

RESEARCH ARTICLE

THIRTY-ONE POINTS BETWEEN PRIMARY AND UPPER SECONDARY: THE SHAPE OF THE INDONESIAN COMPLETION GAP

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ABSTRACT

Indonesian provinces lose an average of 30.93 percentage points of their cohort between primary and upper secondary completion, and the loss ranges from 9.26 points in DI Yogyakarta to 49.95 in Nusa Tenggara Timur. Using Central Statistics Agency completion rates for 2023 across the thirty-four provinces with data, this article shows that dispersion between provinces widens sharply with level while the level itself falls. The coefficient of variation rises from 0.0345 at primary to 0.0600 at lower secondary and 0.1600 at upper secondary, and the Gini coefficient from 0.0137 to 0.0294 and 0.0861. National completion falls from 97.83 to 90.44 and 66.79 per cent over the same three levels. Correlations between adjacent levels are high, at 0.8730 between primary and lower secondary and 0.8362 between lower and upper secondary, but fall to 0.6725 across the full span, so a province's primary completion accounts for 45.2 per cent of the variance in its upper secondary completion. Three of the five provinces with the widest gaps have upper secondary completion below 47 per cent while their primary completion exceeds 93 per cent. The article argues that the Indonesian attainment problem is located at a specific transition rather than distributed across the system, and that provincial rankings at primary level do not identify where it is worst.

Keywords: *education completion; upper secondary; provincial disparity; educational attainment; Indonesia*

1. INTRODUCTION

Almost every Indonesian child completes primary school. The national completion rate at that level was 97.83 per cent in 2023 and the provincial mean 96.75 per cent. Two thirds complete upper secondary: the national rate was 66.79 per cent and the provincial mean 65.81.

The difference is a loss of roughly thirty-one percentage points of a cohort across two transitions. Where that loss occurs, and how evenly it is distributed across the country, determines what a policy addressing it should look like. A loss spread evenly across provinces calls for a national instrument; a loss concentrated in a few calls for something else.

This article measures the distribution. The gap between primary and upper secondary completion averages 30.93 percentage points across the thirty-four provinces with

published data, with a median of 31.05, and ranges from 9.26 points in DI Yogyakarta to 49.95 in Nusa Tenggara Timur — a factor of 5.4 between the smallest and largest.

The dispersion of the completion rate itself follows the same pattern. Its coefficient of variation across provinces rises from 0.0345 at primary to 0.0600 at lower secondary and 0.1600 at upper secondary, and its Gini coefficient from 0.0137 to 0.0861. The system is uniform where it is nearly universal and uneven where it is not.

The research gap is that Indonesian completion rates are reported level by level and the gap between levels is not treated as a provincial variable in its own right. This article treats it as one, reports its distribution, and shows that it is not predictable from the primary rate.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Attainment as a sequence of transitions

A first strand treats educational attainment as the outcome of a series of decisions rather than a single one.

Ollikainen, Pekkarinen, Uusitalo and Virtanen (2024) estimate the effect of secondary education on cognitive and non-cognitive skills, establishing that the stage carries value beyond the credential. Wongmonta (2023) revisits the wage effects of vocational education over the life cycle in Thailand, and Liu, Xu, Zhang, Nie, Rule, Rozelle and Yuan (2024) compare vocational and academic secondary payoffs in China over time; both concern the decision taken at the transition this article locates.

Landaud and Maurin (2026) show that tracking matters when ranking matters, and Kwak and Lee (2023) trace the effects of detracking on students in schools with heterogeneous peers. Edmark (2025) demonstrates that the local supply of upper secondary fields of study shapes what students take, which makes the transition partly a supply phenomenon.

Canegem, Houtte and Demanet (2024) study grade retention across seventeen countries and its relation to intergroup tolerance, a reminder that the mechanisms operating at a transition are not only economic.

2.2 Who leaves and why

A second strand identifies the populations most likely to leave at a transition.

Armand, Herman and Honore (2024) measure inequality of educational opportunity among primary school children in Cameroon and find substantial differences at a stage that is nominally universal. Sanfo and Malgoubri (2023) test whether instructional quality closes socioeconomic gaps in Ethiopian primary schooling. Ren, Zhu, Jin and Yang (2026) trace how family capital shapes academic performance in western Chinese counties through educational investment.

Zhang, Guo and Zhang (2023) re-examine birth order effects on cognitive and non-cognitive ability, and Pan and Liu (2021) relate family size and birth control policy to educational stratification. Both concern the household allocation decision that a transition brings to a head.

Barber (2025) studies how refugee children with disabilities access learning, and Prentice (2022) practices with refugee pupils in England; Gaurav, Aldersey, Lewis and Batorowicz (2023) examine school design for physical disability. Each identifies a population for whom a transition is a barrier rather than a decision.

2.3 Supply, cost and the upper secondary stage

A third strand concerns what is available at the stage where the loss occurs.

Abouk and Adams (2022) evaluate the expansion of school breakfast provision, and Fitzpatrick and colleagues (2026) asthma management as a route to reducing absenteeism; both address the cost side of attendance rather than its returns. Bostwick and Nguyen (2026) examine how the academic schedule affects postsecondary outcomes, a structural feature that determines who can attend.

Kumar (2023) evaluates model schools in India as a productivity intervention, and Ferrare, Waddington, Zimmer and Berends (2025) the outcomes of virtual charter high schools, two contrasting supply responses at secondary level. Serrano-Ardila, Baena-Navarro and Carriazo-Regino (2026) propose a pedagogical model for digital integration in rural education, where supply is thinnest.

Vu, Dao, DeJaeghere and Glewwe (2024) follow a Vietnamese pedagogical model longitudinally, and Hall and Lundin (2024) assess personal computers in primary classrooms; both establish that a supply intervention has effects that are measurable and modest.

2.4 Measuring completion and its gaps

A fourth strand concerns the measurement of completion itself.

A completion rate is bounded above at 100 per cent and, at primary level in a system with near-universal enrolment, most units sit near the bound. The measure then discriminates poorly, and Section 4.4 quantifies this for the Indonesian primary rate. Goldhaber, Grout, Wolff and Martinkova (2021) identify the same compression in ratings that cluster near their maximum.

Fazlul, Koedel and Parsons (2023) show that a familiar administrative educational proxy does not measure the concept it names. Wagner, Nair, Thapa and Kumar (2025) propose a Gini-based index of learning inequality, and Adeleke and McSharry (2022) find that a national education index is well predicted by few components. Gates, Teasdale, Shim and Hubacz (2024) argue for explicit specification of evaluative criteria.

Stals, Isac and Claes (2024) evaluate cross-national measurement comparability directly, which is the question that arises whenever a rate is compared across jurisdictions with different administrative practice.

2.5 The research gap

The gap between primary and upper secondary completion has not been reported as a provincial variable for Indonesia, nor has its relationship to the primary rate been tested. This article does both across the thirty-four provinces with published data.

3. METHOD

The data are the Central Statistics Agency table *Tingkat Penyelesaian Pendidikan Menurut Jenjang Pendidikan dan Provinsi* for 2023, retrieved on 30 August 2026. It reports completion rates at three levels — primary, lower secondary and upper secondary, each including recognised equivalents — for the provinces of the current administrative division.

Four of the thirty-eight provinces carry no data at any level: Papua Barat Daya, Papua Selatan, Papua Tengah and Papua Pegunungan, all created in 2022. The working population is therefore thirty-four provinces, and every statistic below is computed on

that population. Section 4.7 states what their absence means for the findings and a companion analysis treats the absence itself as a subject.

For each level three dispersion measures are computed across the thirty-four provinces, unweighted: the coefficient of variation, the Gini coefficient and the range. The completion gap for a province is its primary rate minus its upper secondary rate, in percentage points. Pearson correlations between levels are reported.

The national figures published alongside the provincial ones are population-weighted; all other statistics here are unweighted and describe the distribution across provinces rather than across people.

Five limitations apply. First, four provinces are absent and they are among the least-served in the country, so every dispersion figure here is a lower bound. Second, one year is observed. Third, a completion rate is a stock measure over a population that has passed the relevant age, so it reflects conditions some years before the reference date rather than current provision. Fourth, the province conceals district variation. Fifth, the analysis is descriptive and identifies no cause for the gap it measures.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Levels and dispersion

Table 1 gives the three levels with their dispersion measures.

Table 1. Education completion by level across 34 provinces, 2023

Computed by the authors from Central Statistics Agency, *Tingkat Penyelesaian Pendidikan Menurut Jenjang Pendidikan dan Provinsi, 2023*, retrieved 30 August 2026. National figures are as published and are population-weighted; all other statistics are unweighted across the 34 provinces with data.

The completion rate falls by 7.39 percentage points from primary to lower secondary and by a further 23.65 from lower to upper secondary. The second transition is more than three times as costly as the first.

Dispersion rises at every step and faster than the level falls. The coefficient of variation multiplies by 1.74 between primary and lower secondary and by a further 2.67 between lower and upper secondary, for a total multiplication of 4.64. The Gini coefficient multiplies by 6.3 over the same span and the range by 2.6.

The pattern matches what a companion analysis finds for school participation by age, where the coefficient of variation rises from 0.0428 to 0.2412 across four age bands. Two different measures, from different surveys in different years, describe the same structural feature: uniformity at the compulsory stages and divergence beyond them.

4.2 The gap as a provincial variable

Table 2 reports the distribution of the primary-to-upper-secondary gap.

Table 2. The completion gap between primary and upper secondary, 34 provinces

Computed by the authors from the Central Statistics Agency series named at Table 1. The gap is a province's primary completion rate minus its upper secondary completion rate, in percentage points.

The mean and median gaps are almost identical at 30.93 and 31.05 points, so the distribution is close to symmetric. The extremes are far apart: Nusa Tenggara Timur loses 49.95 points of its cohort between the two levels and DI Yogyakarta 9.26, a factor of 5.4.

The three widest gaps belong to provinces whose primary completion is unremarkable. Nusa Tenggara Timur completes primary at 93.41 per cent, Gorontalo at 93.69 and Sulawesi Tengah at 97.56 — the third of these is above the provincial median. Their upper secondary rates are 43.46, 46.19 and 55.69 per cent.

The two narrowest gaps belong to the two provinces with the highest upper secondary completion, DI Yogyakarta at 89.69 per cent and DKI Jakarta at 88.10. Both are urban or peri-urban and both have unusually dense provision at that level.

4.3 The gap is not predictable from the primary rate

Table 3 gives the correlations between levels, which determine how far an early figure anticipates a later one.

Table 3. Correlations between completion levels across 34 provinces, 2023

Computed by the authors from the Central Statistics Agency series named at Table 1. Shared variance is the square of the coefficient. Correlations are across the 34 provinces with data, unweighted.

Adjacent levels correlate strongly, at 0.8730 and 0.8362. Across the full span the coefficient falls to 0.6725, so a province's primary completion accounts for 45.2 per cent of the variance in its upper secondary completion and rather more than half is unaccounted for.

The relationship is robust to the extreme. Removing Papua, the lowest province at every level, leaves the primary-to-upper-secondary coefficient at 0.6620, a change of 0.0105. This distinguishes it sharply from the participation relationship examined in a companion article, where an equivalent removal reduced a coefficient of 0.4893 to 0.0178.

That the correlation is real but moderate is the substantive point. Primary completion carries genuine information about upper secondary completion and does not carry enough to identify where the loss is worst. Sulawesi Tengah at 97.56 per cent primary completion would not be flagged by any primary-level screen, and it loses 41.87 points.

4.4 Compression at the primary level

The primary rate discriminates poorly and it is worth stating how poorly.

Across the thirty-four provinces the primary completion rate has a standard deviation of 3.33 percentage points and a range of 19.00. Removing Papua at 80.09 per cent, the range falls to 6.40 points, from Papua Barat at 92.69 to Jawa Barat at 99.09. Thirty-three of the thirty-four provinces occupy a band of six and a half points.

Within that band the ordering is close to arbitrary for policy purposes. Jawa Barat leads at 99.09 per cent and Aceh follows at 99.08, a difference of one hundredth of a point. Twenty-one provinces lie between 97 and 99 per cent.

At upper secondary the same thirty-four provinces span 50.19 points, from Papua at 39.50 to DI Yogyakarta at 89.69, and the standard deviation is 10.53. The measure uses its scale.

The implication for practice is the same one that arises for participation rates: a provincial league table on primary completion ranks measurement noise for the great majority of the country, and its only informative content is the identity of the few provinces that fall clearly below.

4.5 The two transitions separated

Because the completion table reports three levels, the loss can be split into its two components, and Table 4 does so.

Table 4. Loss of cohort at each transition, 34 provinces, 2023

Computed by the authors from the Central Statistics Agency series named at Table 1. Figures are percentage points of the cohort. National figures are differences between the published population-weighted rates; provincial means are unweighted across the 34 provinces with data.

The second transition costs 23.65 percentage points nationally against 7.39 at the first, so it is more than three times as expensive. The provincial means, at 23.74 and 7.19, confirm that this is not an artefact of population weighting.

The second transition is also the more variable. Its loss ranges across 31.69 percentage points, from 7.33 in DI Yogyakarta to 39.02 in Nusa Tenggara Timur, against a range of 11.84 points at the first transition. Both the size and the dispersion of the loss are concentrated at the entry to upper secondary.

DI Yogyakarta records the smallest loss at both transitions and Nusa Tenggara Timur the largest at the second. Kalimantan Barat loses most at the first transition, at 13.77 points, and is not among the five worst at the second, which indicates that the two transitions do not fail together in the same places.

4.6 Where the loss occurs

The two transitions are not equal and separating them locates the problem.

This locates the Indonesian attainment problem specifically. It is not that children fail to enter school, nor principally that they leave during compulsory schooling; it is that a quarter of the cohort nationally, and two fifths in some provinces, does not complete the non-compulsory stage.

The finding is consistent across two independent measures. A companion analysis of school participation by age finds the same asymmetry: the national rate falls by 2.93 percentage points between the age bands seven to twelve and thirteen to fifteen and by 18.44 points between thirteen to fifteen and sixteen to eighteen. Participation and completion, measured in different surveys in different years on different populations, agree that the Indonesian system holds children through the compulsory stage and loses them at the boundary of it.

Edmark (2025) shows that the local supply of upper secondary options determines what students take, and a companion analysis of Indonesian village-level facilities finds a national ratio of 3.92 villages with a primary school for every village with an upper secondary school, rising to 14.32 in Papua Selatan. Supply at the relevant level is the obvious place to look, though this article cannot test it.

4.7 The equivalency route and what it conceals

The published rates count completion of a level or of a recognised equivalent, and this pooling deserves separate treatment because it bears directly on how the gap should be read.

Indonesia operates a substantial non-formal equivalency system, and a province meeting its upper secondary completion figure largely through that route has a different educational system from one meeting it through schools, even though the two record the same number. The distinction matters for what the completion rate predicts: a credential obtained through equivalency and one obtained through three years of

attendance differ in the instruction, the peer environment and the duration they represent.

The published table gives no basis for separating the two, so this article cannot say which provinces rely on the route or how heavily. What can be said is the direction of the resulting uncertainty. If equivalency use is concentrated in provinces with thin school provision, the reported completion figures overstate how far school-based provision reaches, and the true gap between provinces in access to schooling is wider than Table 2 shows.

Two literatures bear on this. Ferrare, Waddington, Zimmer and Berends (2025) evaluate virtual charter high schools and find outcomes that differ from the conventional route, and Serrano-Ardila, Baena-Navarro and Carriazo-Regino (2026) propose a digitally mediated model precisely for settings where conventional provision is absent. Both establish that alternative routes are not equivalent to the conventional one in effect even where they are equivalent in credential.

Ahmed (2023) argues that the field has persistently asked the wrong questions of a perennial crisis, and one instance is the treatment of a completion statistic as a description of schooling rather than of certification. The recommendation that follows is modest: where a completion series pools routes, that fact belongs in the notes to every table built from it, as it does here.

4.8 Implications for practice

Four implications follow.

First, the transition into upper secondary is where a national attainment programme has most to gain. It accounts for 23.65 of the 31.04 points lost nationally between primary and upper secondary completion, and for the great majority of the variation between provinces.

Second, provinces should be selected for attention on the gap and not on the primary rate. Sulawesi Tengah completes primary at 97.56 per cent, above the provincial median, and loses 41.87 points; a screen on primary completion would pass it.

Third, the two provinces with the narrowest gaps are the two most urbanised, at 9.26 and 10.56 points. This is consistent with a supply explanation and equally consistent with a demand one, and the data here cannot separate them. What it does establish is that a gap of ten points is attainable within Indonesia, which sets a benchmark that is not hypothetical.

Fourth, the four provinces absent from the table are almost certainly at the wide end of the distribution. Their participation rates in the corresponding age bands are the lowest in the country, and every figure in this article should be read as understating the national dispersion by an unknown amount.

4.9 Limitations of the finding

Four limitations bound the result beyond those in Section 3.

The absence of four provinces is the most serious. Papua Barat Daya, Papua Selatan, Papua Tengah and Papua Pegunungan carry no completion data at any level, and on the participation figures for the same period three of the four are among the five lowest in the country. Their inclusion would widen every dispersion measure in Table 1 and would raise the mean gap in Table 2.

A completion rate describes a population that has already passed through the system, so it reports on provision as it was some years earlier. The 2023 upper secondary

completion figure reflects cohorts schooled in the 2010s, and a province that has since expanded provision would not yet show it.

The three levels are reported as completion of the level or a recognised equivalent, which pools formal schooling with equivalency programmes. Provinces differ in how heavily they use equivalency routes, and a province meeting its completion figures largely through them is in a different position from one meeting them through schools; the published table does not permit the two to be separated.

Finally, the gap is a difference between two rates measured on the same population at different levels, so it inherits the sampling error of both. For provinces with small samples the gap is correspondingly less precise, and the published table carries no standard errors.

5. CONCLUSION

Indonesian provinces lose an average of 30.93 percentage points of their cohort between primary and upper secondary completion, with a median of 31.05 and a range from 9.26 points in DI Yogyakarta to 49.95 in Nusa Tenggara Timur.

Dispersion between provinces widens sharply as the level rises. The coefficient of variation goes from 0.0345 at primary to 0.0600 at lower secondary and 0.1600 at upper secondary, and the Gini coefficient from 0.0137 to 0.0861 — a multiplication of 6.3. National completion falls from 97.83 to 90.44 and 66.79 per cent over the same three levels.

The loss is concentrated at one transition. Nationally, 7.39 points are lost between primary and lower secondary and 23.65 between lower and upper secondary, and the second transition is also the more variable across provinces, with a range of 31.69 points against 11.84.

The primary rate does not identify where the loss is worst. It correlates with upper secondary completion at 0.6725, accounting for 45.2 per cent of the variance, and thirty-three of the thirty-four provinces sit within a band of six and a half percentage points at that level. Sulawesi Tengah completes primary above the provincial median and loses 41.87 points.

Four provinces carry no data at any level, and on the corresponding participation figures three of them are among the five lowest in the country. Every dispersion figure reported here is therefore a lower bound, and the absence is itself a finding worth pursuing.

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