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# Pros and Cons of Ranking Schools in Kenya National Examinations

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AN INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE PAPER  
BY

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All views presented in the paper are those of the researcher.

## **ABSTRACT**

*In the world, ranking of schools based on their examination performance presents an enormous challenge. The national development goal has guided and reinforced the formulation of current educational policy in Kenya. Recent policy initiative have focused on the ban on ranking of schools in national examinations in Kenya. The government has been under pressure to rescind its ban on ranking of performance of schools and candidates in national examinations. There are reasons why the ministry of Education dropped ranking of schools and candidates. Ranking of schools in national examinations is still an area of great concern for many stakeholders in Kenya. The current debate on the status of education in Kenya mainly touches on ranking of performance in national examination. Pros and cons of school ranking has elicited fierce debate. There is need to address this issue so that quality in education is not compromised. Learners might also be left out as schools remain unchecked. The paper looks at the pros and cons of ranking schools in national examinations in Kenya. The arguments in this paper are informed by a number of secondary sources from which I gathered information. I have no doubt in my mind that this paper will allow the researcher to work with other researchers in education so as to critically reflect on contextualized achievements in education that will inform viable recommendations for sustainable development targets transcending 2015 agenda.*

**Key Terms:** Ranking; Examination; Performance; Policy; Education.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Ranking in Kenyan education history started after the establishment of local native council (LNC) and independent schools (Bogonko, 1992). These schools were ranked alongside the existing missionary schools. Ranking was also done among the government African schools (GAS) whose first batch of pupils sat for Primary Schools Examination (PSE) in 1938. Upto 2007, there have been seven categories of ranking examination results at the secondary school level used. These are ; the overall, National schools, provincial schools, District schools, private

schools, most improved schools and student's categories.

The national development goal has guided and reinforced the formulation of current educational policy. Recent policy initiative has focused on the ban on ranking of schools in national examinations in Kenya ([www.ke.undp.org/.../mdgorv](http://www.ke.undp.org/.../mdgorv) retrieved on 4/5/15 at 7.30 a.m.) There is heated debate in public domain as to whether the decision by the ministry of Education should rescind its decision to ban ranking of schools in national examinations in Kenya or not. Among the new policies for which the cabinet ministry has come

under criticism is the one that abolished ranking of schools and candidates( Musanga, 2015). According to parliament's committee chairman Julius Melly, the committee was never consulted before ranking was abolished(Daily Nation,2015).

### **FACTORS LIKELY TO AFFECT RANKING**

Factors which directly or indirectly affect school ranking include :

- Teachers, parents, students, the school administration, the community and the government.
- Sometimes the teachers input are more especially where students lack self drive. With ranking, students can erroneously get credit for sterling performance and yet their contribution to it was very minimal. Also some teachers set and mark exams whose results are then used for ranking.
- Students contribute greatly to school rank. Students love affairs are prevalent in most coeducational and day schools. This divides the attention of candidates. Most sub-county schools are coeducational as well as day schools .Students may also lack a competitive spirit, self drive and good study habits. students' intake mark can also influence ranking in a big way. If students differ from school to school in their level of achievement when joining the schools, a measure of achievement at a later date that does not take this into account will be inequitable and misleading in that it will not adequately reflect a school success in moving students from their initial entry level to their present level of achievement as reflected in a public examination (kelleaghan and Greaney, 2001). Also Some candidates stay away from school immediately after registration. Some schools register students/

pupils and but they learn elsewhere (Jukwaa. Proboards.com>JUKWAA, 2015). Yet during ranking such students are grouped together with those who were in school throughout

- Parents can also have their students with lower KCPE marks admitted to low ranked schools. Schools can do well or bad depending on external factors like support parents in terms of prompt payment of fees and positive attitude. Unfortunately, in some schools, parents gave up a long time ago.
- Communities might also fail to develop and equip schools.
- The government may also fail to channel adequate financial resources to schools.
- School administration is also expected to motivate teachers and learners. It should also provide a conducive and child friendly environment for teaching and learning. School environment is key to ranking. In the old system, sometimes schools were not ranked because administrators failed to report the cheating to KNEC. Only centres where less than five candidates cheated were ranked. In 2012 KCSE examination, Maranda high school was ranked because it had only one candidate involved in cheating. But in 2014, it was not ranked because 23 candidates in the school were involved in cheating. KNEC did not rank schools that did not meet the stipulated criteria (Wanzala, 2014). Also, some schools discourage weaker pupils from taking K.C.P.E. for fear that they would lower the mean scores in published league tables (Akers, Migol and Nzomo, 2001).
- Other factors likely to affect ranking include; enrolment and difference in facilities .

## SITUATION ANALYSIS

In new South Wales, a students' final mark in each subject is determined by a combination of school based assessment conducted throughout the higher school certificate (HSC) component of the course which forms 50% and externally administered final examination held in October or November of every year (Board of studies NSW, 2008).

Through the 8 years of primary and 4 years of secondary education in Kenya, academic attainment of learners is continually assessed internally. However, at the end of this cycle of education, learners sit for national examinations namely KCPE and K.C.S.E. KCPE is used to measure learning outcome at primary level, whereas KCSE is used to measure the same at the secondary level. KCPE & KCSE provides basis for certification of primary and secondary levels of education as well as selection to the next levels of education. The ministry of education has for decades published the list of top ranked schools based purely on academic performance of those graduating from the KCPE and KCSE. The end of an examination period alone in this case, KCPE and KCSE is not sufficient basis to rank schools and students. Kenyan students have for a long time been subjected to school ranking as an end game to their learning experience rather than demonstrating literacy and skills. A red flag on the ability of the system to measure student potential beyond grade point averages is already raised when students are exposed to examinations in a controlled environment and ranking based on quantitative data collected over a period of 3-4 weeks when students are exposed to examinations.

The publication of mean performance statistics for the top schools in the respective categories

and top students in the nation and provinces was meant to make it possible for schools to compare their performance with other schools. This form of ranking was strictly based on student's performance nationally. So, when the new measures took effect after the release of the latest examination results, there has been both praise and criticism from cross sections of Kenyans.

The current debate on the status of education in Kenya mainly touches on ranking of performance in national examinations. The government has been under pressure to rescind its ban on ranking of performance of schools and candidates in national examinations. The argument is that it has stripped the release of national examinations results of the pomp and glory it was associated with. The decision by the education cabinet secretary professor Jacob Kaimenyi to ban KCPE and KCSE Examination ranking is just one of the many bold steps Kenya needs to take if we would like to change the game and transform the way learning is conducted in Kenyan schools. Pros and cons of school ranking has elicited fierce debate. Proponents of the system are winners of the same system who have continually been ranked as "better" than their peers.

Some argue that the government was covering up its inefficiency by not ranking schools. They claim that ranking may not have been perfect. But stopping it was not fair. There is need to categorize schools before ranking. Nairobi Governor Dr. Evans Kidero wants ranking, to be reintroduced in schools. He states that the new non-ranking system is hiding inefficiencies (Guguyu, 2015). KNUT has also opposed this decision by the Cabinet secretary.

The Kenya private schools association argues that the ban seemed to have targeted

them .They claimed that stopping ranking was intended to punish private schools. But they were consoled by the fact that parents knew which schools to enroll their children if they wanted good performance for them (Thu,2015). According to the Global monitoring report on education for all 2000 - 2015 ,Private schools are more weeded to parents’ demand for good examination results (Wanzala, 2015). Owners of private schools have traditionally used ranking to market their institutions.

According to the education principal secretary, Dr. Belio Kipsang, ranking of schools during the release of national examinations has been scrapped and a realistic measure of evaluating performance adopted. There will be regular review and recasting of school performance merit measuring tools. This is as per MOEST circular dated 24<sup>th</sup> November, 2014. The new directives were to take effect from 1<sup>st</sup> January, 2015. The circular mirrors the recommendation of the secondary school fees review team. The education taskforce argued that evaluation of school performance should only be used to inform Kenyans on institutions that attained the basic minimum academic pass mark. The focus on school recognition should be based on the quality of services (Oduor, 2014). In conclusion, it is clear that the national ban of ranking notwithstanding, schools are still being ranked at other levels.

### **PROS OF RANKING**

- Ranking of schools and learners in national examinations should be viewed as both a social and economic issue. Education is first and foremost an investment, and accordingly, there are inputs and commensurate outcomes.

Performance tables for England have been published annually since 1992. Currently, they are used to describe the difference between “materials brought in and the finished product” and thus measures the value added by the production process (Wilson, 2003). Ranking is thus a crude form of measuring returns in an investment. One of the main advantages of examinations is that they are an easy tool to regularly assess a student’s and by extension, a school’s capability. Exams also improve knowledge because they provide regular feedback and enable students to work on their shortcomings.

- The publication of league tables showing performance in public examination is both a symptom and a cause of greater competition (Bray, 2003). The publication of results may lead to schools that are perceived to be doing well to attract students of high levels of ability. Ranking of schools and students in national examination therefore encourages positive competition. According to Dr. Oludhe of Kenyatta University, “Life is competitive and those who succeed enjoy the accolades. Since schools are microcosm of life, competition is natural. We are not all equal hence the need for ranking. And that is just life. Whether we hide ranking under the carpets, the fact remains. Hiding will not help in any way. The only people who will be encouraged by the non –ranking are the lazy ones and they will remain so.” Additionally, professional educators of this school of thought argue that school rank inevitably

leads to competition and while there are both pros and cons of competition, it can challenge and motivate students to take more demanding courses.

- Burgess et al(2002) argue that, provision of information on school performance is a prerequisite for informed parental choice.
- Another pro of school ranking is the potential to create motivation for positive change. The issue of assessment is critical to the functioning of schools. It serves as a motivator of students performance. According to Dr Kidero, Nairobi Governor ranking is the only way schools can use to plan to improve by measuring their performance against competition. He asserts that, “we cannot improve if we do not know other people are better than us, we need to compete” (Guguyu, 2015). Additionally, proponents maintain that competition is in general healthy, especially when it comes to learning. The publication of mean performance for each school and district also makes it possible for schools and districts to see where they stand and compare themselves with others. In, Kenya, this kind of information is called incentive information (Somerset, 1987). The underlying reason for this is the believe that dissemination of information would create competition among schools which would in turn motivate teachers to change their instructional practices (Chapman and Synder, 2000). Public examinations may help raise academic standards.
- In addition, it provides a feedback on the teacher effectiveness of teaching and student achievement. It communicates to the students, parents and others what have been learnt (Amunga et al, 2010). The school ranking system is used to quantitatively determine academic performance of students in one school as compared to students in another school.
- Ranking is a good idea. Even the National Taxpayers Association (NTA) ranks constituencies based on how they manage and use funds in their constituencies .Ranking is therefore part of accountability. And nowadays accountability is part and parcel of work demands. No wonder private schools perform better than public especially at primary school level because owners of such schools closely monitor their performance with a view of upholding their reputations so that they donot cease being in business ([www.kas.de/.../kas\\_-22494\\_-1522\\_-2\\_-30](http://www.kas.de/.../kas_-22494_-1522_-2_-30). Pdf, 2015). In west pokot, Governor Simon Kachapin said scrapping of ranking will demoralize teachers in the country since since no one will bother the outcome in the examinations (Thuo, 2015).He argued that the move will affect education standards in the country and the ministry should review it. He added that the move will also demoralize pupils, who were encouraged when top pupils in exams were recognized and motivated during the exams release. Ranking should not be done away with. This is because even

countries are ranked according to their economy and poverty index.

- The ranking system, though certainly not perfect is a great way to sift through thousands of schools in Kenya and find schooling options for children that are most in tune with an individual's wants and needs. Ranking provides a list of top public and private schools in the country. This allows prospective students and their parents to identify their school of choice based on quality of academics, resources available, future career opportunities and even school popularity and reputation.

### CONS OF RANKING

- A study conducted in the UK in 2010 on "pupils do better at schools if teachers are not fixated on test results", revealed that learners perform well in exams when teachers seem donot seem to be very much concerned about their results. This obsession contributes to an attempt by schools to even use unorthodox means in order to be ranked highly.
- The World Bank (2011) opine that where parents with social and/ or economic advantage are encouraged to support schools with good results, morale and performance in poorer performing schools can be depressed. In the United States, teachers unions, school leaders, principals and teachers have tended to oppose policies linking assessment to accountability on the grounds of perverse effects including narrowing the curriculum to the practice of teaching to the test and incentives for teachers to cheat (Evers and Wolberg, 2003). Evidence suggests that agencies alter the

timing their actions and engage in cream skinning in response to specific performance measures (Hickman, Henrick and Smith, 2002). They exclude weak students from sitting for examinations. Cheating was mentioned as another unproductive type of response to accountability incentives and misreporting of school dropouts (Peabody and Markley, 2003).

- School ranking is also a poor guideline to prospective students and parents, in that regardless of school ranking, students must feel comfortable at their school to ensure a great overall learning experience. Aspects of the learning environment like the school culture, racial diversity, religious tolerance, teaching and learning resources, student/teacher ratio and on on are important when rating a school but are not given consideration when ranking is done. Some teachers of private schools were against ranking. The teachers observed that school owners imposed stringent rules on teachers and learners in order to be ranked highly at the expense of undermining academic and effective learning.
- Proponents supporting the ban on school ranking claim that it has ended the stress and the heartbreak brought to both the teachers and candidates.
- School ranking in Kenya is not reflective of the circumstances. At times a teacher can be ranked so highly and rewarded for good work which the teacher is assumed to have done in realizing good performance yet a lot of effort came from others who may not be considered

during the ranking stage. In Chile, schools are evaluated on the basis of their improvement in student assessment scores, physical improvements by schools administrators, working conditions of teachers, equality of opportunity through retention rates, promotion and avoidance of discrimination practices on basis of gender or disability and teacher parents' integration in school. The factors are weighted and adjusted to arrive at a final score entitlement for school. The schools are stratified into homogeneous groups so that, the competition is roughly between schools that are comparable in terms of student population, socio –economic status of the community where the school is based. Schools are ranked within each group according to score index and awards given to teachers of schools in that order to be divided among themselves according to hours worked (McMakin, 2000).

- School ranking can sometimes results into negative school behavior. For example the school may omit or augment data to boost persistent ranking factors, leading to examination irregularities. For instance, some schools exclude weak students by engaging in cream skinning at the point of admission. This is because the higher the ability of students admitted, the better the output and the higher the schools relative position in league tables (Wilson, 2001). In their efforts to obtain high grades, students and sometimes teachers resort to various forms of cheating designed to give a candidate unfair advantage over others. This takes many forms including copying from other students during examinations, collusion between students and supervisors, use of material smuggled into examination rooms and

purchasing of examination papers (Kellaghan and Greaney, 1996). The common counter argument is that school ranking arouses unnecessary competition. Some fraudsters took advantage of ranking and even called schools prior to release of examinations promising to change their results if they cooperated by sending money using former KNEC boss, Mr. Paul Wasanga, mobile number. Some schools were also omitted in exam ranking due to cheating. Some schools dropped eliciting alot of complaints from stakeholders. Some schools also claimed that KNEC officers sold them papers prior to exams. Such scenarios make students to be punished unfairly since they are victims of loopholes in the examination system (Wafula, 2014).

- IPAR (2004) maintain that ranking in national examinations at the individual student and also at the school level has resulted in fierce competition which sometimes lead to departure from teaching to preparation for passing examinations. it encourages negative competition in education. It goes without saying that good results will result into higher fees and more children seeking vacancies which are good for business, while bad results will lead to exodus of children and frustration for teachers. Schools perceived to be doing badly will be left with lower achieving students (Kellaghan, 1996). This may also lead to the transfer of more able teachers, lower morale in individual schools and create ghetto schools.
- The pressure of examinations and ranking of schools according to performance has been blamed for lack of depth in learning and the

teaching process. Teachers geared their teaching to the examinations encouraging rote learning. According to Ndago (2004), there is no moral justification in ranking schools where no genuine competition really existed because some schools admitted the best K.C.P.E. candidates and have the best resources which contribute to uneven play ground. Education secretary, Professor Jacob Kaimenyi has outlined reasons why the ministry dropped ranking of schools and candidates. He argued that mean scores did not give conclusive assessment of the learning process. This is because some of the schools are better endowed than others. Former education Assistant minister; Kilemi Mwiria, who chaired a task force that recommended the ban, said that ranking had to be phased out as it was about “comparing the incomparable” (Thuo, 2015).

- Other practices such as denying “under qualified” applicants to the school because they are more likely to lower the school’s ranking have become common occurrence. The student is hence denied the necessary skills and competencies desired by the 21<sup>st</sup> century employer and the world. The student therefore focuses on perfecting performance in exams at the expense of creativity, problem solving and analytical thinking, all critical to the real world of work. The end product is the graduate who is “tired to the bone” of rote learning and ritual practical applications, leading to the “burning of books” mentally common among young graduates in Kenya. As a country we end up with a workforce of ranked graduates peddling data on school certificates but lacking innovation and creative thinking

abilities needed to solve basic social, moral, ethical and cultural problems. To enhance equity and quality of education, the report on Totally integrated quality education and training not only focused on teacher training and motivation but also recommend that school ranking system be abolished (Republic of Kenya, 1999).

- Ranking schools affects the society and schools as evidenced by the anxiety of the stakeholders during the release of KCPE and KCSE results in December and February, every year when names of champion pupils & students and schools have graced the print and electronic media.
- The posting of results has reinforced a widely belief that there are good and bad schools in Kenya.
- The system of ranking schools has been criticized for breeding unfair competition among schools because the comparison between schools fail to take into account the differences in the KCPE intake mark, social and physical conditions under which the different schools operate .
- Ranking can cause many problems in an educational system (Kellaghan and Grepney, 1992). For example, focusing on exam results ignores many other important outcomes of school like physical well being, life skills, integrity, confidence and deportment. It can also led to a narrowing of the curriculum due to the neglect of non- examined subjects (Amunga et al, 2010).
- Despite the well meant argument forwarded by proponents of school ranking, it, unfortunately only provides data and statistics based on grade point averages of the examination class. Statistics such as average age of students, student diversity, discipline,

creativity, innovation, sports potential and so on; which can give some quick and easy insight into a school's culture and learning experience as well as suitability for the real world of work and higher learning, are ignored. So, while school ranking can be helpful, it is impossible to justify its use as a tool in determining students abilities and school culture that churns out the type of graduate desired by the 2<sup>1st</sup> century world and economy.

- It is also impossible to rule out subjectivity and bias from school ranking because a large percentage of student exams in Kenya are marked by a diverse profile of teachers who are also instrumental in the setting of the same exams.
- Furthermore, there are more fluctuating factors that make up an average school test that is virtually impossible to rank schools accurately and consistently. The entry behavior of selecting students enrolling into ranked schools is not taken into consideration yet it impacts eventual ranking. Ranking does not measure student's final score against his/her entry scores into the school. In Kenya, top ranked schools select the highest scores in primary schools.

## CONCLUSION

If Kenya is to truly transcend into a middle income economy with the most vibrant and entrepreneurial youth population in Africa, we must allow the technocrats at the ministry of Education to transform the way school ranking is done. The ban, on ranking is just a beginning and we expect the ministry to be innovative and introduce more reforms that will improve the quality of education in Kenya (Juma, 2015). . It remains for the Kenya government to continue

disapproving ranking of schools or approve it. But the fact remains that, ranking should be improved and this calls for a system that encompasses all aspects instead of focusing on academic performance only. This would ensure that ranking of schools and students should not glorify academic achievement at the expense of talent and other virtues. There is need to ensure that the curriculum does not just focus on exams but produces an all-round student(Gicobi et al,2015). There is need to ask ourselves questions about value addition. There can only be competition by comparing how schools added value to the students they admit (Thuo, 2015).

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The government of Kenya should rethink its decision of banning ranking of schools and re-introduce based on a clustered consideration bearing in mind certain factors like entry behavior, school status, value addition, school facilities, and environment and so on. Schools can be clustered in terms of profile and endowment and ranked using in counties using common parameters. The parameters will determine the weakness in every county or region and ultimately, the entire education in the country

Ranking should be used to communicate to stakeholders so that returns from investment in education can be ascertained and necessary remedial action initiated where necessary. Keeping quiet through shelving ranking of schools will not solve anything. It is just a time bomb whose explosion will ruin generations.

A special approach to ranking is introduced targeting talent and skills development. Ndago (2004) suggested the use of deviations (positive or negative) in KCPE marks or KCSE grades instead of ranking schools in terms of percentage

of candidates who attained a certain level of performance. He advocated for a grading system that captures and rewards everything that the school teaches and nurtures including talent. Thanks to the Ministry Of Educating for introducing the meriting tool for school assessment outside academics. Ranking does not lead to rote learning as implied. What we need to do is research on the concept of ranking, let's categorize schools before ranking. Let's narrow the disparities between regions and schools and not shy away from the fact that education, and by extension, schooling is an investment whose returns we have to constantly measure. In so doing, we must pay the consequences of dropping ranking system altogether. The resulting inertia, apathy and 'products' that are ill-prepared to compete in today's competitive knowledge economy which will only make Kenya poorer.

There is need to look afresh at our examination system and explore ways of having continuous assessment test count in the final score. Failure to do this, we shall continue having the current charade where results are released that doom others and advantage others.

There is need to comprehensively audit KNEC. Also alot of overall school improvement and public sensitization is needed.

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