

Jamaica's education system faces a structural paradox: relatively high fiscal effort that has not translated into learning outcomes, while many students leave before reaching tertiary education. With 76% of education spending allocated to salaries, limited fiscal space remains for investment in areas that directly improve learning conditions, strengthen school infrastructure, and build system resilience. Thus, the priority is not how much Jamaica spends, but how effectively resources translate into learning. Addressing climate vulnerability is particularly urgent, as more than 96% of GDP and population face exposure to multiple hazards, placing schools, learning continuity and students at significant risk. Strengthening teachers' capacity and the effective use of digital tools and educational resources represents an important opportunity to improve learning and better prepare young people for higher education and skilled employment.



Three Strategic Pillars



EFFICIENCY

Optimize the use of public resources by strengthening planning, accountability, and equity in the allocation of education spending.



TRAJECTORIES

Ensure that all children and young people, especially those from rural, Indigenous, or vulnerable communities, can access and remain in the education system.



QUALITY

Improve learning outcomes through better teaching practices, appropriate materials, functional infrastructure, and a safe and inclusive school environment.



Jamaica in Data

Government expenditure on education (2024)¹

→ **5.5%** of GDP
(vs 4.1% LAC and 3.6% CCB)

Initial public funding per student, PPP (2024)¹

→ **USD 2,900** in primary
(vs 3,241 LAC and 3,507 CCB)

→ **USD 3,660** in secondary
(vs 3,232 LAC and 3,966 CCB)

Net Attendance (2024)¹

→ **97.4%** primary
(vs 98% CCB and 97.5% LAC)

→ **96.6%** lower secondary
(vs 96% in CCB and 78.0% LAC)

→ **89.7%** upper secondary
(vs 87 in CCB and 63.3% LAC)

Tertiary Gross attendance rate (2015)²

→ **26.6%** (vs 44% LAC)

Percentage of 15-year Old Students with Low Performance in PISA 2022³

→ **73.8%** in Math
(vs 74.7% LAC)

→ **54.6%** in Science
(vs 57.2% LAC)

→ **50.0%** in Reading
(vs 54.7% LAC)

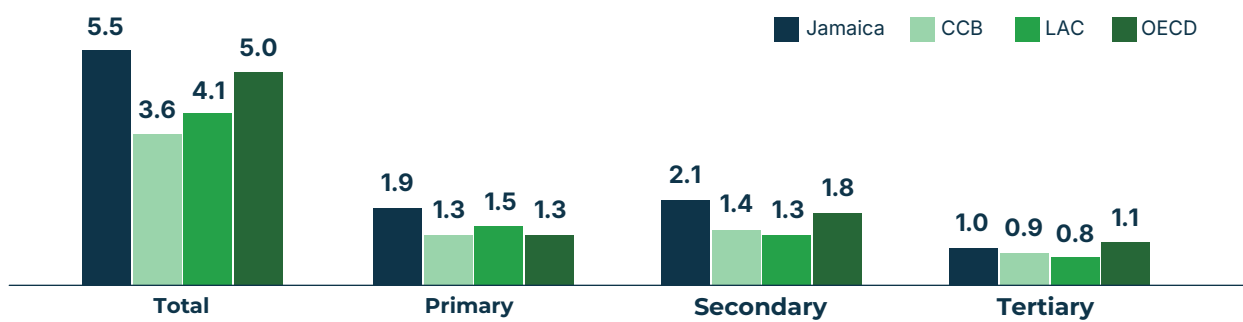
Source: ¹CIMA (2024); ²UIS-Unesco (2015); ³CIMA (2022)



High fiscal effort in education, with persistent gaps in learning trajectories and learning

- Jamaica allocates 5.5% of GDP to education, above the LAC (4.1%) and Caribbean (3.6%) averages, yet per-student spending in primary remains below regional (CBB and LAC) average. Given the large share of the budget devoted to salaries, Jamaica needs stronger analysis of costs, staffing patterns, and results at the school level to identify where resources are producing impact and where inefficiencies persist.
- Despite near universal primary attendance, educational trajectories drop sharply across levels, with only 1 in 4 adults participating in tertiary education, signaling that most students exit the system well before reaching higher education.
- Learning gaps are equivalent to an estimated 5 fewer years of schooling in Math and 3 fewer years in Reading and Science compared to OECD average. At the same time, more than half of students fail to meet minimum proficiency in Math (76.1%), Science (54.6%), and Reading (52.7%), meaning students are leaving school without the foundational skills expected at their grade level.

GOVERNMENT EXPENDITURE ON EDUCATION (% OF GDP)
JAMAICA VS. REGIONAL AVERAGE, BY LEVEL OF EDUCATION



Source: CIMA - IDB. Note: The LAC, OECD and CCB average is estimated using the most recent data available for each country (2023 or 2024). The countries included in the CCB average are Barbados, Trinidad and Tobago, Suriname, Guyana, and Jamaica. For primary, secondary, and tertiary education data, the CCB average is based on information from Barbados, Trinidad and Tobago, and Jamaica.



High fiscal effort, uneven translation into resources

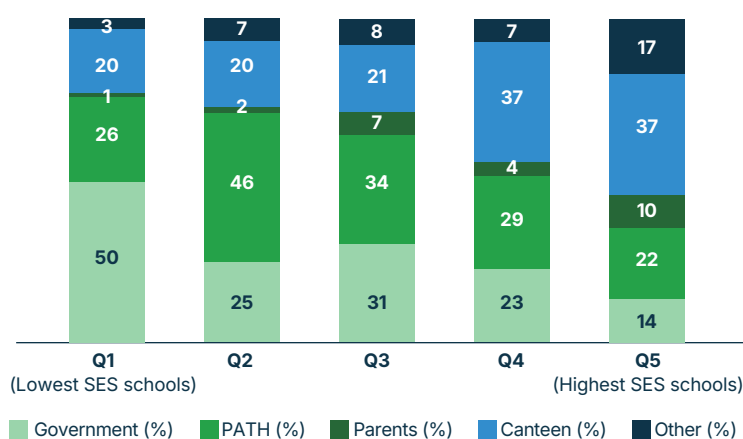
- Jamaica allocates 5.5% of GDP to education, above the Caribbean, LAC and OECD averages, reflecting a comparatively strong fiscal commitment to the sector. Education also accounts for 17.9% of total government expenditure, compared with 14.9% in LAC (UIS, 2024).
- Spending is particularly concentrated at the primary and secondary levels: Jamaica matches the OECD average in primary education and exceeds CCB and LAC averages at both levels. Tertiary spending is slightly below the CCB average, although still above the LAC and OECD benchmarks.
- However, the effectiveness of this investment is constrained by the composition and management of spending. With a large share of recurrent expenditure absorbed by salaries, limited resources remain for infrastructure, learning materials, technology and school resilience. Schools also rely partly on locally generated revenues, which may reinforce disparities between communities with different fundraising capacity (Elacqua et al. 2025).
- In addition, schools traditionally manage a significant part of their finances independently, including through their own bank accounts and school-level records. This gives principals considerable responsibility for budget execution, although this relies heavily on manual processes.



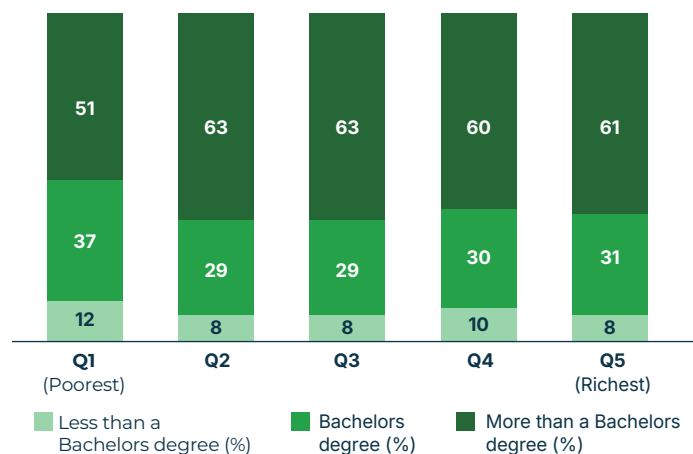
A mixed funding model that can reinforce inequalities

- Schools serving lower-SES students depend much more heavily on government transfers: public funding represents 50% of income in the poorest-school quintile, compared with only 14% in the wealthiest. Higher-SES schools obtain considerably more revenue from canteens, parents and other sources, giving them greater flexibility to supplement public resources.
- Teacher qualifications are relatively high across all socioeconomic groups, but a modest gap remains: 88% of teachers in the lowest-SES schools hold at least a bachelor's degree, compared with approximately 92% in the other quintiles. The largest difference is in postgraduate qualifications, which are less prevalent in the poorest schools.
- Make public allocations more explicitly needs-based and compensatory. Funding formulas should account for poverty, school size, remoteness and limited local revenue-raising capacity, ensuring that schools serving disadvantaged students receive sufficient resources to offset inequalities in privately generated income (Elacqua et al. 2025).
- Strengthen the equitable allocation of teachers and the management of school resources. Jamaica could introduce stronger incentives for experienced and specialized teachers to work in disadvantaged and hard-to-staff schools, while scaling digital financial-management tools to improve transparency and direct non-salary resources toward identified school and learning needs.

PRINCIPALS' DISTRIBUTION OF INCOME
BY SCHOOL SES, JAMAICA (%)



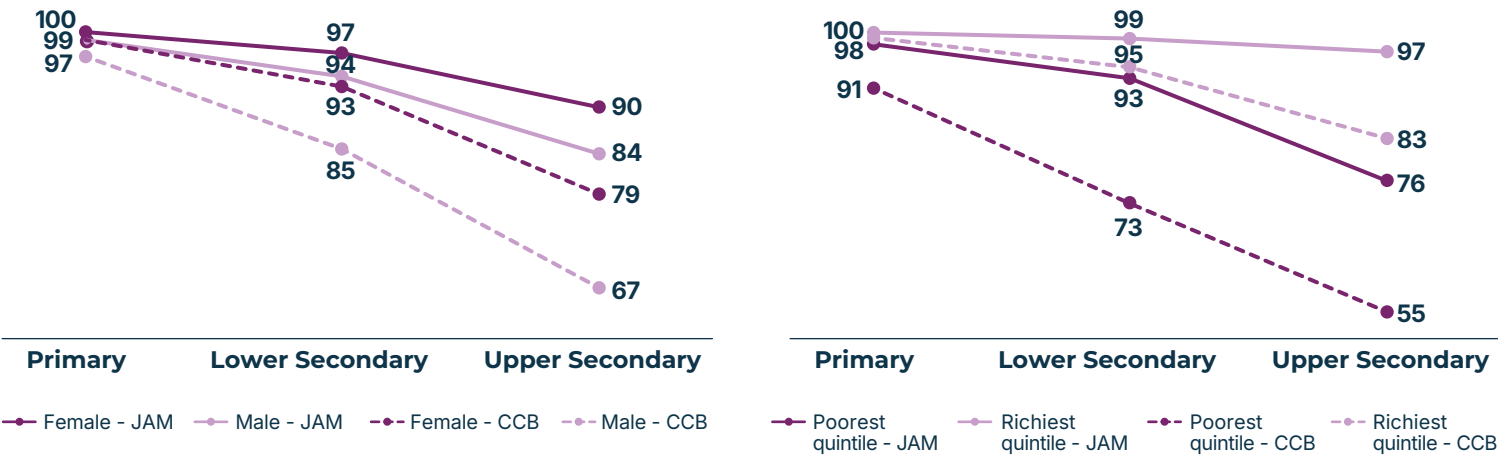
TEACHER QUALIFICATION AND
SCHOOL SES, JAMAICA (%)



Source: Chegwin, Hobbs and Thailinger (2021).

Source: Chegwin, Hobbs and Thailinger (2021).

COMPLETION RATE IN JAMAICA AND CCB (2022)
BY GENDER AND SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS



Source: CIMA (2022). CCB: Caribbean average (based on the following countries: Trinidad and Tobago; Suriname; Barbados; Guyana and Jamaica. Note: First graph: Completion by gender and Second graph: Completion by wealth quintile.

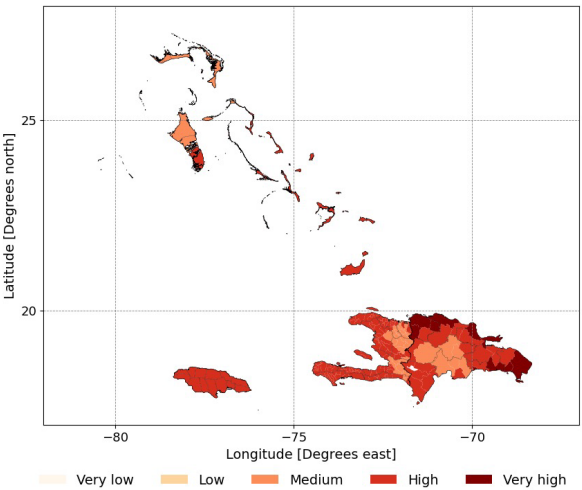
Educational trajectories weaken at each transition, with inequalities widening over time

- Jamaica sustains near-universal completion through primary education, but trajectories weaken progressively thereafter. Completion falls to 94%–97% in lower secondary and to 84%–90% in upper secondary, showing that the main losses occur as students advance through the system.
- Jamaica outperforms CCB at every level, particularly in upper secondary. Upper-secondary completion reaches 90% for girls and 84% for boys in Jamaica, compared with 79% and 67%, respectively, across CCB countries.
- Gender gaps emerge after primary and widen with progression: from near parity in primary to 3 percentage points in lower secondary and 6 points in upper secondary, favoring girls.
- Socioeconomic gaps are larger than gender gaps. Upper-secondary completion is 97% among Jamaica’s richest students versus 76% among the poorest. Though smaller than the 28-point CCB gap, this shows disadvantage accumulates through the system.

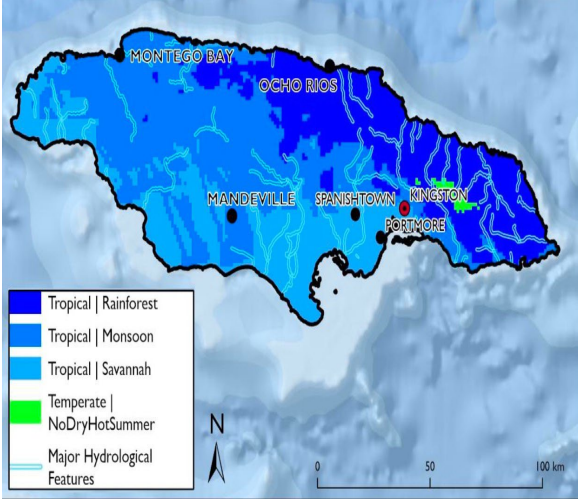
Climate change emerges as a new pressure on school trajectories

- Jamaica is the third most exposed country globally to multiple hazards, with over 96% of GDP and population at risk, directly threatening education continuity (WB, 2022). Hurricane Melissa (2026) caused over US\$190 million in damages and displaced hundreds of students.
- Rising extreme heat through 2075 will further strain a system already affected by infrastructure damage, schools used as emergency shelters, and limited remote-learning capacity when classrooms are unavailable.
- Addressing these vulnerabilities requires shifting from reactive to proactive action: assessing infrastructure risks and upgrading schools for extreme heat, water scarcity and high winds.
- Strengthening Education resilience should also strengthen early warning and dropout-prevention strategies. 14% of students miss school for more than three consecutive months—equal to the LAC average but nearly twice the OECD rate of 8%. Using attendance, achievement and vulnerability data to identify at-risk students early, combined with targeted re-engagement, flexible learning and emergency continuity plans, could prevent temporary disruptions from becoming permanent dropout.

EXTREME HEAT (HEAT WAVES)
HAZARD MAP IN THE CARIBBEAN
CLIMATE PROJECTIONS 2026–2075*

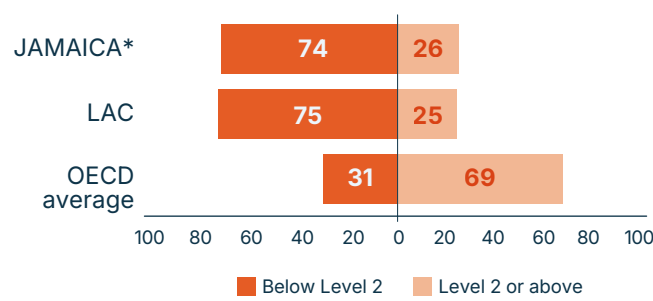


JAMAICA’S EDUCATION SYSTEM OPERATES IN
A HIGHLY CLIMATE-EXPOSED ENVIRONMENT:
KÖPPEN-GEIGER CLIMATE CLASSIFICATION

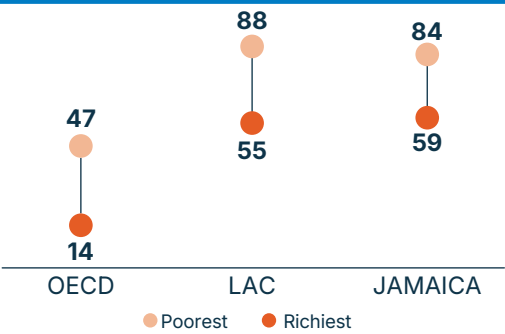


Source: Bos et al. (2025). Note. Under the climate change scenario SSP3-7.0.

PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS WITH LOW PERFORMANCE IN MATH (PISA 2022)



% OF LOW PERFORMERS IN MATH AMONG THE POOREST AND RICHEST STUDENTS (PISA, 2022)



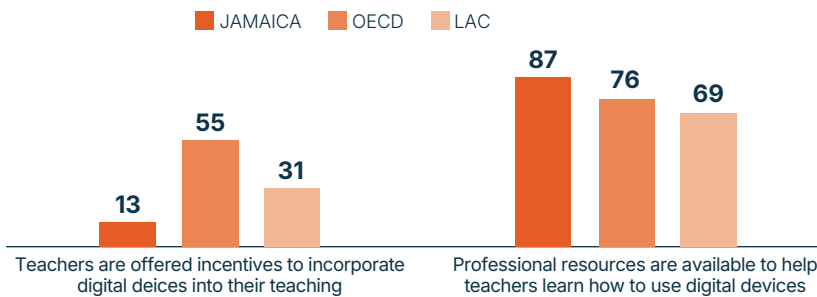
Source: PISA, 2022. *Caution is required when interpreting estimates for Jamaica because one or more PISA sampling standards were not met. The “poorest” and “richest” categories correspond to the lowest and highest quartiles, respectively, of the socioeconomic status index (ESCS). LAC countries considered: Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Mexico, Argentina, Brazil, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Jamaica, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay.



Low learning outcomes are compounded by deep socioeconomic and digital divides

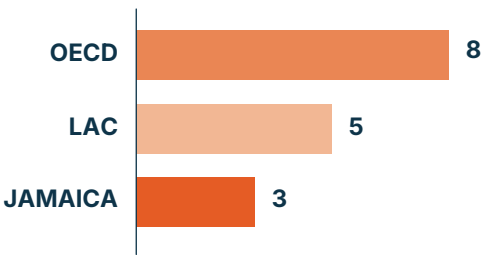
- Approximately 3 in 4 students are low performers in mathematics and about 1 in 2 in reading, placing Jamaica close to the LAC average but well below the OECD.
- Socioeconomic disadvantage strongly shapes mathematics outcomes: 84% are low performers in mathematics, compared with 59% among the richest—a 25-percentage-point gap. Although narrower than the LAC gap, low performance remains widespread even among higher-income students, pointing to both equity and system-wide quality challenges.
- Limited access to adequate digital resources may constrain engagement and learning, particularly in STEM. Jamaica has about three computers per ten students, compared with five in LAC and eight across OECD countries, while more than three-quarters of schools report insufficient digital resources.
- Closing the digital gap requires more than expanding access to devices. Jamaica should pair investments in connectivity, equipment and digital content with stronger teacher training, instructional support and incentives to integrate technology effectively into classroom practice.

PRINCIPALS’ PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR SCHOOLS’ READINESS FOR DIGITAL LEARNING



Source: OCDE (2023). Note: % of students attending schools whose principal agreed or strongly agreed with the following statements.

ACCESS TO DIGITAL AND EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES IN SCHOOLS



Source: OECD (2023). Results based on principals' reports. Note: Ratio of computers per student in school (# of computers per 10 students)



Opportunities for transformation across the three strategic pillars

EFFICIENCY

Improve spending efficiency by shifting expenditure toward capital and digital investment, adopting formula-based approaches for equitable resource and teacher allocation, and strengthening the EMIS with real-time monitoring of spending and outcomes.

TRAJECTORIES

Strengthen school trajectories through climate resilience by assessing current vulnerabilities, retrofitting against extreme heat, water scarcity and high winds, and establishing climate resilient plans for the education sector.

QUALITY

Enhance quality by accelerating digital transformation and strengthening the teacher pipeline, through equipping schools with comprehensive online learning environments, building teacher digital competencies through self-assessment tools and in-service training, and expanding digital curricula across secondary education.

References:

• CIMA (2025). Portal de Estadísticas Educativas del BID. Recuperado de <https://cima.iadb.org/>

• OECD (2023), PISA 2022 Results (Volume II): Learning During - and From - Disruption, OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/a97db61c-en>.

• OECD (2025). Education at a Glance 2025: OECD Indicators. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/1c0d9c79-en>

• UIS-Unesco (2025). Education data portal. Unesco. Recuperado de <https://databrowser.uis.unesco.org/browser>

• Bos, M. S., Contreras, D., Schwartz, L., Alfonso, M., Bergamaschi, A., Corena Forero, C. A., Elacqua, G., Minoja, L., & Paez Trujillo, A. M. (2025). Heat-Proof Education in Latin America and the Caribbean. <https://doi.org/10.18235/0013780>

Web: <https://cima.iadb.org> | Contacto: education@iadb.org | Published: September 2026

Copyright © 2026 Inter-American Development Bank (IDB). This work is subject to a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International Public License CC BY 4.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/legalcode>). The terms and conditions indicated in the URL link must be met and the respective recognition must be granted to the IDB.

Any and all disputes arising under this license that cannot be settled amicably shall be resolved in accordance with the following procedure. Pursuant to a notice of mediation communicated by reasonable means by either you or the licensor to the other, the dispute shall be submitted to non-binding mediation conducted in accordance with the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) Mediation Rules.

Any dispute that cannot be settled amicably shall be submitted to arbitration pursuant to the United Nations Commission on International Trade Law (UNCITRAL) rules. The use of the IDB name for any purpose other than the respective recognition and the use of the IDB logo are not authorized by this license and require an additional license agreement.

Note that the URL link includes terms and conditions that are an integral part of this license.

The opinions expressed in the work are those of its authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the IDB, its Board of Executive Directors, or the countries they represent.

