



Six Years to 2030: Are Kenyan Children Falling Behind Global Literacy and Numeracy Learning Achievement Targets?

UAPB-002-2025 | POLICY BRIEF

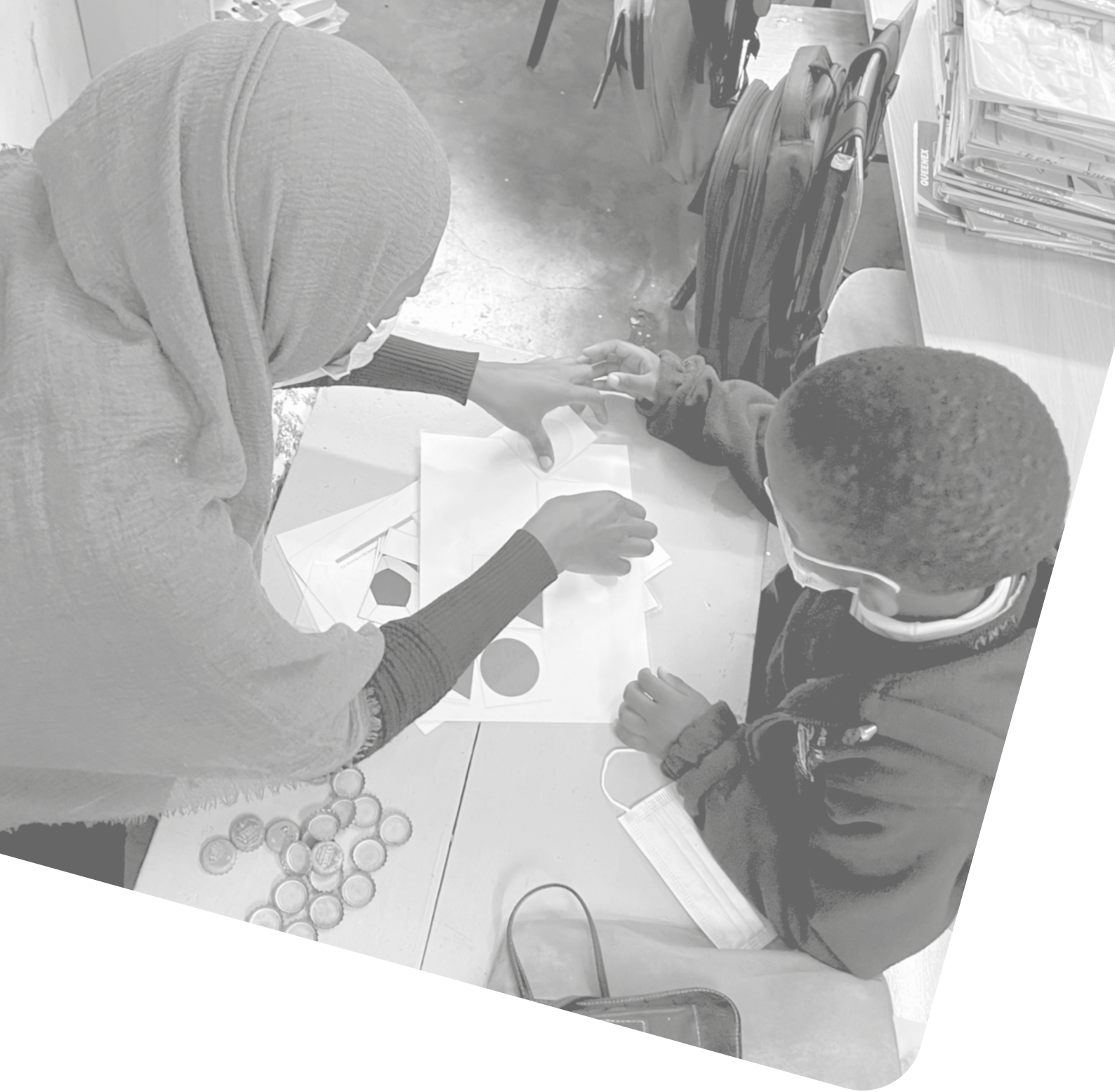
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Quick Facts



1 A significant proportion of learners are progressing through primary school without acquiring foundational skills, with only 4 in 10 of them demonstrating literacy proficiency and 3 in 10 demonstrating numeracy proficiency.

2 Foundational level learners in rural areas, urban informal settlements and Arid and Semi-Arid Lands (ASALs) areas form the majority of those falling behind in literacy and numeracy skills acquisition.

3 Girls outperform boys in foundational literacy and numeracy across most regions, except Nairobi and North Eastern, but there are wider within-gender differences than those between genders.

4 Learners attending private schools outperform those in public schools across the country except in Nairobi Region in literacy and numeracy outcomes. Grade 4 public-school learners in Kenya underperform their private-school counterparts in all regions except Nairobi.

Acknowledgements

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Introduction

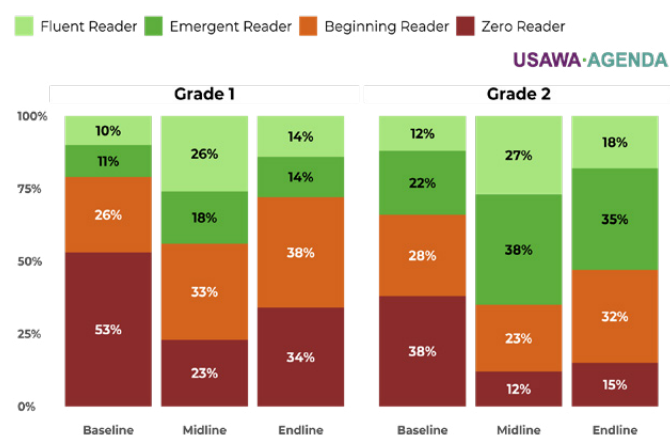
The deadline for countries to achieve the targets for the Global Agenda 2030 education goals, encapsulated in the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 is fast approaching. This is intensifying questions as to whether countries, especially those in the developing world, are on track to achieving these goals. Countries in the developing world are under greater scrutiny with respect to their investments towards the realisation of these global goals, mostly because they are home to the largest percentage of the children falling behind. Kenya is one of the countries in danger of failing to achieve the global targets for foundational literacy and numeracy despite the country standing out for spending the largest percentage of its budget on education.

In cognisance of this, the government of Kenya has collaborated with different development partners over the past 15 years to implement a variety of initiatives aimed at alleviating this danger. In 2011, Kenya in partnership with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) implemented the Primary Math and Reading (PRIMR) initiative¹ as an experiment to determine the most cost-effective solution to closing the foundational literacy and numeracy skills gaps among school-aged children.

Following the success of PRIMR, the government partnered with USAID, DFID (now FCDO) and RTI International to implement at national scale, the *Tusome* Programme² (2014 – 2020), which sought to improve reading proficiency. The *Tusome* programme evaluation report³ highlights in figure 1 below its success in improving English literacy between the baseline and the endline levels. But it also shows less than 100% retention rate of the skill as indicated by higher midline proficiency levels than those at the endline.

Reading Improvements Decay from Midline

Figure 1: Percentage of children at each level of reading proficiency



Source: Tusome External Evaluation Endline Report

The PRIMR initiative also yielded a national project focused on improving foundational numeracy skills at scale — the Primary Education Development (PRIEDE)⁴ project. The PRIEDE project (2015-2019) was co-funded by the Global Partnership in Education (GPE) and the Ministry of Education. The project had two objectives:

1. To improve early grade mathematics competencies among learners; and
2. To strengthen management systems at school and national levels.

The endline evaluation report of this project is yet to be made public, but the evidence from Usawa Agenda data suggests a marginal positive impact on foundational numeracy achievement by learners.

While these improvements have been noted, three critical problems persist:

1. Foundational numeracy and literacy levels among children aged 10 years are still low;
2. The improvements in learning levels are inequitably distributed; and
3. The improvements seem to decline after the interventions.

There is no doubt that Kenya is among the countries falling behind on the set SDG 4 targets, especially indicator 4.1.1, which focuses on the “proportion of children and young people (a) in grades 2/3; (b) at the end of primary; and (c) at the end of lower secondary achieving at least a minimum proficiency level in (i) reading and (ii) mathematics, by sex.”⁵ It is also a well-documented fact that children in rural, poor, urban

1 USAID/Kenya Primary Math and Reading (PRIMR) Initiative https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/pa00k282.pdf

2 Supports literacy development throughout Kenya and fosters a reading culture among grades 1, 2, and 3 learners including children with visual and hearing impairments <https://riseprogramme.org/blog/aligning-your-system-is-key-reaching-your-education-goals-case-tusome-kenya.html>

3 Keaveney, E., C. Fierros, A. Rigaux and A. Menendez. 2021. Tusome External Evaluation Endline Report. https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/pa00XVBP.pdf

4 <https://www.education.go.ke/sites/default/files/2022-05/STAKEHOLDER-CITIZEN-ENGAGEMENT-ANALYSIS-REPORT.pdf>

5 11 Global Indicators SDG 4 <https://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/11-global-indicators-sdg4-cheat-sheet-2018-en.pdf>

informal settlements and historically marginalised communities in Kenya receive comparatively lower quality of education as epitomised by lower learning outcomes.⁶ Yet “...no country can improve overall learning outcomes without tackling the ‘tail’ of its learning distribution....”⁷, which in Kenya’s case, is very thick.

These considerations seem to have informed the design of the recently launched but now suspended, Kenya Primary Literacy Program (KPLP)⁸. The 79 million USD project was a partnership between the USAID⁹ (funder), Education Development Centre, Inc. (implementer) and the Ministry of Education, which convenes key stakeholders supporting foundational learning to deliver enhanced reading interventions across the country. These key stakeholders include: Teachers Service Commission (TSC); Semi-Autonomous

Government Agencies (SAGAs); and collaborative development partners. The six-year project (2023-2028) was clearly building on the successes of *Tusome* and aiming to achieve three main objectives:

1. To improve pupils’ learning outcomes through enhanced literacy instruction and targeted approaches reaching learners in vulnerable situations;
2. To strengthen education institutions and systems to sustainably deliver quality education services and use data to inform decision-making; and
3. To enhance community and family support for learning by educating caregivers and facilitating youth-led after-school support.

This programme was situated within the Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) (now Competency-Based Education), which the government has been implementing since 2017. It reflected the comprehensive approach to education that sought to involve a wider spectrum of stakeholders, including parents and community members. If it had been implemented fully as designed, it had the potential to close the literacy gap as we approach the year 2030.

6 Bold, T., M. Kimenyi, G. Mwabu and J. Sandefur (2010). Does abolishing fees reduce school quality? Evidence from Kenya, CSAE working paper WPS/2011-04, retrieved on (14/08/2020) from: <http://www.csae.ox.ac.uk/workingpapers/pdfs/csae-wps-2011-04.pdf>

7 Mundy, K and S. Hares (2020). Equity-Focused Approaches to Learning Loss during COVID-19, <https://www.cgdev.org/blog/equity-focused-approaches-learning-loss-during-covid-19> (Accessed on 05/08/2020).

8 The Kenya Primary Literacy Program Fact Sheet. <https://www.usaid.gov/kenya/fact-sheets/kenya-primary-literacy-program>.

9 Currently in limbo due to policy changes in the USA.

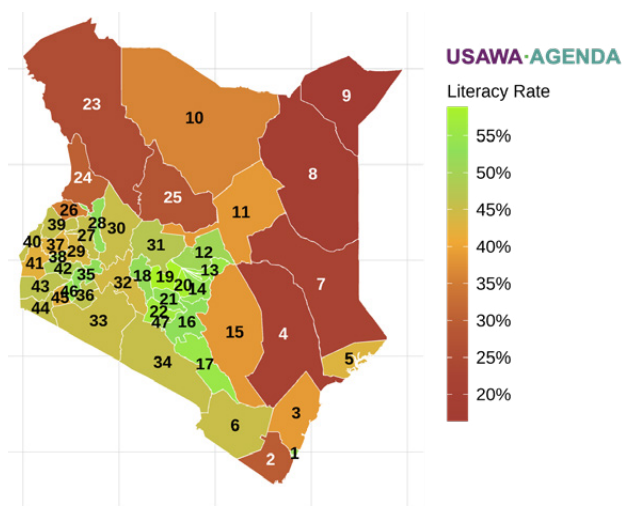
Key Findings

In literacy, the percentage of children of school-going age meeting minimum proficiency ranges from as low as 16% in some counties to a maximum of 58% in others as shown in figure 2. Arid and Semi-Arid Lands (ASALs) counties generally have the least proportions of their children meeting proficiency levels. This highlights geographic disparities that severely hinder equitable progress. Over half of primary school-age children in many counties are progressing through grades without acquiring the foundational literacy skills necessary for future educational success.

Differences in literacy and numeracy skills among 10-year-old children in Kenya's regions by residence in 2023 are shown in figures 3 and 4. In both cognitive skills, urban learners outperform their rural counterparts. Central and Eastern regions have the highest achievement levels, while the North Eastern region trail from far behind. Across all regions, proficiency levels are lower in numeracy than literacy, with stark differences between urban and rural areas.

National Foundational Literacy Proficiency

Figure 2: Foundational literacy rates by County

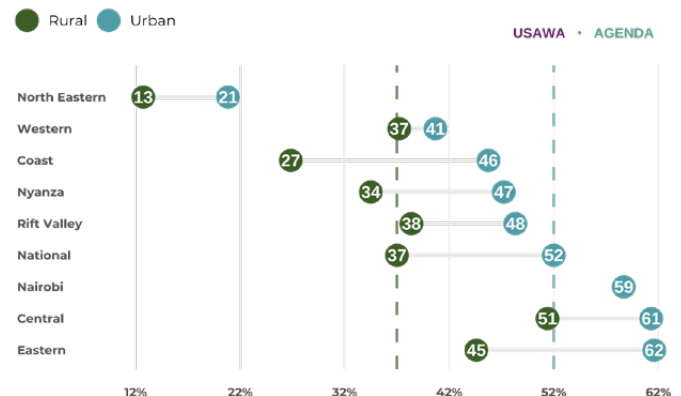


Source: Usawa Agenda, FLANA, 2023

Notes: Literacy is defined as percentage of children aged 6 -15 years who can read for meaning, a Grade 3 English story.

Urban Children Have Greater Literacy Proficiency

Figure 3: Percentage of children aged 10 years with literacy proficiency by region and residence



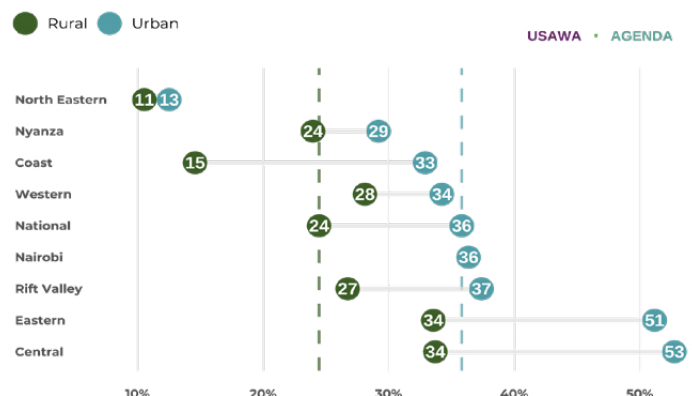
Source: Usawa Agenda FLANA 2023 Household Database

Notes: Dashed lines mark national averages within each category

In all regions¹⁰ of Kenya, higher proportions of children aged 10 years in urban areas achieve literacy proficiency than their rural counterparts, as shown in figure 3. The within-region differences in achievement rates between 10-year-old children in rural and urban areas in literacy range from 4 percentage points in Western Region to 19 percentage points in Coast Region. There is significant disparity between regions. A 10-year-old child in an urban area of the Eastern Region is almost three times as likely to be English literacy-proficient as his/her counterpart in the North Eastern Region. Similarly, a 10-year-old child in a rural area of Central Region is more than four times as likely to be English literacy-proficient as his/her counterpart in the North Eastern Region. Nationally, 52% of 10-year-old children in urban areas achieve English literacy proficiency compared to 37% of their counterparts in the rural areas.

Urban Children Have Greater Numeracy Proficiency

Figure 4: Percentage of children aged 10 years with numeracy proficiency by region and residence



Source: Usawa Agenda FLANA 2023 Database

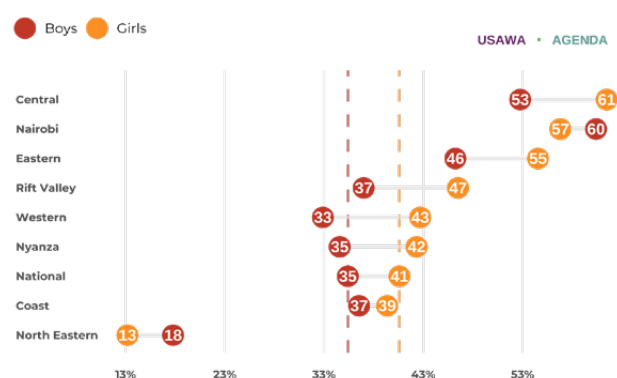
Notes: Dashed lines mark national averages within each category.

¹⁰ Kenya has 8 administrative regions, each of which comprises several counties, except for Nairobi Region, which has only one county.

Higher proportions of children aged 10 years in urban areas achieve numeracy proficiency than their rural counterparts across Kenya, as shown in figure 4. The within-region differences in achievement rates between 10-year-old children in rural and urban areas in numeracy range from 2 percentage points in North Eastern Region to 19 percentage points in Central Region. There is significant disparity between regions. The North Eastern Region underperforms all other regions, while the Central Region has the highest achievement levels in both rural (34%) and urban (53%) areas. Nationally, 36% of 10-year-old children in urban areas achieve numeracy proficiency compared to 24% of their counterparts in the rural areas.

Girls Lead in Literacy Except in Nairobi and North Eastern

Figure 5: Percentage of literacy-proficient children aged 10 years by region and gender



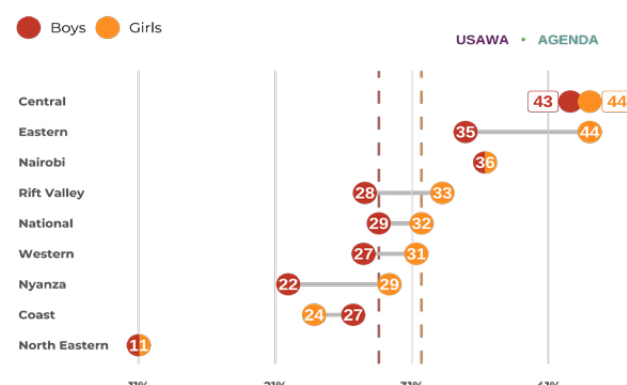
Source: Usawa Agenda FLANA 2023 Database

Notes: Dashed lines mark national averages within each category

Higher proportions of girls aged 10 years achieve literacy proficiency than 10-year-old boys in all regions of Kenya except Nairobi and North Eastern, as shown in figure 5. Within-region gender-based achievement differences range from 2 percentage points in the Coast Region to 10 percentage points in Western and Rift Valley regions in favour of girls, and 3 percentage points in Nairobi to 5 percentage points in North Eastern regions in favour of boys. There is significant disparity between regions. A 10-year-old girl in Central Region is more than four times as likely to be English literacy-proficient as her counterpart in the North Eastern Region. Similarly, a 10-year-old boy in Nairobi Region is more than three times as likely to be English literacy-proficient as his counterpart in the North Eastern Region. Nationally, 41% of 10-year-old girls achieve English literacy proficiency compared to 35% of 10-year-old boys.

Girls Lead in Numeracy Except in Coast and Nairobi

Figure 6: Percentage of numeracy-proficient children aged 10 years by region and gender



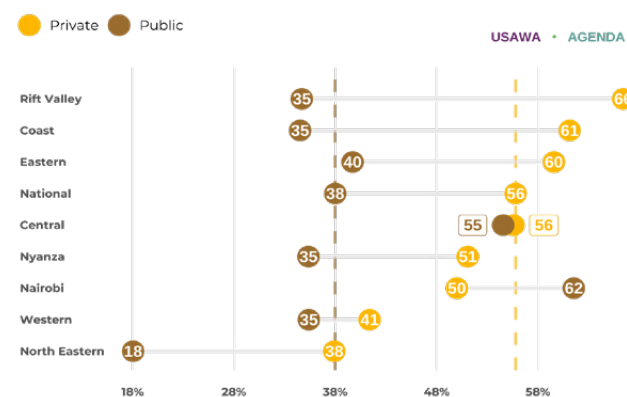
Source: Usawa Agenda FLANA 2023 Database

Notes: Dashed lines mark national averages within each category.

In all regions of Kenya, except Coast and Nairobi, higher proportions of girls aged 10 years achieve numeracy proficiency than boys, as shown in figure 6. Within-region gender-based differences range from 0 percentage point in Nairobi Region to 9 percentage points in Eastern Region in favour of girls, and 3 percentage points in Coast Region in favour of boys. There is significant disparity between regions. The Central Region has the highest achievement rate for both boys and girls aged 10 years old, while the North Eastern Region has the least achievement rate for both groups of children in numeracy proficiency. A 10-year-old girl in Central Region is four times as likely to be numeracy-proficient as her counterpart in North Eastern Region. Nationally, 32% of 10-year-old girls achieve numeracy proficiency compared to 29% of 10-year-old boys.

Private Schools Lead in Literacy Except in Nairobi

Figure 7: Percentage of literacy-proficient Grade 4 learners by region and school type



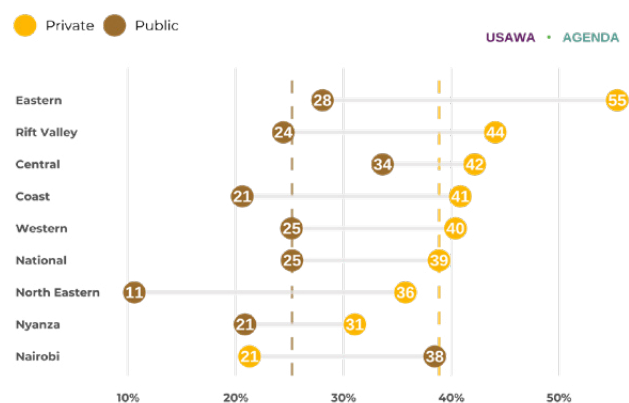
Source: Usawa Agenda FLANA 2023 Database

Notes: Dashed lines mark national averages within each category.

Higher proportions of Grade 4 learners in private school achieve literacy proficiency than their public-school counterparts in all regions of Kenya, except Nairobi, as shown in figure 7. 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 learners in private schools, and 12 percentage points in Nairobi Region in favour of learners in public schools. There is significant disparity between regions. A Grade 4 learner in a private school in the Rift Valley Region is almost twice as likely to be literacy-proficient as his/her counterpart in the North Eastern Region. A Grade 4 learner in a public school 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 Grade 4 learners in private schools achieve literacy proficiency compared to 38% of their public-school counterparts.

Private Schools Lead in Numeracy Except in Nairobi

Figure 8: Percentage of numeracy-proficient Grade 4 learners by region



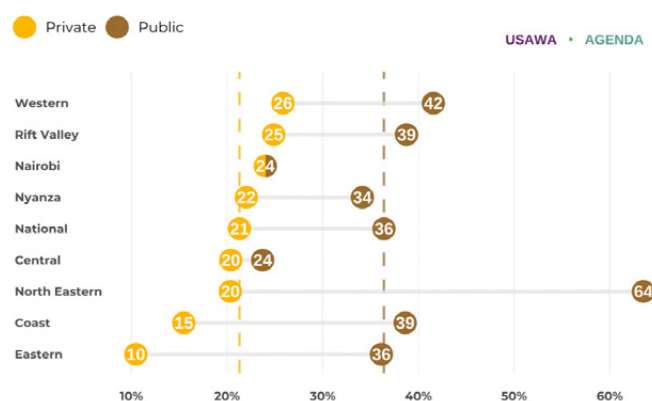
Source: Usawa Agenda FLANA 2023 Database

Notes: Dashed lines mark national averages within each category.

Higher proportions of Grade 4 learners in private schools achieve numeracy proficiency than their public-school counterparts in all regions of Kenya, except Nairobi as shown in figure 8. 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 learners in private schools, and 17 percentage points in Nairobi Region in favour of learners in public schools. There is significant disparity between regions. The Eastern Region has the highest proportion of Grade 4 learners in private schools achieving numeracy proficiency (55%) while Nairobi Region has the least proportion of Grade 4 learners in private schools achieving numeracy proficiency (21%). On the other hand, Nairobi Region has the highest proportion of Grade 4 learners in public schools achieving numeracy proficiency (38%), while North Eastern Region has the least proportion of Grade 4 learners in public schools achieving numeracy proficiency (11%). Nationally, 39% of Grade 4 learners in private schools achieve numeracy proficiency compared to 25% of their public-school counterparts.

Public Primary School Leavers Trail their Private School Counterparts in Literacy

Figure 9: Percentage of Grade 6 learners not achieving foundational literacy proficiency by region and school type



Source: Usawa Agenda FLANA 2023 Database

Notes: Dashed lines mark national averages within each category.

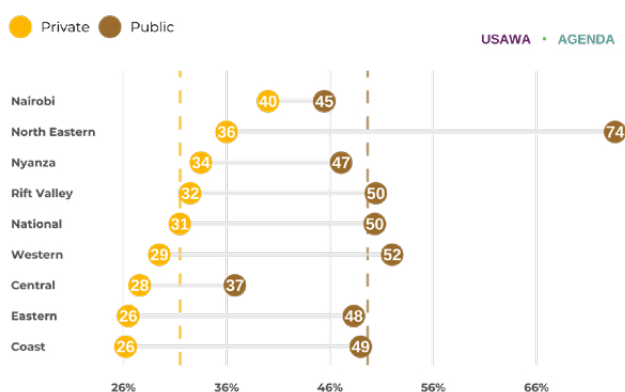
Higher proportions of Grade 6 learners in public schools fail to achieve foundational literacy proficiency than their private-school counterparts in all regions of Kenya except Nairobi, as shown in figure 9. Intra-region school type-based differences range from 4 percentage points in Central Region to 44 percentage points in North Eastern Region in favour of learners in private schools, and less than 1 percentage point in Nairobi Region in favour of learners in public schools. There is significant disparity between regions. A Grade 6 learner in a public school in 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 Grade 6 learners in public schools are likely to complete primary education without achieving foundational literacy proficiency compared to 21% of their private-school counterparts.





Public Primary School Leavers Trail their Private School Counterparts in Numeracy

Figure 10: Percentage of Grade 6 learners not achieving foundational numeracy proficiency by region and school type



Source: Usawa Agenda FLANA 2023 Database

Notes: Dashed lines mark national averages within each category.

Higher proportions of Grade 6 learners in public schools fail to achieve foundational numeracy proficiency than their private-school counterparts in all regions of Kenya as shown in figure 10. Intra-region school type-based achievement differences range from 5 percentage points in Nairobi Region to 38 percentage points in North Eastern Region in favour of learners in private schools. There is significant disparity between regions. A Grade 6 learner in a public school in the North Eastern Region is twice as likely to complete primary education without achieving foundational numeracy proficiency as his/her counterpart in Central Region. Nationally, 50% of Grade 6 learners in public schools are likely to complete primary education without achieving foundational numeracy proficiency compared to 31% of their private-school counterparts.

Conclusion

Four important deductions can be made from this analysis in cognisance of the underlying context:

1. The country is falling behind the 2030 global targets on foundational literacy and numeracy. Internally, children from different regions of the country, of different genders and attending different types of schools are achieving differently. Nairobi Region stands out as the only region where learners in public schools outperform their counterparts in private schools. This is concerning because public schools constitute the majority of schools in the country and educate the largest majority of children, including all the vulnerable groups. Their underperformance, therefore implies unfavourable learning outcomes for the most vulnerable children. The better performance of public schools in Nairobi County should ordinarily, therefore, be a good thing, but it is not. The reason being that Nairobi has only a few public schools and a proliferation of low-cost private schools which, operate in the informal settlements targeting children from socio-economically underprivileged households.¹¹ The majority of children in the city live in the informal settlements¹², yet by virtue of being in the low-cost private schools they never benefit from government support, including the interventions aimed at promoting foundational literacy and numeracy. The continued exclusion of these children from government support and the nebulous government policy on such schools is a major handicap to the government's effort to achieve SDG 4 foundational learning targets.
2. The nation-wide underachievement in foundational literacy and numeracy of learners attending public primary schools in comparison to those attending private primary schools raises a question of accountability of the public school system.
3. There have been significant interventions to remedy the problem of low foundational literacy and numeracy levels: **Tusome** programme and now frozen KLP targeting to improve literacy proficiency attainment; and PRIEDE targeting to improve numeracy proficiency attainment. The concluded interventions resulted in discernible improvements, but their impacts were not sustained beyond the life of the projects.
4. While acquisition of both literacy and numeracy are falling behind, acquisition of numeracy skills is falling further behind the targets than literacy. Yet currently, even though frozen, there is a new programme to improve the acquisition of foundational literacy skills among the learners and none for foundational numeracy.

Call to Action

In light of these conclusions, we make four calls to action:

1. Urgently initiate a new programme to promote foundational numeracy skills acquisition. This programme should include learners in low-cost private schools since these schools are generally attended by the urban poor, who are also among the children falling furthest behind in learning achievement. Seek alternative funding to ensure implementation of the KLP and review it to include the learners in low-cost private schools. Both models should include lessons from the limitations of **Tusome** and PRIEDE with respect to sustainability of their impact beyond their implementation period.
2. Review the Ministry of Education policy on low-cost schools (previously Alternative Provision of Basic Education and Training schools), to resolve the conundrum that has persisted for a long time with respect to the affected children's constitutional right to quality education guaranteed by the state. Evidence shows that the children attending the schools are falling furthest behind and slowing the country's progress towards achievement of the global targets on foundational literacy and numeracy.
3. There is an urgent need to enhance the accountability of the public primary school system. We call for a review and enhancement of the role of parents and their association in the management of public primary schools to hold school leaders to account, but also to close the loop in the tripartite child-parent-teacher collaboration for learning. This must be accompanied by the support for parents associations to become effective interlocutors with school heads and their well-established association.
4. Review and enhance state resourcing of basic education in the ASALs regions, urban informal settlements and rural areas of Kenya. Through partnerships with development partners and non-state actors, deepen and widen programmatic interventions in these areas to accelerate learning there to improve the country's chances of meeting the global targets by 2030.

11 MoE. 2015. Registration Guidelines for Alternative Provision of Basic Education and Training (APBET). [https://www.google.com/search?q=registration+guidelines+for+alternative+provision+of+basic+education+and+training+\(apbet&rlz=1c5gctcm_en&oq=registration+guidelines+for+alternative+provision+of+basic+education+and+training+\(apbet&gs_lcrp=egzjahjvbwuybggaeuyothcaeqiripajihcaiqriripatibctq5njqnmgoxnagcclacaq&sourceid=chrome&ie=utf-8](https://www.google.com/search?q=registration+guidelines+for+alternative+provision+of+basic+education+and+training+(apbet&rlz=1c5gctcm_en&oq=registration+guidelines+for+alternative+provision+of+basic+education+and+training+(apbet&gs_lcrp=egzjahjvbwuybggaeuyothcaeqiripajihcaiqriripatibctq5njqnmgoxnagcclacaq&sourceid=chrome&ie=utf-8)

12 Most children reside in the informal settlements, where there are mostly no public schools.

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