

Is it time to Abolish Boarding Schools in Kenya?

Charles G. Manyara

Radford University, Geospatial Science Program, Radford, VA 24142, USA

Email: cmanyara@radford.edu

In 2019 the Ministry of Education inaugurated the Competency Based Curriculum (CBC). The following year (June 2020), a Taskforce was announced to undertake a critical analysis of the national rollout of the CBC and advise the minister on key implementation issues. At the core of the changes is a strategic plan to transition from basic/primary to tertiary education and training by 2029, including infrastructural and human resource requirements. Among the proposed changes in the taskforce report was the scrapping of boarding in all (junior) secondary schools.

According to the report, boarding facilities will be reserved for a few institutions that will admit learners across the country to pursue various pathways in senior secondary schools as envisioned under the new system. Using this model, learners will spend two years in pre-primary education, six in primary, three in junior secondary, three in senior secondary school and another three in university (tertiary institution), dubbed 2-6-3-3-3 education system. All children leaving Grade Six, at the end of primary education, will be required to enroll in a nearby secondary school for the three-year junior secondary education (Grades 7, 8 and 9), which will be domiciled at the high school level. Students will be required to enroll in secondary schools within a radius of about five kilometers from their place of residence. The recommendation was based on the understanding that most primary schools have a nearby secondary school, making it easier to transition children to available spaces in adjacent facilities.

The proposal to abolish boarding schools is in line with the views of the former Kenya National Union of Teachers (KNUT) Secretary General, Mr. Wilson Sossion, an ardent voice in boarding school abolition in Kenya (Siele, 2020). Sossion wrote an opinion piece in 2020 in which he stated that boarding schools had outlived their usefulness and argued that it was time to reform Kenya's education system to completely day schools and be accessed at the local level. This recommendation was not just at the secondary level, but also from kindergarten to Grade 12. His view is an interesting development in the history of education reforms, but it is not new. The Koech Commission of 1999 (GOK, 1999) stressed the need to make secondary education more accessible through the establishment and expansion of more day schools. The reason behind this was to reduce costs and hence increase access to secondary education. The reality is that many developed countries, like Britain that introduced (boarding) schools in Kenya, have fully adopted the day school system as the prime mode of secondary (junior and senior) schooling.

Both the 2020 Taskforce and Sossion converge on the idea that it is time to run public schools from nursery to Grade 12 locally and together. It is doable. In fact, in many localities for every other primary school, there is a nearby high school. Furthermore, almost all elite schools, some of which run the British and USA education systems, have no option than to contain lower and upper or secondary (and in some case Advanced) levels in the same institutions. For instance, Brookhouse School (in Langata and Runda) operates a co-educational day and boarding school, which offers nursery, primary and secondary schooling. This same approach is used at St. Andrews Turi School that admits children aged five to thirteen in the Preparatory school and thirteen to nineteen at the senior school and college level. Similarly, Greensteds International School (in Nakuru), which is a private day and boarding school, serves children from Early Years Foundation

Stage (EYFS) to sixth form (senior schools).

So, what does Sossion mean by outdated ‘usefulness’ of boarding schools? In my view that goes back to the history of boarding schools and the purpose they served then and now. Most well-established boarding schools are a legacy of British colonial engagement with the natives. The colonial administration and the church policed the cultural protocols and competencies in pedagogic institutions designed to shape young minds to suit the imperial policies and their self-fashioned rationalities. Mission schools got funding to help mold Africans into craftsmanship and other skill sets. Those in the confines of boarding schools adopted better. Kenya’s past experience was not different from boarding schools for native ‘Indians’ in the USA that were built with the clear intention of assimilating them into the mainstream American way of life and intended to eradicate all vestiges of Indian culture (Lewy, 2004; NPRA, 1993). The Indian Residential School (IRS) system in Canada did the same by destroying native languages, religions, and cultures (Triffterer, 2001). It is, therefore, time to have an education system responsive to the unique needs of Kenya and its people in the 21st century.

The post-independence expansion of boarding schools was born out of the need to meet the competitive job market and admission to the best schools available. The haste for parents to send their children to boarding schools picked up in the 1970s and more so in the 1980s. The prevailing perception in Kenya is that anyone wishing to raise successive children ought to send them to a boarding school as *harambee* schools and private schools mushroomed.

Parents send their teenagers to boarding schools primarily for better education and to learn to live independently. It is also true that some parents send their children away because they cannot handle them. We saw how unmanageable some children became during the COVID-19 lockdown. The need and desirability of boarding schools has continued unabated, particularly at the secondary school level. Zachariah and Joshua (2016) did a study to test whether there was a significant difference in availability of study time, between day and boarding schools. Their results indicated that boarding schools generally performed better than day schools. Boarding school students enjoy more than double the time per week with teachers, coaches, and staff members outside class than private day and public-school students. They also found that more than 50% of the learners in boarding schools had better supervisory support, study room facilities, and twice as much time for their studies during the week and about three times on weekends.

Apparently, while parents may desire their children to benefit from the culture of discipline and structure of boarding environments, these students miss out on valuable time with their families. The desire for academic success through boarding school is justified; however, it is also true that the long-extended isolation of children from society makes it harder for them to learn and appreciate their culture, relationships and bond with their families. The role of the family in a child’s formative years cannot be duplicated by an educator. Scholars in epigenetics explain that children’s physical, cognitive, and emotional health is shaped, in part, by their environments in those early years. As Sossion (2020) argues, “The socio-psychological effects of parental separation with their children at a tender age extend into adulthood and manifest as violent or abusive people, emotional detachment and passive-aggressive behaviour.” Granted, some parents see boarding schools as a way out of their busy and hectic day-to-day lives, but the effects from missing out on raising their children are irreversible. Holidays and weekends cannot make up for the lost quality family time. Likewise, boarding school experiences can neither replace the parents’ nurturing care of their children nor instil proper upbringing. Unfortunately, it breaks the most

sacred and fundamental of all human ties: the parent-child bond.

The boarding school mania and the associated success still grips society. Maina (2020) in her opinion piece, “Educating Kenyan children for productive citizenry: Cultural relevance in curriculum development,” observes that “The question to ask then is whether the focus on passing national examination is a detriment to Kenya’s ability to harness the human resource endowed in our children by labelling them as failures while inflating the sense of achievement for those who pass the exams based on access to more resources and social class!” Do we *really* need to go on like this? In fact, the 2020 Taskforce recommended that the Kenya Certificate of Primary Education (KCPE) be scrapped.

Boarding schools universally are known to inculcate elitism and corrupt young minds (Turner, 2015). Scutts (2018) argues that when students are separated from their families at a tender age, some develop what psychotherapists call “Boarding School Syndrome,” a defensive and protective encapsulation of the self in which they learn to hide emotion, fake maturity, and assert dominance over anyone weaker. Alumni of the elite Eton School in Britain are famed for identifying each other with the ancient joke or question, “Did you go to school?” as though there is only one school worthy of the name (Bullmore, 2020; Verkaik, 2018). That culture of success associated with some of these well established and often elite boarding schools is quietly creeping into the Kenyan society. No offence to the reader, but those who attended expensive private schools (like Brookhouse School, Peponi School and Saint Mary’s School or ‘national’ public schools such as Alliance, Nairobi School and Maseno School) are synonymous with success. Day local schools as proposed will level the playing ground.

With the abolition of boarding schools nationwide, bullying, too, will come to an end. Even though bullying was illegal, endemic and structural in most boarding schools, especially amongst boys, it affected some students’ individual performance. More concerning also is that those who were bullied considered school life unsafe, had increased risk of depression, and had low self-esteem tendencies that progressed into adulthood (Mutiso et al., 2019). Such students are apt to be anti-social, break school rules and are generally defiant or oppositional towards adults.

Recent spontaneous strikes and suspected arson cases occurred at boarding schools or schools that combined day and boarding students, most of which were at all-boys and mixed schools. Sossion (2020) believes boarding schools are a security hazard. A key finding by a team formed to investigate a spate of cases of school unrest in 2016 was that boarding schools are criminal training groups that shield children from the reality of life. The team report recommended that the rational alternative would be a meaningful transformation of day schools, if they were made more attractive through adequate funding, provision of qualified and motivated teachers, and restore sanity in public schools.

Aspects of the misconduct among students in boarding schools can be understood by reflecting on the excessive expectations placed on students by both schools and parents. Studies have shown that boarding schools put unnecessary pressure even on the best students and are not, therefore, an ideal place for academically weak students. So clearly the pressure is on all students. It is no surprise then that arson cases in schools spike around national exam time.

The transformation of boarding to day schools may also be timely in a country whose economy is struggling. Studies have shown that it is costlier to run boarding schools in the country despite the high rate of learners in day schools. When free Primary Education was introduced in 2003 (MoEST, 2003), it led to a steady growth in net school enrolment in basic education (from

Early Childhood Development Education (ECDE) to 12th grade). The report on the Taskforce on Affordable Secondary Education in Kenya (Ministry of Education, 2007) indicated that among the challenges facing secondary education were: (1) lack of enough and quality day schools many of which lacked essential facilities, (2) high cost of secondary education, and (3) longer distance to school. In 2008 Free Day Secondary Education (FDSE) was introduced (GOK, 2012) to cut down on the cost of education, especially on parents and to give children access to basic education. Since then, the Ministry of Education releases FDSE funds to schools at a capitation rate.

With all that is ailing boarding schools, day schools are not a panacea. The idea that by 2029 most Kenyan students will be living within five kilometers of school is too idealistic and, in some case, impractical. Even for children in urban areas with an increased influx of students for public or school transport in the morning and evening will potentially be a nightmare, if not planned properly. Countries like the UK & US have elaborate school bus system to transport students from home to school in the morning and afternoon. Kenya's infrastructure is not optimal yet. Traffic jams and impassable roads make time-space convergence a long shot. Further, it is common knowledge that one of the contributing factors to poor performance, especially in rural schools, are the long distances students must walk every day to-and-from school.

Day schools can sometimes be unsafe, especially for teenage girls. Two years ago, the country experienced one of the highest rates of teen pregnancies in primary school. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of young girls lured or defiled by irresponsible men spiked. Certainly, boarding schools are often safe havens for students from the outside influence and social risks. The question is: Is Kenya ready to handle this age group responsibly?

The reality of our education system today is that the government's role in secondary level education has become increasingly limited to provision of teachers' salaries, which take up almost 90% of recurrent expenditure for education. Parents are left to meet the balance of the remainder of the costs: maintenance, physical facilities provision, electricity, water, non-teaching staff emoluments, school uniforms, food stuff, and etcetera. The cost of education becomes even higher in boarding schools compared to day schools. In a comparative study on cost effectiveness ratio (CER) for a day and boarding student, Jagero (2011) noted that improving the performance of a day student by one point requires KES 7,748 compared to KES 10,005 for a boarder. Therefore, educating a student in a day school is more cost effective and a more efficient way of using scarce resources available, which aligns with the findings of the 2015 Taskforce led by Kiremi Mwiria (GOK, 2014).

As the curriculum transition from 8-4-4 to 2-6-3-3-3 the debate should continue on how to provide for the needy and those from marginalized regions, particularly the arid and semi-arid areas. A practical option for them is to provide sufficient and adequately supported schools to avoid overburdening parents economically.

There is no one school or school structure that is perfect for all students. Students bring with them a variety of intelligences, dispositions, learning styles, cultures, religions, family backgrounds, and personal tastes and preferences. Therefore, there is need to re-think and have an education system responsive to the needs of Kenya and its people in the 21st century.

Kenya's boarding schools are predominantly same sex. The proposal to scrap boarding secondary schools would certainly be a game changer as most, if not, all will give way to public co-ed institutions. Same-sex education is controversial. Advocates argue that it aids student outcomes such as test scores, graduation rates, and solutions to behavioral difficulties. Opponents

insist there is evidence that such effects are inflated or non-existent, and instead argue that segregation increases sexism and impairs the student's development of interpersonal skills. Whatever the argument, teen years are a critical time when children learn how to handle responsibility and independence, navigate relationships on a deeper level, and make decisions that impact their future. These are all junctures that are best guided by parents, not advisors or teachers. Teenagers need more time with their parents than they do with peers and teachers. Sossion argument for the abolition of boarding schools will enable parents to spend more time with their children and contribute to their holistic growth, which may not be achieved in the current educational set up. It makes perfect sense.

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