

## ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF FOOD SUPPORT POLICY PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOL CHILDREN IN LAI CHAU PROVINCE, WHO WILL NO LONGER BE ELIGIBLE FOR ASSISTANCE WHEN REGION III COMMUNES, VILLAGES, AND HAMLETS BECOME REGION I, AS PER VIETNAMESE GOVERNMENT REGULATIONS

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### Abstract

Ethnic minorities and mountainous terrain are divided into three regions. Region I communes are beginning to develop, Region II communes are still problematic, and Region III communes are extremely difficult. The division of commune-level administrative units according to development level serves as a foundation for planning and organizing policy implementation to focus on investment, exploitation of potentials, narrowing the development gap, and improving the infrastructure system to improve conditions for ethnic minorities to access essential social services, particularly education and health care, in order to improve the quality of human resources, reduce poverty, and promote national identity<sup>1</sup>. Policies governing the demarcation of ethnic minorities and mountainous areas, on the other hand, have had a considerable impact on policies supporting ethnic minority children's education. According to some research, ethnic groups still have unequal access to education. In order to assess the process and determine how policy changes affect the policy of supporting education for elementary and middle school students, this paper summarizes educational support policies for ethnic minority students. It also analyzes education and training outcomes in Lai Chau province and conducts in-depth interviews with stakeholders (students, teachers, village officials, commune officials). The results show that the policy system to support ethnic minority students of Vietnam in general and Lai Chau, in particular, has many outstanding advantages such as comprehensiveness, systematicity, and attention to ethnic specificities. The policy system has been a driving force for ethnic minority students to go to school. However, it is ineffective in maintaining the number of students transferring between primary and secondary schools and their success in secondary school due to several barriers such as changing policies to student food support, training programs, natural conditions, cultural issues, and job opportunities.

**Keywords:** Policy for student food support, policy for education support, ethnic minority students, Lai Chau.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

According to studies, governmental efforts in Vietnam have had impressive results, with the number of ethnic minority pupils attending school remaining stable or increasing significantly over time. However, there are

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.bandantoc.kontum.gov.vn/nghien-cuu-trao-doi/Phan-dinh-vung-dong-bao-DTSMN-theo-trinh-do-phat-trien-de-thuc-hien-policy-dan-toc-co-in-three>

still many legal documents that apply to a policy beneficiary, and the phenomenon of early dropout still exists at various levels; even if children attend school, the absorption of real educational benefits is still low, as evidenced by the fact that they do not achieve good academic results. Furthermore, some cultural stereotypes are not expected, such as early marriage and early work, and if higher education is obtained, career options are likewise limited, and the community's culture of cohesion remains strong. Inbreeding still continues because members do not want to leave their group. So, what prevents policymakers from having the desired impact in motivating pupils to attend school?<sup>2</sup>

The article focuses on two goals in order to address the aforementioned question. The first goal is to examine policies that help ethnic minority children attend school, focusing on direct support measures such as tuition assistance, scholarships, day-boarding, and other expense support. The second goal is to identify issues in assessing the impact of the policy to support meals for students who lose the support regime when communes, villages, and hamlets in Region III transition to Region I, as per Vietnam's Decision No. 861/QD-TTg and Decision No. 612/QD-UBND, which has not achieved the desired effect, especially in Lai Chau, a particularly difficult area.

## **2. MAIN TEXT**

Through the years, the Vietnamese State's stance on promoting ethnic minorities' education has been reflected in its Constitution (1946, 1959, 1980, 1992, 2013). A review of policies reveals that, in addition to general education policies, ethnic minority students benefit from a diverse system of specific support policies, such as preferential training policies, scholarship policies, academic support, and tuition fee exemption or reduction; however, support for ethnic minority students is limited. Furthermore, in addition to the government's initiatives, communities such as Lai Chau have policies supporting ethnic minority pupils' attendance at school.

*In terms of the direct support policies*, from 2010 to the present, the government has issued three decrees on tuition fee exemption and reduction policies, study expenses support, and the mechanism for collecting and using tuition fees for educational institutions under the national education system (Decree No. 49/2010/ND-CP dated May 14, 2010; Decree No. 74/2013/ND-CP dated July 15, 2013, amending and supplementing a number of Articles of Decree No. 49/2010/ND-CP; and Decree No. 86/2015/ND-CP dated October 2, 2015). In terms of assistance measures for ethnic minority children, Decree 74 does not differ significantly from Decree 49. Ethnic minority students, who are frequently students in border areas, highland areas, and areas with challenging economic conditions, are entitled to additional study expense support of 100,000 per student per month for a maximum of 9 months per academic year, in addition to tuition-free policies.

In addition, pupils from a select group of ethnic minorities are given preferential consideration. Decree No. 57/2017/ND-CP (replacing Decision 2123/QD-TTg of the Prime Minister) stipulating priority policies for enrollment and academic support for children, pupils, and students of the local population. from 9 ethnic groups according to Decision No. 2123/QD-TTg to 16 ethnic groups (Cong, Mang, Pu Peo, Si La, Co Lao, Bo Y, La Ha, Ngai, Chut, O Du, Brau, Ro Mam, Lo Lo, Lu, Pe Then, La Hu), in which in addition to the supports that ethnic minority students receive, students from these 16 ethnic groups receive an additional 15 kg of rice/month/ students (no more than nine months/school year/student).

Decree No. 57/2017/ND-CP (replacing Prime Minister's Decision 2123/QD-TTg) establishes priority policies for enrollment and academic support for children, pupils, and students from the local population, ranging from 9 ethnic groups according to Decision No. 2123/QD-TTg to 16 ethnic groups to 16 ethnic groups (Cong, Mang, Pu Peo, Si La, Co Lao, Bo Y, La Ha, Ngai, Chut, O Du, Brau, Ro Mam, Lo Lo, Lu, Pe Then, La Hu), in which, apart from the supports provided to ethnic minority students, students from these 16 ethnic groups receive an additional 15 kg of rice per month (no more than nine months per school year/student).

Many specific local policies have been issued in Lai Chau province, including a policy to support meals for boarding students at high schools, as per Decision 01/2012/QD-UBND, to support organizational expenses, and concentrated cooking for high schools, as per Decree 116/2016/ND-CP, from 2.0 to 4.5 percent of the minimum salary, with support up to 9 months.

In general, the current system of educational support policies for ethnic minority students has met their diverse needs, such as tuition support, study funding, housing regime, with priority is given to creating favorable conditions for ethnic minority students to go to school, and also in terms of teachers and facilities for educational activities. However, the Prime Minister's Decision No. 861/QD-TTg of June 4, 2021, approving the

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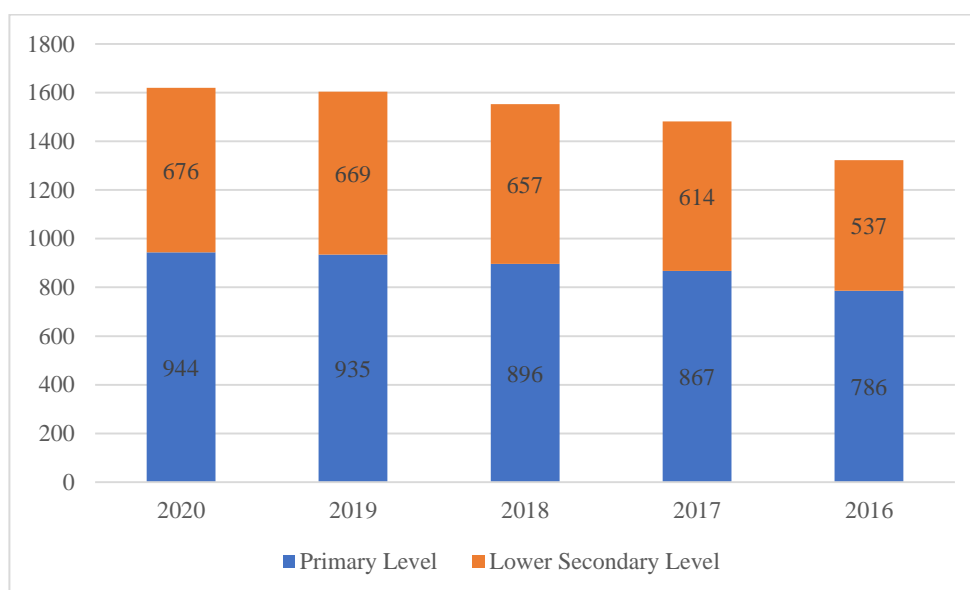
list of communes in Regions III, II, and I about ethnic minority areas and mountainous areas in the period 2021-2025, and the Committee for Ethnic Minorities' Decision No. 612/QĐ-UBND for the term 2021-2025 takes effect, whereby students in Region III become students in Region I and Students in Region III communes who fulfill new rural standards for the year 2021-2025 are no longer eligible for State assistance, and the majority of ethnic minority homes have only recently fled poverty. The economy in this region is still struggling; people in Lai Chau province have a low average income, the consumer price index for essential goods is high when compared to other provinces in the northern midland and mountainous region, and the percentage of poor and near-poor households according to the new standard is around 35%. As a result, these rules have substantially impacted kids' motivation to attend school.

### 3. THE RESULTS OF ENACTING PROGRAMS TO ASSIST PUPILS FROM ETHNIC MINORITIES IN LAI CHAU PROVINCE

Lai Chau is one of 14 provinces in the Northwest region, with 84.6% of the population being ethnic minorities. By the end of 2022, the total population of Lai Chau province is 465,636 people (ranked 62/63 in the country); including 25 ethnic groups, of which Thai ethnic group is about 31.4%, H'Mong ethnic group 23.9%, Dao ethnic group 17.8%, Kinh ethnic group 15.4%, Ha Nhi ethnic group 3.6%, the remaining 10.3% are other ethnic groups, of which there are 2 special ethnic groups, only very few people living in Lai Chau, namely Mang and La Hu.

With a majority of the population being ethnic minorities, Lai Chau has its programs to promote ethnic minority pupils and execute the state's regulations. The chart below shows that total local budget expenditures on elementary and secondary schools climbed the greatest.

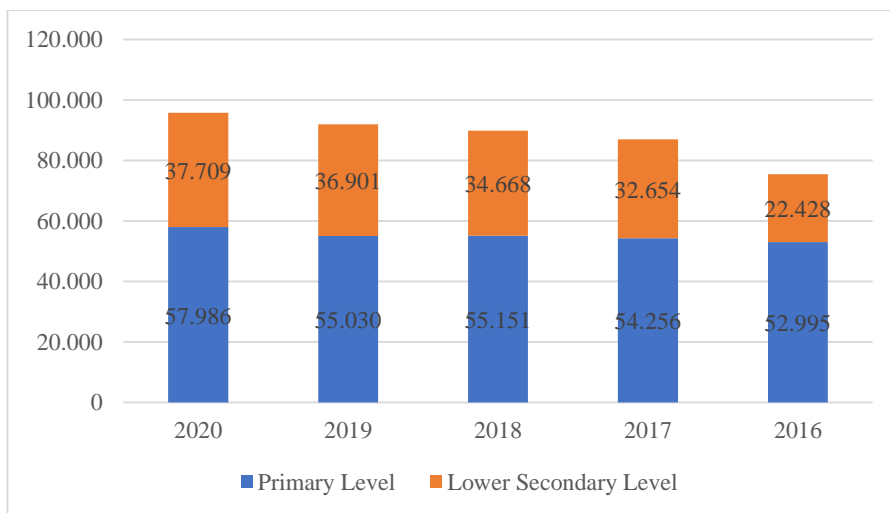
**Figure 1. Total budget expenditures by education level in Lai Chau province over the years (Unit: Billion VND)**



Source: Annual summary report of the Lai Chau province's Department of Education and Training, 2020

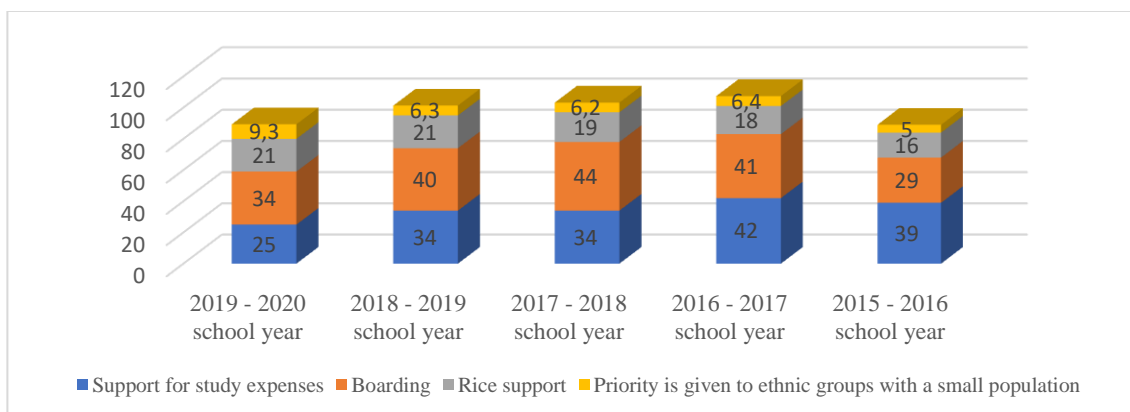
Corresponding to that, the number of primary and secondary school pupils in Lai Chau has climbed steadily throughout the years, from more than 75,423 in 2016 to 95,695 in 2020. This is an extraordinary result that demonstrates the partial influence of supportive policy. The issue that is frequently raised in mountainous education is the situation of students dropping out of school after transferring from primary to secondary school, which will account for only 39.4 percent of students in 2020. The solution to this problem will be presented in the following section on educational support policies.

**Figure 2. Number of primary and secondary school students in Lai Chau over the years (Unit: person)**



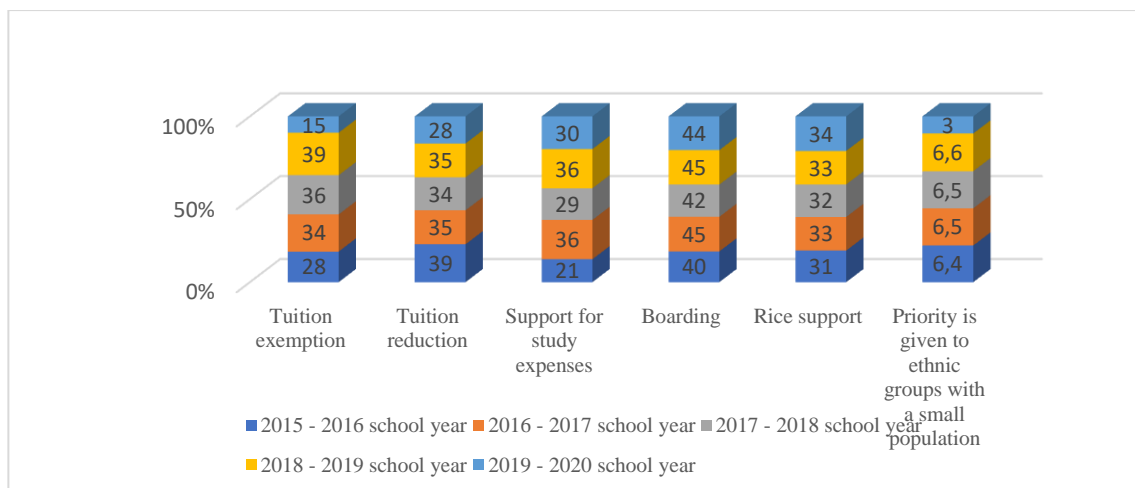
Source: Annual summary report of the Lai Chau province's Department of Education and Training, 2020

**Figure 3. Percentage of ethnic minority primary school students in Lai Chau province that receive assistance (Unit: %)**



Source: Lai Chau province's Department of Education and Training, 2020

**Figure 4. Percentage of ethnic minority pupils enrolled in secondary school in Lai Chau province who receive financial assistance (Unit: %)**

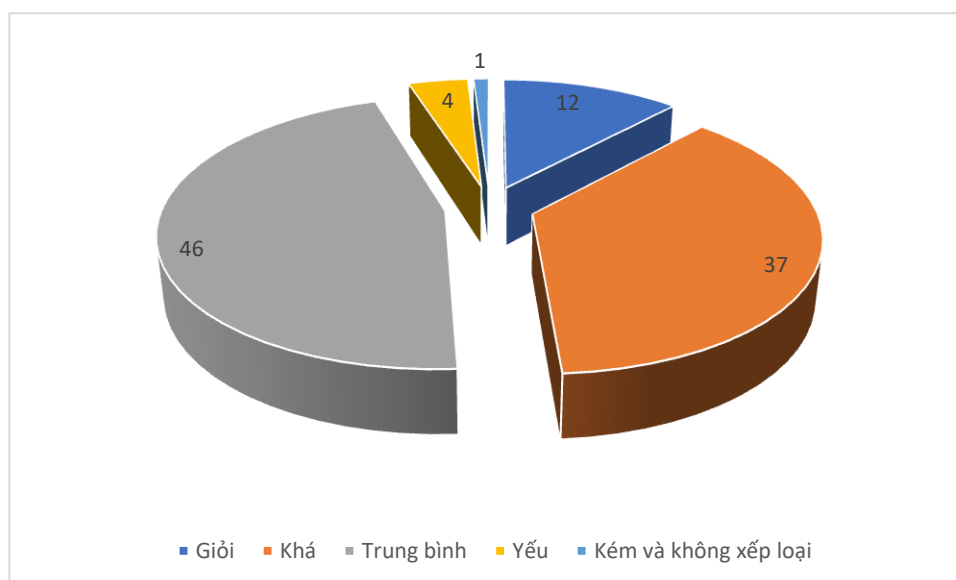


Students require a variety of assistance, and the ones listed above have a good impact on their ability to attend school. According to Lai Chau province's Department of Education and Training statistics, over 89 percent of pupils in this province receive assistance and universalized primary education (this level of education does not have to pay tuition fees). In contrast, at the secondary level, in addition to exempting and reducing tuition fees for students from poor and near-poor households, other supports such as study expenses, part-boarding students, and so on have created favorable conditions for students to attend school from elementary to high school.

Although measures to encourage ethnic minority students' education have boosted the number of students attending school, figures from the Department of Education and Training in Lai Chau province reveal that they have not been successful in school:

The assessment of primary school pupils' academic performance takes two forms to lessen academic pressure on children and alter textbooks according to the new general education program. 1) Finish the program; 2) Repeat a class and incomplete the program. As a result, students who finish the program account for 99%, whereas those who repeat a class and are incomplete the program account for 1%. At the lower secondary level, 51% of pupils are evaluated as below average or not graded, with 5% of students being weak, bad, or not graded. This demonstrates that ethnic minority students have had less success in education.

**Figure 7. Secondary school students' academic results in Lai Chau province in 2020**



Source: Lai Chau province's Department of Education and Training

What makes it so that, despite their relative success in attracting ethnic minority pupils to school, programs to support them do not appear to have significantly impacted their learning outcomes? According to feedback from education management organizations and students, the existing curriculum and support policies related to education still have flaws, allowing them to be successful in attracting children to school but not in assisting them in succeeding in school.

#### **4. EVALUATING THE IMPACT OF THE POLICY SUPPORTING MEALS FOR ETHNIC MINORITY STUDENTS WHO ARE NO LONGER ELIGIBLE FOR THE SUPPORT REGIME FOLLOWING THE RELOCATION OF COMMUNES, VILLAGES, AND HAMLETS FROM REGION III TO REGION I FOLLOWING DECISION NO. 861/QD-TTG AND DECISION NO. 612/QD-UBND IN LAI CHAU PROVINCE**

\* Policy promulgation and policy implementation plan

The promulgation and implementation of legal documents, policies on education support for high school students in ethnic minority areas have been and continue to be fraught with unreasonable, overlapping, inconsistency, and conflicting issues with priority policies; supporting students in ethnic minority areas policies remain scattered, requiring continued amendment, supplementation, and integration; Some regulations on assisting ethnic minorities are in conflict with and incompatible with the policy on assisting and

developing mountainous areas, for example under Decision 861/QD-TTg dated June 4, 2021 and Decision No. 612/QD-UBND and formerly Decision 582/QD-TTg dated April 28, 2017 on approving the list of communes and villages with particular difficulties in Region III, Region II, Region I belonging to ethnic minority and mountainous areas in the 2021-2025 period, in the whole province, there are a number of communes, villages and hamlets out of extremely difficult areas because they changes from Region III into Region I that no longer enjoy the policies of Decree 116/2016/ND-CP, while most of the ethnic minority households have just escaped poverty. Their economic situation is severe; residents in this Region have a low average income, the consumer price index for necessary goods is high compared to the northern midland and mountainous regions, and the ratio of poor households according to the new standard is over 35%. This dramatically affects the mobilization of students to class; the risk of dropping out of these subjects is considerable. Specifically:

The policy to assist students in this area reduces but does not specify the transition period, which means that functional agencies and socio-political organizations do not have time to educate and mobilize the public about the impact of these decisions on the supporting policies that students currently enjoy. As a result, many students' families are unprepared psychologically and logistically for sending their children to school once they are no longer eligible for the support policy.

When students lose their right to enjoy the support of state policies, it has a significant impact on their motivation to attend school; some localities in Lai Chau province only mobilize a maximum of 65 percent of students to attend school in the school year 2021-2022 in Nam So commune, Ho Mit commune, and Tan Uyen district; maintaining the attendance rate, reducing malnutrition rates, etc., numerous targets in the sector's and province's programs, resolutions, and plans are difficult to achieve on time, affecting the quality of education,.... This is one of the reasons for the loss of primary and secondary education standards, as well as the criteria for meeting the new rural standards.

*\* Impact of policies on primary and secondary education*

+ *Impact on Primary School:* Students who lose their support are more likely to apply to return to school sites to study, which results in the following indicators: The rate of mobilization of 3, 4, and 5th-grade students back to centers for study; teaching two sessions per day; teaching foreign languages and informatics under the 2018 General Education Program is challenging to implement due to a teacher shortage; child care and education are impacted, making it difficult to reduce the rate of malnourished and stunted children. When students return to their school points at the communes, the environment for exchange and study is limited in variety and communication, resulting in difficulties in improving Vietnamese language proficiency. Students become shy and lack confidence in communication, which does not improve the quality of education.

*"Only the change in textbooks as part of the educational reform program has created numerous difficulties for the work of general education; whereas previously, a set of textbooks was unified and could be used for generations, learning directly from books now requires students to have their own set of books, putting financial strain on parents to purchase books and school supplies for their children. When Region III communes, villages, and hamlets become Region I, pupils who are not eligible for a part-boarding diet will be required to return to their families, reducing the number of students attending school" (In-depth interview with Mr. Nam, the village head and 38-year-old Thai ethnicity).*

+ *Impact on the secondary school:*

According to feedback from education officials, the explanation for the rate at which children transfer from primary to secondary school only account for 39% is as follows: "There are many unique aspects of schooling in mountainous places, such as the diversity of environmental conditions and the sparse population. The secondary school level is frequently focused in the village center, while the elementary school level has school sites around the community. As a result, students' transportation conditions are severely hampered, as is the issue of child marriage, staying at home to assist parents in the fields, and so on. Families who have fled poverty in some places, in particular, are not entitled to educational support measures such as the Decision approving the list of ethnic minority areas, which has an impact on student mobilization to school (In-depth interview with an Education officer, Kinh ethnic group, 43 years old).

According to educator feedback, the number of students eligible for the support policies depicted in Figure 4 increased in the 2015-2016 school year compared to the 2016-2017 school year, as the policy tuition fee exemption and reduction are 15% tuition waiver, 28% tuition reduction, and 39% tuition reduction, respectively. However, as shown in the table, support regimes and policies tend to diminish from 2017-2018 to 2019-2020 school years, as the percentage of pupils receiving benefits reduces in part owing to some communes, villages, and hamlets in Region III are reclassified as Region I, pupils in this area and the

number of students in households escaping poverty are no longer eligible for the required study support regimes.

According to the Department of Education and Training of Lai Chau Province, the influence of Decision 861/QD-TTg dated June 4, 2021 and Decision No. 612/QD-UBND has impacted the work of upper secondary education:

+ 12/35 communes do not meet the target of graduating students (Than Uyen district: Muong Cang, Ta Gia; Tan Uyen district: Nam So, Ho Mit, Ta Mit, Phuc Khoa; Tam Duong district: Then Sin, Khun Ha, Ban Bo; Muong Te district: Thu Lum; Nam Nhun district: Muong Mo; Lai Chau city: Sung Phai).

+ 7/35 communes and 5 districts/cities face the possibility of losing the universal lower secondary education norm (Than Uyen district: Ta Gia; Tan Uyen district: Nam So, Ho Mit, Muong Khoa, Phuc Khoa; Muong Te district: Thu Lum; Nam Nhun district: Muong Mo; Lai Chau city: Sung Phai), simultaneously, Tan Uyen district and Lai Chau city face the prospect of losing their new rural standards..

*Regarding the quality of education:* The risk of dropping out of school in Lai Chau province may increase to over 2.5 percent (it was less than 0.5 percent in previous years); 12 out of 106 communes failed to meet educational standards due to a lack of student mobilization and failure to meet provincial programs, resolutions and plans targets.

\* *Impact on the arrangement of teachers' staff* : When the State's support regime ends, some students will return to study in villages, where the arrangement of teachers will face several issues as a result of the requirement to supplement the number of teachers teaching in villages to fulfill the attendance needs of students. Meanwhile, for the 2020-2021 school year, Lai Chau province's entire education sector will have 12,806 administrators, teachers, and employees (females 8,797, ethnicity; 4,997), but will still be short of 351 teachers..

\* *Facilities:* When a family cannot afford to send their children to boarding school, they will need to return to the villages to study, necessitating the usage of temporary classrooms in the villages. , while infrastructures have deteriorated, making it challenging to meet the province's aim of 100 percent of schools being appropriately built by 2025 without temporary classrooms. Central school facilities will become superfluous (particularly semi-boarding equipment), resulting in waste; investment expenditures for educational institutions will be distributed rather than concentrated, reducing investment effectiveness.

\* *Thoughts of parents:* Without a transition period, Decision No. 861/QD-TTg and Decision No. 612/QD-UBND take effect immediately upon issuance, depriving related organizations and agencies of time to educate people about the issue and prepare them to adapt to the fact that they will no longer benefit from the State's support policies when sending their children to school, resulting in the situation where some families have not created conditions for their children to attend school. Indeed, people living in communes, villages, and hamlets in Region III have recently reclassified to communes and villages in Region I, where they continue to face numerous difficulties; additionally, the Covid-19 epidemic continues to have a direct impact on people's lives; the number of poor households is likely to increase; and many families cannot afford to send their children to school.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Through an analysis of the Central Government's policy system in general and Lai Chau province in particular, policies have been promulgated that contribute to economic stability, ensure social security, and gradually raise the intellectual level of the populace; to assist students' families, particularly those with multiple children attending school, in overcoming obstacles associated with sending their children to boarding school; to create favorable conditions for students with special needs.

Reduce the administrative load associated with mobilizing and socializing education to nurture part-time pupils. When the policy is implemented, parents can rest assured that their children will attend school away from home in order to focus on increasing productive labor in order to escape poverty sustainably; teachers will no longer be required to mobilize students to attend school, spend time researching to improve teaching quality, overcome the difficulties associated with teaching while mobilizing students to attend class, or solicit donations to assist students.

Over time, the steady reduction in support teaches families that the assistance is only temporary, allowing people to gradually adjust to no longer benefiting from the state's support measures.

Based on our policy analysis in Lai Chau, we believe that in order to further increase the effectiveness of

support policies for ethnic minority students so that they do not simply attend school mechanically but also reap the full benefits of the educational system, policies should be tailored to the natural geographical conditions and income levels of residents in communes and villages in Region III, which has been reclassified as Region I. Indeed, the economic, cultural, and social situations of the inhabitants of these communes remain challenging. It is necessary to have a social security policy that assists this vulnerable group in attending school, studying, maintaining a high rate of attendance, and assisting in improving the quality of education in remote, isolated, and ethnic minority areas throughout the province, in order to close the gap between beneficiaries of state policies and those who have lost state support due to their new status.

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