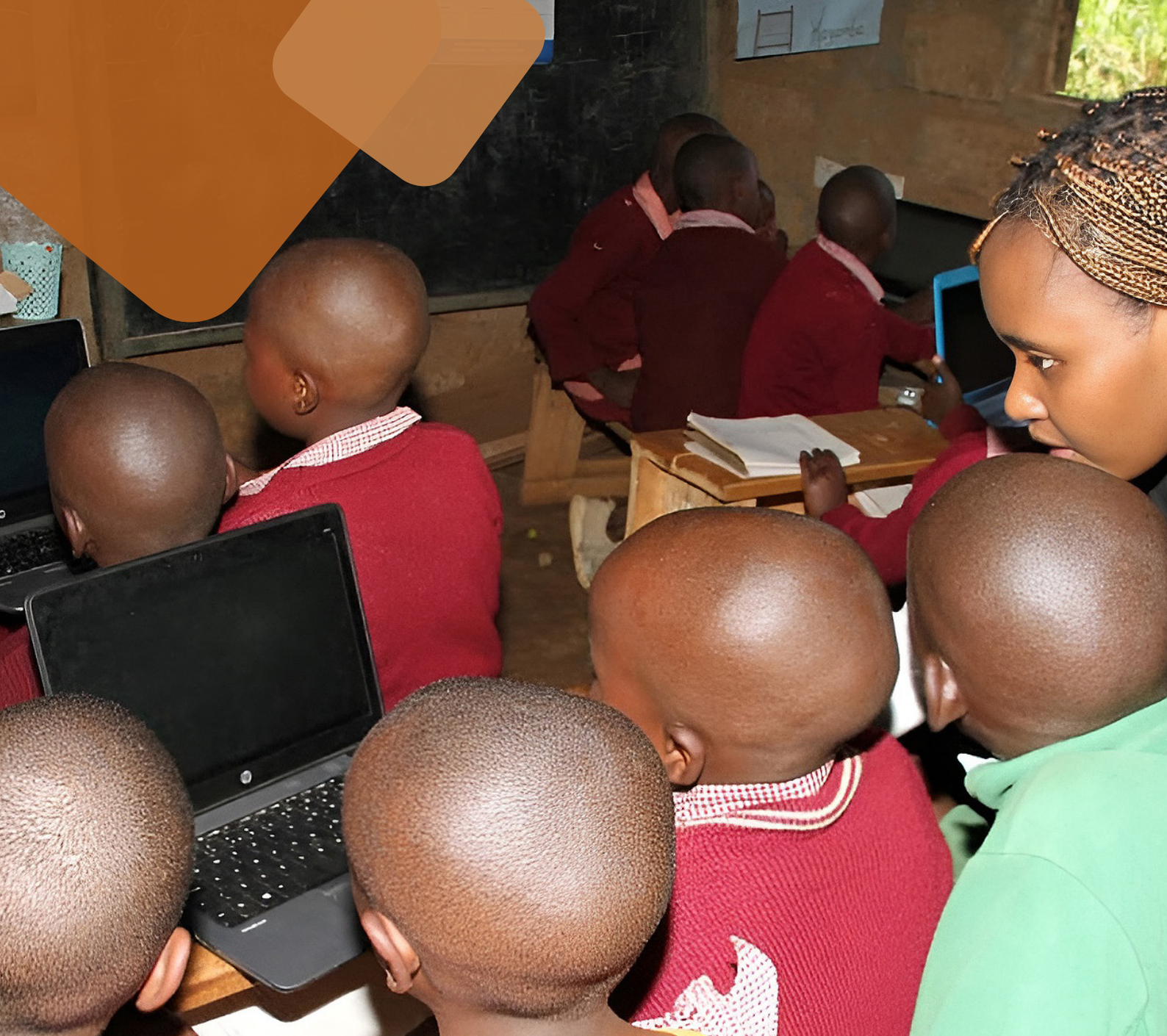




Equal Class Sizes for Equal Learning:

Addressing Staffing Inequities in Kenya's Primary Schools

UAPB-001-2025 | POLICY BRIEF



Evidence | Innovation | Engagement



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Quick Facts



1 Counties with Higher Learner/Teacher Ratios (PTRs), have lower literacy proficiency attainment rates, while counties with lower PTRs, have higher literacy proficiency attainment rates.

2 Arid and Semi-Arid Lands (ASALs) regions face the worst teacher shortages.

3 Public-school teachers bear the burden of large class sizes compared to their private-school counterparts.

Acknowledgements

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Introduction

Teachers play a pivotal role in quality of education delivery. Their availability and training directly impact the quality of education learners receive. One of the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4's most critical indicators is 4.c.12, which tracks the proportion of teachers receiving the minimum organised training required for teaching. It is generally accepted that well-trained teachers contribute to equitable education for all learners, thus their importance cannot be gainsaid.

Yet teacher shortage remains a major global challenge.¹ The 2024 Global Education Monitoring (GEM) Report on teachers estimates that to meet the SDG 4 targets by 2030, the world requires an additional 44 million primary and secondary school teachers. Sub-Saharan Africa will need the largest additional number of teachers approximated at 17 million by 2030 in light of the region's rapid population growth (UNESCO, 2024). This underscores the urgent need for targeted policies and investments to address both current and anticipated teacher shortage.

Kenya, like many other countries, grapples with teacher shortage and inequitable distribution of those available (FLANA, 2023). According to the Teachers Service Commission (TSC), the country had a teacher shortage of 111,870 teachers in 2024. This shortage could only get worse with increasing number of learners in schools, the transition to the Competency-Based Education (CBE), which includes new learning areas requiring specialised teachers, and budget constraints limiting the government's ability to increase the number of teachers in tandem with their growing demand. In the face of these challenges, the government of Kenya through the TSC has implemented various policies and programmes to address this shortage.

In 2017, TSC implemented a new policy on appointment of heads of institutions, resulting in transfer of head teachers across counties to promote national integration and enhance functional efficiency and accountability. The policy provides that no head teacher will serve in their home county.² In 2019, the government introduced Teacher Internship Programme³ recruiting college graduates and deploying them to schools facing significant shortage. To enhance equitable allocation, the government uses affirmative action, offers hardship allowances and local recruitment incentives in marginalised regions.

The government has partnered with development partners such as the World Bank and UNICEF to enhance teacher recruitment and professional development, besides continuing to allocate funds annually to TSC for hiring new teachers.

These efforts notwithstanding, teacher shortage and inequitable deployment persist. The introduction of the Competency-Based Education (CBE), which by design requires smaller class sizes in 2017 has exacerbated the situation. This is further worsened by infrastructural deficits that often force school heads to cram together more learners than the number provided by the Ministry of Education guidelines on class sizes (45 learners)⁴. With TSC implementing the staffing norm of one teacher per class plus an extra 2.5% of the total number of classes in the school (often one additional teacher), infrastructural deficits lead to staffing problems for the schools. The policy on the number of classes, defined as actual **number of distinct groupings** of learners poses two significant problems:

1. When school heads are forced to cram learners together, the number of classes reduces and the concerned schools become eligible for fewer teachers than they deserve. Teachers in such schools are overburdened with huge class sizes besides the practical challenges of navigating congested classes during lessons. These two disadvantages magnify each other's effect to significantly undermine the ability of many schools to offer quality education.
2. The recent revision of the class size in the Ministry of Education guidelines to 45 learners, up from the previous 40 learners to one teacher, which was in line with the global standard⁵, at the point when the government is implementing the transition to CBE misaligns the needs of the schools and the policy framework. This misalignment has the potential to undermine efforts to address the staffing gaps that continue to impinge on quality education.

The perceived policy misalignments and empirical evidence of great disparities in teacher distribution are the main motivations for this policy brief. The brief shares available evidence to spotlight these issues and herald conversations on the possible solutions (some of which are proposed herein), to these problems.

1 Global Education Monitoring Report. 2024. Leadership in education: lead for learning <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000391406.locale=en>

2 Teachers Service Commission. 2017. Policy on appointment and deployment of institutional administrators. <https://www.tsc.go.ke/index.php/downloads-bj-file/301-policy-on-appointment-and-deployment-of-institutional-administrators-1>

3 Teachers Service Commission. 2020. Teacher Internship policy and guidelines 2019.

4 Ministry of Education. 2021. Registration Guidelines for Basic Education Institutions.

5 Ministry of Education. 2021. Registration Guidelines for Basic Education Institutions.

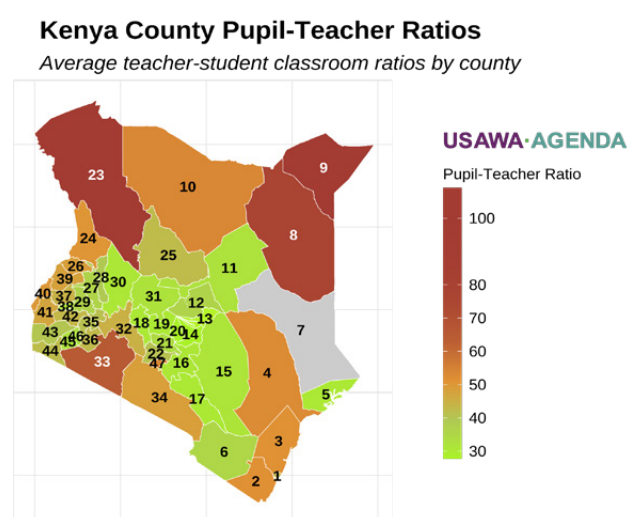
Key Findings

The evidence shared in this policy brief is curated from the Foundational Literacy and Numeracy Assessment (FLANA) data collected from over 39,000 children aged 6 – 15 years and over 1,700 primary schools (both public and private) spread across all counties of Kenya in June/July 2023. This brief contains only the main highlights relevant to the subject of staffing our schools.

ASALs Regions Bear the Brunt of Teacher Shortages

Average learners-teacher ratios by county

Figure 1



Source: Usawa Agenda FLANA, 2023 Database

Notes: Higher values indicate more learners per teacher in the classroom. Garissa County (7) was not included in this analysis.

Figure 1 shows distribution of PTRs⁶ by county. Counties with the highest PTR are shown by darker shades of brown while those with the lowest are shown by lighter shades of green. Generally, the Arid and Semi-Arid Lands (ASALs) counties, particularly in the north of the country have the highest PTRs, while those in the centre of the country have the least PTRs. These regions are also generally variously referred to as “hard-to-staff” or “hard-to-reach” regions. While it has become normal to refer to them as such, deeper thinking about these phrases raises important policy questions about staffing of our schools and generally the commitment to guaranteeing every Kenyan child access to the same quality of education.

For instance, when referring to these regions as hard-to-reach, the question that we don’t reflect on is reach

from where? This question reflects a centre-periphery approach to staffing schools, which is reinforced by the distribution of PTRs as reflected in the map in Figure 1. It is important to reflect on this map against the teacher hiring and deployment policies and guidelines, and in some cases even teacher training and use of technology in closing gaps in PTRs to enhance just access to quality education for all children.

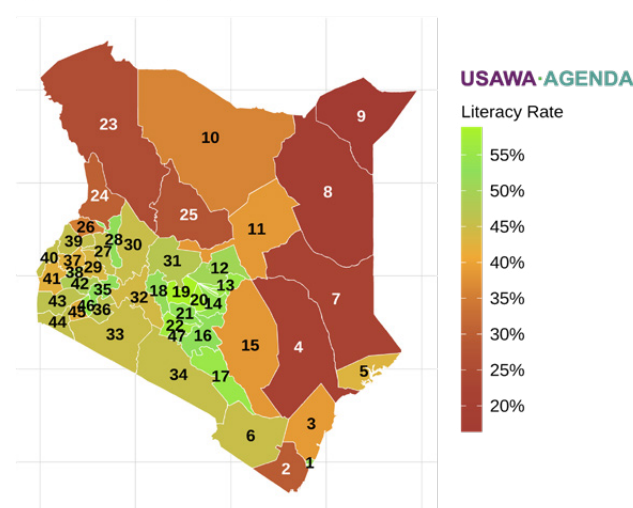
National Foundational Literacy Proficiency Distribution

Average foundational literacy proficiency rates by County

Figure 2

Kenya County Literacy Rates

Literacy rates by county



Source: Usawa Agenda FLANA, 2023 Database

Notes: Literacy rate is defined as percentage of children aged 6 -15 years who can read for meaning, a grade three English story.

Figure 2 shows the distribution of literacy proficiency achievement by children aged 6-15 years across the country. The lighter shades of green indicate the highest average proficiency levels, while darker shades of brown indicate the lowest average proficiency levels.

Reading Figures 1 and 2 together highlights the fact that the national foundational literacy proficiency achievement follows the distribution of adequate number of teachers across counties. Counties with higher learner/teacher ratios such as Turkana and Mandera, also have lower literacy proficiency attainment rates. Conversely, counties such as Nyandarua, Murang’a and Kiambu with lower PTRs have higher percentages of children achieving literacy proficiency. This confirms the well-established wisdom that adequate, well-trained and well-motivated teachers are critical for children’s learning. A closer

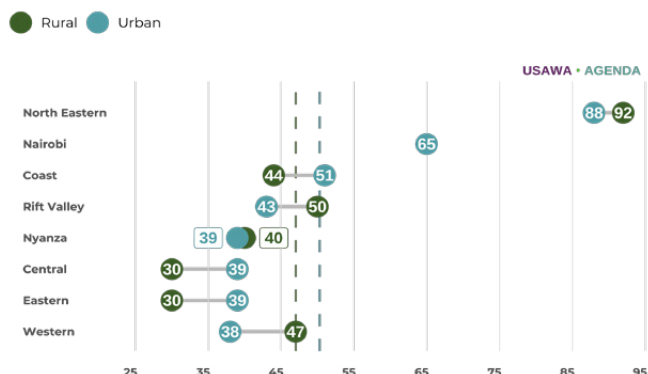
⁶ For public schools, PTRs are computed using the permanent and pensionable teachers posted by the TSC only.

review of the two maps, however, underscores the fact that learning outcomes are driven by more factors than the PTRs as reflected in the imperfect mapping of the least PTRs to the highest average literacy proficiency achievement levels by counties.

North Eastern Region has an Extreme Learner/Teacher Ratio

Mean PTR by region in Kenya's public primary schools

Figure 3



Source: Usawa Agenda FLANA, 2023 Database

Notes: The PTR is computed based on permanent and pensionable TSC-posted teachers.

Schools in the North Eastern Region suffer the greatest burden of teacher shortage, with average PTRs of 92 learners per teacher in rural schools and 88 learners per teacher in urban schools as shown in Figure 3. Nationally, the average PTR for urban schools is higher (51 learners/teacher) than the average PTR for rural schools (47 learners/teacher). In Nairobi Region, which is entirely urban, the average PTR is 65 learners per teacher. The higher PTRs in urban schools could be explained by the fact that generally urban public schools are bigger in size than their rural counterparts.

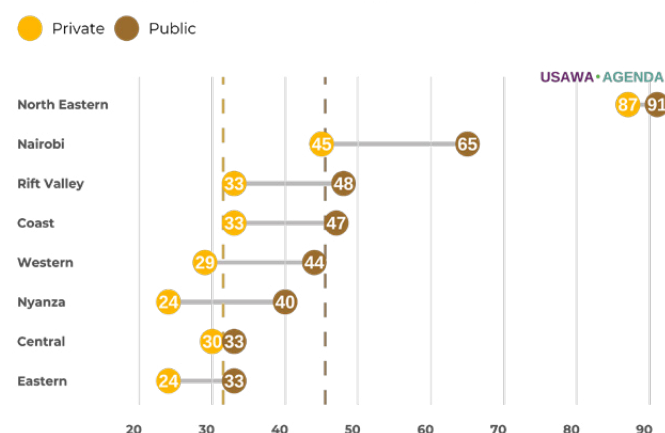
Four of the seven regions with both rural and urban schools, have lower average PTRs for urban schools than for rural schools. These are Western, Rift Valley, North Eastern and Nyanza regions. The remaining three regions — Central, Eastern and Coast have higher average PTRs for urban schools than for rural schools.

Going by the PTRs, it may seem like all the regions except for North Eastern and Nairobi are adequately staffed with Nyanza, Eastern, Central and Rift Valley having better PTRs for both urban and rural schools than the national averages. However, analysis of the map in Figure 1 underscores intra-regional disparities that are masked by the regional-level averages. This has implications for equitable deployment of teachers across the country, especially to the historically marginalised regions of the country as well as pockets within regions that are otherwise considered privileged.

Public-School Teachers Bear the Burden of Big Class Sizes

Mean PTR by type of Kenya's primary school

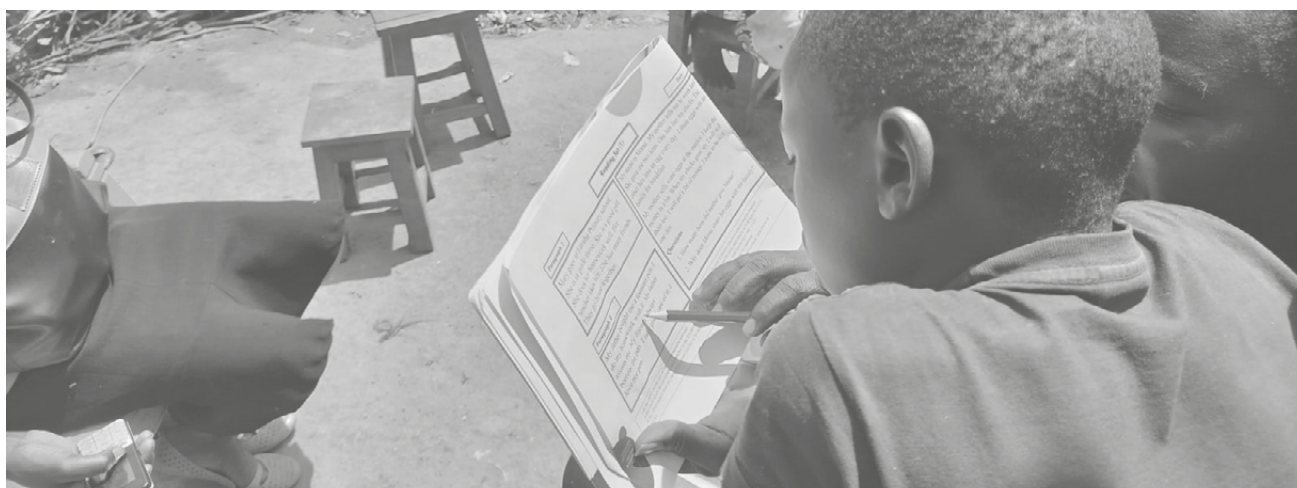
Figure 4



Source: Usawa Agenda FLANA, 2023 Database

Notes: The PTR for public schools is computed based on TSC-posted teachers. The dashed lines mark the national averages within each category.

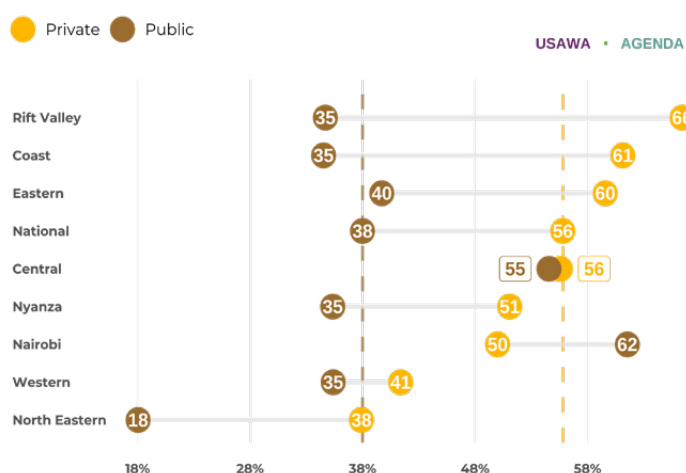
Figure 4 compares average PTRs in public and private schools across regions. The North Eastern Region has the worst average PTRs for both public (91 learners/teacher) and private (87 learners/teacher) schools. In the context of CBE implementation, such numbers are alarming, as they undermine the ability of the teachers to deliver the curriculum as designed and the achievement of its goals. Nationally, private schools have smaller class sizes with an average of 32 learners per teacher, compared to public schools which have an average of 45 learners per teacher. This disparity is most pronounced in Nairobi Region, which besides having the second largest private-school average PTR (45 learners/teacher), also has the widest gap between the public and private schools average PTRs. On average, there are 20 more learners per teacher in public schools compared to private ones in Nairobi. This is an interesting finding that requires further investigation given that most public-school teachers desire to be posted to Nairobi. Central Region on the other hand has the narrowest gap in the average PTRs between private and public schools, with just 3 more learners per teacher in public schools.



Public Schools Trail Private Ones in Literacy Except in Nairobi

Percentage of literacy-proficient Grade 4 learners by region

Figure 5



Source: Usawa Agenda FLANA 2023 Database

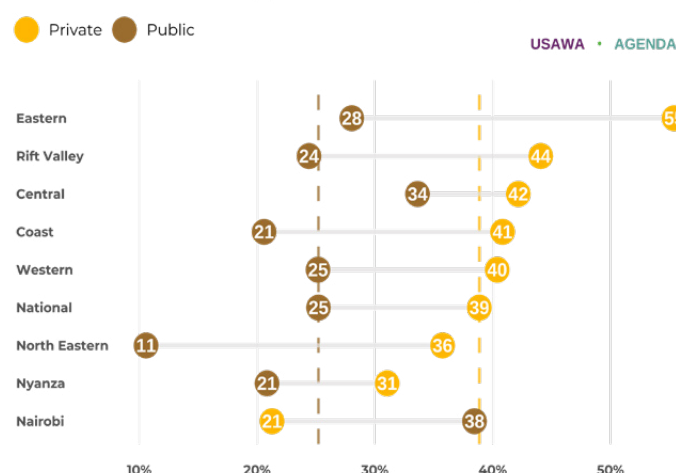
Notes: Dashed lines mark national averages within each category

Higher proportions of private-school Grade 4 learners achieve literacy proficiency than their public-school counterparts in all regions of Kenya, except Nairobi, as shown in Figure 5. Intra-region school type-based achievement differences range from 1 percentage point in Central Region to 31 percentage points in Rift Valley Region in favour of private-school learners, and 12 percentage points in Nairobi Region in favour of public-school learners. There is significant disparity between regions. A private-school Grade 4 learner in the Rift Valley Region is almost twice as likely to be literacy-proficient as his/her counterpart in the North Eastern Region. A public-school Grade 4 learner in Nairobi Region is more than three times as likely to be literacy-proficient as his/her counterpart in the North Eastern Region. Nationally, 56% of private-school Grade 4 learners are literacy-proficient compared to 38% of their public-school counterparts.

Public Schools Trail Private Ones in Numeracy Except in Nairobi

Percentage of numeracy-proficient Grade 4 learners by region

Figure 6



Source: Usawa Agenda FLANA 2023 Database

Notes: Dashed lines mark national averages within each category.

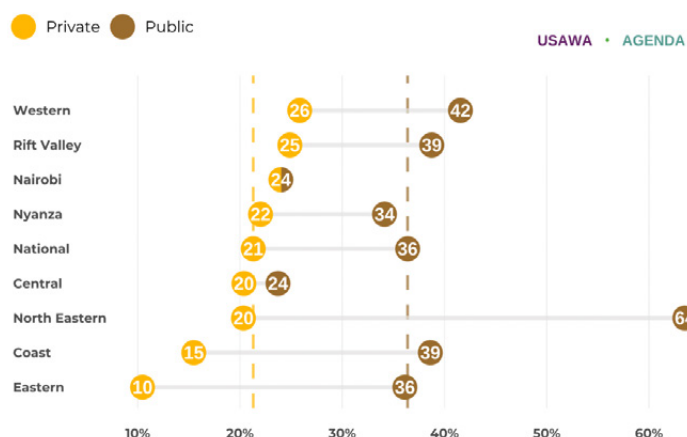
Higher proportions of private-school Grade 4 learners achieve numeracy proficiency than their public-school counterparts in all regions of Kenya, except Nairobi as shown in Figure 6. Intra-region school type-based achievement differences range from 10 percentage points in Nyanza Region to 27 percentage points in Eastern Region in favour of private-school learners, and 17 percentage points in Nairobi Region in favour of public-school learners. There is significant disparity between regions. The Eastern Region has the highest proportion of private-school Grade 4 learners achieving numeracy proficiency (55%) while Nairobi Region has the least proportion of private-school Grade 4 learners achieving numeracy proficiency (21%). On the other hand, Nairobi Region has the highest proportion of public-school Grade 4 learners achieving numeracy proficiency (38%), while North Eastern Region has the least proportion of

public-school Grade 4 learners achieving numeracy proficiency (11%). Nationally, 39% of private-school Grade 4 learners are numeracy-proficient compared to 25% of their public-school counterparts.

Public Schools Produce Most School Leavers Who Can't Read

Percentage of Grade 6 learners not achieving foundational literacy proficiency by region

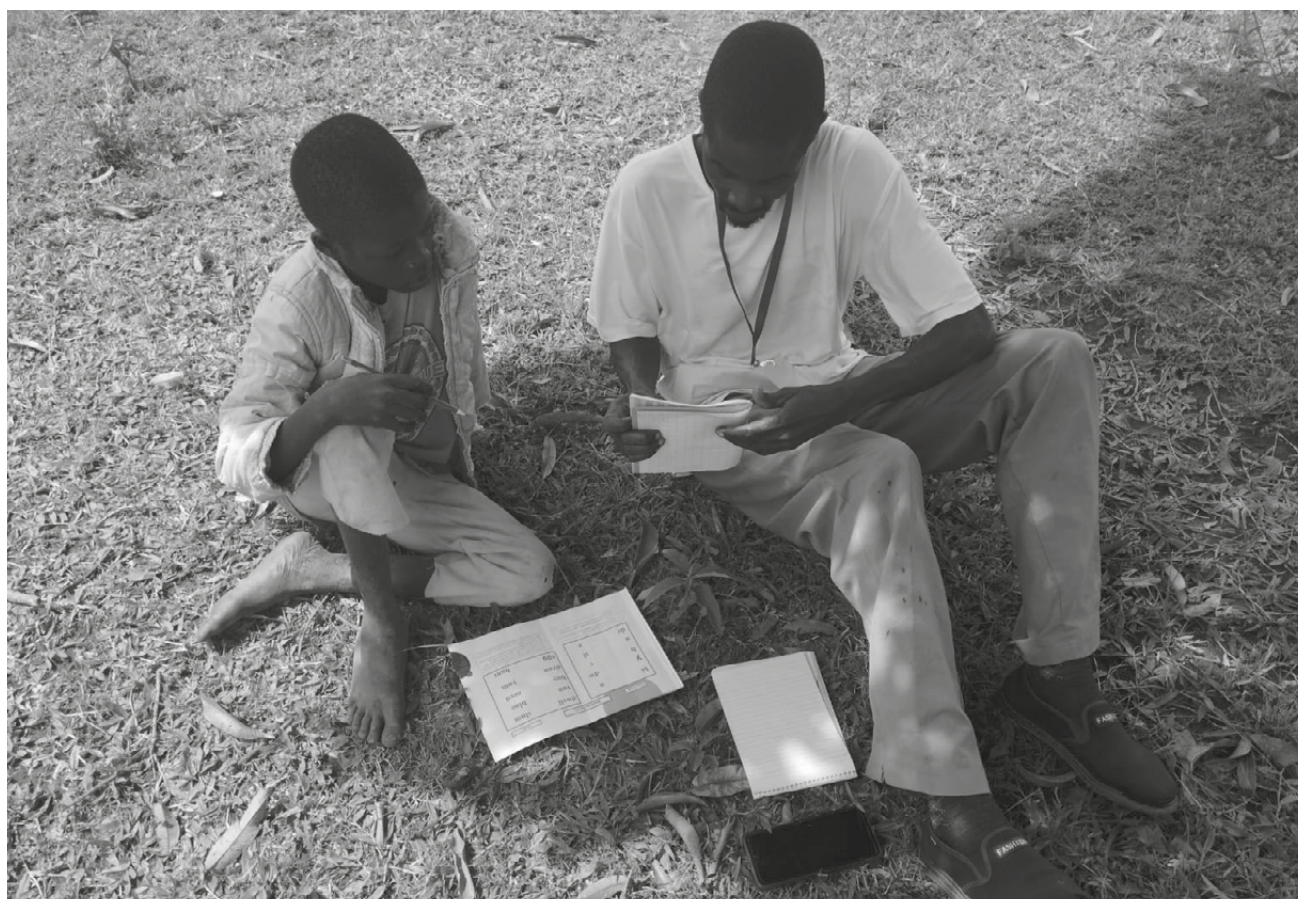
Figure 7



Source: Usawa Agenda FLANA 2023 Database

Notes: Dashed lines mark national averages within each category.

Higher proportions of public-school Grade 6 learners failed to achieve foundational literacy proficiency than their private-school counterparts in all regions of Kenya except Nairobi, as shown in Figure 7. Intra-region school type-based differences range from 4 percentage points in Central Region to 44 percentage points in North Eastern Region in favour of private-school learners, and less than 1 percentage point in Nairobi Region in favour of public-school learners. There is significant disparity between regions. A public-school Grade 6 learner in the North Eastern Region is almost three times as likely to complete primary education without achieving foundational literacy proficiency as his/her counterpart in Nairobi Region. Nationally, 36% of public-school grade 6 learners are likely to complete primary education without achieving foundational literacy proficiency compared to 21% of their private-school counterparts.



Conclusion

Four important deductions can be made from this analysis:

1. There is discernible misalignment among two important teacher-focused policy documents: class size policy; and staffing norms. The misalignment implies a systemic disconnect between policy formulation and implementation, with insidious potential to undermine provision of just access to quality education for all children across the country.
2. Inequity in the distribution of teachers across public schools persists in spite of all the measures hitherto implemented by the government to remedy the situation.
3. Teacher shortage almost directly translates into low foundational learning attainment.
4. The high level of teacher shortage in Nairobi's public schools calls for further investigation of the situation.

Call to Action

1. Urgently review the class size policy, factoring in the needs of effective implementation of the CBE. Redefine the number of classes in schools as the total number of learners in a school divided by the official class size, rather than the actual number of groupings of learners, which may be driven by resource constraint, to ensure accurate measurement of teacher shortage. This is necessary to inform resourcing of hiring and deployment of additional teachers.
2. Amend the TSC Act 2013, to make it obligatory for TSC to ensure balanced and just distribution

of teachers across the country. This should include putting at the disposal of TSC a revised incentives structure by borrowing from other public service sectors in the country, and from other jurisdictions with which to ensure that each region is adequately served by the right numbers of teachers with sufficient skills and experience, and motivation. The incentives structure should encompass: enhanced hardship allowances; enhanced security in insecurity-prone areas; faster career progression while serving hardship areas; and enhanced stipend for interns serving in hardship areas.

3. Review school establishment guidelines, factoring in the process, rigorous scientific needs assessments to inform setting up of any new public school. Enhance the advisory role of TSC in the process to centre teacher availability as complementary to the needs assessment in the decision to establish new public schools. Provide for consolidation of small public schools operating within close proximity of each other to optimise both teachers and infrastructural resources.
4. The policy on appointment of heads of institutions remains valid on paper, but has since been abrogated in practice by way of parliamentary directive. The current parliament directed TSC to redeploy school heads back to their home counties on claims of the policy as written being punitive and amenable to abuse by the teachers' employer. Yet this policy remains an important tool in TSC's toolbox in fixing teacher shortage. Review this policy to replace not working in home counties with not working in home sub-counties for school heads and include not working in home wards for teachers who are currently not covered in the delocalisation policy.

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