

School choice, distance, and access in Fiji: who gets left behind?

Distance-to-school analysis using linked MICS-EMIS data

KEY FINDINGS

- 01 School choice is widespread but unequal: more than two out of three secondary students do not attend their nearest school. But bypassing is concentrated among children from urban and wealthier households. For children from poorer and rural families, the nearest school is often the only realistic option.
- 02 For those with least choice, distance is also greatest: Rural, Northern and poorer children face the longest distances at every education level, with inequalities largest at secondary level. Children belonging to the poorest households travel roughly twice as far to secondary school as all other wealth groups.
- 03 Beyond shaping *where* children study, distance is also associated with *whether* they study at all: children living more than 5 km from the nearest secondary school have an out-of-school rate of 27.1%, compared to 18.3% nationally. At primary level, distance makes no difference.

DATA AT A GLANCE

2 out of 3

secondary school students bypass their nearest school

×2

farther: the distance children belonging to the poorest households travel to secondary school vs all others

27.1%

secondary out-of-school rate for children >5 km from nearest school

About the analysis

The MICS-EMIS Analysis links household survey data from the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) with school administrative records from Education Management Information Systems (EMIS). It builds on MICS-Link, UNICEF's initiative to connect MICS with other data sources for richer, more policy-relevant insights. In Fiji, data from the 2021 MICS were linked to the Fiji Education Management Information System (FEMIS), managed by the Ministry of Education (MoE). Because FEMIS contains GPS coordinates for most schools, this linkage made it possible to calculate how far children travel to school in Fiji. Distance is measured as air (straight-line) distance between MICS cluster centroids and school GPS coordinates, and results use the median to represent typical travel. It should be noted that this distance is a proxy for the actual travel distance to school, since the exact household locations were not available, and because walking and driving distances could not be used reliably due to incomplete road network data in Fiji. All findings are weighted to be nationally representative.

Key assumptions

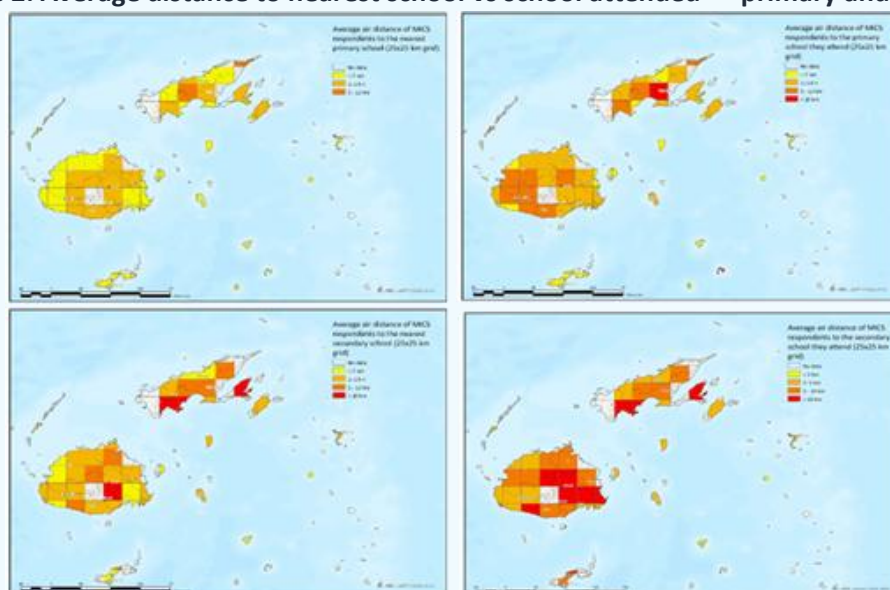
- **Cluster centroids, not exact addresses:** Distances are calculated from the center of the MICS survey cluster, not the exact household location. This is reliable for small clusters but less precise for large clusters (some exceed 50 km²), where the true distance may differ. A robustness check using only small clusters confirmed the main findings hold.
- **Household as location:** The survey household is assumed to be where the child lives during the school year. Children in boarding schools or staying with relatives near school may show unusually long apparent distances.

Key findings

Finding 1: School choice is widespread but not equally distributed

In Fiji, families can choose which school their child attends, and many exercise that choice: actual travel distances are consistently longer than the distance to the nearest available school. The maps below make this visible: comparing distance to the nearest school (left) with distance to the school children actually attend (right) reveals a consistent pattern. Across both primary and secondary level, areas that appear close to schools on the nearest-school map shift to darker colors on the attended-school map. Children are travelling considerably further than the nearest available option.

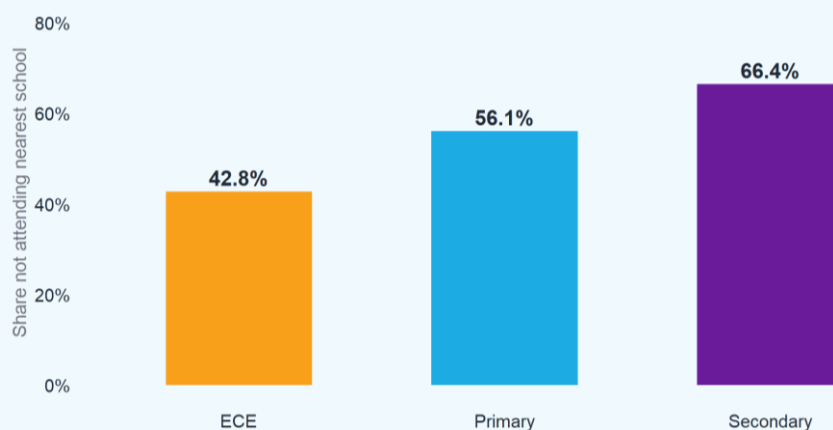
Figure 2: Average distance to nearest school vs school attended — primary and secondary



Source: Fiji MICS 2021 linked to FEMIS. Calculations by authors. All estimates weighted using MICS survey weights.

The share of children bypassing their nearest school increases sharply with education level: around 2 in 5 ECE-age children bypass their nearest school, rising further at primary level, to more than 2 in 3 at secondary level.

Figure 3: Share of children bypassing their nearest school, by education level

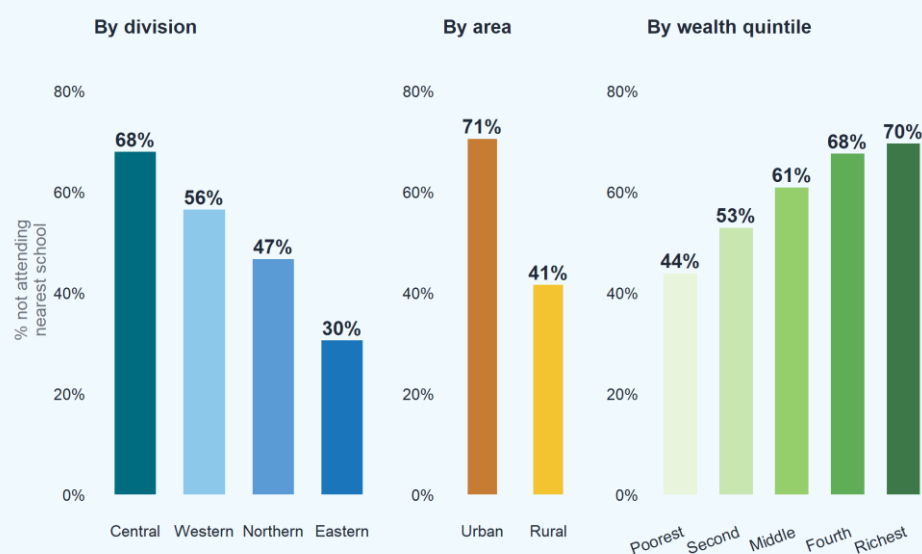


Source: Fiji MICS 2021 linked to FEMIS. Calculations by authors. All estimates weighted using MICS survey weights.

Bypass rates vary sharply by household wealth, area, and geography. In the Central division, denser school networks mean more options and higher bypass rates. Urban children bypass more than rural children. The children belonging to the wealthiest households bypass at substantially higher rates than those belonging to the poorest.

For children from wealthier and urban families, bypassing reflects genuine choice: a preference for a particular school's quality, language, religion, or reputation. For poorer and rural families, and particularly those in the Eastern division where island geography limits the number of schools within reach, not bypassing is rarely a matter of preference. It reflects a lack of realistic alternatives. School choice in Fiji is universal as policy. In practice, it is a privilege.

Figure 4: Bypassing the nearest school — by division, area, and wealth quintile



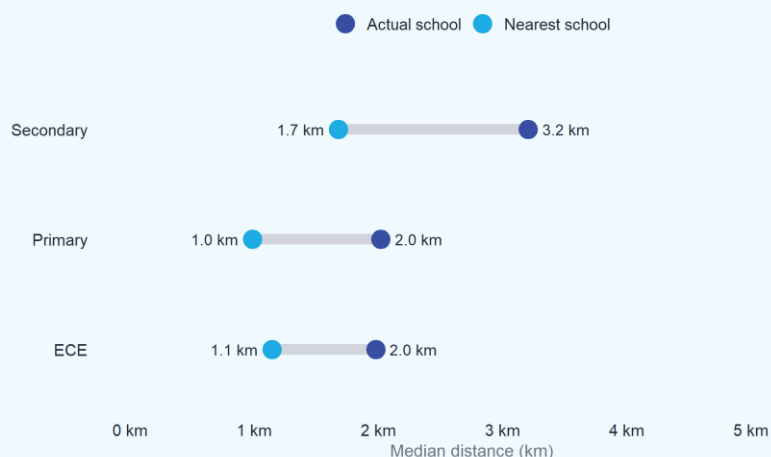
Source: Fiji MICS 2021 linked to FEMIS. Calculations by authors. All estimates weighted using MICS survey weights.

Finding 2: For those with least choice, distance is also greatest

The families least able to exercise school choice are also the ones who face the longest distances to school. This is not a coincidence: limited school availability in rural areas both reduces choice and increases distance. The result is a compounding disadvantage that is most severe at secondary level.

Distances increase substantially with education level, both to the nearest school and to the attended school. The gap between the two is widest at secondary level, where school choice is most actively exercised among those who can afford it, and access constraints are most acute for those who cannot.

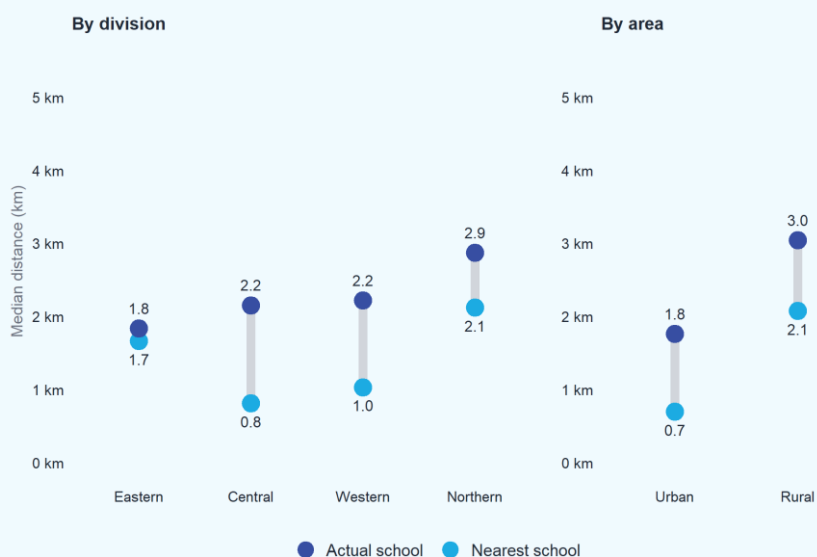
Figure 5: Median distance to nearest and attended school, by education level



Source: Fiji MICS 2021 linked to FEMIS. Calculations by authors. All estimates weighted using MICS survey weights.

Geographic inequalities are pronounced. Children in the Northern division and in rural areas face the longest distance, mainly because the nearest school is further away. In rural areas, the distance to the nearest school alone often exceeds the total distance urban children travel to their attended school, confirming that rural disadvantage is driven by limited school availability rather than by school choice.

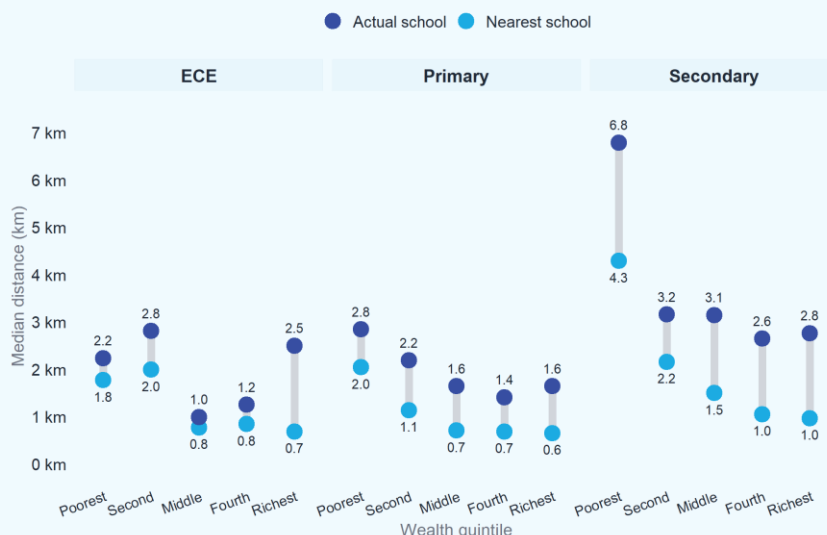
Figure 6: Median distance to nearest and attended school — by division and area type



Source: Fiji MICS 2021 linked to FEMIS. Calculations by authors. All estimates weighted using MICS survey weights.

The inequalities are sharpest when viewed through the lens of household wealth. Children belonging to the poorest households have both the longest distance to the nearest secondary school and median attending distances roughly twice as long as those of all other wealth groups. Among children from wealthier households, attending distances are relatively similar, suggesting that longer travel often reflects school choice rather than limited access. A similar gradient is also visible at ECE and primary levels, where poorer children generally live farther from the nearest school and travel farther to the school they attend, with the exception of higher attended ECE distances among the richest households.

Figure 7: Median distance to nearest and attended school, by wealth quintile and education level



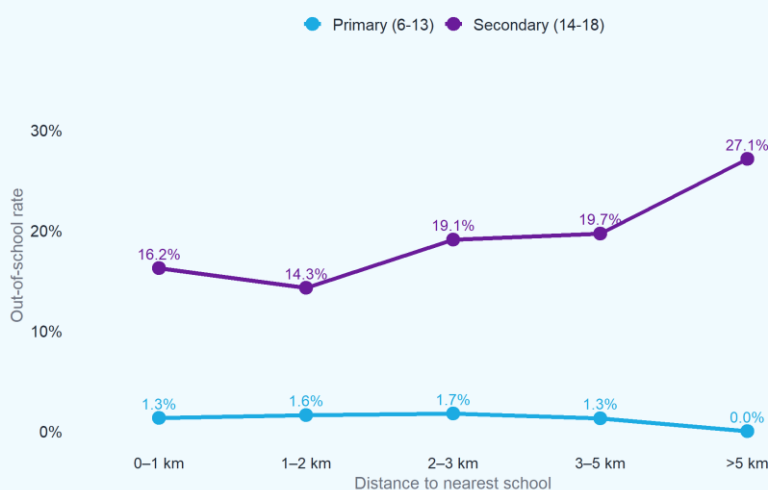
Source: Fiji MICS 2021 linked to FEMIS. Calculations by authors. All estimates weighted using MICS survey weights

Finding 3: Beyond shaping where children go to school, distance is also associated with whether they go to school at all

The same children who have least access to school choice also travel the furthest to school. But there is a third layer: at secondary level, these are also the children most likely not to be in school at all.

At primary level, out-of-school rates remain low regardless of how far the nearest school is, suggesting geographic access to primary education is broadly adequate across Fiji. At secondary level, the picture is starkly different. The national out-of-school rate of 18.3% rises to 27.1% for children living more than 5 km from the nearest secondary school, seven to thirteen percentage points higher than children in closer distance bands. This points to secondary school proximity as a genuine barrier to attendance.

Figure 1: Out-of-school rates by distance to nearest school



Source: Fiji MICS 2021 linked to FEMIS. Calculations by authors. All estimates weighted using MICS survey weights.

Policy Recommendations

The findings in this brief point to a broader conclusion: not all children in Fiji experience school choice, distance and access in the same way. For children from wealthier and urban families, school choice is a genuine option and distance is largely manageable. For poorer and rural households, the picture is different: they are least able to choose beyond their nearest school, travel the furthest to get there, and at secondary level are most at risk of not being in school at all. Planning decisions that treat distance as a neutral or uniform factor risk continuing to serve the first group better than the second.

In light of this evidence, the Ministry of Education may consider three priority areas:

1. Investigate the drivers of school choice

Many children, particularly those belonging to urban and wealthier households, do not attend their nearest school. Understanding whether this reflects preferences around school quality, language, religion, transport, or other factors is essential before drawing conclusions about where new schools are needed and which schools may require quality improvements to attract local students. For poorer and rural families, understanding whether low bypass rates reflect preference or a lack of realistic alternatives is equally important.

2. Prioritise secondary school access for rural, poorer and Northern communities

Distance barriers fall hardest on rural, Northern and poorer children. In the Northern division and in rural areas, distances to both the nearest and attended school are consistently the longest. At secondary level these inequalities are sharpest: children belonging to the poorest households travel roughly twice as far as all other wealth groups, and children living more than 5 km from the nearest secondary school face an out-of-school rate of 27.1%, compared to 18.3% nationally. Expanding access may require targeted infrastructure investment, transport support, boarding options, and financial assistance for poor households.

3. Use linked MICS-FEMIS data to monitor access and guide investment

The linkage between MICS and FEMIS used in this analysis provides a richer picture of school access than either data source alone. It can identify communities where the nearest secondary school is more than 5 km away, cross-reference these with out-of-school rates and household wealth, and help prioritise where investment is most urgently needed.

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