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Abstract

Purpose: The aim of this study was to assess the impact of government grants on student enrollment in public secondary schools in Busia County, Kenya. The study specifically sought to identify the level of these grants and investigate their effect on enrollment rates. This objective was motivated by the ongoing challenges of low transition rates and high dropout rates, despite financial interventions such as the Free Day Secondary Education Program. The research aimed to determine whether the current government funding effectively addresses financial barriers and promotes equitable access to education in this resource-constrained region.

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 found that government grants increased overall student enrollment in Busia County by 16% between 2019 and 2023, effectively reducing financial barriers. However, significant challenges persisted. Approximately 80% of schools still sent students home for unpaid ancillary fees, such as uniforms and exams. Boys were more affected (43.9%) than girls (24.4%), partly due to targeted bursaries for females. The COVID-19 pandemic led to a 9% decline in enrolment in 2020. Delays in fund disbursement and hidden costs continued to limit the effectiveness of the grants, preventing equitable access and sustained retention for the most vulnerable students. The study recommends that the government expand subsidy coverage to include essential non-tuition costs such as uniforms, exam fees, and other hidden charges, while ensuring timely fund disbursement and strengthening gender-sensitive bursary programs to support vulnerable learners. It further urges community sensitization, establishment of emergency support programs, and targeted outreach to marginalized groups to sustain enrolment gains and address persistent equity gaps.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy: This study was based on Human Capital Theory, which views education as a valuable investment. The research supports this theory by demonstrating a measurable connection between government grants (which serve as an investment) and increased enrolment (indicating the development of human capital). This confirms that financial interventions can lead to positive educational outcomes. For practitioners, such as school administrators, it is recommended to implement flexible payment plans and utilize community support networks to assist students in need. This approach will help ensure that enrolment increases are not hindered by additional costs or administrative inflexibility. For policymakers, the study recommends expanding grant coverage to include often-overlooked costs, such as uniforms and exam fees, while ensuring timely disbursement of funds. These actions are crucial for aligning policy intentions with on-the-ground realities, thereby promoting equitable access to education.

Keywords: *Government Grants, Students' Access to Education, School Enrollment*

JEL Codes: *I22, I25, I28, H52, H75, O15, O12*

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INTRODUCTION

Education remains a cornerstone for achieving sustainable development and social equity. It is directly linked to Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education), which aims to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all." Similarly, SDG 1 (No Poverty) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) emphasize education as a pathway to poverty reduction and social inclusion. In Kenya, various initiatives have been implemented to improve access to secondary education, including the Secondary School Education Bursary Fund (SSEBF), the Constituency Bursary Fund (CBF), and the Free Day Secondary Education (FDSE) program (Omolo et al., 2019; Inyega et al., 2021). Nevertheless, inefficiencies in fund distribution and allegations of corruption have significantly undermined their effectiveness (Oyugi, 2019). Despite an increase in funding, the researcher observes that Busia County continues to face challenges, including low transition rates, high dropout levels, and insufficient infrastructure, which raises concerns about the impact of these policies.

Table 1: Busia County KCPE Candidates

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Male	10,939	13,505	15,342	15,956	10,419
Female	11, 255	11,048	14,160	15, 330	10,515
Total	**22,194**	**24,553**	**29,502**	**31,286**	**20,934**

Source: Busia County, 2024

Table 2: Busia County Public Secondary Schools Form One Enrolment

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Male	11,212	11,008	11,208	14,006	14,815
Female	8,818	9,856	10,868	13,129	14,966
Total	**20,030**	**20,864**	**22,076**	**27,135**	**29,781**

Source: Busia County, 2024

Table 1 reveals a fluctuating trend in the number of KCPE candidates in Busia County from 2019 to 2023, with a peak of 31,286 candidates in 2022, followed by a decline to 20,934 in 2023. In contrast, Table 2 indicates a consistent increase in Form One enrollment in public secondary schools, rising from 20,030 in 2019 to 29,781 in 2023 (Busia County, 2024). However, the data also underscores a disparity between the number of KCPE candidates and Form One enrollments, suggesting that a significant portion of primary school graduates are not transitioning to secondary education. This situation highlights the ongoing challenges in achieving universal access to secondary education, despite the government's grant program aimed at alleviating financial obstacles for families.

According to Onderi (2024), the implementation of basic education reforms in Kenya reveals a "reality check" in which policy ambitions often outpace the actual administrative and fiscal capacities of schools. This gap between policy and practice continues to hinder Kenya's progress toward SDG 4 targets, especially in marginalized regions such as Busia County. Previous studies conducted in Uganda and Ghana (Bazilio, 2019; Duflo et al., 2021) report similar constraints, where free secondary education programs improved initial enrollment but failed to sustain long-term retention due to hidden costs and weak governance structures. This comparative evidence underscores the need to re-examine Kenya's grant programs through a localized lens.

Busia County's administrative data indicates a significant decline in KCPE candidates, from 31,286 in 2022 to 20,934 in 2023. In contrast, Form One enrollment increased from 27,135 to 29,781 during the same period (Busia County, 2024). This apparent contradiction can best be understood through a combination of three interrelated factors: cohort and timing effects linked to curriculum changes and pandemic disruptions; genuine shifts in student demographics (including transfers, in-migration, late entrants, and repeaters); and differences in administrative and EMIS reporting.

Firstly, Kenya's shift to the Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC), along with the school closures due to COVID-19 and subsequent patterns of re-entry, has created cohort-timing distortions that render single-year comparisons misleading. During the CBC implementation and post-pandemic recovery phases, cohorts may be compressed or extended, leading to inconsistencies in the year-to-year counts of KCPE candidates compared to Form One intakes at the county level (Ministry of Education/KICD basic education statistical reviews).

Secondly, national placement operations and local admission channels contribute to increased divergence. The Ministry's placement exercises allocated approximately 1.4 million learners to Form One for the 2024 cycle. However, school-level KEMIS returns and county registers also account for transfers, private entrants, repeaters, and late admits who do not appear on the same year's KNEC candidate list (according to KNEC registration guidance and MOE Form-One placement releases). Given that Busia is both a cross-border and transit county, lateral inflows from neighboring districts or across the Ugandan border likely increase the Form-One headcount independently of local KCPE registrations.

Thirdly, administrative and EMIS factors account for a significant portion of the discrepancies. KCPE candidate totals are derived from KNEC registration lists, whereas Form-One totals come from school returns submitted to KEMIS. When county offices or schools fail to de-duplicate late registrations, record transfers under the receiving county, or register repeaters and private entrants without linking them to their index numbers, the resulting county aggregates will show discrepancies (as noted in KNBS and MOE guidance on reconciling administrative data). Simple reconciliation exercises that match KNEC index numbers to KEMIS admission lists and classify admission modes (KCPE placement, transfer, repeater, private entrant) typically highlight the contribution of non-KCPE entrants.

Empirical comparisons with counties of similar socio-economic profiles—such as neighboring Lake Region counties with comparable school sizes and urban-rural mixes—indicate that once KNEC–KEMIS reconciliation is conducted, the anomaly in Busia diminishes. In instances where reconciled data still reveal elevated Form-One shares of non-matching index numbers, the prevailing evidence suggests that this is likely due to transfers or in-migration, or higher proportions of over-age and repeater admissions, rather than a sudden decline in primary completion rates (as shown in Busia County administrative tables and KNBS county factsheets).

The researcher's focus, therefore, is to assess how government grants affect enrollment patterns in Busia County and whether the current financing mechanisms are sufficient to achieve the SDG vision of equitable, inclusive, and sustainable education for all Kenyan learners.

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Statement of the Problem

Secondary education plays a crucial role in equipping learners with the knowledge and skills essential for higher education, vocational training, and employment opportunities (Martinez & Terway, 2016). In an effort to promote accessibility, the Kenyan government launched the Free Day Secondary Education (FDSE) program in 2008, alongside supplementary financial aid initiatives, including the Secondary School Education Bursary Fund (SSEBF) and the Constituency Bursary Fund (CBF). These programs were designed to alleviate financial burdens, enhance equity, and boost enrollment in public secondary schools.

However, despite these efforts, concerns remain regarding the sufficiency and effectiveness of government grants. Reports indicate that while national enrollment rates surged from 2.1 million in 2014 to 3.6 million in 2022, the transition rate from primary to secondary school remains low, at just 74.6% (Brudevold-Newman, 2021). In Busia County, the issue is especially pronounced, as many learners struggle to either progress to or remain in secondary school due to additional costs, delays in financial disbursements, and various socio-economic challenges. Overcrowding, inadequate facilities, and gender disparities further hinder equitable access.

Despite significant national investments in basic education and efforts to achieve 100 percent transition, Busia County continues to face inconsistencies in learner progression. County records indicate a sharp decline in KCPE candidature between 2022 and 2023, while Form One enrollment increased during the same period. This raises concerns about learner flow, system accountability, and the broader factors influencing educational participation. These trends suggest underlying disruptions that cannot be attributed solely to enrollment policies and point to more profound structural challenges affecting learners' movement through the primary education cycle.

The socioeconomic landscape of Busia exacerbates these inconsistencies. High poverty rates, widespread food insecurity, child malnutrition, and dependence on low-productivity subsistence agriculture hinder households' ability to support consistent schooling. Large family sizes, low parental education levels, and limited employment opportunities further impede children's ability to complete their primary education on time. In this context, the decrease in KCPE numbers may indicate late entry, repetition, temporary dropout, or socio-health disruptions. Meanwhile, the increase in Form One enrollment could stem from transfers, in-migration, repeaters, alternative admissions, or inconsistencies between KNEC and KEMIS data systems. Without addressing these discrepancies, policymakers will find it challenging to design interventions that effectively tackle the structural barriers to smooth learner progression.

This scenario raises important questions about whether government grants provide adequate support for enrollment and retention in Busia’s public secondary schools. Consequently, this study aims to assess the level of government grants and investigate their impact on student enrollment in Busia County.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

The Human Capital Theory

Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1964; Schultz, 1971) posits that education is an investment that yields future economic and social returns. From this perspective, households and governments allocate resources to schooling with the expectation that learners will acquire skills that enhance productivity, employability, and long-term earnings. In the context of basic and secondary education, government grants effectively reduce the private cost of schooling—such as fees, uniforms, levies, and learning materials—thereby encouraging greater participation. When the financial burden on households decreases, human capital theory predicts a corresponding increase in enrolment, attendance, and progression because education becomes more accessible and economically rational for families facing financial constraints (Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2018).

In Busia County—where high poverty levels, food insecurity, and limited household incomes significantly restrict educational opportunities—government grants serve as critical inputs into the production of human capital. By subsidizing the cost of schooling, grants lower barriers that would otherwise prevent children from completing primary school or transitioning to secondary education. Conversely, when grants are insufficient, irregularly disbursed, or unable to offset the high opportunity costs of schooling, households may underinvest in education. Human Capital Theory predicts that underinvestment leads to lower enrolment, increased dropout, delayed progression, and reduced formation of human capital at both individual and county levels (Becker, 1993). This dynamic is particularly acute in socioeconomically vulnerable areas such as Busia, where families are more sensitive to even small changes in education-related expenses.

Conceptual Model Based on Human Capital Theory

Government Grants → Reduction of Schooling Costs → Increased Access → Higher Enrolment and Transition.

Government Grants: Capitation, bursaries, subsidies, and fee waivers reduce households' direct financial burden.

Reduced Costs: Lower spending on levies, uniforms, transport, and learning materials increases affordability for poor households.

Increased Access: More learners can attend regularly, remain in school, and transition to the next level.

Higher Enrolment: Greater participation in KCPE and Form One reflects improved investment in human capital.

This model demonstrates that improving the size, targeting, and reliability of grants can help counter the socioeconomic challenges in Busia, providing a pathway to better educational outcomes and stronger human capital development.

Empirical Review

According to the economic study conducted by GOK (2015), enrollment increased significantly between 2010 and 2019 from 1,653,384 in 2010 to 2,431,716 in 2014 and 2942770 in 2019 learners enrolled in secondary schools. The secondary enrollment in public and private schools in Kenya and Busia County is displayed in the Tables (3 and 4) below, in chronological order.

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Table 3: Enrolment and Grant of Form One in Secondary Schools between Years 2019 – 2023 in Kenya

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Male	1,505,330	1,724,931	1,632,198	1,710,740	1,829,411
Female	1,437,440	1,535,809	1,372,112	1,579,145	1,757,670
Total	**2,942,770**	**3,260,740**	**3,004,310**	**3,289,885**	**3,587,081**
Grant	**65,458,975,880**	**72,531,900,560**	**66,827,871,640**	**73,180,201,940**	**79,791,029,764**

Source: Ministry of Education, 2024

Table 4: Enrolment and Grant of Form One in Secondary Schools between Years 2019 – 2023 in Busia County, Kenya

Year	KCPE Learners	Form 1 Enrollment	Grant
2019	22194	20030	441,541,320
2020	24553	20864	504,014,016
2021	29502	22076	486,643,344
2022	31286	27135	598,141,896
2023	20934	29781	656,492,364
Total	**128469**	**119885**	**2,642,744,940**

Source: Busia County 2023

Tables 3 and 4 provide insights into Form One enrollment and government grant for secondary schools at both national and Busia County levels from 2019 to 2023. Nationally, Form One enrollment experienced steady growth, increasing from 2.942,770 in 2019 to 3,587,081 in 2023. Concurrently, government grants rose from KES 65.5 billion to KES 79.8 billion, reflecting efforts to enhance access to secondary education. In contrast, Busia County witnessed fluctuations in Form One enrollment despite receiving significant grant funding totaling KES 2.64 billion over the five years. Notably, there was a decline in enrollment in 2021, with only 22076 students enrolled despite a KCPE cohort of 29502. This data underscores disparity in transition rates and points to inefficiency in translating government funding into consistent enrollment gains in Busia County. These trends are particularly relevant to the study, highlighting the necessity to investigate the local implementation of grant and its effectiveness in overcoming barriers to access and retention to secondary education in Busia County.

According to Lim (2018), in 2007, South Korea achieved noteworthy enrollment rates in education, with 59% of students attending intermediate secondary schools and an impressive 91% in high schools. Additionally, the country recorded a remarkable transition rate of 99.7%. These achievements were realized without significant enrollment and progression disparities, indicating gender parity and minimal dropout rates in secondary education. Similarly, UNESCO (2000) noted that Chile has provided free and compulsory secondary education since 1920, emphasizing vocational training at this level. Public institutions in Chile offer four years of free secondary education, resulting in a total enrollment of 739,316 students, which accounts for 72% of the eligible population. The country experienced a dramatic increase in literacy rates, rising from 50% in 1920 to 95.7% in 2022.

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In Rwanda, the costs of lower secondary education were eliminated in 2006, followed by Uganda in 2007. Previously, high tuition fees and the lack of sports programs deterred many eligible students from pursuing secondary education after primary school. In response, both governments implemented measures to enhance the low transition rates from primary to secondary education (Koriyow, 2017). Uganda initiated the Free Secondary Education (FSE) program, aiming to quadruple the number of students completing secondary education, with an estimated cost of Ushs 30 billion (approximately US$17.15 million). Bazilio (2019) highlighted that the Universal Free Secondary Education (UFSE) policy particularly benefitted girls, significantly increasing their enrollment in public secondary schools in Uganda.

Kenya's Vision 2030 is a national development plan intended to span from 2008 to 2030, with the goal of transforming the country into a middle-income, newly industrialized nation that provides high-quality living standards for all its citizens (UNESCO, 2018). The plan is organized into two five-year phases beginning in 2008. Key educational objectives include strengthening training and research for development and ensuring competitive education on an international level. To combat illiteracy, the plan aims to expand educational opportunities, accelerate the transition from primary to secondary school, and enhance the quality and relevance of education. Additionally, the government has set a target for a 95% school attendance rate and an 8% increase in the number of students progressing to technical and higher education institutions (Orodho, 2017).

It is crucial to recognize that as student enrollment rises due to government grants, the resources dedicated to teaching and learning must also expand. Without sufficient funding and support, the grant programs alone will not fulfill their intended purposes. This study seeks to address this issue by examining the resources available during the study period and identifying the additional support necessary for the effectiveness of government grant programs (Orodho, 2017).

Research conducted in Mexico by Mukhwana et al. (2020) revealed that high secondary school fees often impede student enrollment. The study highlighted an 8.6% increase in female attendance and a 6.3% rise in male attendance. In a broader context, UNESCO (2018) reports that Sub-Saharan Africa has the lowest secondary school enrollment rate globally. In 2006, only 25% of the region's 104 million children of secondary school age were enrolled. The net enrollment rate in Sub-Saharan Africa is 33% lower than the global average for developed countries, positioning it as the region with the least likelihood of secondary school enrollment (UNESCO, 2018).

Government grant policies are in place to enhance access to secondary education in developing countries. However, ongoing direct and indirect costs associated with households continue to deter children from low-income families from attending secondary school. For instance, although Uganda implemented universal secondary education in 2007, parents are still required to cover boarding and medical expenses (Bazilio, 2019). Similarly, in Nigeria, even with the government covering tuition fees, parents still face additional levies necessary for maintaining the educational system.

According to Nyerere (2018), significant disparities in funding and access have been identified in Kenya, particularly within urban areas. Families residing in low-income formal settlements are less likely to enroll their children in public secondary schools compared to those living outside these regions. This indicates that, despite the availability of government grants, access to secondary education for students in poorer urban neighborhoods remains constrained, as the costs associated with enrollment are comparatively higher for these families than for their more affluent counterparts.

In Kenya, the number of secondary schools grew from 5,600 in 2008 to 7,325 in 2014, a remarkable increase of 46.5% following the implementation of secondary education grants. Correspondingly, student enrollment rose from 1.8 million in 2008 to 2.1 million in 2014. The Secondary School Fees Taskforce Survey (2014) reported that the Net Enrollment Rate (NER) surged from 8.9% to 39.5% by 2013, while the Gross Enrollment Rate (GER) increased from 42.5% in 2008 to 56.2%. Nonetheless, in the Global Competitiveness Index (2014), Kenya was ranked 111th out of 148 countries regarding access to secondary education. Despite these advancements, by 2013, 60.5% of the eligible population still did not attend secondary school (MOEST, 2014).

Research Gaps

A notable gap in the existing literature on educational financing in Kenya is the lack of focus on how school-level administrative bottlenecks affect the effectiveness of grants. While national studies, such as those conducted by the Ministry of Education in 2018, have documented overall increases in student enrollment, they often overlook the operational challenges identified in this study, such as the delays in disbursement that force schools to send students home. Additionally, previous research, including that by Oyugi (2019) and Omolo et al. (2019), has highlighted issues of fund mismanagement and corruption. However, few studies have quantitatively linked these implementation failures to specific enrollment outcomes, particularly regarding gender-specific dropout rates. The lack of empirical data linking policy implementation to student retention is a significant shortcoming, especially given the 43.9% rate of boys being sent home. As a result, there is a critical knowledge gap regarding the causal pathways by which well-intentioned grants are diluted during implementation. This highlights the need for detailed mixed-methods research that traces the flow of funds from the ministry to the classroom and examines its direct impact on daily attendance and student retention.

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 Enrolment Rate

The study examined the level of government grant on learners' enrolment rates in public secondary schools in Busia County, Kenya? This research question was respondent by 82 class teachers and 8130 students by questionnaire.

Table 5: Descriptive Analysis for Enrolment Rate

Statements	Teachers		Students	
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	Std. Deviation
There has been timely disbursement of fees by the government.	1.74	1.03	1.71	1.01
Government subsidized fees are sufficient to sustain students in school	2.12	0.88	2.23	0.95
Government subsidized fees and other grants have transformed the attitude of students and parents	2.73	1.03	2.94	1.14
There has been reduced number of students dropouts because of fees	3.10	1.10	3.71	1.25

Source: Field Data, 2025

Findings from Busia County show that delays in government grant disbursement (Mean ≈1.7) hinder policy effectiveness. While subsidized fees moderately improved retention (Mean ≈2.1–2.2, SD 0.88–0.95), inconsistent implementation limited impact. Grants improved perceptions of affordability (Mean ≈2.7–2.9) and significantly reduced dropout rates, with students (Mean 3.71) more optimistic than teachers (Mean 3.10). However, 60–70% of students cited financial constraints—such as uniforms, books, and exam fees—as barriers, while over 50% of teachers highlighted poverty, delays, and hidden levies as causes of dropout. Long distances (reported by students 17, 60, 88) and poor infrastructure discouraged enrolment, while over 50% of teachers stressed that KCSE performance and reputation strongly influenced school choice. Sociocultural barriers, including teenage pregnancies and early marriages, particularly affected girls, with more than half of teachers observing gender disparities. Peer pressure and relocations also contributed to dropouts.

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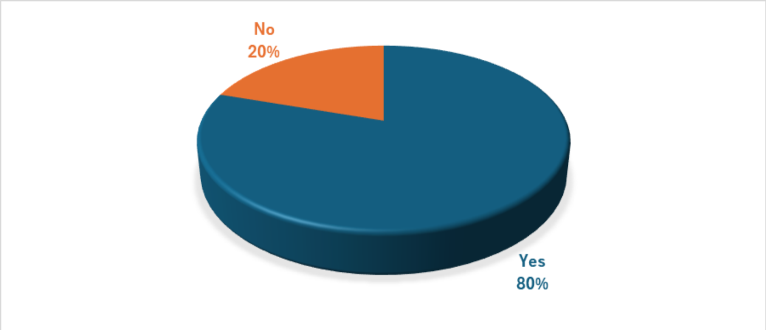

Figure 1: Students Sent Home due to Lack of School Fees

Source: Field Data, 2025

Findings from Busia County indicate that 80% of teachers confirmed that students are regularly sent home due to a lack of school fees, while only 20% disagreed. This highlights the persistent financial barriers that remain despite tuition subsidies. Such interruptions contribute to academic underperformance, high dropout rates, and loss of interest in education, particularly among low-income students, worsening inequality. Teachers and administrators face dilemmas, balancing learning with enforcing fee compliance. Reliance on parental contributions, coupled with delayed or inadequate government grants, exposes systemic financing gaps that hinder equitable access to secondary education.

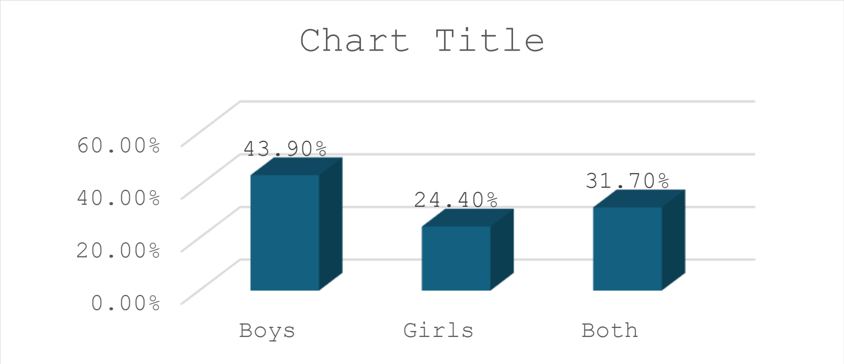

Figure 2: Most Affected Gender

Source: Field Data, 2025

Figure 2 presents an analysis of the gender most affected by being sent home due to lack of school fees in public secondary schools in Busia County. The findings reveal that boys (43.9%) are the most affected, followed by both genders (31.7%), and girls (24.4%) being the least affected. This data challenges the common assumption that girls are more vulnerable to school exclusion, highlighting a context-specific dynamic in Busia County where boys are disproportionately impacted by financial constraints. Teachers suggested that many boys are expected to contribute to family income or engage in manual labor, which interferes with their education and increases absenteeism.

On the other hand, the 31.7% response indicating both genders are affected shows that financial challenges are a cross-cutting issue, impacting learners regardless of sex. The relatively lower

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percentage of girls may be attributed to targeted bursary programs and advocacy campaigns promoting girls' education. These findings call for gender-responsive interventions that consider the unique socio-economic pressures faced by both boys and girls in order to enhance school retention equitably.

The study sought to find out on how those unable to pay school fees were sustained in school. The outcome showed that despite the prevalence of fee-related dismissals, public secondary schools in Busia County employ several strategies to sustain needy students. First, many schools utilize internal mechanisms, such as flexible payment plans, which allow parents to pay fees in installments. Some institutions discreetly permit students to attend classes while they are indebted, particularly when teachers recognize their academic potential. Additionally, schools often rely on community support networks, where local leaders or alumni contribute to emergency funds for vulnerable cases. The government's bursary programs and constituency-level education funds (like the National Government Affirmative Action Fund) provide partial relief, though delays and limited coverage persist.

Teacher 1 stated, *"We often allow students to stay in class even when they haven't paid fees, especially if we see that they're hardworking and focused."* Teacher 3 and 4 were in agreement that most schools in Busia County have adopted flexible payment plans, allowing parents to pay in installments throughout the term. Student 2 said, *"My principal told my parents they could pay pole pole (slowly), so I was allowed to stay in school."*

Teacher 5 noted, *"Sometimes we speak to local leaders or alumni to assist students who are completely unable to raise fees."* Teacher 6 added, *"We have an emergency kitty from well-wishers, which we use to help the most vulnerable cases."* Student 4 confirmed this, saying, *"When I was almost sent home, our chief came to talk to the school and helped me get a bursary."*

Both teachers and students acknowledged the support from government bursaries and the National Government Affirmative Action Fund (NGAAF). Student 5 said, *"I applied for the bursary through the MP's office, and it helped with part of my school fees."* However, Teacher 7 pointed out, *"These funds are not always timely, and sometimes students miss class waiting for disbursements."*

Despite these efforts, Teacher 8 warned, *"Allowing students to accumulate fees affects school operations. It's not sustainable in the long run."* Teachers 9 and 10 were in agreement that the absence of a standardized national policy creates inconsistency, where some schools are lenient and others dismiss students immediately. Student 6 stated, *"I know classmates who were sent home many times because their parents couldn't afford to pay anything at all."*

Both groups strongly felt that systemic solutions are urgently needed. Teacher 11 proposed, *"There should be automatic support for students from the poorest households and harsher penalties for schools that violate this."* Student 7 echoed, *"We need real change, not just waiting for help that sometimes never comes."*

The study also set to determine the extent to which tuition fee subsidy has affected enrolment of students from poor backgrounds. The respondents noted that the study findings reveal that tuition fee subsidies have had a moderate but incomplete impact on improving enrolment among students from poor backgrounds in Busia County.

Teacher 1 stated, *"The Free Day Secondary Education policy has definitely helped reduce dropout rates, especially in Form 1. More parents can now at least bring their children to school."* Teachers 2 and 3 were in agreement, noting that subsidies have made secondary education more accessible, but not fully sustainable.

Student 1 said, *"My parents could never have managed to pay school fees without the government subsidy, but we still struggle to buy books and uniforms."* Student 3 added, *"I stayed out of school for two weeks because I didn't have exam fees, even though the tuition was covered."* These sentiments echo the broader finding that while tuition support reduces financial pressure, hidden costs continue to be a barrier.

Teacher 4 emphasized, *"We often have to send students home, not for tuition, but for development fees, lunch contributions, or uniforms."* Teacher 5 pointed out, *"The government subsidy does not cover everything. Parents still have to raise significant amounts, which is difficult for many households here."*

Both groups expressed concerns over systemic issues undermining the subsidy's effectiveness. Teacher 6 reported, *"Funds arrive late, and sometimes not at all. When that happens, schools are forced to collect money from parents just to keep running."* Teacher 7 added, *"We've even heard of cases where funds are mismanaged or diverted, and students end up suffering."*

Student 4 said, *"It's unfair because sometimes we are sent home and yet we are told school is free."* Student 5, who had dropped out temporarily, shared, *"I left school because my family couldn't afford books and shoes. No one helped us."*

Gender-specific challenges were also highlighted. Teacher 8 noted, *"Girls are more likely to drop out when financial problems are either due to early marriage, pregnancy, or being expected to help at home."* Student 6 confirmed, *"Some of my friends were married off after missing school for too long."*

While Form 1 enrolment has increased, indicating a positive impact overall, Teacher 9 observed, *"The poorest students are still falling through the cracks. We see the same faces missing classes whenever fees are mentioned."*

Both teachers and students suggested solutions. Teacher 10 said, *"We need the subsidy to cover everything—uniforms, exams, lunch. That's what truly makes education free."* Student 7 proposed, *"The government should act faster in giving out bursaries and ensure no money goes missing."* There was a shared sentiment that subsidies, while helpful, do not go far enough.

Enrolment Trend

What has been the enrolment trend in your school since 2019?

Table 6: Enrolment Trend

Gender	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Boys	324	335	381	380	411
Girls	390	313	401	421	417
Total	**714**	**648**	**782**	**801**	**828**

Source: Field Data, 2025

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The enrolment data in table 6 indicates fluctuating yet generally positive trends, marked by distinct gender-specific patterns. Over the past five years, total enrolment increased by 16% (from 714 to 828), though this growth was not uniform. A significant 9% decline in 2020 appears to be a consequence of COVID-19 disruptions, particularly affecting girls, whose enrolment fell by 20%. This suggests that the pandemic's effects disproportionately impacted female attendance.

The rebound in 2021, with a total increase of 21% (28% for girls), points to the effectiveness of recovery initiatives, likely supported by government interventions such as fee subsidies and re-entry programs for girls. Boys' enrolment displayed steadier growth, achieving a total increase of 27%, whereas girls' enrolment exhibited more volatility after 2020, peaking in 2022 before experiencing a slight 1% dip in 2023. This trend may indicate ongoing challenges in retention.

Additionally, the gender composition shifted from a female-majority in 2019 (55% girls) to near parity in 2023 (50.4% girls), aligning with national gender equity objectives. However, the anomaly observed in 2020 and the decrease in girls' participation in 2023 necessitate a closer examination of socioeconomic barriers, such as early marriages and household labour demands, which may resurface during times of crisis.

In response to the impact of government grants on student enrolment, the teachers in Busia County observed that government grants have had a noticeable but limited impact on student enrolment. While the Free Day Secondary Education (FDSE) policy has undoubtedly reduced the financial burden for many families, its implementation challenges often undermine its effectiveness. Delays in fund disbursement force schools to send students home for unpaid fees, particularly affecting those from the poorest backgrounds. Additionally, the grants do not cover ancillary costs, such as uniforms and exam fees, which remain a significant barrier. We see students who enroll but later drop out due to these hidden expenses. While the policy has improved enrolment in principle, its inconsistent execution and inadequate coverage mean that many vulnerable students still fall through the cracks.

From our perspective as students, government grants have been a lifeline for many of us who would otherwise be unable to afford secondary education. The reduction in tuition fees has allowed more of our peers to enroll. However, we also see how the grants fall short. Many of our friends are still sent home for failing to pay additional costs, and some eventually drop out altogether. Girls, in particular, face higher risks, as families often prioritize boys' education when funds are limited. While we appreciate the support, we believe the grants need to be more comprehensive and reliably distributed to make education truly accessible for all.

SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

The study's findings demonstrate that government grants in Busia County led to a significant 16% increase in student enrollment from 2019 to 2023, validating their role in reducing financial barriers. However, their effectiveness was substantially undermined by systemic issues. A critical 80% of schools still sent students home due to unpaid ancillary fees for items like uniforms and exams. Boys were disproportionately affected, comprising 43.9% of those sent home compared to 24.4% for girls, a disparity linked to socio-economic pressures and labor demands. Furthermore, delays in fund disbursement and external shocks, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused a 9% enrollment drop in 2020, revealed persistent vulnerabilities in achieving equitable and sustained educational access.

Conclusion

The study offers comprehensive insights into the impact of government grants on students' access to public secondary education in Busia County, Kenya, highlighting both progress and persistent challenges. Government subsidies, such as the Free Day Secondary Education (FDSE) program, have significantly improved enrolment rates, with a 16% increase from 2019 to 2023, demonstrating their effectiveness in reducing financial barriers. However, the benefits were unevenly distributed, with COVID-19 disruptions in 2020 causing a temporary decline, particularly among female students, highlighting vulnerabilities in the system. Despite these gains, ancillary costs like uniforms and exam fees remain a hurdle, leading to frequent fee-related dismissals (80% of schools) and undermining the policy's inclusivity. Gender disparities persist, with boys more likely to be sent home for unpaid fees (43.9%) compared to girls (24.4%), though targeted bursaries have helped narrow this gap. These findings underscore the need for more comprehensive funding models that address hidden costs and socio-cultural barriers to ensure equitable access for all students.

Recommendations

The study revealed that while government subsidies increased overall enrollment by 16% from 2019 to 2023, significant challenges remain. Concerning 80% of schools still send students home for unpaid ancillary fees, with boys (43.9%) disproportionately affected compared to girls (24.4%). The COVID-19 pandemic led to a 9% drop in enrolment in 2020, highlighting system vulnerabilities, while the 2023 decline in girls' enrolment (-1%) suggests persistent retention issues. To address these findings, the government should expand subsidy coverage to include essential non-tuition costs, such as uniforms and exam fees; implementing gender-sensitive bursary programs with higher allocations for vulnerable girls; developing community sensitization campaigns to address cultural barriers; establishing emergency school feeding programs during crises; and creating mobile registration units to reach marginalized communities. These measures would help sustain enrolment gains while addressing the equity gaps identified in the study.

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