



# LOW-COST PRIVATE SCHOOLS IN THE DRC

## Needs, Challenges, and Recommendations to Improve Access and Quality For All

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USAID, UK Aid, and other development partners working in the education sector in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) as well as other countries, have traditionally supported national partner governments to improve the quality of and access to public education. In 2019, funding streams from donors in the DRC changed in such a way that USAID pivoted its support to low-cost private schools (LCPS). For purpose of this Technical Brief, LCPS are defined as private schools that do not target upper income or elite urban populations, but rather that target low income and/or vulnerable households in urban and peri-urban areas where the government has not kept up with demand for education.

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## ACCELERE!!

The goal of A! I is to improve educational outcomes for girls and boys through improved teaching and learning in national languages and French, reduced barriers to education, and increased transparency of school governance structures.

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This Technical Brief presents the background on the emerging picture of LCPS in low-income countries, and DRC in particular. It also provides an overview of the lessons learned from USAID's ACCELERE!! project about non-state schools in the DRC. It finally presents recommendations for implementing partners who will be working with LCPS in the future.

## LOW-COST PRIVATE SCHOOLS IN LOW-INCOME COUNTRIES

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4.1 states that by “2030, [nations must] ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable, and quality primary and secondary education leading to ... effective learning outcomes.”<sup>1</sup>

The Abidjan Principles,<sup>2</sup> adopted in Côte d'Ivoire in February 2019 following a three-year participatory consultation and drafting process,<sup>3</sup> stipulate the human rights obligations of nations to provide public education and to regulate private involvement in education. The Abidjan Principles promise to be the new reference points for governments, educators, and education providers when debating the respective roles and duties of states and private actors in education. The Abidjan Principles further state that the application of the human rights framework to private involvement in education contains a potential tension between government obligations to ensure free quality education and the liberty to establish a private school.

This tension is further exacerbated by the fact that fragile states and sub-Saharan country governments, faced with fast-growing populations, often cannot keep up with the demand. This often leads to a dearth of public schools so private schools fill the gap. Non-state schools already enroll nearly 14 percent of primary school-age students in low-income countries and 24 percent in lower-middle income countries.<sup>4</sup> Countries adopt different policies to address this phenomenon. Some try to regulate and control, with

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<sup>1</sup> Sustainable Development Goals, “SDG #4 – Quality Education.” <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/education/> (Accessed February 2020)

<sup>2</sup> Abidjan Principles on the Right to Education. <https://www.abidjanprinciples.org/> (Accessed February 2020)

<sup>3</sup> A Drafting Committee of nine eminent experts led the development of the Abidjan Principles and incorporated the comments from the consultations, with inputs from other experts. More than 50 other recognized experts, a majority of them from the Global South, advised on the text and signed it. (*The Abidjan Principles 2019*, p. 5)

<sup>4</sup> UNESCO. (2018). “UIS Stat.” <http://data.uis.unesco.org> (Accessed January 2020)

more or less success; others fail to even provide the minimum services they owe accredited private schools.

Issues of equity also arise as part of this dynamic. There is little direct evidence of how LCPS compare to public schools in achieving “true” equality of opportunity in education. What is available tends to suggest an ambiguous or negative effect of private provision and financing on equity. There is also weak evidence that private schools provide education to disadvantaged children, and weak to moderate evidence that private schools are financially affordable for the poor and the poorest.<sup>5</sup>

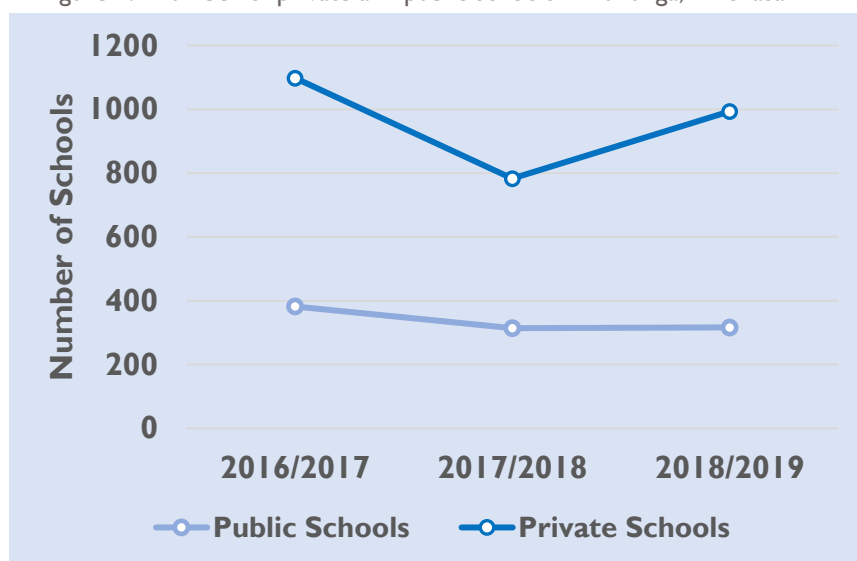
Lastly, the evidence that does exist on private education is geographically weighted to South Asia, with less of an African focus. Insufficient research exists on conflict-affected or fragile states, and the DRC is no exception.<sup>6</sup>

## LOW-COST PRIVATE SCHOOLING IN DRC

Since the 1990s, in a context of high demographic pressure and economic crisis, the public education system in the DRC has experienced a steady decline in education quality, insufficient numbers of schools, poor education infrastructure, low remuneration of teachers, and ineffective management of schools.

At the same time, and due in part to the government’s inability to keep up with demand, the number of low-cost private schools has grown (see fig.1 for illustrative numbers in a sub-province of Kinshasa). LCPS in DRC, as in other low-income countries, increasingly offer an alternative to public education for many poor and vulnerable families and are often the only education providers in densely populated urban and peri-urban areas.

Figure 1: Number of private and public schools in Lukunga, Kinshasa



<sup>5</sup> Lipcan, A. MacAuslan, I. and Uppal, V. (2016). “Publicly financed and sensibly provided: An agnostic framework for managing public and private education,” pp. 25

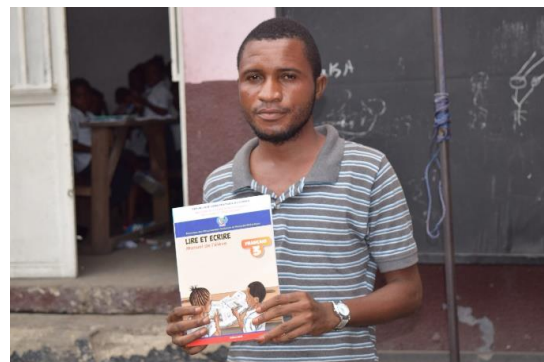
<sup>6</sup> Overseas Development Institute (2014). “The role and impact of private schools in low-income countries.” <https://www.odi.org/publications/10203-role-and-impact-private-schools-developing-countries>

Another unique characteristic of the Congolese education system is that 70 percent of public schools are managed and run by religious networks (referred to as “*écoles conventionnées*” and include Catholic, Protestants, Kimbanguistes, and Islamic schools<sup>7</sup>), 20 percent are “*écoles non-conventionnées*” also run by the government, and 10 percent are private.<sup>8</sup> In both the *conventionnées* and *non-conventionnées* schools, the government still pays teacher salaries. This “Covenant” came about in 1977 to settle long-term tensions between Church and State around contested roles and responsibilities dating back to colonial times. This complex hybrid system has added layers of bureaucracy and provides the rationale to impose even more school fees on already very stretched households.

The DRC’s education policy (2014 “Loi cadre”) requires all private schools, regardless of their “*conventionnée*” status, to maintain the same standards as public schools, but evidence from a rapid assessment conducted by AII indicates this is not the case. For example, LCPS targeted by AII:

- Suffer from the same issues as public schools such as poor infrastructure, low capacity of teachers, lack of materials, and high dropout rates.
- Are not meeting the national standards of teacher quality and hire teachers without the minimum required qualifications.
- Are not accorded the same level of oversight as public schools, even though regulatory frameworks require it.

Though the DRC’s own laws and statutes acknowledge the right to education for all and declare its obligation to provide free, inclusive, and quality public education, it is still far from achieving SDG goal 4.1 and is by no means in compliance with the Abidjan Principles. Notwithstanding the fact there are high quality private schools in DRC, most LCPS observed by AII are insufficiently regulated, standards are not applied, and inequality may be exacerbated. Given the still challenging socio-economic conditions that prevail in the DRC, this situation is unlikely to improve any time soon. The DRC will continue to be faced with fast-growing populations, will not be able to meet the growing demand for public education, and the need for LCPS will continue to grow.



“... we need sufficient teaching materials and textbooks ... and we need teachers’ training in reading and writing but also in math and science”.

Joseph Matina, Teacher at **CS Biko**

<sup>7</sup> Application of school fees in DRC dates back to 1992 when a stop-gap measure to pay teacher salaries during a teacher strike was never lifted. Ref: Cambridge Education. “The School Fees Landscape in the DRC ACCELERE!2.” p. 6.

<sup>8</sup> *Evaluation prospective de l'appui du PME à l'éducation au niveau des pays; 2019 (forthcoming).*

## CHALLENGE

The question therefore becomes, how can funders and implementing partners support countries such as the DRC to meet the pressing demands of education without exacerbating inequalities between and/or within private and public sectors? This issue is also part of the current education policy debates, especially in the context of growing commercialization of education throughout Africa. The Global Partnership for Education,<sup>9</sup> for example, has opted to not fund for-profit provision of education. USAID's education policy (see text box), on the other hand, views investment in non-state schools as critical to meeting the ever-increasing demand for education. USAID calls for a focus on equitable<sup>10</sup> improvements in learning for vulnerable populations rather than heightening inequalities, and to build capacity of partner governments to provide stewardship, oversight, and appropriate safeguards for non-state providers and public-private partnerships in education."<sup>11</sup>

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### USAID POLICY ON NON-STATE SCHOOLS

“There is a need, and opportunity, to invest in and engage with non-state schools to help ensure all children and youth in developing countries receive a quality education.” USAID encourages Missions and implementing partners to “provide evidence and technical leadership on issues of non-state schools and providers to measurably and equitably improve learning outcomes.... It is essential that reforms in this area focus on equitable improvements in learning and educational outcomes for marginalized and vulnerable populations, rather than exacerbating inequalities.”

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## BUILDING THE EVIDENCE BASE OF LOW-COST PRIVATE SCHOOLS TO INFORM FUTURE PROGRAMMING IN THE DRC

The USAID/UK Aid-funded ACCELERE! I (A! I) project began to work with and support 1,578 targeted low-cost private schools in 6 provinces of DRC in 2019. Having worked only with public schools for the first four years of the project, A! I needed to learn about LCPS in the DRC. In April 2019, A! I conducted a rapid learning needs assessment<sup>12</sup> that consisted of classroom observations in 26 purposefully sampled schools (four of which included accelerated learning centers) in Haut Katanga, Kasai Central, Equateur, and Kinshasa Provinces. A! I tested 740 students in reading and writing in national languages as well as in French and interviewed and observed 74 teachers. Summary findings include:

- Grades 1 and 2 students in private schools demonstrate low scores in reading fluency and comprehension in local languages and in French.
- Teachers report teaching in French because of the lack of teaching and learning materials in Congolese languages.
- Teachers are not recruited in accordance with national standards and are hired and fired at the whim of the school proprietor.

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<sup>9</sup> Edwards, S. (June 2019). “Education advocates claim ‘groundbreaking’ victory on latest GPE decision.” Devex.

<https://www.devex.com/news/education-advocates-claim-groundbreaking-victory-on-latest-gpe-decision-95110>

<sup>10</sup> Education in Crisis & Conflict Network. (2019). “Putting Equity at the Center of Education in Crisis and Conflict.” (Technical Brief), p. 3. <https://www.devex.com/news/education-advocates-claim-groundbreaking-victory-on-latest-gpe-decision-95110>.

<sup>11</sup> USAID. (2018). “USAID Education Policy.” pp. 22-23.

<sup>12</sup> Rapport sur l’Etude pédagogique, April 20, 2019

- Private school teachers teach reading and writing separately (rather than as complimentary subjects as mandated by the national curriculum) and are not aware of the five recommended reading competences also mandated in the national curriculum.
- The minimum number of hours of instruction is not being applied.
- Teaching and learning materials are insufficient.
- Public inspectors charge a fee to private schools to conduct inspections and to train private school teachers, contrary to education law.
- Parent-School Associations, which should be in place in accredited schools according to the *Loi Cadre* (National Education Policy), seemed to be non-existent.
- School infrastructure, including classrooms and toilets, is very poor.
- Instructional and managerial oversight of the school is insufficient to support quality teaching and learning.

A!I is supporting targeted low-cost private schools to improve the quality of their educational offerings and the functioning of their schools through the provision of teaching and learning materials, teacher professional development, and capacity building of school leadership and private school associations. As part of this capacity building, A!I is training LCPS leadership, associations, and authorities on the laws and statutes regulating low-cost private education so that they can provide the proper oversight and safeguards to ensure quality and equitable education for all.



*“In private schools, a child in Year 2 is able to read a sentence and write a word compared to that of public school ... private schools at reasonable cost help because there are available where there are no public schools ... school fees in the private school at reasonable costs are slightly higher than fees in public school.”*

Maman Agnès,  
Parent of a student at CS Biko, Kinshasa

More remains to be done and learned to advance quality and equitable education within the public-private education sphere in the DRC and inform future programming. A!I is conducting a survey in Kinshasa Province to begin to answer the following questions:

- What drives parents or caregivers and households to choose private over public schools? Is the choice based on perceived quality differences, security issues, or simply a matter of accessibility?
- What features of a school are important to them and influence their choice?
- What do parents know about the teaching and learning conditions in the school they are sending their children to in terms of access, safety, cost, education quality, or school management?
- How do parents compare private to public school costs and quality of education?

Through this survey, AII hopes to learn about how the education needs of vulnerable households are met and whether low-cost private schools are in a position to provide equitable access to schooling for children from poor families. This in turn will begin to contribute to the evidence-base on whether low-cost private schooling can meet the need of vulnerable families in the DRC and whether these schools can be affordable.

## **PATH FORWARD TO ADVANCE EQUITY IN EDUCATION IN THE DRC**

While more remains to be learned, existing data and evidence point to several key actions that funders, implementers, and government can take to improve access and quality of LCPS in the DRC. Outlined below is preliminary guidance for the Government of the DRC (GDRC), donors, agencies, and practitioners on how to best support the low-cost private education sector while not undermining the public sector mandate and its corollary of equity.

**Continue to support both private and public education in the DRC:** In the past, funders have been hesitant to support private education systems for the very reasons outlined in the UN SDGs and the Abidjan Principles, namely, that states must provide free public education for all. Thus, funders in the past have opted to support public education initiatives only. However, because the growing numbers of private schools emerging in the lowest income areas of large urban areas will not abate any time soon and because private schools hold some promise to address issues of access, donors should support low-income private schools to ensure that they meet the minimum requirements and standards of quality education. Moreover, supporting LCPS with the right set of policies and guidelines can further strengthen a source of resilience that already exists within communities.

**Continue to advocate for elimination of school fees:** The evidence worldwide is compelling that the elimination of school fees leads to increased access and retention of poor and vulnerable populations.<sup>13</sup> The issue of school fees in DRC is serious.<sup>14</sup> President Félix Tshisekedi's government has begun to address it, and funders and implementing partners must do as much as possible to support this essential step of the government's path to self-reliance. This will be the most effective and sustainable way to ensure equity of education for all students. Examples of critical steps the GDRC can take include an in-depth review of the "*conventionné*" system where religious networks administer 80 percent of public schools as well as their own private schools. This system creates parallel administrative systems, preventing transparency and leading to additional layers of school fees unrelated to education needs.<sup>15</sup>

Elimination of school fees will lead to budget shortfalls as teacher salaries and operating costs will need to be replaced. Funders and implementing partners should continue to work with and support the GDRC for long-term funding of teacher salaries as the current support is certainly helpful, but not sufficient to cover the budget shortfalls.

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<sup>13</sup> Education Equity Research Initiative. (2016). "[Fair Financing Policy Compendium](http://www.educationequity2030.org/resources-2/2017/1/5/fair-financing-policy-compendium)."

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<sup>14</sup> Cambridge Education. (2017). "[The School Fees Landscape in the DRC ACCELERE!2](#)," p 3.

<sup>15</sup> Cambridge Education. (2017). "[The School Fees Landscape in the DRC ACCELERE!2](#)," p. 14.

**Support the government in its stewardship and oversight for both sectors, especially the private sector:** The GDRC does not lack sound policies, but rather the ability to implement them. USAID/DRC is rightly moving toward providing policy support to the GDRC. USAID should consider conducting political economy analysis to determine how to best target potential policies and reforms that will advance equity within the private and public education spheres. This type of analysis will help better align political will and incentives, resources for change, and knowledge.

**Continue to increase capacity of private school associations:** Just as the GDRC needs support in stewardship of LCPS, so do the associations who represent most, if not all, low-cost private schools. A!I found that many associations and private school proprietor associations lacked knowledge of access to the updated national curriculum, for example. Associations and proprietors were unaware of the requirements to facilitate the establishment of school-parent committees. Capacity building and support in the form of establishing a joint steering committee under A!I has also contributed to improved relations between the associations and the GDRC. This type of support will help establish durable transparency and accountability between the school and parents, associations, and the GDRC.

**Free taxes for LCPS in the DRC:** Similar to other businesses and operating entities in the DRC, LCPS are also subject to taxation. However, given that private schools provide a public service, the GDRC should relieve LCPS from significant tax burdens. This in turn will allow them to redistribute their resources toward improving the quality of the education offer.

**Establish a learning agenda on LCPS in the DRC:** As stated above, there are many unknowns regarding the status of private education in the DRC in terms of GDRC policies that could better inform future donor interventions. Funders and implementing partners should establish quality monitoring evaluation and research mechanisms to better understand, for example, the impact of private sector education on equity and whether quality is indeed greater in private rather than in public schools.

## **CONCLUSION**

Education access and quality in the DRC continue to be a significant challenge for the government and donors because it impedes the achievement of sustainable development goals. LCPS can be part of the solution by being key partners in the narrowing of the access gap and improving student outcomes in reading, math, and other foundational skills, but only with the right support and oversight to ensure that equity is not undermined within the broader education sector.