the tide changed around 1980s in northern countries, under the banner of rural revitalization, and multigrade schools have come back as an effective form of educational organization in areas of low population density, such as Australia, parts of US, and Canada, and Latin America.[18]

Figure 9: Schools by type and settlement



Source: Public school infrastructure assessment database 2018-2019 collated by GeoWel based on data provided by ESIDA

These statistics on the size and type of rural school may not fully reflect the reality for some areas: in many cases, a large school in a village may have absorbed one or more elementary schools in villages nearby – but those small schools, while administratively part of a secondary school, still continue to function in the same, usually bad building, like they did before the union.

[17] Richard Li et al. Georgia. OECD Reviews of Evaluation and Assessment in Education. p53 https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/94dc370e-en.pdf?expires=1629729388&id=id&accname=guest&checksum=55DF9D41E19475A8E26B9B9423977887 (Reviewed August 23, 2021)

[18] Brunswic, Etienne and Jean Valerien. Multigrade schools: improving access in rural Africa?; Fundamentals of educational planning; Vol.:76; 2004. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED496622.pdf p. 25

As is apparent, most elementary and primary schools are concentrated in the Georgian countryside. These are often very small, often two-room buildings which have not been renovated. They have an extremely small amount of students, sometimes none at all (See Figure 11). As a standard, most small villages in Georgia have at least a primary school, and keeping it open has a particular social function, as younger kids are harder to transport to nearby villages for studies and closing down these small primary schools, would likely mean the acceleration of the processes already emptying the Georgian countryside.

Figure 10: Number of students in primary schools in rural Georgia

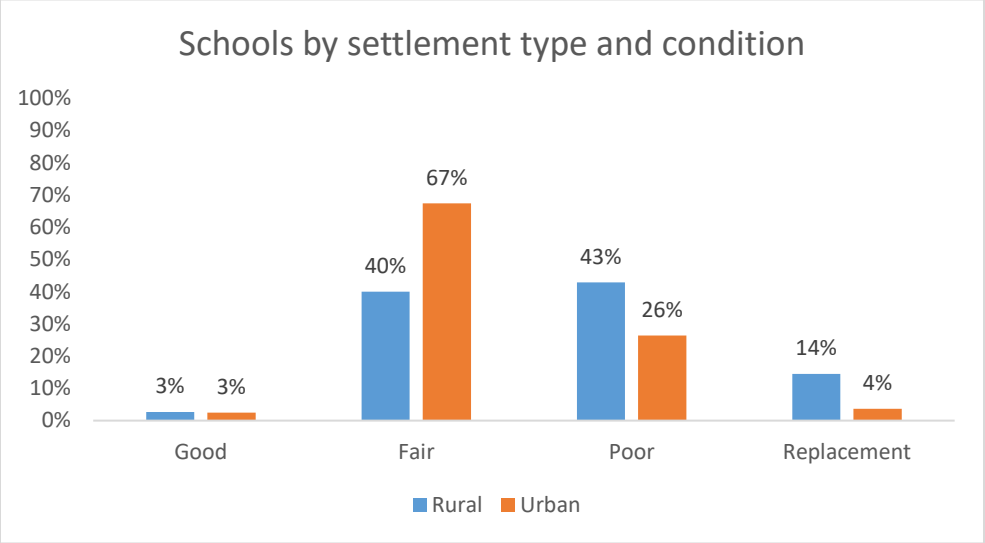
# of students	Count	Share
0	46	16%
1-5	104	36%
6-10	54	19%
11-50	63	22%
51 or more	19	7%
Total	**286**	**100%**

Source: EMIS

Infrastructure

Schools in rural areas face a number of more acute infrastructural challenges than urban ones. First, their general physical condition is markedly worse: based on the Facility Condition Index (FCI), which is an index that measures the general quality of school infrastructure in Georgia, 14% of rural schools are on "replacement" level and further 43% are "poor." These two categories collectively represent around half of all Georgian village schools and, when thinking about demographic trends, are a policy headache for the government. The costs of reconstructing or repairing the poor and replacement schools are incredibly high, and still even having a renovated school is no guarantee that the village will not continue to depopulate, which means that some of these schools could be repaired in vain.

Figure 11: Schools by FCI condition by type of settlement



Source: Public school infrastructure assessment database 2018-2019 collated by GeoWel based on data provided by ESIDA

This is why further school consolidation, instead of considerable investment in infrastructure, is often thought of as a sensible option when talking about rural schools: newer schools alone are unlikely to be a sufficient condition to slow the urbanization of Georgia and migration of people out of its villages in general, yet closing village schools could accelerate the trend and put increased pressure on already overcrowded urban schools.

Village schools are further disadvantaged, compared to their urban counterparts, if we look more closely at some of the technical aspects of the school premises.

Heating

While almost all urban schools have gas central heating, rural schools have a more diverse system of heating (see figures below)

Figure 12: Type of heating by rural/urban

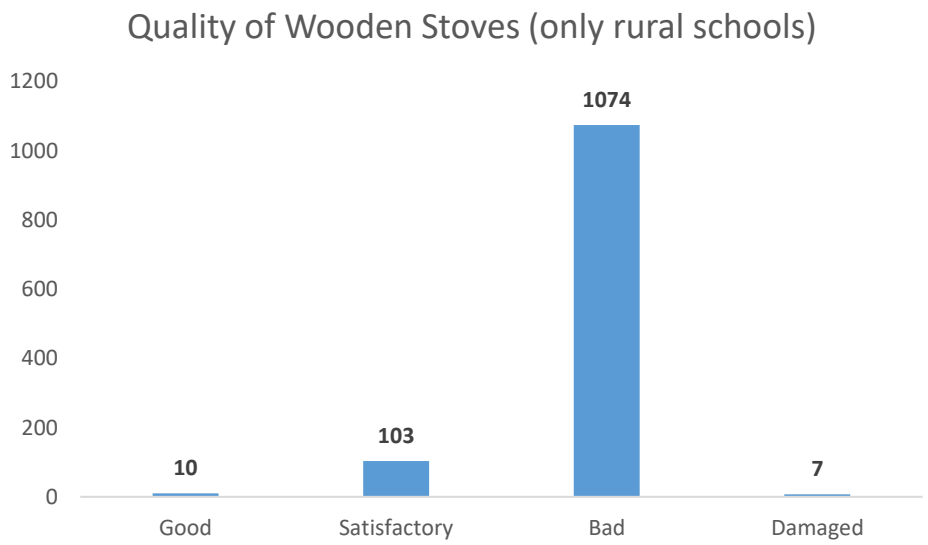
Type of heating	**Rural**	**Urban**
Natural gas	16%	**88%**
Wood stove	**64%**	7%
Liquid fuel	6%	2%
Solid fuel	5%	1%
Other/More than one system	7%	1%

Source: Public school infrastructure assessment database 2018-2019 collated by GeoWel based on data provided by ESIDA

Two thirds (64%) of rural schools, use wood stoves as their primary system of heating. The quality of those wood stoves is awful – 9 in 10 of them were classified as bad in the 2018-2019 assessment database. In focus groups, there was a sense that heating systems in these schools workplace was stuck in time.

"Who even heats with wood these days?" a teacher from a public school in Samegrelo region asked rhetorically in a focus group discussion. "I finished the same school [20 or so years ago] and the heating system is exactly the same as it was then".[19]

Figure 13: Quality of wooden stoves



Source: Public school infrastructure assessment database 2018-2019 collated by GeoWel based on data provided by ESIDA

Heating discussions, particularly about wooden stoves, loomed large in in many focus group interviews with the disadvantaged schools in rural areas, where and a number of issues were laid out by school personnel and parents.

First, on windy days, smoke from the stoves gets in the classroom and beyond it being harmful, it makes it impossible to study on such days.

"Wooden stoves are an issue. When there's a wind, it sends smoke into the rooms, and it's bad for the students' health and also the ash damages the furniture and the rooms themselves. Some time ago, they installed special knee-pipes [bent flues] outside against the wind, but it did not help"[20]

[19] Focus Group with Public School D (rural)
[20] Focus Group with public school E (rural)

"When there's a wind, it's impossible to stay in teacher's room and the library. We can't handle the smoke, it's impossible"[21]

Obviously, in areas where there is no central gas system, wooden or liquid fuel (central diesel heating) are the only options. However, in two focus groups, it turned that while the village had access to the central gas system, it had not reached the school. "Our neighbor has gas, but we still use the stoves."[22]

Secondly, in many cases, teachers have to do double duty of stoking the fire and teaching at the same time. Some rural schools employ stokers for the fireplaces, while in others, teachers themselves have to manage fires – which means coming in early to heat the stove and keep it safe and warm throughout the day. "We have no stoker, the stove dies, we need to bring firewood, light it up again and actually it's not part of our jobs. Teachers are covered in soot, with tears in their eyes. It's not suitable."[23]

In some rural schools with recently installed central heating, the system was not installed properly and the school personnel prefer the old, traditional style of wooden heating:

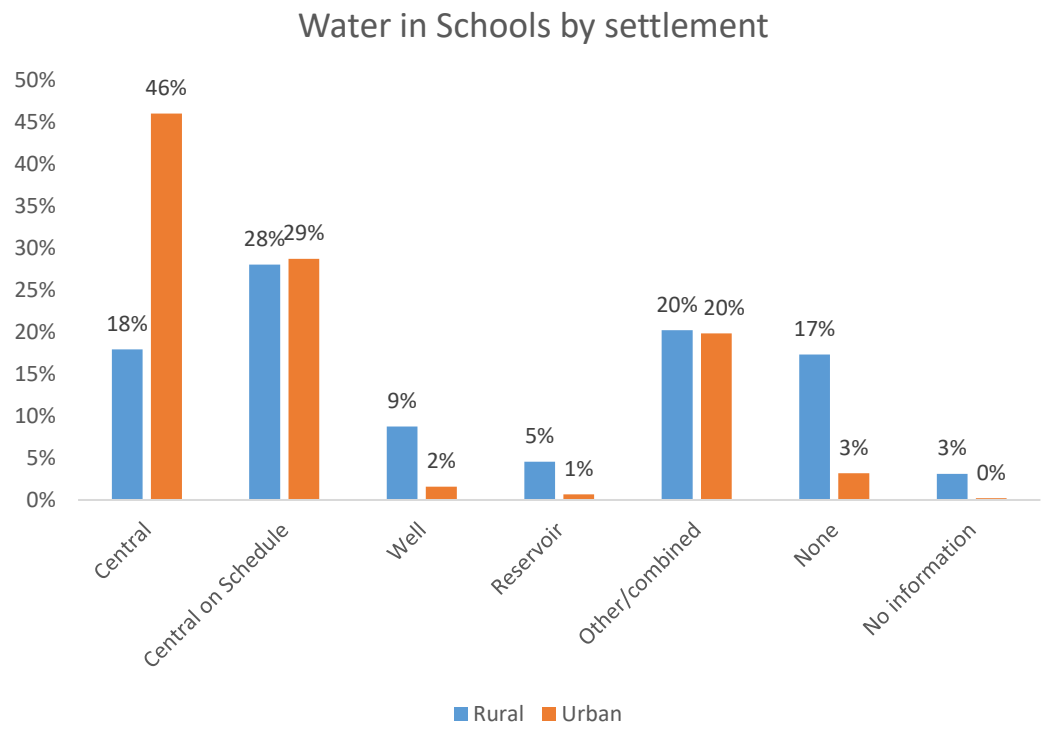
"Heating is the largest issue. We got a new gas system, but it was not installed properly. In the mid-winter, we would not get enough heat. They did not install enough radiators, and now they are making some changes. We would sit in 2-3 rooms with additional electrical heaters on in order for children to be heated. Some of them sat with coats on[24]"

Water

The availability of running water is also an issue in many Georgian regions, and schools have to accommodate the lack of water in their settlements. In many areas with no running water, or no constant running water, schools keep wells and water tanks. However, even in these circumstances, around one in five schools in the Georgian countryside has no water at all (see Figure below).

[21] Focus Group with Public School F (rural)
[22] Focus Group with Public School G (rural)
[23] Focus Group with Public School E
[24] Focus Group with Public School B

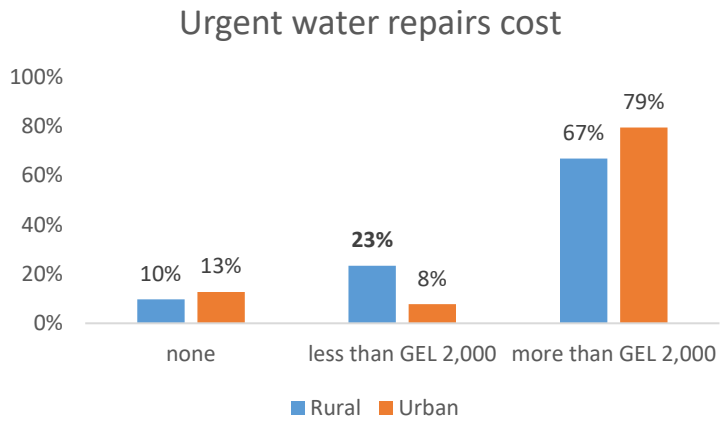
Figure 14: Water in schools by rural/urban



Source: Public school infrastructure assessment database 2018-2019 collated by GeoWel based on data provided by ESIDA

Providing clean and constant water supply in Georgia's countryside is not a task for education policy as such and is a part of a more general infrastructural development package. In a more limited number of cases when water provision could be provided easily (such as investing in a new well or repairing the existing piping around the school), such works can and should be carried out: based on the 2018-2019 assessment data, 23%, or 420 rural schools' water systems need urgent, but relatively cheap (<GEL 2,000) water repairs. Such works could greatly improve school conditions (see Figure 15 for details).

Figure 15: Small-time repair costs by settlement

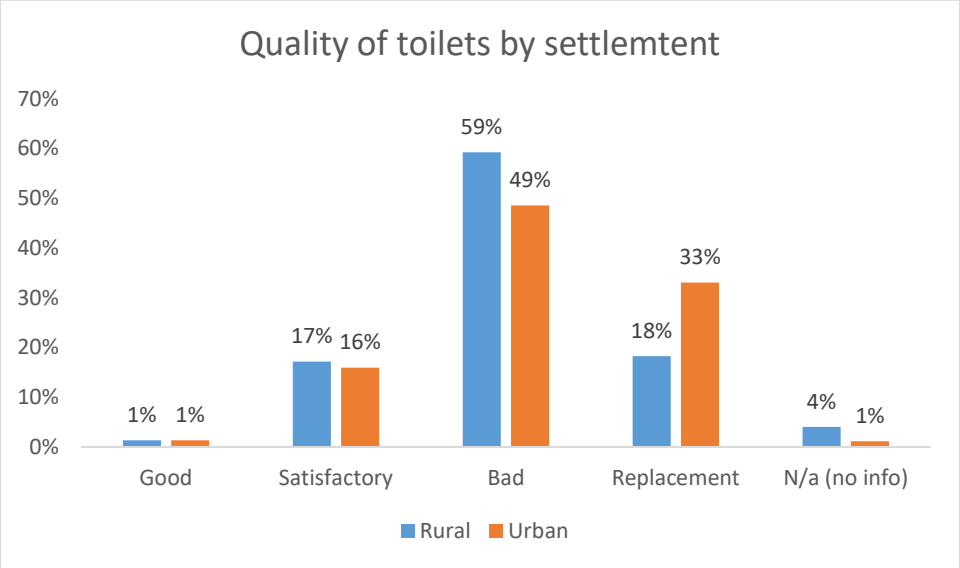


Source: Public school infrastructure assessment database 2018-2019 collated by GeoWel based on data provided by ESIDA

Toilets

Generally speaking, toilets in urban and rural schools are relatively similar in terms of quality: very few schools have good or satisfactory toilets, and while there are more "bad" toilets in rural schools, a third of urban school toilets need replacement compared to 18% or rural schools.

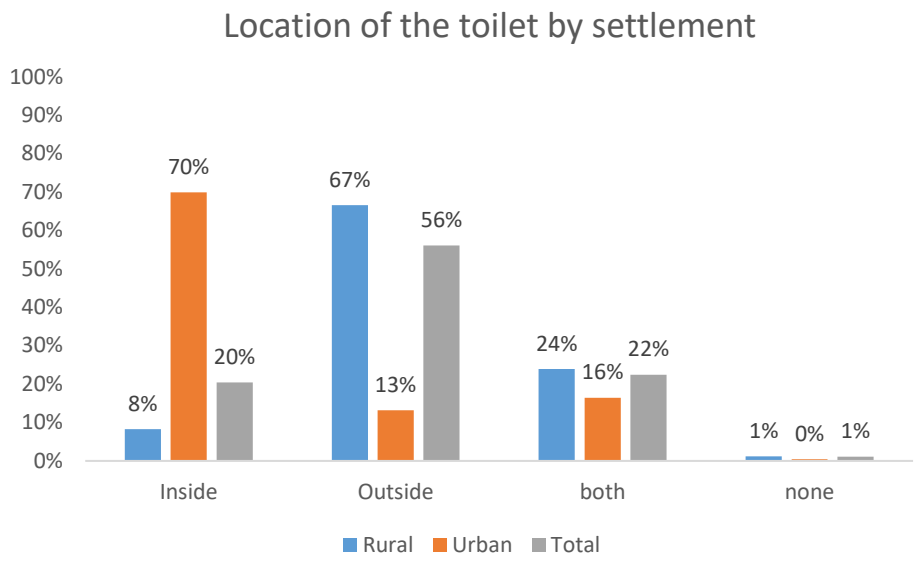
Figure 16: Quality of toilets in schools



Source: Public school infrastructure assessment database 2018-2019 collated by GeoWel based on data provided by ESIDA

This, however, conceals the fact that over half of village schools have toilets outside the building.

Figure 17: Location of the toilet

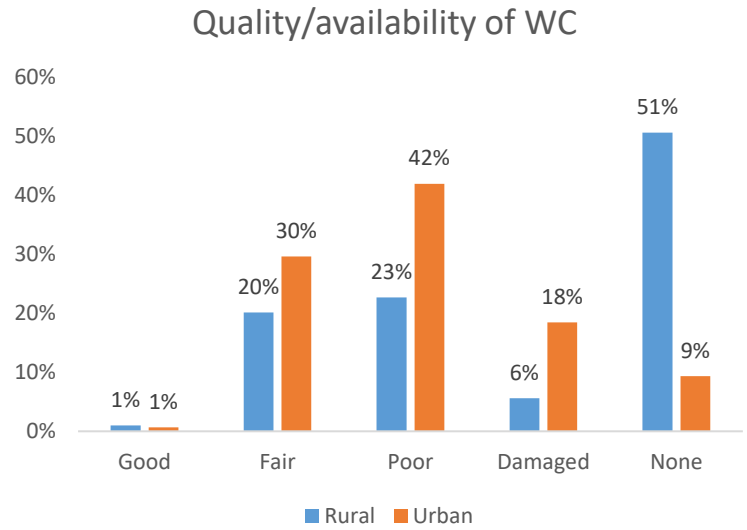


Source: Public school infrastructure assessment database 2018-2019 collated by GeoWel based on data provided by ESIDA

As seen, two thirds of schools in the country side have outside toilets only. In addition, 24 schools, 22 of them rural, have no toilets listed at all.

The existence of water in toilets is clearly important, and here we can see the similar issue – over half or rural schools have no water in their WC's.

Figure 18: Quality / existence of water in WC



Source: Public school infrastructure assessment database 2018-2019 collated by GeoWel based on data provided by ESIDA

Sports halls

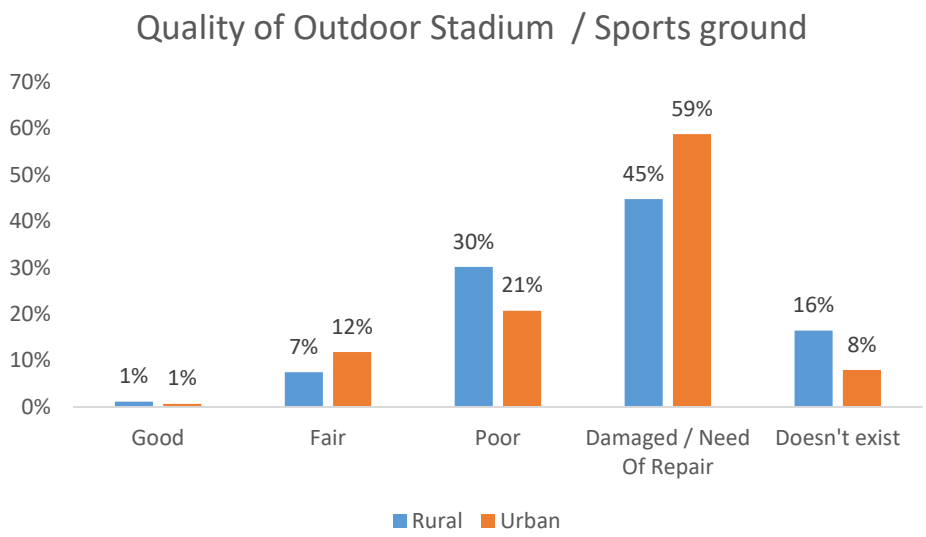
When asked what their children want to be added to schools the most, the overwhelming response from parents from the most disadvantaged schools was sports facilities, both indoor and outdoor.[25] Village schools generally lack indoor sports halls and during winter their sports "lessons" are about learning history about various sports champions, and, infrastructure permitting, playing games such as table tennis and chess.[26]

Indeed, few rural schools have indoor sports halls (gyms), especially as compared to urban schools. Based on the 2018-2019 assessment data, 67% of rural schools don't have internal gyms, compared to 31% of urban schools.

While most schools, both rural and urban, have some sort of outdoor sports ground or stadium (some have multiple), most are in condition that is poor and in need of repair (see Figure below).

[25] Focus Group with public school C, H and I
[26] Focus groups with public Schools D and H

Figure 19: Outdoor sports hall quality

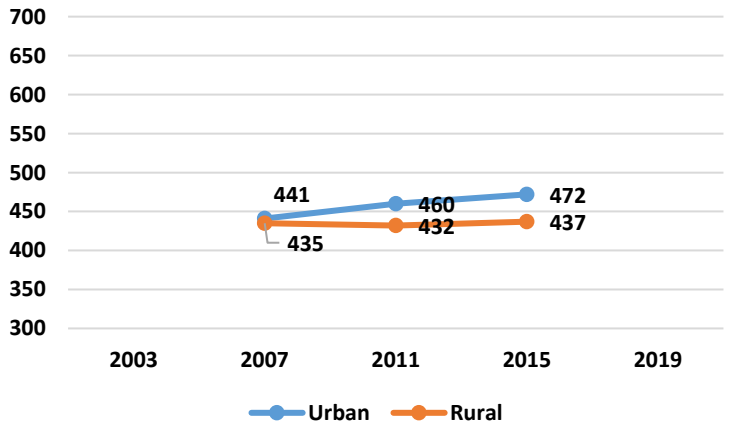


Source: Public school infrastructure assessment database 2018-2019 collated by GeoWel based on data provided by ESIDA

Teachers and performance

It is a fact that currently, students from rural schools perform worse than their urban counterparts. For example, the TIMSS study, which collects test data from students at grades 4 and 8 every 4 years, shows the level of mathematical and science achievement for rural kids falling from around similar positions in 2007 to lower scores in 2011 and 2015.

Figure 20: Dynamics of TIMSS student achievement in rural and urban schools, 2007, 2011 and 2015



Source: UNICEF

PISA scores show an enormous and ever increasing chasm between rural and urban students: In 2009, students from cities scored 30 points more than students from rural areas. In the 2015 PISA assessment, this gap grew to 44 points, which is equivalent of one and a half year of schooling.[27]

One of the challenges of interpreting this data is that living in rural or urban areas is a proxy for the wealth of the student's household, and since we know that kids from richer backgrounds do better, it is hard to say whether these differences reflect a difference in the teaching environment, or simply reflect home life. Indeed, if we look generally across the OECD countries, rural-urban gaps in academic performance are said to disappear if we account for socio-economic status. This highlights the importance of raising aspirations and creating opportunities for rural students.[28] This idea is also supported by the fact that, on the face of it, rural schools have seen no improvement in TIMSS scores over eight years and that the bulk of the improvement that has been seen in Georgia has been centered in the urban schools. Further, a disproportionate amount of the improvement in urban schools seems to come from private schools (which are almost entirely urban). These schools saw a 50-point improvement in their TIMSS scores, versus 19-point improvements in public schools (including rural).

However, again, since we know that rural schools have fewer qualified teachers and they are also poorer financially, it is also hard to disentangle cause and effect.[29]

Teachers

Despite the general oversupply of teachers in Georgia, there are shortages in some subjects such as sciences, mathematics, and Georgian as a second language, particularly in rural and/or mountainous areas.[30] In many focus group discussions, teachers said that they live in a regional center and travel to a village or a number of villages to teach.[31]

The demographic reality of rural areas losing population, and especially the younger population, means that in rural areas in Georgia, the teacher to student ratio can be as low as 2:1 and in urban areas as high as 15:1. And, according to an OECD report, sustaining several small schools raises important efficiency

[27] Richard Li et al. Georgia. OECD Reviews of Evaluation and Assessment in Education. P60 https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/94dc370e-en.pdf?expires=1629729388&id=id&accname=guest&checksum=55DF9D41E19475A8E26B9B9423977887 (Reviewed August 23, 2021)

[28] LEARNING IN RURAL SCHOOLS: INSIGHTS FROM PISA, TALIS AND THE LITERATURE. 2019. OECD Education Working Paper No. 196 https://www.oecd.org/officialdocuments/publicdisplaydocumentpdf/?cote=EDU/WKP(2019)4&docLanguage=En (Reviewed August 19, 2021)

[29] GeoWel Research (2019), *Educating Georgia: an overview of Georgia's General Education system and a consideration of opportunities and challenges*. https://geowel.org/en/educating-georgia-key-findings/ (Reviewed August 16, 2021)

[30] Richard Li et al. Georgia. OECD Reviews of Evaluation and Assessment in Education. P60 https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/94dc370e-en.pdf?expires=1629729388&id=id&accname=guest&checksum=55DF9D41E19475A8E26B9B9423977887 (Reviewed August 23, 2021)

[31] Focus groups (general)

concerns as providing a wide range of learning opportunities for students and hiring high quality staff is more difficult to accomplish under such circumstances.[32]

This was the case in one of the villages visited by GeoWel, which was home to two schools: the smaller school struggled to keep students living nearby, as the larger school offered more extracurricular activities and parents would rather have kids make the long journey than keep them at a smaller school closer to home.[33]

While the population has been shrinking in rural areas the number of teachers remains relatively steady. Over the years 2000-2015, student numbers have declined 21%, spearheaded by general rural population decline, the number of teachers has declined just 1%.[34] One reason listed for this, along with decision to keep rural schools open, is absence of mandatory retirement for old teachers.[35] There have been some recent changes in this regard, as in 2019 the government introduced a program with financial incentives to encourage teachers passed retirement age to retire, which led to about 8,000 teachers retiring. They were replaced by around 5000 teachers and the rest of classes were allocated to already employed teachers where there was such need, but the teacher-student ratio still remains tilted. [36]

Policy Ideas

School Consolidation pros and cons

In most discussions that we have engaged-in regarding the pros and cons of consolidation, the practicality of bussing students loomed large. The argument is that village schools are necessary in order to make sure that students don't have to travel unreasonable distances. However, data gathered by GeoWel tentatively suggests that purely from a geographic point of view, considerable consolidation could be possible.[37]

Of course, distance is not the only hurdle. Local schools are often the heart of a community and attending the school, which your siblings, parents or even grandparents attended, may be familiar and comfortable to all concerned.

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[32] Richard Li et al. Georgia. OECD Reviews of Evaluation and Assessment in Education. P54 https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/94dc370e-en.pdf?expires=1629729388&id=id&accname=guest&checksum=55DF9D41E19475A8E26B9B9423977887 (Reviewed August 23, 2021)

[33] GeoWel Blog: Smaller School Dilemmas in Disadvantaged Communities: Case of Mukhrani. https://geowel.org/en/smaller-school-dilemmas-in-disadvantaged-communities-case-of-mukhrani/

[34] Richard Li et al. Georgia. OECD Reviews of Evaluation and Assessment in Education. P53 https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/94dc370e-en.pdf?expires=1629729388&id=id&accname=guest&checksum=55DF9D41E19475A8E26B9B9423977887 (Reviewed August 23, 2021)

[35] Ibid

[36] GeoWel Research (2019), *Educating Georgia: an overview of Georgia's General Education system and a consideration of opportunities and challenges*. https://geowel.org/en/educating-georgia-key-findings/ (Reviewed August 16, 2021)

[37] Ibid p. 95

Travelling to a distant school in a new community can also be a challenge. Not only distance, but the type of travel, security and payment for travel are issues. Also, rural students may face challenges integrating into urban schools.

As a result, closing local schools is unpopular in the communities where the closure takes place. This can be made worse if one village-school is closed, and students have to then travel to a neighboring village, as people can legitimately ask, why is my village school being closed rather than the neighbor? Teachers in a village, who may see their livelihood end with the closure of a school are also likely to fight against it. This is why, keeping schools open, has often been a plank of local, particularly majoritarian, MPs.[38]

Policy Solutions

Devising appropriate education policies to address these interconnected and at the same time, often contradictory issues is tricky politically, as it is connected with general social or regional government policy, how the state sees the economic potential of the countryside and/or the pros and cons of urbanization.

That said, urbanization and/or immigration directly out of villages for jobs is unlikely to stop in the near future. Thus optimisation/consolidation/school closing is something rational that policymakers will have to grapple with, especially regarding disadvantaged primary and elementary schools in rural areas.

The argument for consolidation may be the most compelling when thinking about infrastructure upgrades. On a cost-per-student basis, it is often hard to justify large-scale infrastructure renovation or maintenance of existing very small schools. But, worse than that, these schools were built with poor materials, poor insulation and poor heating and sanitation. Upgrading all of this in very small, very old schools, most of them primary or elementary, would probably not make sense and, instead, Georgia should probably look to build new and modern facilities which simultaneously bring multiple schools together.[39]

Publicly, education policy makers plan the opposite: According to Lali Kalandadze, head of preschool and general education development at the Ministry of Education, “School is often the only place for social life in many rural areas.” Hence, rather than close schools with tiny student populations, the ministry is instead planning to cluster other services in the same buildings.

“We are looking at ways of enriching schools functionally, rather than ‘optimising’ [closing]. Many schools in villages have added options for preschool, kindergarten, youth clubs and professional courses in the

[38] Interview with Ghia Nodia, 9th August, 2019

[39] GeoWel Research (2019), *Educating Georgia: an overview of Georgia’s General Education system and a consideration of opportunities and challenges*. https://geowel.org/en/educating-georgia-key-findings/ (Reviewed August 16, 2021)

same building. Schools can become a service provider, not just for school-age children but kindergarteners and adults," Kalandadze said.[40]

The quest for making local village schools hubs of general knowledge rather than simple school education could be a solution in a number of rural localities, but this should be a part of a larger project of rural revitalization or rural policy. Practice of multigrade schooling, happening in many rural schools in Georgia is often understood as an effective means of communication in rural and underprivileged areas and already is playing a crucial role in expanding access to education in a context of budget cuts and limited human resources.[41] However, education policy alone can't work against "demographic destiny" and therefore, this is unlikely to be the whole of the solution and a frank discussion about school consolidation in parts of rural Georgia will probably be a necessary part of any reform agenda.

Beyond consolidation and/or diversification of functions of the existing rural schools, devising appropriate heating systems for existing schools is key. For the villages where there already is a system of gas network, schools shall immediately be connected. For the villages with no planned gas system, central heating system with liquid fuel is a sensible solution. Simple water upgrades should be made where possible[42]

Balancing urbanization and keeping life in rural areas around the country is key to Georgia's economic development – be that agriculture, tourism or local industries. Investing in rural areas often has to come in one package with investing in education one way of slowing or preventing rural depopulation. Georgia should look at international best practice involving multigrade small schools in countries with similar economic development in Latin America and Asia.[43] That said, a large number of replacement schools are located in remote rural parts of Georgia which are not projected to see an increase in population any time soon. In such cases, schools - which often have no students as of today – would have to consolidate with neighboring schools.

[40] Mikheil Svanidze. 2021. School report: what Georgia's missing in its education reforms OpenDemocracy. https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/school-report-what-georgias-missing-in-its-education-reforms/ (Last accessed August 17, 2021)

[41] Brunswic, Etienne and Jean Valerien. Multigrade schools: improving access in rural Africa?; Fundamentals of educational planning; Vol.:76; 2004. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED496622.pdf p. 25

[42] Focus group with public School B

[43] Brunswic, Etienne and Jean Valerien. Multigrade schools: improving access in rural Africa?; Fundamentals of educational planning; Vol.:76; 2004. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED496622.pdf p.25