



The Secondary Education Reform and Educational Inequalities

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ABSTRACT. The concern with educational inequalities is intensified with the reform of Secondary Education. What became popular as 'New High School' began in 2016 with Provisional Measure nº746, converted into Law nº 13,415 of 2017, and advocates for curricular changes with the idea of flexibility: the establishment of educational pathways (a diversified part of the curriculum). The essential learning, common to the federative entities, was determined by the National Common Curricular Base aimed at the final stage of Basic Education. Criticism of the legislation and requests for the annulment of the reform since Lula takes office for his third term (2023-2027) show the dissatisfaction of several subjects (students, teachers, associations, among others) with what would be an abyssal deepening of the impossibilities for young people in the public network, in the face of determinations that disregard different realities. The Ministry of Education establishes public consultations and freezes the implementation schedule of the reform. An executive report was produced, and a new proposal was sanctioned by the presidency, which provides for the expansion of the workload for basic general training and the reduction of training itineraries. Thus, aiming to analyze possible effects of educational policy on issues of inequality in access and retention in Higher Education in Brazil, this research is conducted with a qualitative nature and exploratory approach. The methodological path consists of a bibliographic survey of scientific articles (2020-2022) and documentary analysis (National Education Plan - 2014/2024, NCCB, and Law nº 13,415/2017). It is observed that the outlined plan can be considered compromised, with many unmet goals, and the new one will need to address challenges of complex inequality that afflict part of the youth, as educational policy may exacerbate historical barriers, affecting access and retention of youth from public schools in Higher Education.

Keywords: New High School; youths; inequality; education policy.

A reforma do Ensino Médio e as desigualdades educacionais

RESUMO. A preocupação com as desigualdades educacionais se intensifica com a reforma do Ensino Médio. O que se popularizou como 'Novo Ensino Médio' tem seu início em 2016 com a Medida Provisória nº 746/2016, convertida na Lei nº 13.415 de 2017, e preconiza mudanças curriculares com a ideia de flexibilização: instituição de itinerários formativos (parte diversificada do currículo). As aprendizagens essenciais, comuns aos entes federativos, ficam determinadas pela Base Nacional Comum Curricular (BNCC) da etapa final da Educação Básica. As críticas em torno da legislação e os pedidos de revogação da reforma, desde que Lula assume o seu terceiro mandato (2023-2027), congregam a insatisfação de diversos sujeitos (estudantes, docentes, associações, entre outros) com o que seria um aprofundamento abissal das impossibilidades para as juventudes da rede pública, diante de determinações que desconsideram as diversas realidades. O Ministério da Educação estabelece consultas públicas para a reestruturação da política e congela o calendário de implementação da reforma. Foi produzido um relatório executivo e uma nova proposta foi sancionada pela presidência, a qual prevê a ampliação da carga horária para a formação geral básica e a redução para itinerários formativos. Assim, objetivando analisar possíveis efeitos da política educacional na questão das desigualdades no acesso e permanência na Educação Superior no Brasil, realiza-se esta pesquisa de natureza qualitativa e abordagem exploratória. O percurso metodológico se dá por meio de levantamento bibliográfico de artigos científicos (2020-2022) e documental (Plano Nacional de Educação - 2014/2024, BNCC e Lei nº 13.415/2017). Vê-se que o plano traçado pode ser considerado comprometido, com tantas metas não alcançadas, e o novo deverá lidar com desafios de uma desigualdade complexa que aflige parte das juventudes, já que a política educacional pode agravar barreiras históricas, afetando o acesso e permanência dessas juventudes da rede pública na Educação Superior.

Palavras-chave: Novo Ensino Médio; juventudes; desigualdade; política educacional.

La reforma de la Educación Secundaria y las desigualdades educativas

RESUMEN. La preocupación por las desigualdades educativas se intensifica con la reforma de la Educación Secundaria. Lo que se popularizó como ‘Nueva Escuela Secundaria’ empezó en 2016 con la Medida Provisional n° 746, convertida en la Ley n° 13.415 de 2017, y aboga por cambios curriculares con la idea de flexibilización: la institución de itinerarios formativos (parte diversificada del currículo). Los aprendizajes esenciales, común a las entidades federativas, fueron determinados por la Base Nacional Común Curricular (BNCC) de la Educación Secundaria. Hubo críticas a la legislación y pedidos de derogación de la reforma desde que Lula asumió su tercer mandato (2023-2027), que muestran una insatisfacción (de estudiantes, docentes, asociaciones, entre otros) con lo que sería una profundización abismal de las limitaciones para los jóvenes en la red pública, con determinaciones que desconocen las diversas realidades. El Ministerio de Educación establece consultas públicas y congela el calendario para la implementación de la reforma. Se elaboró un informe ejecutivo y la Presidencia sancionó una nueva propuesta que prevé la ampliación de la carga de trabajo para la formación general básica y la reducción de los itinerarios de formación. Así, con el objetivo de analizar posibles efectos de la política educativa en cuanto a las desigualdades en el acceso y permanencia en la Educación Superior en Brasil, se realiza esta investigación de naturaleza cualitativa y enfoque exploratorio. El recorrido metodológico se realiza a través de un levantamiento bibliográfico de artículos científicos (2020-2022) y análisis documental (Plan Nacional de Educación - 2014/2024, BNCC y Ley n° 13.415/2017). Se observa que el plan trazado puede considerarse comprometido, con tantas metas no alcanzadas, y el nuevo deberá enfrentar desafíos de una desigualdad compleja, ya que la política educativa puede agravar barreras históricas, afectando el acceso y la permanencia de estas juventudes de la red pública en la Educación Superior.

Palabras clave: Nueva Educación Secundaria; juventudes; desigualdad; política educacional.

Received on August 24, 2024.

Accepted on July 22, 2025.

Published in November 24, 2025.

Introduction

An examination of the diverse inequalities affecting a vast segment of the Brazilian population, especially its youth, reveals the nation's specific inheritance. According to Frigotto and Ferreira (2023, p. 34), this legacy of conservatism and authoritarianism—which manifests across the social, political, economic, cultural, and educational domains—stems from “[...] our genesis as a colonized society and nearly four centuries of a slave-owning regime [...]”. This context is further compounded by a neoliberal system, wherein “[...] education is elevated to capital” (Frigotto & Ferreira, 2023, p. 36).

The implications are manifold, and the establishment of education as a field of ideological disputes means that a group (or groups) is unwilling to change; that is, they want for privileges to remain in their hands. Lima and Colares (2023, p. 6) point out a contradiction in this context: although public education is maintained by the State (which, in theory, would guarantee the right to education of all), it is, at the same time, controlled “[...] by the bourgeoisie, by the dominant class”. An example of a long-protected privilege is access to and retention in Higher Education.

In this context, this text will address educational inequality, with a focus on the issue of access to and retention in higher education courses. This relates to the privilege of continuing one's studies after High School, the final, three-year stage of Basic Education.

For a long time, entrance examinations for Higher Education have served as a kind of sieve that filters access to the continuation of studies and keeps a large portion of young people in the job market immediately after completing High School. This is when such a possibility even exists, as the dropout rates from the first year of this stage cannot be disregarded. This occurs for several reasons, but certainly one of them is the need for young people from families with lower per capita income to help support their households, since “[...] the issue of income still remains a strong factor of social inequality, which is made explicit in the educational exclusion of young people” (Dayrell & Jesus, 2016, p. 410).

This is not a new problem per se, but one that takes on new dimensions with the most recent reform of High School, mandated by Law No. 13,415 (2017), of February 16, 2017, which was initiated during the Michel Temer administration with the urgency determined by Provisional Measure No. 746 (2016). This law amended the Law of Directives and Bases for National Education (LDB), Law No. 9,394, dated December 20, 1996, establishing full-time attendance and a flexible curriculum model for High School. With this change, High School came to be composed of the ‘National Common Curricular Base’ and ‘formative itineraries’, which “[...]”

should be organized through the offering of different curricular arrangements, according to their relevance to the local context and the capacity of the education systems” (Ministry of Education, 2018a, p. 475). Furthermore, the law also modified the National Curricular Guidelines for High School (DCNEM) – Resolution No. 3 of November 21, 2018 (Ministry of Education, 2018b).

However, the implementation of these changes may create an even greater gap of educational inequality among young people. From this perspective arises the central problem addressed in this paper, which stems from the diversified part of the curriculum, the expansion of the school day, and other developments of the reform, such as the incorporation of Vocational Education and the requirement of ‘notorious knowledge’ to work as an educator.

It is important to emphasize that this study is qualitative in nature, exploratory in type, and is based on bibliographic research and documentary analysis, focusing on public policies directed toward high school education and their possible effects on access to and retention in higher education, especially among students from the public school system. The sources were selected based on their centrality in the formulation and implementation of recent educational guidelines, especially: Law No. 13,415 (2017), which established the High School Reform; the National Common Curricular Base (NCCB), which defines the essential learning outcomes for Brazilian youth; and the National Education Plan (PNE) 2014–2024 (Law No. 13,005, 2014), which sets forth guidelines, objectives, and goals for education in Brazil through twenty goals that cover diverse aspects of the educational system.

In addition to these documents, studies authored by scholars who critically discuss curricular reforms and their implications for producing educational inequalities are examined – such as that of Sússekind and Maske (2020), who emphasize the need for flexible curricula and the importance of recognizing youth as plural, diverse, and complex. These are aspects that, as they point out, are often neglected, such as “[...] the distance each student must travel to get to school, how many hours of sleep each had the night before, how many managed to have breakfast – or not – so as not to arrive late to class [...]” (Sússekind & Maske, 2020, p. 176).

In this regard, the paper draws upon official documents and educational policy data – such as those from the 2014–2024 National Education Plan (PNE) concerning high school education – to infer the possible effects of these policies on access to higher education. It also includes a bibliographic review of recent studies (2020–2022) published as scientific articles. The text is structured into the following sections: Historical Challenges of High School Education in Brazil; High School Reform: A Reform within a Reform – Law No. 13,415 (2017) and the National Common Curricular Base; the National Education Plan and High School Education. Finally, the paper presents the final considerations.

Historical Challenges of High School in Brazil

High School is well-established as the stage that concludes Basic Education, however, it remains important to debate the role it has been fulfilling: whether that of effectively constructing knowledge designed for this educational phase or merely serving as a transitional point. In other words, whether it prepares young people to enter the labor market as an immediate workforce, or whether its objective is to prepare them for entrance examinations and selection processes for Higher Education.

Throughout Brazilian Basic Education, high school has historically focused on preparing labor for the job market, according to Ramos (2004), who offers an analysis of the challenges faced by this educational stage. The author considers the 1996 LDB (National Education Guidelines and Framework Law) a milestone in the treatment of the human person, since it redirected the focus of the educational project toward individuals – “[...] not abstract or isolated subjects, but unique individuals whose life projects are built through multiple social relationships, within the perspective of human emancipation” (Ramos, 2004, p. 39).

At least in theory, labor market and world of work are conceptually distinct. A focus on the labor market embodies a conception of workforce detached from human emancipation, in contrast to the notion of education for the world of work. However, Lima and Colares (2023, p. 5), based on Maciel, Jacomeli, and Brasileiro (2017), argue that the capitalist system, in today’s complex society, “[...] has built a supplementary system to public school education, in order to effectively prepare this demand for entry into the labor market for subordinate functions”.

Even though, according to the 1996 LDB (Law no. 9.394), high school legally became the final stage of Basic Education, paradoxically, the law did not make it compulsory at the time. Compulsory attendance was only instituted 13 years later, through Constitutional Amendment no. 59 of 2009, which made Basic Education

mandatory for individuals aged 4 to 17. This scenario illustrates the need for the establishment of Goal 3 of the National Education Plan (NEP) – 2014/2024, regarding the universalization of access to high school for 85% of the population by the end of the decade, in 2024 (Silva, 2020).

In her study, Bueno (2000) examines documents that contributed to the construction of the public education policies we know today, with a particular focus on Basic Education and, specifically, on high school. The author presents documents produced by international agencies such as the World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), and organizations linked to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), highlighting their influence on Brazilian educational policy. In addition, various texts issued by the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Labor, and the National Council of Education are also analyzed.

She clarifies that by examining these and other official and legal documents in depth, one can construct a chronology revealing financing agreements and normative measures that, in their assumptions and guidelines for high school education, make direct reference to the recommendations of international agencies and so-called First World models.

These recommendations are presented through research and diagnostics conducted by the agencies' own methodologies, which in turn propose so-called 'real' demands, thereby disqualifying and disregarding any research or evaluations carried out by previous governments, as well as academic production, whenever it diverges from such premises (Bueno, 2000).

The international agencies, described by the author as the 'mandators' of education, propose actions and policies aligned with their market-oriented ideals, aiming at growth, competitiveness, and employment. Their discourse asserts that "[...] policies for poor and emerging countries should move toward productive transformation, equity, and democracy" (Bueno, 2000, p. 121). The 1990s can be considered a turning point marking the alignment with international organizations. For Oliveira (1997), administrative reforms were introduced based on management models developed in private corporations, while, in the author's view, the necessary reforms were educational in nature.

Using the lens of economics and relying on the positive outcomes that emerged in Europe (a region with a distinct historical and colonial context), the parameters established for developing countries emphasized responding to globalization and international competition, highlighting human resources and training mechanisms as factors of competitiveness (Bueno, 2000).

This conception permeates educational policies, with many states adopting meritocratic systems that reward performance, such as the case of São Paulo State and the bonuses linked to the achievement of goals within the São Paulo State School Achievement Assessment System (SARESP). As with educational policy broadly, Mota, Casagrande, and Alonso (2022) point out that the design of the high school curriculum constitutes a field of political, ideological, and cultural dispute among various groups, particularly those within the business sector.

Still regarding competitiveness, Bueno (2000) notes that there is a Latin American concern grounded in the argument of combating impoverishment and social exclusion. In this way, education would have the role of improving quality within the public school system—where those who lack access to privileges such as extracurricular language classes are located—and of integrating those excluded from the school environment. It is also necessary to rethink training for the world of work, ensuring it does not become merely a means of supplying the labor market with cheap workers, but rather that the State provides education capable of overcoming social inequalities. Within this context, education is viewed as a political investment strategy, an essential element for building a just, solidary, and integrated society, necessary for the full exercise of citizenship, the development of daily activities, and integration into the world of work (Bueno, 2000).

Surrounding this role of education is the concept of integral education, distinct from full-time education (which refers to longer school hours), though the two can be combined: integral education in full-time schools. The establishment of full-time schooling within high school began prior to the so-called 'New High School Reform', with the Federal Program for Full-Time High School Education (EMTI), which aimed to extend school hours (Provisional Measure No. 746, 2016).

The study by Mota, Casagrande, and Alonso (2022) sought to understand the configurations of the Escola Plena Project, implemented as an educational policy for full-time high schools in the state of Mato Grosso. When contextualizing the full-time policy axis of high school education in Mato Grosso, the authors indicate that, by forging partnerships with the private sector, the State tends to lose autonomy, thereby breaking with its own obligations. They problematize the implementation of the Escola Plena Project, which involves

several layers, warning, for instance, about the “[...] sale of courses, standardized teaching materials, consultancy services, and even training for school administrators” (Mota, Casagrande & Alonso, 2022, p. 2283). These materials, in turn, are imbued with market logic, marketed as efficient and effective.

The authors also emphasize that, once market principles are consolidated, the improvement of educational aspects related to “[...] citizenship, emancipation, quality of life, and resistance to social, racial-ethnic, and gender inequalities [...]” becomes secondary (Mota, Casagrande & Alonso, 2022, p. 2283). This is the central aspect to be highlighted: it connects directly with the propagation of inequalities experienced by portions of youth often pushed into low-wage employment — in many cases, even before completing high school.

Bueno (2000, p. 124) warns of a “[...] new order [...]” — a new pragmatism applied to the understanding of human labor — one that carries the discourse of adaptability and flexibility. This discourse originates in neoliberal ideals, aspiring to the formation of individuals capable of mastering the scientific and technological principles demanded by modernity, yet also conditioned to accept the instability inherent in the cyclical crises of capitalist overaccumulation (Frigotto & Ferreira, 2023).

When high school is tied to the purpose of ‘feeding’ the labor market, its potential to conclude the cycle of learning established throughout Basic Education becomes diminished. High school, therefore, should represent an investment in humanistic formation, enabling entry into the world of work under conditions that avoid precarity, as reflected upon by Bueno (2000). The author further highlights the discourse of interest in educating youth committed to active citizenship in the society in which they live—and in shaping the one they aspire to build. Educational reforms, in the concept argued here, should be precisely this concern and objective.

Regarding the most recent curricular changes targeting high school, Kuenzer (2017) discusses how curricular and methodological organization aims to train a new type of worker — whose labor force will be consumed in a predatory manner along production chains — serving production needs and reinforcing a flexible accumulation regime within high school education. For Ciavatta and Ramos (2012), the flexible curriculum consists of a fragmented structure marked by formative rotation, enabling the development of ever-changing competencies. It demands constant updating but fails to provide the theoretical and critical tools necessary for autonomous and transformative social and productive practice.

The authors’ stance criticizes the neglect of a broad, general education in the face of curricular fragmentation grounded in a productivist view of production. This can be illustrated through the idea of a worker who knows only a decontextualized fragment of a process—rather than understanding the production of a given good or service. In contrast, a solid foundation of integrated knowledge enables critical decision-making for confronting the adversities present in society (Ciavatta & Ramos, 2012).

In the current context, a deeper analysis of the reforms imposed upon high school is needed—one that resists reducing it to a space for ‘shaping’ flexible and malleable young individuals to fit into neoliberal labor standards. Neves and Colares (2023) argue that, under a market-oriented perspective, the education provided to poor youth is strongly focused on employment, ensuring that neither labor itself nor human formation stands as the central objective.

State practices, through educational policy, fall within this same logic. According to Frigotto and Ferreira (2023, p. 36), the counter-reforms that serve the capitalist system “[...] eliminate basic rights for workers, currently leaving over 50 million people living in poverty—and, of these, more than 20 million in absolute poverty, in life-threatening conditions”. Considering young people, the primary public within the state school system, the following sections will address the changes in high school education and the challenges of access to and retention in Higher Education, which remains a privilege.

It is important to emphasize that many of the challenges surrounding high school stem from its nature as a field of ideological dispute, in which the demands of the prevailing economic system and contemporary society clash with the humanistic perspective of youth formation — the latter currently defined by Law No. 13.415 (2017) and by the NCCB (National Common Curricular Base), which will be discussed in the following section.

Reform upon Reform: Law No. 13,415/2017 and the National Common Curricular Base (NCCB)

Law No. 13,415 (2017) underwent significant debate following its implementation, particularly after Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva assumed his third presidential term (2023-2027). Students, teachers, unions, associations, and other civil society actors called for the repeal of the reform established by the law.

The path adopted by the Ministry of Education between March 9 and July 5, 2023, was one of fostering democratic participation through dialogue. Furthermore, the national implementation schedule of the reform was suspended. In schools, since the academic year had already begun, the existing structure for all new high school cohorts was maintained, featuring an increased workload and curricular flexibility through the ‘formative itineraries’.

The executive report prepared after this participatory process presented the instruments used—such as public hearings, working meetings, seminars/webinars, and online consultations. The results were organized into the following categories: Total class hours, Curriculum organization, National High School Examination (ENEM), Educational equity, Human rights and democratic student participation, Distance Education (DE), Infrastructure, Technical and Vocational Education, Teacher training and appreciation, Student retention support, Full-time schooling, Evaluation, and the Role of the Ministry of Education (Ministry of Education, 2023).

Among its recommendations, the document suggests supporting the expansion of full-time education, “[...] taking into account the reality of working students and creating policies to encourage attendance and preserve the offer of evening high school education and Youth and Adult Education (AE)” (Ministry of Education, 2023, p. 19). It also emphasizes measures related to supporting student retention, including: ensuring equity in the Fund for the Maintenance and Development of Basic Education and the Valorization of Education Professionals (*Fundeb*) to meet the demands of Youth and Adult Education (AE); creating a scholarship or savings system (later incorporated into public policy); providing free meals and housing for students; supporting states and municipalities in offering student transportation; increasing funding to implement the Quality Student Cost (CSC); as well as addressing out-of-school youth and offering diverse cultural and sports activities (Ministry of Education, 2023, p. 19).

Subsequently, the federal government presented Bill No. 5,230/2023 during an extraordinary meeting convened by the Education Committee (EC), introducing significant changes to the high school reform. Hence the section title: a reform *within* the reform. Among the proposed changes was an increase in the number of hours allocated to general education instruction, from 1,800 to 2,400 hours.

The bill also proposed a new structure for articulating the five *formative itineraries* with the NCCB’s areas of knowledge: *Languages and their Technologies* (comprising Portuguese Language and Literature, English Language, Arts, and Physical Education); *Mathematics and its Technologies*; *Natural Sciences and their Technologies* (comprising Biology, Physics, and Chemistry); and *Human and Social Sciences Applied* (comprising Philosophy, Geography, History, and Sociology). Regarding *Technical and Vocational Education*, the fifth itinerary is now structured according to the axes and technological areas defined by the national curricular guidelines for Technical and Vocational Education (Bill No. 5,230, 2023).

The text of Bill No. 5,230/2023 also gives greater attention to the specificities of Indigenous and Afro-Brazilian rural communities. It further highlights low-income students regularly enrolled in public or community schools operating in rural educational contexts and partnered with government authorities, ensuring they are supported by programs such as *Pé-de-Meia*, *ProUni*, and the higher education quota system.

In 2017, the *National Common Curricular Base for High School* (NCCB/ High School) was implemented as a guided document to assist in building high school curricula. However, Fuza and Miranda (2020) emphasize that the NCCB/ High School does not establish a curriculum itself but rather defines the essential knowledge that Basic Education students should develop under the framework of *integral education*. The NCCB/ High School’s commitment to integral education appears in the document’s introduction—signed by then-Minister Mendonça Filho—which “[...] expresses the commitment of the Brazilian State to promoting integral education and the full development of students, aimed at fostering inclusion, respect for differences, and the rejection of discrimination and prejudice” (Ministry of Education, 2018a, p. 5).

Within the NCCB’s pedagogical foundations, the commitment to integral education also appears explicitly: “[...] the NCCB explicitly states its commitment to integral education. It thus acknowledges that Basic Education must aim at comprehensive and holistic human development, which entails understanding the complexity and non-line of such development” (Ministry of Education, 2018a, p. 14). The document clarifies that this concept is independent of the length of the school day and is tied instead to the promotion of “[...] learning processes attuned to students’ needs, possibilities, and interests, as well as to the challenges of contemporary society” (Ministry of Education, 2018a, p. 14).

According to Mota, Casagrande, and Alonso (2022), integral education is valuable because it is grounded in a democratic and inclusive vision of citizenship-oriented human formation-encompassing humanistic, ethical, political, and intellectual dimensions. The challenge lies in implementing it as full-time education,

which conflicts with the objective conditions faced by low-income youth, who often cannot remain in school for two shifts a day.

In practice, the study by Mota, Casagrande, and Alonso (2022) conducted at a state public school located on the outskirts of Cuiabá – within the scope of the Escola Plena Project—revealed a considerable dropout rate among high-school students following the implementation of full-time schooling. With the expanded class hours, enrollment plummeted from 913 students in 2017 to 217 in 2018 and further decreased to 145 by the end of the 2019 school year – the final year of Basic Education. By contrast, a nearby regular night school had 1,100 students enrolled in 2019.

The NCCB for High School itself acknowledges Brazil's inequality, describing it as “[...] a country characterized by the autonomy of its federal entities, marked cultural diversity, and deep social inequalities [...]” and further admitting that the country “[...] throughout its history, has naturalized educational inequalities regarding access to school, student retention, and learning outcomes” (Ministry of Education, 2018a, p. 15). Therefore, the defense is that the NCCB plays a fundamental role in combating these disparities by establishing the essential learning outcomes that all students must achieve.

On the other hand, from the perspective of Sússekind and Maske (2020, p. 176), the reforms inspired by the NCCB are inappropriate, as they “[...] threaten the organic unity of basic education by creating different curricula for high school—making it a victim of a fallacy of flexibility through standardization—and, more recently, they degrade, reduce, and reify teacher education, ultimately failing to produce quality”.

Given the considerations highlighted in the NCCB/High School about the Brazilian context, the document recommends that: “[...] curricular and pedagogical decisions by the education departments, the annual planning of school institutions, and the routines and daily activities of schools must take into account the need to overcome these inequalities” (Ministry of Education, 2018a, p. 15).

Bueno (2000) points out that there is a pendular movement in official discourses—sometimes assuming stronger commitments to high school education, at other times maintaining a policy of resource reduction in education. As seen in the public consultation document, quality education necessarily involves adequate funding to make it viable. Since 2017, high school has indeed come into the spotlight, but it still faces historical problems such as access to and retention in higher education, which will be discussed in the following section.

Unequal Opportunities for Access to Higher Education

University Entrance Exams and the National High School Examination (*ENEM*), whose scores serve as a pathway to higher education, are selective assessment processes. Although both serve the same purpose, there are key differences between them. The *vestibular* is independently administered by public or private institutions and is characterized as a content-heavy, multi-stage examination. For example, the entrance exam conducted by the State University of Campinas (*Unicamp*) consists of two phases held over three separate days: on the first day, in the first phase, candidates answer multiple-choice questions; on the second and third days, in the second phase, they respond to open-ended questions and produce an essay (*Estratégia Vestibulares*, 2020).

By contrast, the *ENEM* — created during the administration of Fernando Henrique Cardoso through Ministerial Ordinance No. 438 of May 28, 1998 (Ministry of Education, 1998) — was initially designed to assess “[...] the competencies and skills of Brazilian secondary school graduates and completers” (Moraes et al., 2020, p. 4). In other words, it was originally conceived as an external evaluation instrument within Brazil's educational policy framework. Today, however, it has become the primary route for admission to public and private universities. Thus, the exam in its pre-2009 format was not designed as a selection process – yet that is now its defining role.

Based on their *ENEM* scores, candidates can apply for higher education placements and participate in federal programs such as: the Unified Selection System (*SISU*), a program for admission into public universities and consequently one of the most sought-after by students; the University for All Program (*PROUNI*), which offers full (100%) or partial (50%) scholarships at private universities; and the Student Financing Fund for Higher Education (*FIES*), which, similar to *PROUNI*, also subsidizes access to private universities – though it functions as a student loan that must be repaid under predefined contractual terms after graduation.

This dynamic reinforces the necessity for youth to achieve increasingly high scores to secure admission into higher education programs. In this scenario, ENEM stands out for its qualitative approach and its emphasis on the interrelation of knowledge areas, making it an exam that requires not only domain-specific knowledge but also strong reading comprehension and interpretative skills. The test consists of 180 questions distributed across four areas of knowledge: Languages, Codes and their Technologies (Portuguese Language, Foreign Language, Literature, and Arts); Mathematics and its Technologies; Human Sciences (History, Geography, Sociology, and Philosophy); and Natural Sciences (Biology, Physics, and Chemistry).

The *ENEM* is designed to promote interdisciplinarity, meaning that questions should integrate content from more than one subject. For the essay component, candidates are expected to produce an argumentative text that proposes a concrete intervention to address the given social issue. Following the reform established by Law No. 13,415/2017, changes to the *ENEM* were anticipated to align with the new high school curricula; however, with the ‘reform of the reform’ subsequent public consultations, these changes were suspended. In September 2023, the current Minister of Education, Camilo Santana, confirmed that no modifications would be made to the *ENEM* in 2024 (Tenente, 2023).

ENEM is defined by Azevedo (2020, p. 525) as “[...] a public educational policy for university access and social inclusion in Brazil”. Nevertheless, it still functions as a selection mechanism in the competition for higher education admission.

Within this context, preparation for this academic milestone increasingly begins earlier – often during elementary and middle school. Here, a sharp divide between the public and private school systems becomes evident: youth from affluent social classes consistently occupy the top positions in prestigious institutions, most of which are public universities. As Pereira et al. (2010, p. 87) observe, admission to public higher education institutions –federal or state –becomes practically unattainable for those lacking sufficient educational, family, emotional, and social resources to succeed in the competition.

In addition to unequal access, low-income students who do manage to enroll in higher education face challenges in remaining there. Public universities offer some support through student assistance programs and scholarships, but policy attention must also focus on earlier interventions—ensuring that students can complete high school successfully and thereby have real opportunities to pursue life projects, rather than leaving these aspirations as mere promises of the so-called ‘New High School’.

This is precisely the purpose of Law No. 14,818 of January 16, 2024 (Law No. 14,818, 2024), sanctioned by President Lula, which established a savings program for public high school students in Brazil. The *Pé-de-Meia* Program aims to reduce dropout rates during this crucial phase of Basic Education. Before its approval, some provisions of the congressional bill were vetoed, such as the prohibition on combining this educational savings benefit with the Continuous Cash Benefit (*BPC*) intended for low-income individuals with disabilities – and the increase in the minimum attendance requirement to receive the benefit, from 80% to 85% (Law No. 14.818, 2024).

Administered by the Department of Basic Education (*SEB*), the *Pé-de-Meia* Program was launched by the federal government in November 2023, in partnership with the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Social Development, Brazilian Federal Savings Bank, *NEES/UFAL* (National Education Evaluation System –Present Gestion), and *UFSC* (Student Journey initiative). Participation was formalized through a commitment agreement signed by federal, state, district, and municipal high school networks. The program is expected to reach approximately 2.5 million students, with an estimated investment of 7.1 billion reais in 2024, drawn from a private fund managed by Brazilian Federal Savings Bank, contingent upon compliance with program conditions (Ministry of Education, 2024a).

This financial incentive aims to support student retention in high school, mitigating the effects of social inequality on continuation and completion rates at this educational stage. In addition to reducing dropout and absenteeism, the policy seeks to foster human development, address the structural determinants of extreme poverty and its intergenerational reproduction, and promote social mobility (Ministry of Education, 2024a). It directly engages with the well-known inequalities affecting Brazilian youth – acknowledged by the *NCCB/High School* itself.

Eligible students include those aged 14 to 24 enrolled in regular public high schools from low-income families registered in the *Bolsa Família* program. Additionally, students aged 19 to 24 enrolled in Youth and Adult Education (*AE*), likewise from low-income families registered in *Bolsa Família*, are also eligible (Ministry of Education, 2024a).

Once enrollment and attendance are verified, students receive a monthly stipend of R\$200,00, which may be withdrawn at any time, along with R\$1,000,00 deposits at the end of each of the three years of high school education – accessible only after completion. Considering the ten monthly installments, the three annual deposits, and an additional R\$200,00 incentive for participation in the ENEM, total benefits can amount to R\$9,200,00 per student (Ministry of Education, 2024a).

This policy is expected to expand opportunities for young people and contribute to the improvement of Brazilian education. The pursuit of such improvement aligns with the goals of the National Education Plan (NEP) (Law No. 13,005/2014), which establishes specific objectives and strategies for enhancing secondary education. The next section will address the NEP and its connection with the final stage of Basic Education.

The National Education Plan and High School Education

The National Education Plan (NEP) is the outcome of popular demand and defines the multiannual intervention of public authorities in the educational field. Its importance lies in its role as the guiding axis of national education policy. Some of the strategies established to achieve the goals of the most recent NEP (covering the period from 2014 to 2024), approved through Law No. 13,005 of June 25, 2014, include: institutionalizing a national program for the renewal of high school education aimed at encouraging pedagogical practices based on interdisciplinary approaches that connect theory and practice; and developing – under the coordination of the Ministry of Education in articulation with federal entities and with public consultation – a proposal for learning and development rights and objectives for high school, guaranteeing a common basic education.

The NEP 2014–2024 also established an agreement among the Union, states, Federal District, and municipalities for the implementation of learning and development rights and goals that would form the National Common Curricular Base (NCCB) for high school. It calls for the “[...] expansion of free high school enrollments integrated with vocational education [...]”, considering the specificities of rural populations, Indigenous and *quilombola* communities, and persons with disabilities. It further proposes “[...] active outreach to the out-of-school population aged 15 to 17 [...]”, in coordination with social assistance, health, and youth protection services; and the implementation of “[...] policies to prevent dropout [...] by prejudice or any form of discrimination, creating a protection network against associated forms of exclusion” (Law No. 9.394, 2014).

It is well known that one way to ensure the achievement of these goals relates directly to adequate funding. Law No. 13.415 (2017) also introduced changes to the Fund for the Maintenance and Development of Basic Education and the Valorization of Education Professionals (Fundeb), redirecting resources to finance technical and vocational training, now foreseen in Article 36 of the Law of Guidelines and Bases of National Education (LDB). Fundeb resources may also be allocated to private institutions, provided they are authorized by the State Council of Education (CEE) to operate within public high school education (Amaral, 2017). This dynamic has sparked controversy among those who defend the principle that public funds should exclusively support public schools, as Pinto (2016, p. 150) warns: “[...] various mechanisms have been devised by the private sector – whether for-profit or non-profit – to obtain from the federal, state, and municipal governments an increasingly larger share of resources that should be destined for public schools”.

Within the Policy for the Promotion of the Implementation of Full-Time High Schools, it was established that through the Ministry of Education, financial transfers would be made to states and the Federal District over a ten-year period per school, via the National Fund for the Development of Education (FNDE). Schools selected for funding must formalize, by signing a commitment agreement, the conditions for participation: identification and delimitation of the actions to be financed; achievement of quantitative targets; execution of the physical and financial schedule; inclusion of the start and end dates for actions; and completion of each planned stage or phase. Furthermore, participating schools must have begun offering full-time high school education as of February 16, 2017, and must follow a political-pedagogical project aligned with Article 36 of the Law of Guidelines and Bases of National Education (LDB) and the High School Reform (Amaral, 2017).

Amaral (2017) highlights that among the goals set in the NEP 2014–2024, the volume of financial resources invested in education is a central concern. His research analyzes data that helps in understanding the inequalities observed in high school and questions whether the resources allocated will be sufficient for the implementing full-time schooling in this educational stage. The study compared data from twenty countries,

including Brazil, and showed that although investment per student increased – from R\$2,282.00 in 2000 to R\$7,302.00 in January 2017—the amount remains insufficient, even after discounting inflation, when compared to other member countries of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (Amaral, 2017).

For international comparison, Amaral converted values to U.S. dollars. In 2013, Brazil spent US\$/PPP 3,852.00 per high school student, considered low in the study. The classification included three categories: high investment—above US\$/PPP 10,000 per student; medium investment—around US\$/PPP 5,000; and low investment—below that level. Even acknowledging that spending alone does not determine outcomes on the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), Amaral noted that countries with higher PISA scores were also those with greater investments in education (Amaral, 2017).

Countries with low education spending achieved scores near or below 400 points in PISA, as was the case for Brazil. Amaral (2017) therefore emphasizes the need to increase financial resources for education. He observes that the fiscal policies devised by the “[...] group that participated in the legislative-judicial-media coup and took office in the Federal Government (Amaral, 2017, p. 106)” allocated insufficient funds to the Ministry of Education—a total of R\$107.3 billion for 2017, representing an adjustment of only 1.23% over the R\$106.0 billion from the 2016 Annual Budget Law (LOA), despite inflation of 6.29% (LOA, 2016, apud Amaral, 2017).

From his analysis, Amaral concludes that the budgetary projection indicates insufficient resources for the Full-Time High School Promotion Policy and for meeting the broader targets established by the NEP 2014–2024. Consequently, implementing the proposed improvements to high school education, including universalization, may be compromised. Law No. 13.005 sets, under Goal 3, the aim of universalizing high school education by raising the net enrollment rate to 80%. Goal 10 seeks to integrate about 25% of Youth and Adult Education (AE) enrollments with Technical and Vocational Education to encourage completion of Basic Education. Goal 11 proposes tripling enrollment in secondary-level technical education and promoting its expansion across state school networks and through Distance Education (DE) (Law No. 13,005, 2014). Rozendo (2023) considers these goals extremely challenging and stresses that little investment is made in continuous training, professional development, and the material infrastructure necessary for the proper functioning of public educational institutions.

The NEP 2014–2024 document identifies, among the strategies for achieving Goal 3, the universalization of the National High School Examination (ENEM) (strategy 3.6), positioning it as both an evaluative tool to improve Basic Education policies and an assessment with a “[...] classificatory function, serving as a criterion for access to higher education” (Lei nº 13.005, 2014). Thus, the NEP recognizes *ENEM* as an important instrument in educational policy and evaluation.

The NEP 2014–2024 Monitoring Panel, launched in 2016, integrates InepData – a set of Business Intelligence panels that facilitate access for governments and civil society to data produced by the National Institute for Educational Studies and Research *Anísio Teixeira* (INEP) – and presents concerning indicators regarding the progress of several educational goals and strategies (INEP, 2020).

Regarding Goal 3 of the 2014–2024 National Education Plan (NEP), the monitoring panel indicates that there is still progress to be made toward achieving full universalization of high school enrollment and reaching a net enrollment rate of 85% by 2024. The results are presented in Figures 1 and 2.

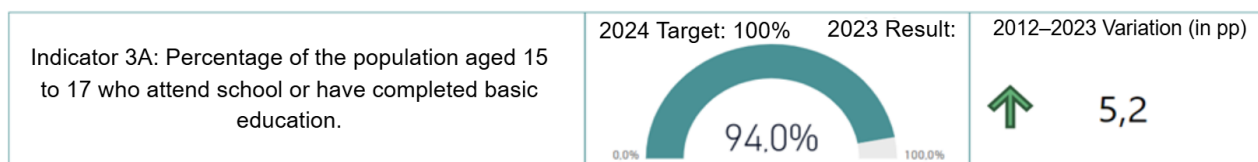


Figura 1. Indicator 3A NEP 2014/2024.

Fonte: INEP (2020).

It is observed that, within a single year, 6% of the target must still be achieved for it to be fully met by the end of the ten-year period. Figure 1 also illustrates the progression of the total in percentage points (p.p.). Regarding youth aged 15 to 17 – the high school target population – who are either currently enrolled in this stage or have completed Basic Education, the goal must advance by an additional 8.1% to be fully accomplished by the end of the period initially established for the 2014–2024 National Education Plan (PNE).

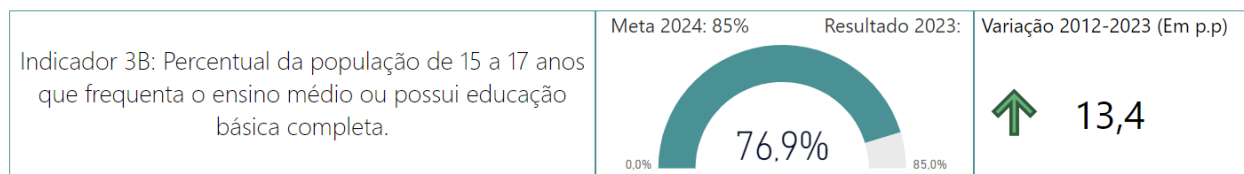


Figura 2. Indicator 3B NEP 2014/2024.

Fonte: INEP (2020).

Regarding Goal 6, the monitoring panel shows that the provision of full-time education in at least 50% of public schools, reaching at least 25% of students in Basic Education, stood at 20.6% in 2023, as illustrated in Figure 3 (INEP, 2020), while the target for 2024 is to reach 25%.

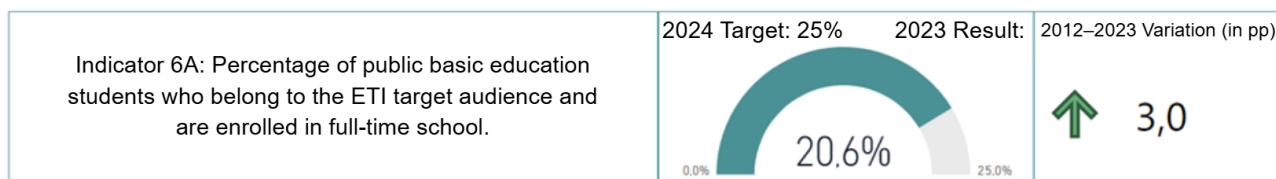


Figura 3. Indicator 6A NEP 2014/2024.

Fonte: INEP (2020).

Indicator 6B (Figure 4), in turn, shows the percentage of public Basic Education schools that have at least 25% of their target students enrolled in full-time programs. In 2023, this percentage was 30.5%, with 37.1% of such schools located in urban areas and 19.7% in rural zones. For high school education, the rate was 29.6% (INEP, 2020). One contributing factor could be the *Pé-de-Meia* Program, for instance, which may enable students who were previously unable to attend extended school hours to do so through the financial incentive provided by the program.

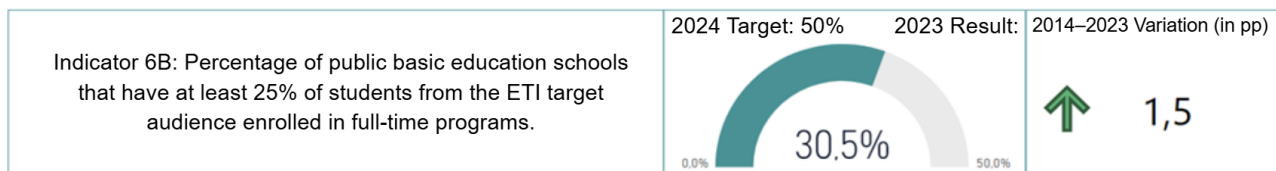


Figura 4. Indicator 6B NEP 2014/2024.

Fonte: INEP (2020).

A concerning figure relates to Goal 12 (Figure 5), which addresses the increase of the gross enrollment rate in higher education to 50% and the net enrollment rate to 33% among the population aged 18 to 24, ensuring both the quality of provision and the expansion of at least 40% of new enrollments within the public sector.

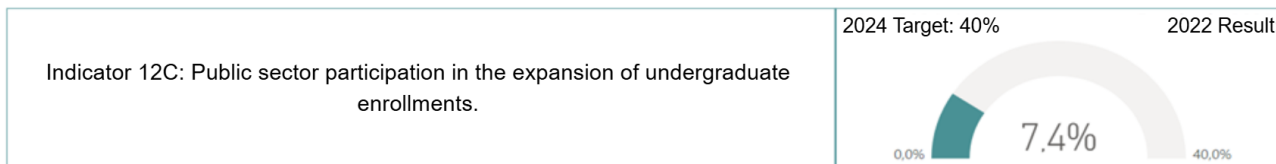


Figura 5. Indicator 6B NEP 2014/2024.

Fonte: INEP (2020).

As shown in Figure 5, the target is 40%, and by 2022 only 7.4% had been achieved. This is a crucial goal for expanding opportunities for public school students to occupy places in public universities and for ensuring that those who aspire to pursue higher education have the actual possibility of doing so. There is clear evidence here of the persistent problem of unequal access to higher education and of the privilege held by wealthier youth in the competitive processes of the *vestibular* and the success in the *ENEM*, as previously discussed. These patterns significantly increase their chances of securing admission to public universities. This phenomenon demonstrates an inversion: High School students from private schools access public higher education institutions more easily than those from the public education system.

Law No. 14.934 of July 25, 2024, extended the validity of the 2014–2024 NEP to December 31, 2025 (Law No. 14,934 of 2024). The process began with Law No. 5.665/2023, presented by Senator Professor Dorinha Seabra (Union–TO), aimed at avoiding a legislative gap in Brazil’s educational planning (Bill No. 5,665, 2023). The original text proposed extending the NEP until December 31, 2028 (Bill No. 5,665, 2023). However, the Minister of Education, Camilo Santana, emphasized the importance of approving a new NEP still in 2024, to enter into force in 2025 (Ministry of Education, 2024b). Consequently, Bill No. 2.614/2024 introduces proposals concerning education financing, full-time schooling, access to higher education, professional and technological education, inclusion, and equity—as means to reduce educational inequalities. The bill establishes 18 objectives, supported by 58 goals and 253 strategies (Bill No. 5,665, 2024).

In an official statement released on July 28, 2024, the National Association of Graduate Studies and Research in Education (ANPEd, 2024) presented a set of considerations regarding the new NEP 2024–2034 Bill, highlighting both advances and setbacks identified by coordinators of its Working Groups on *State and Educational Policy (GT 5)*, *Literacy, Reading, and Writing (GT 10)*, and *Education and Ethnic-Racial Relations (GT 21)*.

In its assessment, ANPEd observed that the financial provision maintaining the intermediate target of allocating 7% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) to education—potentially increasing to 10% by the end of the decade—differs from the previous plan. Under the 2014–2024 NEP, this benchmark was scheduled for the fifth year; in the 2024–2034 Bill, it has been shifted to the sixth year, a point to be debated during its legislative process. The statement also notes the brevity with which the bill addresses funding for public Basic Education through the Quality Student Cost (CAQ), an indicator derived from the Initial Quality Student Cost (CAQi), which defines the minimum investment per student per year for each stage and modality of Basic Education, ensuring a baseline standard of quality (the National Association of Graduate Studies and Research in Education, 2024).

ANPEd further highlights the absence of provisions ensuring public tenders for permanent teaching positions, a factor that encourages temporary contracts and outsourcing—thereby contributing to the precarization of education and undermining its quality. The document also criticizes the growing reliance on private-sector providers financed with public funds—referred to as ‘partnerships’—which reinforce market-driven logics and intrude upon curriculum design, teaching materials, school management, teacher training, and external assessment policies (National Association of Graduate Studies and Research in Education, 2024).

At the same time, the statement welcomes the inclusion of goals related to equity, which aim to reduce regional, socioeconomic, and ethno-racial disparities, among others, and that are tied directly to the 18 overarching objectives. For instance, ANPEd highlights the goal promoting the expansion of Indigenous, *rural*, and *quilombola* education, directed at populations that constitute the majority of the impoverished and, therefore, those most affected by structural inequality (ANPEd, 2024). Education thus enters another crucial period of strategic planning, one that envisions both its own future and that of Brazilian society.

In this new context, there is a growing concern with addressing inequality—what Senkevics and Carvalho (2020) describe as “[...] new and old barriers to schooling [...]” faced by young people. In their study covering 1995–2015, the authors identified barriers sustained by socioeconomic, racial, and gender disparities that hinder the universal guarantee of quality education.

Senkevics and Carvalho (2020) emphasize the key role of public policies and official documents such as the current NEP, which calls for universalization in at least five of its twenty goals, spanning from early childhood education to higher education. They assert that “[...] each completed stage of schooling represents both the end of one cycle and the beginning of the next” (Senkevics & Carvalho, 2020, p. 337), highlighting that the growth in the number of graduates from one stage necessarily demands expanded provision at the subsequent level—a goal that remains unmet, as eligibility does not always result in access.

Accordingly, the central point in analyzing educational inequalities lies in examining the barriers and transitions within youth educational trajectories. Senkevics and Carvalho (2020) argue that the poor Black population should be the particular focus of policies ensuring both access to and permanence in education, even before higher education. In this regard, the *Pé-de-Meia Program* stands out as a pertinent initiative, given the persistent inequalities in High School education.

This dynamic, which the authors term as a reactualization of inequalities, heightens the challenges of progression, learning, and successful completion of basic schooling. As an example, they refer to large-scale assessment results that build a broad picture of education among youth at the High School level, citing data from the 2018 Program for International Student Assessment (PISA).

Final considerations

The issue of inequality is complex, and the situation is no different when it comes to educational inequality. It is well understood that there are no simple solutions to problems of this nature. Nevertheless, the High School reform has been the subject of intensive studies and strong criticism from specialists, as it introduces curricular guidelines that fragment knowledge into optional ‘learning tracks’ (*itinerários formativos*), considered the diversified part of the curriculum—yet largely impractical for many school systems responsible for implementing High School education. This means that the various academic pathways promoted by the reform may end up reproducing, or even reinforcing, existing inequalities.

The main justification for the reform was ‘flexibility’, presented as an opportunity to empower youth by enabling them to personalize their learning process. However, in practice, it may result in differentiated educational pathways that deepen the inequalities to which many young people are already subjected – especially those without privileges, for whom access to higher education and academic continuity are not obvious or easily attainable prospects.

It should be emphasized that the challenges faced by High School education stem not only from the structural issues of the economic system (such as cyclical crises of overaccumulation) but also from a political and ideological battleground in which the demands of the prevailing economic model in contemporary society clash with a more humanistic vision for youth. Considering the most recent reform, established by Law No. 13.415 (2017) and consolidated through the National Common Curricular Base (NCCB), it becomes evident that High School education has been treated as an absolute priority – to the extent that its implementation began through a Provisional Measure, when Michel Temer assumed the presidency of the Republic.

Regarding access to higher education, significant inequality remains, compounded by difficulties in student retention, signaling the urgent need for new public policies. Such policies must arise from strategies aimed at improving the quality of High School education, focusing both on civic and humanistic formation and on enhancing the competitiveness of public-school youth in *vestibular* and *ENEM* assessments.

The NEP, as revealed by data from its monitoring panel, does not display particularly promising results regarding the goals set for High School education – especially given how much progress must still be made within the short remaining period before the conclusion of the 2014–2024 NEP. As the country now moves toward constructing the National Education Plan for the next decade, education once again enters a crucial planning phase, assuming a central role in reducing regional, socioeconomic, ethnic-racial, and cultural inequalities – chief among them, educational inequality itself.

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NOTE:

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Associate editor in charge:

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Evaluation rounds:

Five review invitations sent; two reviews received

Standardization reviewer:

Adriana Curti Cantadori de Camargo

Data availability:

For the document analysis, the Monitoring Panel available at the following link was used: <https://www.gov.br/inep/pt-br/acesso-a-informacao/dados-abertos/inep-data/painel-de-monitoramento-do-pne>, which corresponds to pages 9 to 13 of this article. The NCCB and Law No. 13,415/2017 are referenced throughout the text but are especially emphasized on pages 6 and 7.