

Free Primary Education and After in Kenya: Enrolment impact, quality effects, and the transition to secondary school

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Summary

Following on earlier work in which the national-level impact of the 2003 Free Primary Education programme and its two predecessors was explored, this study uses local-level information gathered during field visits to a small group of case-study primary schools to complement and extend the previous analysis.

First, we examine the local-level effects of FPE 2003. These varied widely from school to school. At two high-impact schools, acute shortages of teachers, physical facilities and learning materials brought about by massive enrolment increases had led to severe ‘quality shock’, from which neither school had recovered at the time of our initial visit in 2007. Both schools are located in Nairobi, and both draw their pupils almost entirely from low-income families. By contrast two low-impact schools had employed barriers which protected them from the effects of FPE; one through the levying of charges for additional facilities; the other by requiring Grade 1 recruits to have completed a pre-primary course at the school’s own, fee-charging, facility. So pupils at these ‘high-barrier’ schools, one in Nairobi the other in Nyeri District, come almost entirely from relatively-prosperous families.

Second, we enquire into the secondary-school transition patterns among the pupils who graduated from our case-study schools at the end of 2007. Partly as a consequence of the introduction of the Free Secondary Education programme at the beginning of 2008, the overall transition rate was high and relatively uniform. But when the data were disaggregated to take account of the type of secondary school entered, substantial differences emerged. Because of their relatively weak performance in the selection examination, the majority of graduates from the rural primary schools, and from urban schools serving low-income families, moved into low-status district secondary schools. By contrast, those from urban schools serving middle-income catchments were more likely to enter a higher-status provincial secondary school. Access to the top-status national secondary schools was largely preempted by graduates from the three private primary schools we had included in our case-study group.

We then examine the future consequences likely to follow from the type of secondary school the primary graduate enters. Data from the secondary-school leaving examination results for Central Province indicate that a typical graduate from a national school has a better-than-even chance of qualifying for a regular place at a public university; compared with a chance of about one-in-twelve for a typical provincial-school graduate. The district-school graduate, by contrast, is a rank outsider: his or her chances are typically no better than about one in 200. So the majority of the graduates from the rural primary schools, and urban schools serving low income communities, have virtually no chance of qualifying for university after completing their secondary education – unless by fortunate circumstance their families have the resources to meet the high fees demanded by the parallel university programme.

In the final section we consider implications of the study for policy. It is suggested that at the highimpact primary schools, remedial measures be introduced to counter the effects of the ‘quality shock’ they experienced following FPE in 2003. It is also suggested that consideration be given to the introduction of a secondary-school quota system, either by setting a maximum limit to the proportion of private-school graduates accepted to each national and provincial school; or alternatively by setting a minimum limit to the proportion of leavers accepted from each public primary school to the higherstatus secondary schools. However the fundamental issue is that of quality; and no quota system will help resolve it. Without sustained measures to strengthen teaching and learning in the classroom, it is likely that the performance gap between the public and private primary schools will continue to widen.

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