



EDUCATION FINANCE NETWORK EVIDENCE BRIEF

Sole-Proprietor Low-Cost Private Schools: Conditions for Success

What conditions are necessary for sole proprietor low-cost private schools to improve learning outcomes for disadvantaged students?

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Sole proprietor low-cost private schools comprise the majority of the non-state school sector in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). These schools are some of the most important non-state actors in education delivery, but many face challenges in delivering on equity, quality, and learning outcomes. This evidence brief reviews the literature to identify the conditions necessary for sole proprietor schools to improve learning outcomes for disadvantaged students.

Sole proprietorships are the most common form of non-state school core delivery in most contexts. Often these small low-cost private schools (LCPS)¹ operate independently of larger chains or franchises but encompass a wide variety of schools. Sole proprietorships may be for-profit, non-profit, community-based, or faith-based, and they might be registered or unregistered with education ministries. In many contexts, LCPS sole proprietorships comprise the majority of the non-state school sector (van der Berg et al., 2017; Draper and Hofmeyr, 2015). Indeed, a 2017 study of 998 LCPS in Sub-Saharan Africa found that in Abuja, Lusaka, Kampala, and Dar es Salaam, more than 84 percent of the LCPS surveyed were sole proprietorships (Capital Plus Exchange, 2017).

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¹As many studies included in this desk review do not specify the type of LCPS being examined, this report also reviews relevant literature on LCPS more broadly and synthesizes findings and recommendations that apply to sole proprietorships. Further, **unless otherwise specified by the study, it can be assumed that the majority of the schools being considered by general studies on LCPS are sole proprietors**, given the high prevalence of sole proprietor schools in these communities.

The recent rise of LCPS has prompted many researchers to assess the impact of these schools on access and learning outcomes. However, many studies reach drastically different conclusions depending on the country context, regulatory environment, or specific characteristics of the schools evaluated (Day-Ashley et al., 2015; Akmal et al., 2019).

For example, while LCPS aim to create affordable fee structures that target low-income families, studies find mixed evidence that these schools are accessible to families in the lowest-quintile income level who may be unable to afford any fee amount (Akmal et al., 2019). In Kenya, for example, only 3.8 percent of the lowest-quintile families attend private schools compared to 10–30 percent of families in other income brackets (Gruijters et al., 2020). In contrast, other regions have higher percentages of LCPS that reach the lowest-quintile income level, with 16.5 percent of lowest-quintile families in rural India and 10 percent in rural Pakistan and Uganda attending private school (Gruijters et al., 2020).

Other studies have found that LCPS may facilitate greater access and equity by filling gaps in public school provision in hard-to-reach areas. Particularly in non-formal settlement areas, there are not enough public schools to accommodate all school-age children (Zuilkowski et al., 2017). For example, Kibera, a non-formal settlement area in Nairobi, has nearly 55,000 school-age students served by just four public primary schools (Open Schools Kenya, n.d.). In these locations, affordable LCPS are important actors in equitable school provision.

In addition to improving access, research shows mixed results on whether LCPS lead to improved learning outcomes. While some studies show that there is a positive impact on children’s learning outcomes as represented by test scores in math and literacy, others show little or no impact. For example, there is moderate evidence from studies in India (Gruijters et al., 2020), Pakistan (Hafeez et al., 2016), and Kenya (Baum and Riley, 2019) that LCPS succeed in improving learning outcomes, whereas other studies in Peru (Eigbiremolen et al., 2019) and Uganda (Masuda and Yamauchi, 2018) found no impact of private schooling on learning outcomes, especially when controlling for socio-economic status.

Despite these mixed findings in research, the literature on successful LCPS coalesces around a set of common conditions for success that are critical for meeting objectives in education quality and equity. This evidence brief reviews the literature on LCPS at the primary and secondary level to understand the conditions necessary for LCPS to improve learning outcomes for low-income students. Drawing on research findings from a range of contexts, this evidence brief discusses three key conditions for effective sole proprietorships in detail. The brief consists of three sections that synthesize the literature on each condition and provide examples of sole proprietorships to illustrate successes and challenges in implementation in low-income communities. Each section also provides key implications for policymakers to consider when engaging with LCPS.

What conditions are necessary for LCPS to succeed in improving learning outcomes?



1 Partnership with state system and regulatory environment



2 Accountability to informed and connected parents



3 Investments in school leaders and teacher professional development

1. Partnership with state system and regulatory environment

The enabling environment of the state education system can impact whether LCPS are able to successfully provide high-quality teaching and learning, or whether they are hindered in their ability to operate (Day Ashley and Wales, 2015). A positive enabling environment is one in which the government is supportive of LCPS as key actors in education delivery, and where there are clear pathways for strong, mutually beneficial engagement between LCPS and the government. The 2021/2 Global Education Monitoring report finds that governments support LCPS in many ways, such as by paying teacher salaries, providing per-student subsidies, or supporting schools through infrastructure grants, textbooks, technological equipment, and other resources. For example, in Peru, LCPS receive government funding for teacher salaries, equipment, and buildings. The agreement stipulates that schools adhere to government requirements by undergoing regular inspection of facilities and aligning their curriculum and calendar to the public school system (Rossignoli, 2021.) Similar agreements between governments and LCPS in South Africa (van der Berg et al., 2017), Chile (Elacqua et al, 2018), and Pakistan (Ansari, 2020) have been highly effective in ensuring schools meet minimum quality outcomes while providing them with needed financial support. These agreements result in a mutually beneficial partnership in which LCPS can receive resources and support, and governments can hold schools accountable for quality and equity.

School registration is a critical first step that is required for greater government engagement through official channels. Registration is the key mechanism that allows governments to identify LCPS, to allow for engagement, collaboration, and the provision of support.

Despite this, a high percentage of LCPS remain unregistered due to high registration costs and other barriers. A study in five Sub-Saharan African cities found that 56 percent of LCPS were unregistered (CapPlus, 2017). In other locations the number is much higher: in Lagos State, Nigeria, 75 percent of the nearly 20,000 LCPS in the state remain unregistered as of 2021, while in Jharkhand State, India, more than 80 percent are unregistered (GEM Report, 2021, pg. 82). As noted, one of the most common barriers is the high cost of registration requirements often are prohibitive for LCPS (Unterhalter et al., 2018). In many contexts, stringent requirements for registration are focused on high-cost inputs (e.g., new classrooms, infrastructure, and higher teacher salaries) rather than on learning outcomes (Day-Ashley et al., 2020). In addition to costly requirements, in many cases the registration process itself is lengthy, bureaucratic, and burdensome for school proprietors (GEM Report, 2021).

Key Finding:

Registered LCPS see numerous benefits, including opportunities for government subsidies, provision of resources and equipment, and quality assurance.

However, despite these challenges, registration that utilizes official government processes and is focused on key priorities can lead to improved outcomes for disadvantaged students. Examples of how registration can improve outcomes include, but are not limited to, the following outlined below.

Ways in which registration can lead to improved outcomes



- **Ensures registered LCPS meet minimum government standards on school and teacher quality (Elacqua et al., 2018; Steer et al., 2015).** These standards may be inputs-focused or outcomes-focused – e.g., requiring that teachers have a minimum level of experience (inputs), or monitoring test scores (outcomes). This guidance helps schools align on curriculum, ensures teachers are qualified and knowledgeable of the subjects they teach, serves as a vote of confidence for parents, and results in stronger learning outcomes (GEM Report, 2021). Monitoring learning outcomes (test scores) of registered schools can also ensure that targeted support is provided for those schools not meeting minimum requirements (Elacqua et al., 2018).



- **Allows LCPS students to qualify for national exams** which are necessary for continued education (Baum et al., 2018). This helps ensure students can progress to secondary or tertiary education. Requiring that schools take part in standardized exams also holds LCPS accountable to learning outcomes, by ensuring governments have visibility on their students' test scores. For example, in Lagos, Nigeria, registered private schools must adhere to the prescribed national curriculum content, and schools are required to take part in standardized exams (Abdul-Hamid et al., 2015).



- **Helps to ensure admissions processes are transparent and equitable.** While the effectiveness may depend on context and the capacity to manage this process, registration can give governments visibility over admissions and help prevent inequitable practices. For example, the Chilean government has enacted a system whereby families apply for schools and rank their preferences on a platform administered by the Ministry of Education, rather than applying directly to the schools (Elacqua et al., 2018).



- **Provides opportunities for LCPS to collaborate with other organizing bodies, school associations and networks.** For example, in Ghana, registered LCPS can join the Ghana National Association of Private Schools or the Ghana National Council of Private Schools. This association lobbies the Ministry of Education to give LCPS access to national training materials and curriculum, and helps private schools improve their services and align their teaching with government outcome targets (Acholla, 2021).



- **Qualifies schools for government subsidies if they meet learning outcomes targets.** There are many examples of government-administered performance-based subsidies that have resulted in improved outcomes for registered LCPS. For example, in South Africa (van der Berg et al., 2017), registered LCPS can qualify for government subsidies based on minimum test scores, and subsidy amounts are calculated based on the schools' fee-bracket (lower fees qualify for higher per-student subsidies) (Draper and Hofmeyr, 2015; Hofmeyr et al., 2013). Other successful methods of government subsidies that result in improved learning outcomes include teacher bonuses and pay-for-performance incentives (Alves et al., 2015) or school improvement plans using government resources.

Implications for policymakers

Regulation of the non-state school sector must begin with ensuring **registration is both accessible and beneficial for LCPS.**



Accessible:

- **Policymakers should work with local governments to ensure the requirements for registration are affordable for LCPS to meet without increasing their fees.** One method of ensuring registration is affordable may be to encourage regulators to shift the focus from educational inputs (i.e., infrastructure, land ownership, and facilities) to learning outcomes (Baum et al. 2018). While governments still need to ensure minimum quality standards, reducing the burden on the school to comply with expensive inputs can encourage more schools to seek out registration.
- **Ensure that the registration process itself is affordable.** In addition to the cost implications of meeting the registration requirements, outlined above, the registration process itself can also be expensive for LCPS. In some contexts, the registration fee is inaccessible, which can be exacerbated by the additional expenses resulting from a lack of financial transparency and challenges with corruption (Härmä, 2017; Heyneman and Stern, 2014).
- **Implement a phased approach to registration.** Lastly, governments can offer a phased approach to registration, in which schools start by meeting a smaller set of minimum requirements for initial recognition and can then build up in tiers. The first registration tier may be more accessible for small schools with lower administrative and management capacity, with later tiers targeted towards larger schools and school networks. This allows schools with less capacity to build towards full registration rather than needing to comply with the full set of requirements while they are still in early stages.



Beneficial:

- **Policymakers can encourage LCPS to actively seek out registration by providing financial incentives.** By committing a minimum subsidy amount to registered schools in exchange for meeting registration requirements, governments may be able to incentivize new registrations.

2. Accountability to informed and connected parents

Parents and communities serve as an important accountability mechanism to oversee LCPS in the absence of government regulation (Acholla 2021). When LCPS are closely embedded in their communities, studies have found this translates into greater teacher accountability, effort, and lower rates of teacher absenteeism (Grujters et al., 2020; Day- Ashley and Wales, 2015; Mbiti, 2016). Creating a culture of trust between parents and the school – in which parents are encouraged to provide feedback to school leadership, and schools are open to engaging with parental input – can lead to significant improvements in accountability and learning outcomes (Read and Atinc, 2016; World Development Report, 2018).

Key Finding:

Unregistered schools without official accountability mechanisms to the government can remain accountable by building strong relationships with community parents.

For parents to successfully hold schools accountable, they must be informed and empowered to engage with school leaders and teachers. This can be a challenge in many low-income communities, particularly when parents have not attended school themselves, where there are limited appropriate tools to assess school quality (van der Berg et al., 2017). As such, studies have found that providing parents with direct information on a school's performance via school-level and student-level score cards successfully increases student attendance and learning outcomes (de Hoyes et al., 2015; Baum et al., 2014; Mbiti 2016). For example, in Pakistan, Andrabi et al. (2017) found that the provision of school "report cards" to parents resulted in increased student learning outcomes. In another study in Uganda, parents designed their own school scorecard, supported by facilitated discussions on how to define progress, roles, and objectives. The program significantly improved student test scores (Barr et al., 2012).

Implications for policymakers

Develop a culture of shared information and trust between parents and schools: Promoting the active involvement of parents to hold schools accountable is an effective way of improving outcomes. This can be achieved by equipping parents with information on school quality, and by building a culture of open communication between schools and parents. Sole proprietor schools can promote this information-sharing by engaging parents in school management committees, facilitating parent-teacher meetings at the school, and openly disseminating school-level data. These strategies of open engagement with parents have been shown to have a positive impact on learning outcomes (Barr et al., 2012; Day- Ashley and Wales, 2015; Baum et al., 2014; Mbiti 2016).

Encourage government policies to actively disseminate information to parents: In addition to parent engagement at the community level, governments can also play a role in ensuring data on student learning outcomes is shared with parents. Government policies to disseminate information about a school's performance to parents – for example, in Mexico (de Hoyes et al., 2015) – are found to improve learning outcomes (Elacqua et al., 2018). However, as these policies require sole proprietor schools to be registered, it is important that community-led information dissemination for unregistered schools continues alongside government-led policies.

3. School leadership and teacher professional development

Teacher quality and an enabling learning environment are critical factors that have been found to significantly improve learning outcomes. However, one of the most persistent challenges in LCPS is recruiting and retaining highly qualified teachers (Mcloughlin, 2013) given that the low-cost structure of these schools requires them to pay lower, less competitive teaching salaries. Therefore, investing in continuous teacher training and professional development is critical to ensuring LCPS sole proprietorships succeed in improving learning outcomes (Crawfurd, 2017; Cimini et al, 2020). Research has highlighted a variety of teacher training methods that all effectively improve learning outcomes, including peer-to-peer and cluster approaches (Adeyanju, 2016; Ayodele and Govender, 2018), train-the-trainer cascade models (NORC, 2019), individualized coaching and mentorship (Rizvi and Nagy, 2015), and training in student-centered pedagogies

Key Finding:

Investing in continuous teacher training and professional development is critical to ensuring LCPS improve learning outcomes.

such as teaching at the right level (Banerjee et al. 2016). These programs are of particular importance in LCPS in lieu of official government teacher certification programs.

A strong school leadership plays a large role in creating a school environment that empowers and invests in its teachers. Proprietors of LCPS have a unique opportunity to design and implement effective teacher professional development activities, as they often have more autonomy to do so than in public school settings (Scur et al., 2018). Ensuring that school leaders in LCPS also have access to training and support is an essential component in school quality. Rather than focusing on administrative tasks, research has found that school leaders training is most effective when it focuses on how to give constructive feedback to teachers through coaching and mentorship (Nannyonjo, 2017; Fryer, 2017; Cimini et al., 2020; Sampat et al., 2020). When school leaders prioritize teacher mentorship, this also helps them create a positive school culture where teachers are intrinsically motivated – a culture that results in lower rates of teacher absenteeism, greater engagement in the classroom, and improved learning outcomes (Endow, 2018; Education Development Trust, 2017; Hallinger and Lee, 2014).

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Case Study: The Dignitas Project

The Dignitas Project in Kenya is a successful case study of how sole proprietor community schools can improve learning outcomes through accountability to parents, a strong school leadership, and commitment to teachers. Dignitas works with sole proprietor schools founded at the community level, and provides tailored support to school proprietors in the form of leadership training and parental involvement. Since 2011, Dignitas has supported 186 community schools and trained 1,029 teachers and school leaders (Dignitas, 2020). Dignitas uses a bottom-up approach that aims to empower community members, parents, and staff, and as a result has seen improved school quality and learning outcomes for disadvantaged students in Kenya (Rees, 2014).

First, Dignitas invests in school leaders through their one-year fellowship program called the Leadership Institute. Participants enter a three-week course in leadership training, in which Dignitas works one-on-one with targeted school administrators, teachers, and community leaders on professional development and technical assistance via on-site coaching. The training course features topics such as emotional intelligence, school and classroom goal setting, strategies for driving student performance and outcomes, and leadership ethics in addition to more technical areas such as lesson planning, pedagogy and financial management (Rees, 2014).



Photo source: *Opportunity International*

Alongside this, Dignitas also invests in community parents and encourages schools to foster relationships with parents as allies in their children's education. Parents are encouraged to work together with school leaders to develop a school rubric to inform parents of their schools' progress. Likewise, school leaders are encouraged to actively involve parents in the school's decision-making and development planning (Rees, 2014). This whole-of-community approach to Dignitas partnerships ensures that schools are accountable to parents and that parents are informed and invested in the schools' activities. Further, this approach ensures that teachers receive adequate training while fostering a sense of community so that teachers feel committed to their school and school leaders.



Photo source: *Opportunity International*

Implications for policymakers

Enhance teaching quality through flexible, whole-of-community approaches: Ensuring teacher quality translates into learning outcomes for disadvantaged students is not a one-size-fits-all approach in sole proprietor schools. While government regulation can be an important tool, it is essential that these regulations still give school leaders the freedom to work with and train their teachers as they see fit. In many cases, teacher training programs in community schools are most successful when they incorporate a whole-of-community approach, involving school leaders, teachers, and parents in creating a strong school culture that translates directly into learning outcomes for students.

Encourage governments to proactively engage with sole proprietor schools: Governments should work in partnership with LCPS to support their community-based teacher training and development. Governments can support sole proprietor schools in numerous ways, such as by subsidizing teacher performance incentives, extending free teacher training provided in public schools to teachers in LCPS, making standardized curriculum widely available to LCPS, and considering school leaders in their approaches to regulation. In short, enabling trust and accountability structures between school leaders, teachers, parents, and governments is essential in ensuring LCPS improve learning outcomes for disadvantaged students.

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About the Education Finance Network

The Education Finance Network convenes diverse education stakeholders with a focus on directing non-state resources toward creating inclusive, high-quality education in low- and middle-income countries globally.

The Network is open to a broad range of organizations, including foundations and family offices, donors, impact investors, practitioner networks, and research and advisory organizations. It provides members with opportunities to network, engage the public sector through policy forums, work on technical issues and trends affecting the sector through focused working groups, access members' only research, and participate in professional development.

For more information, including how to apply to become a member, go to: <https://www.edu-links.org/about/global-engagement/education-finance-network>

This report was authored by:

Natalie Davirro, Research and Knowledge Manager for the Education Finance Network, Opportunity International.

Questions? Please submit any questions to educationfinance.network@dalberg.com

The executive committee members
who advise and support the Network are:



Dalberg





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