UNESCO’s 2015 Education for All Global Monitoring Report (GMR) was launched on April 9th in Paris, New Delhi, New York and Santiago de Chile. The report assesses progress toward the six EFA goals established at the Dakar World Education Forum in 2000, comments on why progress has (or has not) been made, and offers some observations regarding a post-2015 global education agenda. It includes many graphs, infographics and tables that provide abundant empirical data on the state of education worldwide. It provides an extensive discussion of the concepts underlying each EFA goal, compares progress among countries and regions, and comments on different approaches to achieving the goals. At nearly 500 pages, the report provides a lot of useful information.

The GMR finds that progress has been mixed, at best. Although many countries have made significant progress towards many of the EFA goals, most fall short. Only one-third achieved all of the measurable goals. Just one-half have managed to provide universal primary enrollment. Less than a quarter have met the goal of reducing adult illiteracy by 50%. Half the world’s countries fail to meet the gender equality goals at the secondary level, and a third at the primary level. Pre-primary education and childcare are expanding, but far too many children receive neither. Children from poor families continue to be much less likely to attend school than children from rich families. Efforts to assess student learning have increased significantly, but there is little indication that the sixth goal (quality of education) is being reached. Government spending on education has increased, but remains insufficient. The report offers critical comments on the post-2015 SDG education goals and targets that will be discussed next month in Incheon, Korea, and will presumably be adopted in September 2015 by the UN General Assembly. It concludes that the EFA movement has been “a qualified success even if EFA partners have not collectively lived up to their commitments.”

What I found most noteworthy about the GMR, however, is not so much what it says but what it doesn’t say. The report emphasizes traditional education inputs, such as enrollments, pupil-teacher ratios, materials, teacher training and government spending, and says little about education outcomes—the most important of which, of course, is student learning. To be sure, the chapter on the third EFA goal—youth and adult skills—is about learning, but the discussion focuses primarily on enrollment in secondary education as a proxy for skill acquisition, rather than on the skills themselves. The chapter on the fourth EFA goal—adult literacy—is also about learning, but focuses on adults and adult literacy programs rather than on students and schools, and is based on data that is often unreliable. The chapter
on the sixth EFA goal—quality of education—is ostensibly about learning. But even that discussion focuses largely on inputs such as pupil/teacher ratios, social protection programs and teacher training. Just five of its thirty pages discuss learning outcomes—in a near-500-page report. Overall, student learning, presumably the primary objective of schooling, is not a central part of the GMR. The report does not tell us clearly whether Education for All has produced learning for all.

Why is this so? If learning is the primary objective of schooling, why is data about learning so unobtrusive in the GMR? Why does the report not sound the alarm by beginning with graphs that illustrate the low levels of learning common in many (perhaps most) countries, particularly among children from poor families? Why does it not suggest that progress in education is better measured by test scores than by government spending and enrollments? Why does it place so little emphasis on what research tells us about improving learning outcomes? Why doesn’t the GMR recommend that countries make learning the center of education policy by setting concrete learning goals and establishing strong assessments to monitor progress towards reaching them? Even a simple goal, like making sure that all children be able to read upon completing third grade, would be a big step forward.

Part of the answer is presumably that the GMR is in some sense a prisoner of the EFA process. The EFA goals were established by negotiation among the world’s national governments 15 years ago. They reflect the thinking of that time, when emphasis was overwhelmingly on getting children into school, and student learning was barely on the global policy agenda. They may also reflect the reluctance of governments to commit themselves to learning goals that, despite their merits, would be hard to achieve without painful education reforms. The GMR was established “to monitor progress, highlight remaining gaps and provide recommendations for the global sustainable development agenda to follow in 2015.” That mandate might in theory permit substantial flexibility in emphasis. But in practice it might encounter strong internal resistance to emphases that diverge significantly from the original EFA goals, or seriously criticize government performance. Another part of the answer may be that the GMR reflects accurately the conventional wisdom of the global education community—that spending, enrollments and teacher training deserve top priority now, and that learning is something that will come later, once these inputs have reached appropriate levels.

Whatever the explanation, the relatively weak emphasis on student learning in the GMR, and in the EFA process more generally, is worrisome—particularly from the viewpoint of students and their parents. Learning levels are too often too low, leaving children ill-prepared for further education, modern jobs and the responsibilities of democratic citizenship. Learning is the elephant in the room for many—perhaps most—governments. They avoid acknowledging how low levels really are, and have not developed serious strategies to raise them. They need to be pushed to shift their focus from inputs to outcomes. International norms and goals are one proven way to make that happen. A 2013 report by a Center for Global Development study group argues that “…schools, governments, and donors need to focus more on actual learning goals, not just filling seats.” Despite providing solid analysis on many issues, the GMR does little to shift the focus toward actual learning goals and away from filling seats.

Looking forward, however, there at least is some reason for hope. The goals proposed for the post-2015 education agenda take a step in the right direction, calling for all youths (and an as-yet-unspecified percentage of adults) to achieve literacy and numeracy by 2030. Unfortunately, they fail to define literacy and numeracy, or to suggest how to measure them. Nor do they urge countries to establish robust systems of student assessment. However, UNESCO’s Institute for Statistics (UIS) has been tasked with developing a set of global indicators for learning outcomes, and then working with countries to promote their use in monitoring education progress. If this initiative establishes clear, measurable targets for literacy and numeracy, it could play a key role in shifting global attention towards learning. It might even spur structural reform. In its 2013 report, the CGD study group urged the United Nations to “…set global standards against which national efforts can be measured” and “…establish a global learning goal as part of the post-2015 development agenda.” The UIS initiative provides the UN with an opportunity to do both. If the UN seizes that opportunity, it might claim leadership in the global push for student learning.