African Journal of
Education and Practice
(AJEP)

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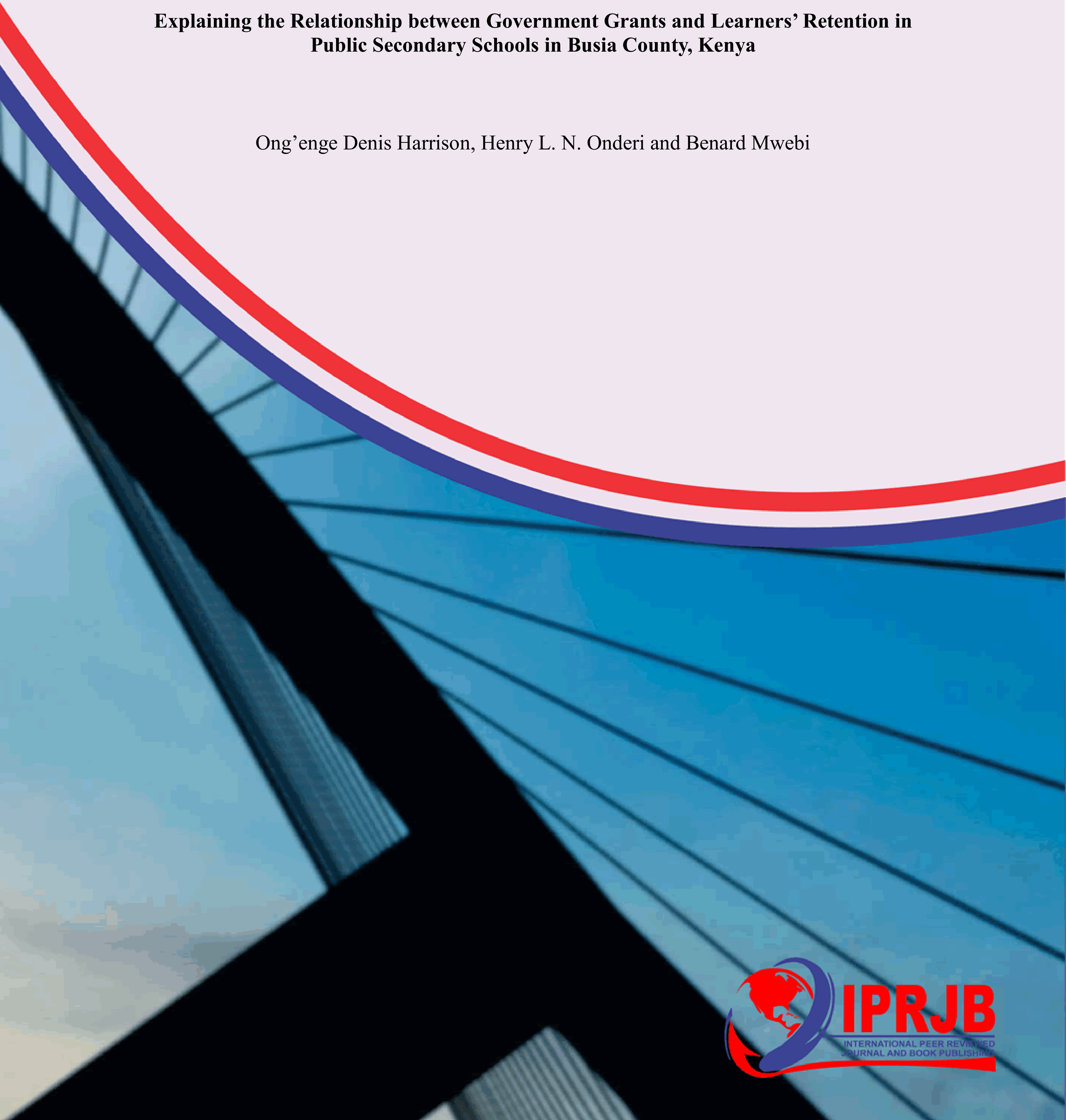

IPRJB
INTERNATIONAL PEER REVIEWED JOURNAL AND BOOK PUBLISHING

African Journal of Education and Practice
ISSN 2519-0296 (Online)
Vol.11, Issue 3, No.5, pp 61 - 71, 2025

www.iprjb.org

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Article History

Received 17th September 2025

Received in Revised Form 19th October 2025

Accepted 21st November 2025

How to cite in APA format:

Ong'enge, H., Onderi, H., & Mwebi, B. (2025). Explaining the Relationship between Government Grants and Learners' Retention in Public Secondary Schools in Busia County, Kenya. *African Journal of Education and Practice*, *11*(3), 61–71. https://doi.org/10.47604/ajep.3572

Abstract

Purpose: The study aimed to explore the relationship between government grants, specifically the Free Day Secondary Education (FDSE) program, and student retention in public secondary schools in Busia County, Kenya. It seeks to determine whether these grants effectively reduce financial barriers to education. Additionally, the study examines whether issues such as delayed disbursements, mismanagement, hidden costs, and inadequate infrastructure undermine the impact of these grants, leading to poor student retention despite governmental support.

Methodology: The research employed a Descriptive Survey Design and a Mixed-Methods Approach to collect both quantitative and qualitative data. The Sampling Technique involved Cluster Sampling of public secondary schools in Busia County, supplemented by simple random sampling. The Sample Size comprised of 35,821 participants, including 130 principals, 130 bursars, 290 class teachers, and 35,271 students. Data Collection was conducted through questionnaires and interviews. For Statistical Analysis, quantitative data were processed using statistical package for social science (SPSS) version 22 and excel. Tables and Figures were also used to present the data. In contrast, qualitative data from open-ended questions were analyzed using Thematic Analysis to identify recurring themes and contextual insights.

Findings: The study revealed that while government grants increased enrollment by alleviating financial barriers, their impact on student retention was limited due to systemic inefficiencies. Key challenges included frequent delays in fund disbursement, inadequate funding levels, and the imposition of hidden fees, which often forced low-income students to withdraw. Moreover, overcrowded classrooms, insufficient teaching materials, and poor infrastructure further impeded retention. Socio-economic factors such as child labor and early pregnancies exacerbated these issues. As a result, while the grants enhanced access to education, they did not sufficiently ensure consistent student retention in public secondary schools in Busia County. The study recommends establishing an automated, timely disbursement system, adopting need-based funding formulas, and strengthening financial management through training, income-generating projects, and public accountability portals. These measures are intended to ensure the equitable and efficient use of government grants. The goal is to address funding delays, resource inequities, and management weaknesses that currently hinder student retention and academic performance in Busia County's public secondary schools.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy: The study was guided by Human Capital Theory, which views education as an investment. The findings supported this theory by demonstrating that adequate and timely grants promote student retention (the investment). However, systemic inefficiencies such as delays and mismanagement can undermine the expected returns on this investment in human capital. For school administrators, recommendations include implementing stricter financial management practices, creating income-generating projects, and establishing public accountability portals to ensure transparent, efficient use of funds at the school level. For policymakers, key recommendations include establishing automated, timely disbursement systems and developing need-based funding formulas that prioritize marginalized schools. These measures aim to enhance equity and improve student retention outcomes.

Keywords: *Government Grants, Learners' Retention, Free Day Secondary Education (FDSE)*

JEL Codes of Classification: *I22, I24, I25, I28, H52, H75, O15, 018, O22, C83*

INTRODUCTION

Education remains a cornerstone of the development of social, economic, and human capital, aligning with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 1 (No Poverty), 4 (Quality Education), and 10 (Reduced Inequalities). Globally, several governments have adopted financing mechanisms similar to Kenya's tuition-based grants. Examples include voucher subsidies in Chile and Colombia (Carnoy & McEwan, 2018), capitation grants in Uganda (Zahidy et al., 2019), and no-fee secondary school policies in South Africa (Marishane, 2017). These models, including Kenya's Free Day Secondary Education (FDSE) grant, aim to diminish financial barriers by covering operational school costs rather than providing direct payments to students. Evidence from these systems shows that while such grants increase enrollment and access, their effectiveness heavily depends on timely disbursement, adequacy, and transparent utilization (UNESCO, 2018; Duflo et al., 2021). These international experiences conceptually inform the design, strengths, and weaknesses of Kenya's own grant mechanism.

In the Kenyan context, a grant refers explicitly to the government's per-learner capitation under the FDSE program—funds allocated directly to public secondary schools to cover tuition-related costs such as teaching and learning materials, utilities, and administrative expenses (Ministry of Education, 2008). This is distinct from bursaries, which are need-based awards targeted at individual students (Omolo et al., 2019), the Constituency Bursary Fund (CBF), which is a political allocation that supplements student fees (Oyugi, 2019), and household levies, which are additional charges imposed by schools to address funding gaps (Wanjala & Hussein, 2017). Clarifying these concepts ensures that the study focuses on the institutional effectiveness of government tuition grants.

Busia County is a compelling case for examining the relationship between government grants and student retention, as it consistently records below-average educational outcomes. According to the World Bank (2020) and Ministry of Education reports, Busia's secondary school retention rate is estimated to be around 52%, compared to the national average of approximately 80%. The primary-to-secondary transition rate is about 75%, and the county experiences a high dropout rate, mainly due to poverty, hidden levies, and infrastructure deficits. These challenges are exacerbated by chronic delays in FDSE disbursements and inadequate school-level resources, issues noted at the national level (Oyugi, 2019; Onderi, 2024). With over 70% of households living below the poverty line, Busia's socio-economic context further intensifies the risk of dropouts and low completion rates (World Bank, 2020). These verifiable indicators justify Busia as a suitable and high-need site for evaluating the effectiveness of government grant implementation.

Given these contextual and empirical gaps, this study aims to investigate whether the grants provided are adequate, efficiently managed, and capable of addressing the economic barriers that affect retention in public secondary schools.

Statement of the Problem

Secondary education plays a crucial role in preparing students for higher education, vocational training, and active participation in the labor market (Martinez & Terway, 2016). To enhance access and equity, the Government of Kenya implemented the Free Day Secondary Education (FDSE) grant in 2008. This initiative was designed to ease the financial burden on households by subsidizing tuition costs (Ministry of Education, 2008). While the program aimed to improve enrollment, retention, and completion rates, concerns have emerged about its effectiveness. Parents and stakeholders report an increase in levies and hidden charges that compromise the policy's original intent (Wanjala & Hussein, 2017). National statistics illustrate this challenge: although secondary school enrollment surged from 2.1 million in 2014 to 3.6 million in 2022, the primary-to-secondary transition rate remains modest at approximately 74.6%, with retention rates averaging around 79%. This suggests that while access to education has improved, sustained participation remains a concern.

The situation in Busia County is particularly alarming. According to county-level data from the Ministry of Education and the World Bank (2020), Busia has a lower secondary retention rate of approximately 68%, a primary-to-secondary transition rate of about 71–72%, and an estimated dropout rate of 12–13%, all of which are below the national averages. These challenges persist despite government grants aimed at reducing financial barriers. Schools in the county face issues such as delayed disbursement of FDSE funds, mismanagement of resources, inadequate infrastructure, and the continued imposition of extra levies on parents—issues also highlighted in national analyses (World Bank, 2020; Oyugi, 2019). Moreover, Onderi (2024) emphasizes that disparities in infrastructure and inefficiencies in grant distribution continue to hinder the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education) in many public schools.

These patterns reveal a complex relationship between government grants and student retention. On the one hand, grants are intended to reduce dropout rates by lowering financial barriers; on the other hand, systemic inefficiencies—such as delayed funding, insufficient capitation amounts, hidden fees, inadequate facilities, and socio-economic pressures—continue to drive learners out of school. This creates uncertainty about whether retention challenges stem from inadequate funding levels, poor resource management, or broader structural issues affecting education in marginalized regions. Therefore, a context-specific examination is crucial to understand how government grants operate in Busia County and whether they effectively support learner retention in public secondary schools.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

The Human Capital Theory

The Human Capital Theory, as articulated by Schultz (1961), Becker (1964), and Mincer (1958), positions education as an investment that enhances individual productivity, lifetime earnings, and national economic development. Education provides learners with the knowledge, skills, and competencies that yield both private and social returns, thereby justifying public funding for schooling (Cooper & Davis, 2017). In Kenya, this theoretical framework underpins government initiatives such as the Free Day Secondary Education (FDSE) program, which aims to reduce financial barriers and enable students—particularly those from low-income households—to complete their education (Kuria & Mose, 2019). By subsidizing tuition and associated costs, the FDSE grant exemplifies the fundamental principle of Human Capital Theory: that investing in education enhances individual capabilities and promotes long-term socio-economic mobility (Oyaro, 2019; UNESCO, 2018).

Nonetheless, the theory has significant limitations when applied to the realities of education in resource-constrained settings such as Busia County. Firstly, Human Capital Theory presumes rational economic behavior, suggesting that households will invest in education as financial barriers diminish. However, poorer households often grapple with non-economic constraints, including food insecurity, demands of child labor, gender norms, and competing survival priorities that can result in irregular attendance or dropout, even when schooling is subsidized. Secondly, the theory places disproportionate emphasis on financial investment as the primary catalyst for retention, neglecting crucial socio-cultural and structural factors such as early pregnancies, household responsibilities, inadequate school infrastructure, teacher shortages, and community attitudes towards education issues frequently highlighted in Sub-Saharan Africa (Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2018; Marishane, 2017).

Despite these shortcomings, Human Capital Theory serves as a valuable analytical framework for this study by elucidating how financial interventions are expected to shape educational outcomes. The study adopts the following conceptual link, grounded in this theory:

Government grants → Reduced household cost burden → Increased attendance → Higher retention.

In this pathway, grants are designed to reduce the costs of education, decrease absenteeism and dropout rates due to financial pressures, and ultimately facilitate students' progression through secondary school. However, systemic challenges such as delayed disbursements, mismanagement, hidden fees, and socio-economic vulnerabilities hinder this anticipated outcome, creating the empirical ambiguity this study aims to explore.

Empirical Review

The existing empirical literature on education financing primarily focuses on access, enrollment, and participation. However, there is a notable lack of studies specifically examining how government funding impacts retention, attendance, and longitudinal persistence in secondary education. In Sub-Saharan Africa, retention is significantly influenced by both direct and indirect costs. For example, Lewin (2009) found that, even when tuition is subsidized, indirect costs—such as uniforms, transportation, and examination fees—remain critical predictors of dropout rates. Similarly, Hungi and Ngware (2015) highlighted that socio-economic vulnerability and resource gaps in schools contribute to irregular attendance and early withdrawal among adolescents in East African secondary schools. These findings suggest that while financial grants may facilitate initial enrollment, they do not necessarily ensure ongoing participation.

Several empirical studies conducted in Kenya highlight specific challenges related to student retention. Ohba (2009) noted that, despite the introduction of Free Secondary Education, hidden levies and development fees continued to drive students out of school, resulting in fluctuations in attendance and grade progression. Glennerster, Kremer, Mbiti, and Takavarasha (2011) discovered that even minor financial shocks significantly increase dropout probabilities among impoverished Kenyan households, suggesting that grants must be both sufficient and reliable to enhance retention. Furthermore, Koskei and Korir (2020) found that timely disbursement of capitation funds markedly improves students' school attendance, whereas delays are associated with fee-related absenteeism and increased dropout rates. These findings closely reflect the challenges identified in Busia County.

In East Africa, retention patterns have been closely linked to the adequacy of school-level funding. Nabyonga-Orem et al. (2015) reported that in Uganda, irregular disbursements of capitation grants resulted in interrupted learning, teacher shortages, and increased dropout rates in rural schools. Similarly, Byamugisha and Sibanda (2020) pointed out that retention is more influenced by the quality of school infrastructure and the availability of learning materials than by enrollment-driven funding formulas. These findings underscore concerns that underfunded or poorly equipped schools struggle to keep students engaged, even when tuition grants are available.

Studies focused on Kenya further highlight the multifaceted nature of retention. Mugisha (2019) discovered that early pregnancies, child labor, and poverty continue to exert significant pressure on girls' retention, even in schools that receive government subsidies. Meanwhile, Wanjala and Hussein (2017) and Koriyow (2017) stress that ongoing hidden charges and inadequate capitation funding undermine the anticipated retention gains under Free Day Secondary Education. These studies confirm that financial subsidies must be accompanied by structural, social, and administrative reforms to enhance retention effectively.

Research Gaps

The existing literature, including national studies by Wanjala and Hussein (2017) and Omolo et al. (2019), highlights significant challenges in Kenya's educational funding. However, there remains a considerable gap in context-specific, county-level analysis. As indicated in the problem statement, the situation in Busia County is "particularly alarming," suggesting that national trends may not fully reflect localized realities. This study addresses this gap by providing a micro-level investigation into how failures in grant implementation—such as delayed disbursements and hidden levies—uniquely affect student retention in a specific, resource-constrained county. While Human Capital Theory supports the rationale for education spending (Schultz, 1961; Becker, 1964), there is a deficiency in the empirical link between this theory and the specific mechanisms underlying grant failure. This research bridges that gap by employing the theory as a framework to illustrate how systemic inefficiencies (e.g., mismanagement and inadequate infrastructure) disrupt the investment-retention-return pipeline, thereby validating and contextualizing the theory within the devolved Kenyan landscape. Many previous studies rely on macro-level data, whereas this study utilizes a mixed-methods approach to provide a more nuanced understanding. By combining quantitative data on academic performance with qualitative insights from principals, teachers, and students, it aims to capture the lived experiences that underlie the statistics.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a descriptive survey design complemented by a mixed methods approach. A descriptive survey is suitable because it allows the researcher to collect both quantitative and qualitative data from a large sample, offering a comprehensive snapshot of the current situation. Orodho (2017) point out that this design is particularly effective for evaluating educational programs in real-world social contexts. It enables the researcher to investigate patterns, trends, and relationships associated with government grants and their effects on access to quality education.

The sampling technique utilized in this context was cluster sampling which enhanced the precision and reliability of results by organizing the population into naturally occurring groups (clusters), such as geographic regions or institutional types (Kothari, 2014). In this study, the sampling frame consists of all public secondary schools in Busia County, which served as the unit of analysis. The study utilized a combination of cluster sampling and simple random sampling techniques to ensure representativeness across geographic and institutional variables.

A total of 35,821 individuals, including 130 principals, 130 bursars, 290 class teachers, and 35,271 students were surveyed. Quantitative data were scrutinized for completeness, accuracy, and uniformity to ensure the quality of the data. Data from questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive statistics, resulting in frequencies and percentages generated with the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), a reliable quantitative data analysis tool. Descriptive statistics were deemed appropriate for this study as the primary objective was to summarize and present the characteristics and patterns within the community rather than to test hypotheses or infer causality.

Qualitative data generated from open-ended questions were analyzed thematically, using content analysis to identify emerging similarities and differences. This included a detailed examination of respondents' statements to capture nuanced perspectives and contextual factors influencing forest use and management.

RESULTS

Descriptive Analysis for Academic Performance

The second research question responded to was: what is the relationship between government grant and learner's retention in public secondary schools in Busia County, Kenya? This research question was respondent by 82 class teachers and 8130 students by questionnaire.

The study sought to find out the extent to which the following statements that promote academic performance applied in the respondents' schools since 2019. The outcome is shown in table 1.

Table 1: Descriptive Analysis for Academic Performance

Statements	Teachers		Students	
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	Std. Deviation
Parents have been able to submit funds for the construction of physical facilities for example classes, dorms, labs to promote good learning environment	2.13	0.99	2.14	1.14
Government has been able to provide adequate funds to enable students obtain quality grades	2.60	1.25	3.16	1.39
Students have been less frequently sent home to collect school fees to reduce absenteeism rates to enhance academic performance	2.29	1.07	2.34	1.15
Government subsidized fees have been sufficient to acquire teaching and learning materials to enhance academic performance	2.66	1.33	2.86	1.29

Source: Field Data, 2025

The data in Table 1 reveals significant insights about the relationship between government grants and academic performance in Busia County's public secondary schools. Both teachers and students provided moderately positive assessments (Means ranging from 2.13 to 3.16) across all indicators, suggesting that while government support has made some impact, critical gaps remain in infrastructure development, resource provision, and fee subsidy effectiveness.

Regarding infrastructure development, the low means (2.13-2.14) for parental contributions to physical facilities indicate limited community participation in school improvement projects. This suggests that schools still struggle with inadequate learning environments despite government grants. The slightly higher means for government funding adequacy (2.60-3.16) show that while students are more optimistic than teachers about resource provision, both groups acknowledge persistent shortfalls in materials needed for quality education. This disparity in perception between teachers and students (3.16 vs 2.60) may reflect teachers' deeper understanding of resource requirements versus students' more general satisfaction with available materials.

The persistence of fee-related absenteeism (Means 2.29-2.34) confirms findings from Figure 1, where 80% of teachers reported sending students home for fees. This continued practice undermines the very purpose of government subsidies and directly impacts academic performance through disrupted learning. The moderate ratings (2.66-2.86) for sufficiency of subsidized fees to acquire teaching materials indicate that while the policy helps, it doesn't fully address schools' operational needs. The consistently higher standard deviations (ranging from 0.99 to 1.39) across all items highlight significant variability in how different schools experience and implement these grants, suggesting unequal distribution or utilization of funds across the county.

These results collectively demonstrate that while government grants have made progress in supporting education, systemic challenges in implementation, equity, and comprehensiveness continue to limit their potential impact on academic performance and student retention.

The respondents (teachers) were asked to indicate the schools' academic performance from 2019-2023.

Table 1: School Academic Performance

Year	Average marks	Grades
2019	4.32	D+
2020	4.18	D+
2021	4.75	C-
2022	5.03	C
2023	5.21	C

Source: Field Data, 2025

The academic performance trends in Busia County public secondary schools demonstrate a notable recovery pattern following pandemic-related disruptions. The data reveals a significant dip in 2020 (4.18 mean score, D+), directly attributable to COVID-19 school closures and learning interruptions, consistent with national trends during this period. The subsequent steady improvement (2021: 4.75/C-; 2022: 5.03/C; 2023: 5.21/C) suggests effective implementation of remedial strategies, likely including government-supported catch-up programs and enhanced teacher interventions. While the consistent upward trajectory from 2021 to 2023 is encouraging, the persistent C average in 2023 indicates ongoing challenges in achieving higher academic standards. This plateau may reflect systemic limitations, such as inadequate teaching resources, large class sizes, or gaps in curriculum implementation. The improvement from a D+ to a C grade band demonstrates progress yet falls short of the national quality targets, underscoring the need for targeted investments in teacher capacity building, STEM infrastructure, and differentiated learning approaches to sustain and accelerate academic gains in line with Kenya's competency-based curriculum objectives.

Considering the impact of government grants on academic performance, teachers in Busia County observed that these grants have had a moderate yet inconsistent effect on their students' academic performance. While the subsidies have alleviated some financial barriers to education, flaws in their implementation limit their overall effectiveness. Issues such as delayed disbursements and inadequate funding continue to force schools to send students home due to unpaid fees, disrupting learning and negatively impacting academic performance.

The grants have contributed to specific improvements, such as the partial provision of learning materials, but they fall short of addressing systemic challenges. Infrastructure remains underfunded, and significant resource gaps persist, particularly in the sciences and laboratory facilities. The elevated optimism among students likely stems from a lack of awareness regarding these systemic deficits.

Ultimately, while the grants have stabilized enrolment, their uneven distribution and insufficient coverage of operational costs hinder significant academic progress. To achieve better outcomes, teachers recommend timely disbursements, increased funding for infrastructure, and stricter monitoring to ensure equitable allocation of resources across all schools.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

This study examined the relationship between government grants and student retention in public secondary schools in Busia County, Kenya. Grounded in Human Capital Theory, the research employed a mixed-methods approach, collecting data from principals, teachers, and students. The findings revealed that while the Free Day Secondary Education (FDSE) grants significantly boosted initial enrolment by alleviating financial barriers, their effectiveness in promoting retention was severely undermined by systemic inefficiencies. Key challenges identified included chronic delays in the disbursement of funds, inadequate funding levels, hidden parental fees, and insufficient infrastructure. These issues, compounded by socio-economic factors such as poverty, contributed to a notable dropout rate. The study concludes that timely disbursement of funds, increased financial support, and improved accountability mechanisms are essential for ensuring that grants effectively enhance student retention.

Conclusion

Academic performance in Busia County schools showed a V-shaped recovery post-2020, with mean scores rising from 4.18 (D+) to 5.21 (C) by 2023, reflecting the positive impact of government-supported remedial programs. However, the plateau at a C average indicates systemic limitations, including inadequate teaching resources, overcrowded classrooms, and inconsistent instructional quality, particularly in STEM subjects. Teachers reported low motivation (Mean = 2.60) due to insufficient incentives and heavy workloads, which were further exacerbated by understaffing and the reliance on underpaid Board of Management (BOM) teachers. While students rated infrastructure, such as dormitories, relatively high (Mean = 4.04), teachers highlighted critical gaps in laboratories and libraries, revealing disparities in perceived resource adequacy. External factors such as poverty and teenage pregnancies (27.3% of dropouts) compounded these challenges, limiting academic progress. To bridge these gaps, targeted investments in teacher training, STEM facilities, and digital learning tools are essential to elevate academic outcomes to national standards.

Recommendations

Financial management systems demonstrated strengths in transparency (Mean = 3.67 for audits) but exhibited fatal flaws in timeliness (Mean = 1.74 for disbursements). The study found that rural schools were particularly disadvantaged, with 70% of parents unable to supplement government funds and critical resources, such as lab equipment, consistently underfunded. To optimize resource utilization, the study recommends implementing an automated, quarterly disbursement system to prevent delays, developing needs-based funding formulas that favor marginalized schools, establishing school financial management training for administrators, creating income-generating projects (such as agriculture and vocational units) to diversify revenue streams, and launching public accountability portals that display real-time expenditure data. These measures would address the inequitable distribution and inefficient use of resources documented in the study.

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