



# Twenty Million Left Behind

## *How Nigeria's Broken Education Policies Threaten a Nation, a Continent, and the World*

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Education is widely recognized as a cornerstone of national development, economic opportunity, and political stability across Africa. Nowhere is this more urgent than in Nigeria, where more than half the 237 million population is under the age of eighteen.<sup>1</sup> This youthful demographic holds immense potential to drive economic and social progress if equipped with the skills and knowledge to thrive. Yet despite decades of policy interventions, Nigeria continues to record the highest number of out-of-school children on the continent, with over twenty million young people currently excluded from formal education out of the sixty-six million Nigerian children who fall within the school-age range, ages six through fifteen.<sup>2</sup> This is not merely a domestic crisis. Nigeria's education failures risk deepening poverty, fueling insecurity, and accelerating migration, with far-reaching implications for regional and even global stability, world economic growth, and international development agendas.

As of 2024, approximately seventeen million Nigerians reside abroad, forming one of the largest diaspora populations globally. The primary destinations for Nigerian emigrants include the United States, approximately 476,000; the United Kingdom, around 215,000; Italy, about 119,400; the United Arab Emirates, approximately 100,000; and Canada, around 70,000. The majority of these emigrants are young adults, with a significant proportion between the ages of twenty-five and forty-four, reflecting a trend of skilled professionals seeking better opportunities abroad.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Nigeria's youth bulge could be an incomparable opportunity for the countries undergoing precipitous population decline. And yet, the persistently limited impact of its national education system, despite numerous reform efforts, raises a fundamental question: What must now be done differently to ensure that Nigeria's education system delivers transformative, sustainable change?

This policy brief examines the root causes of Nigeria's enduring education crisis and outlines practical, context-sensitive solutions for reform. It begins by tracing the historical evolution of Nigeria's education policy from 1960 to 2025, showing how successive reforms have been undermined by poor planning, underfunding, and weak institutional capacity. Next,

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it examines how Nigerian communities and civil society hold the education system accountable, highlighting how parents, alumni groups, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have stepped in to fill gaps and, at times, pressure the state to act. The analysis then shifts outward to explore two different streams of international comparison, offering examples of how strategic investment, political commitment, and system coherence can produce measurable gains. The first follows the state-led models of educational progress in Tunisia and Seychelles. The second focuses on the role of private-sector competition, drawing lessons from Kenya, Ghana, Uganda, and Liberia, where nonstate actors have expanded access and introduced new models for service delivery. These case studies, taken together, reveal the power of both state-led leadership and adaptive, market-based innovations in driving progress.

Informed by these state-led and market-based cases, the final section presents policy recommendations inspired by African innovations, offering actionable proposals for Nigeria to combine stronger public accountability with effective engagement of nonstate actors. These recommendations include piloting public-private partnerships, expanding vocational and adult learning, supporting low-cost private schools, and improving regulatory oversight and funding stability. Crucially, the brief argues that a blended approach, rooted in both local accountability and regional best practices, presents the most viable path forward for Nigeria's education system.

With global stability increasingly tied to Africa's trajectory, Nigeria's education crisis cannot be ignored. As the continent's largest democracy and most populous country, Nigeria's ability to educate the next generation will shape migration patterns, economic development, and security partnerships far beyond its borders. The time for isolated reform is over. Nigeria must now embrace integrated, inclusive, and scalable strategies that prepare its youth for the future. In doing so, Nigeria can strengthen the African foundation for global stability and shared prosperity.

## **HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF NIGERIA'S EDUCATION POLICY (1960-2025)**

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Over more than six decades, Nigeria's quest to educate its populace has been mired in a cycle of well-intentioned policies undermined by systemic challenges. The historical record shows a pattern of ambitious plans followed by implementation shortfalls: from Universal Primary Education (UPE) in the 1970s to Universal Basic Education (UBE) in the 2000s, obstacles including inadequate planning, funding gaps, corruption, and governance issues have recurred, preventing these programs from reaching their full promise. Although Nigeria has experienced periods of progress, such as the expansion of school access in the 1970s and early 2000s, and ongoing efforts to reform the system, the fundamental issues remain unresolved. Policies often fail at the intersection of design and execution: The government sets goals without realistic pathways, and the education bureaucracy struggles to carry out even well-crafted plans in the face of resource and accountability constraints. As a result, the

education system, despite minor improvements, still does not meet the needs of Nigeria's growing population or the demands of the modern economy.

Addressing these challenges requires sustained political commitment beyond the reform rhetoric, ensuring continuity of policies across administrations; involving stakeholders at all levels, from teachers to state governments, in decision making; and dramatically improving funding and oversight. Encouragingly, the current policy discourse in Nigeria recognizes these needs, with the House of Representatives, civil society organizations such as the Socio-Economic Rights and Accountability Project (SERAP), education advocates, and international observers calling for enforcing the right to education as enshrined in the constitution, insulating education from politicization, and cracking down on corruption in the sector.<sup>4</sup>

Learning from historical mistakes is also essential for Nigerian decision makers. By examining the patterns since 1960, one can see that piecemeal approaches will not suffice. Rather, both comprehensive reforms that strengthen institutions and systems of accountability must accompany any new policy initiatives. Only then can Nigeria's educational policies translate into tangible gains in literacy, skills, and national development, fulfilling the long-deferred promise of education for all. Understanding the context of Nigeria's educational policies requires a look at key historical phases and shifts.

### **1960s (POST-INDEPENDENCE)**

Upon independence in 1960, Nigeria inherited a regional education structure from British colonial rule. Education policy was largely region driven in the First Republic (1960–1966). Local initiatives such as the Western Region's (now largely comprising states in Nigeria's South West zone) free primary education program, launched in 1955, set early examples by offering tuition-free and compulsory schooling, funded largely through regional taxation. This ambitious scheme led to significant increases in enrollment. However, overall access to schooling remained uneven across the country. The Northern Region, with fewer financial resources and a different administrative legacy, lagged behind the south. Due to limited local experience in educational administration, the period was marked by planning challenges that debilitated the education system during this period.<sup>5</sup> Early policies were modest in scope, and the need for a national framework grew as regional disparities became apparent to the government.

### **1970s (OIL BOOM AND UPE)**

A major federal push in education began in the early 1970s. After the civil war (1967–1970), the government assumed control over most schools, which were previously run by regional or missionary bodies, in order to centralize and standardize education.<sup>6</sup> A landmark 1970 National Curriculum Conference set the stage for Nigeria's first National Policy on Education formulated in 1977.<sup>7</sup> In 1976, the military government launched Universal Primary Education (UPE), an ambitious program to provide free primary schooling nationwide. UPE led to an explosion in enrollments—for example, primary one (ages five and six) intake in some northern states jumped by over 400 percent in one year.<sup>8</sup> This rapid expansion, however, exposed serious planning and capacity gaps: The lack of trained teachers, classrooms, and

learning materials could not meet the demand. By the late 1970s, the UPE program struggled under the weight of its unrealistic targets and resource shortfalls, illustrating the consequences of inadequate preparation and data in policy design.<sup>9</sup>

### **1980s–1990s (ECONOMIC CRISIS AND DECLINE)**

The 1981 revised National Policy on Education aimed to make education more functional and vocational, introducing the 6-3-3-4 system—six years primary, three junior secondary, three senior secondary, four tertiary. Nigeria in the 1980s, however, experienced an economic recession and a Structural Adjustment Program, which led to cuts in public spending on education. Under military regimes (1983–1998), funding for education stagnated or fell in real terms. Many reforms remained only partially implemented. The quality of education deteriorated as facilities decayed and teachers left for better opportunities.<sup>10</sup> Frequent policy shifts continued, with regimes announcing new nomadic and adult education initiatives. Yet weak implementation meant limited results. The late 1990s saw Nigeria lagging behind global Education for All (EFA) goals, with high illiteracy and millions of children out of school.

### **2000s (RETURN TO DEMOCRACY AND UBE)**

With the return to civilian rule in 1999, the sitting president, Olusegun Obasanjo, renewed emphasis on education reform. The Universal Basic Education (UBE) program was launched in 1999 to provide free, compulsory nine-year basic education (primary and junior secondary) as a follow-up to the earlier UPE.<sup>11</sup> Backed by the UBE Act of 2004, the UBE initiative came with high hopes and specific targets. Unfortunately, it quickly became evident that the same structural challenges persisted. A 2001 evaluation found significant inadequacy in UBE implementation, with the identical problems that handicapped UPE, including inadequate qualified teachers, insufficient funds, inadequate facilities, and poor motivation, reappearing.<sup>12</sup> In effect, Nigeria had relaunched UPE under a new name (UBE) without fully learning from past failures. Nonetheless, during the 2000s, the Nigerian government achieved marginal progress in enrollment numbers due to UBE and increased international support, such as debt-relief funds channeled to education. The National Policy on Education was revised in 2004 to reflect new commitments such as education for girls and the introduction of Information and Communications Technology (ICT), but implementation remained patchy.

### **2010s–2020s (CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES)**

In the last decade, Nigeria’s education system has continued to grapple with long-standing issues amid new challenges. In 2015, UNESCO noted that despite some gains, Nigeria still had one of the world’s largest out-of-school populations, and quality remained low.<sup>13</sup> Teacher shortages and infrastructural decay were widespread, partly due to funding deficiencies and population growth outpacing school expansion.<sup>14</sup> Crucially, the governance issues persisted: Insufficient coordination between federal and state authorities often led to funding mismatches and duplication of efforts.<sup>15</sup> The mid-2010s also brought security challenges, notably the Boko Haram insurgency in the northeast, that directly disrupted schooling; UNESCO’s Global Education Monitoring Report estimated that insurgency in the north had displaced over nineteen thousand teachers and further undermined educational access.<sup>16</sup>

Entering the 2020s, Nigeria has increased education spending modestly under recent administrations, but it still falls far short of international benchmarks. According to BudgIT's 2025 Budget Analysis, the federal government allocated ₦3.66 trillion to education, representing 6.65 percent of the national budget, signaling its highest nominal allocation in history. This figure, however, still falls significantly short of the UNESCO benchmark of 15–20 percent of national expenditure or 4–6 percent of GDP.<sup>17</sup> Thus, while the context has evolved, with greater global attention and new policies addressing safety of schools and technology in education, the core problems afflicting policy design and execution have remained remarkably consistent over time. See table 1.

Despite numerous reforms since independence, Nigeria's education system remains deeply constrained by governance failures, underfunding, and implementation gaps. Yet, while state-led efforts have struggled to deliver consistent results, education has not collapsed entirely. This resilience is, in large part, due to the often-overlooked role of Nigerian society itself. Across the country, parents, alumni groups, religious leaders, and local communities have stepped in, not only to supplement state efforts, but in many cases to sustain and supervise the education system where the government has faltered. Understanding their contributions reveals how nonstate actors have become indispensable coproviders and watchdogs in basic education.

## **HOW DO NIGERIAN COMMUNITIES AND CIVIL SOCIETY HOLD THE EDUCATION SYSTEM ACCOUNTABLE?**

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In the absence of effective state oversight, Nigerian communities and civil society organizations have developed grassroots accountability tools to monitor education delivery, expose corruption, and pressure officials to act.

The NGO Connected Development (CODE) runs the “Follow the Money” (FTM) initiative, which enables local communities to track education budgets and infrastructure projects. In 2019, citizens in Yobe State monitored a ₦91.6 million school project in Fune Local Government Area, using community site visits, social media, and town halls to report delays, leading to the project's completion.<sup>18</sup> Similar campaigns have succeeded in Plateau, Kaduna, and Adamawa States.

BudgIT's Tracka project has also empowered communities to demand school upgrades. In Meigero in Kaduna State, Tracka revealed that a funded classroom block had not been built. In response, the parent-teacher association (PTA) repeatedly petitioned local officials, leading to construction being completed after two years of pressure.<sup>19</sup> These models show how citizen access to budget data and advocacy platforms can bypass middlemen and directly pressure the state.

When domestic mechanisms fail, some NGOs turn to litigation. In 2010, SERAP sued the Nigerian government at the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Court after ₦54.8 billion in UBE funds were mismanaged. The court ruled in favor of SERAP,

**TABLE 1** MAJOR EDUCATIONAL REFORM POLICIES IN NIGERIA, 1960–PRESENT. THIS TABLE PROVIDES AN OVERVIEW OF SIGNIFICANT EDUCATION REFORMS INTRODUCED IN NIGERIA FROM 1960 TO DATE, INCLUDING THEIR LEGAL/POLICY STATUS AND THEIR INTENDED ROLES IN BASIC, SECONDARY, AND TERTIARY EDUCATION.

Name	Legal/Policy status	Role	Current status
First National Development Plan (1962–1968)	Government planning policy	Introduced Nigeria’s first formal education development strategy; emphasized technical/vocational education and teacher training.	Historical milestone. Helped launch institutions and influenced the 1970s UPE program.
Free Universal Primary Education (UPE)	Implemented (1976)	Introduced by the Obasanjo military government to provide free primary education nationwide.	Still in place, though implementation varies by state.
National Policy on Education	Implemented (first in 1977, revised multiple times)	Provided a blueprint for educational objectives and curriculum across all levels.	Still in effect; revised multiple times to reflect new goals.
Nomadic Education Policy	Implemented (1989)	Targeted at educating nomadic and pastoral communities through mobile and flexible schooling systems.	Partially active, but with limited reach and declining support.
National Commission for Colleges of Education Act	Implemented (1989)	Created a regulatory body for colleges of education to enhance tertiary teacher training.	Still operational; serves as the regulatory body for colleges of education.
Education for All (EFA)	Internationally ratified commitment (1990, 2000)	Nigeria committed to global goals for universal education by 2015, affecting national strategies.	No longer actively referenced; absorbed into Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 initiatives.
Universal Basic Education (UBE)	Implemented (1999)	Expanded UPE to include junior secondary education; aimed at compulsory, free, and universal education for children aged 6–15.	Active and ongoing, but faces funding and infrastructure challenges.
Almajiri Education Program	Implemented (2010)	Aimed at integrating Western education into the traditional Quranic schools system in northern Nigeria.	Largely dormant or poorly implemented due to structural challenges.
Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFund)	Statutory funding agency (TETFund Act, 2011)	Tertiary education funding and development.	Active and well funded, though future sustainability is threatened by proposed tax reforms.

(continued)

**TABLE 1** (Continued)

Name	Legal/Policy status	Role	Current status
Safe Schools Initiative (SSI)	Implemented (2014)	Established to protect students and schools, especially in conflict-affected northern regions.	Still in place, but implementation limited by insecurity and funding.
National Home-Grown School Feeding Programme (NHGSFP)	Implemented (2016)	A federal social investment initiative providing free daily meals to public primary pupils (initially grades 1–3).	Active nationwide. The program is ongoing under the Federal Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs, though it faces budgetary and logistical challenges as it scales.
Edo Basic Education Sector Transformation (EdoBEST)	Implemented (2018, Edo State program)	A state-level reform in Edo State aimed at overhauling basic education delivery. Emphasizes teacher training, technology-enabled learning, and data-driven school management to improve teaching quality and student learning outcomes.	Active and acclaimed. EdoBEST has significantly improved schooling outcomes—over 16,000 teachers trained, teacher absenteeism dropped, and student performance in literacy/numeracy climbed.
Nigerian Education Loan Fund (NELFUND)	Enacted (2024)	Established to provide interest-free loans to students in tertiary institutions.	Active; has disbursed funds to thousands of students across various institutions.
New Curriculum with 15 Trades	Implemented (2025)	Introduced vocational training in secondary schools to equip students with practical skills.	Active; aims to reduce youth unemployment, though implementation faces challenges such as resource constraints.

ordering restitution for violated education rights.<sup>20</sup> SERAP has since filed additional lawsuits, including against governors for failing to allocate 15 percent of state budgets to education while overspending in other areas.<sup>21</sup>

At the school level, integrity subcommittees formed by PTAs and school-based management committees (SBMCs) now monitor textbook deliveries and school feeding procurement, reporting fraud to anti-corruption agencies. Some communities use mobile phones to report absenteeism or grant diversion, creating real-time accountability loops. These efforts informed some of Nigeria's transparency-related initiatives, which formally encouraged community monitoring.



When monitoring and litigation are not enough, some communities bypass the state altogether. In areas with chronic neglect, locals hire volunteer teachers, fund unregistered community schools, and work with religious groups to offer informal literacy programs. One example is the community-built school in Rumde Baru, Adamawa State, which operated independently until it gained state attention and eventual support.

While grassroots and civil society efforts in Nigeria have proven resourceful and at times transformative, they often operate in response to, or in spite of, weak state structures. Yet, in some African contexts, the state has successfully led broad-based education reform without requiring parallel civic intervention. To better understand what a functional, reform-oriented state can achieve, the next section examines two African countries, Tunisia and Seychelles, that have pursued sustained, state-led pathways to educational progress. These examples, alongside the upcoming analysis of private-sector contributions elsewhere, allow us to explore two key streams of reform: one driven by strong and coherent government leadership, the other by adaptive, nonstate innovation. Together, they offer comparative lessons for how Nigeria might reimagine the role of the state while leveraging the power of civic engagement and private initiative.

## **STATE-LED MODELS OF EDUCATIONAL PROGRESS: TUNISIA AND SEYCHELLES AS CASE STUDIES**

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This section explores the educational reform experiences of Tunisia and Seychelles, two African nations that, while differing significantly in population size, religious composition, and historical trajectories, exemplify state-led pathways to education success. Tunisia, a predominantly Muslim North African country, has pursued wide-reaching reforms focused on curriculum modernization and public investment in universal education. Seychelles, a small island state with a largely Christian population, has achieved near-universal literacy and remarkable educational equity through consistent political will and strategic state funding.

### **TUNISIA**

Tunisia presents a compelling case for educational reform in Africa, combining strong state policy with consistent investment to achieve near-universal access and high literacy rates. Since gaining independence, Tunisia has prioritized education through legislation that guarantees free and compulsory basic education for children aged six through sixteen.<sup>22</sup> Modeled after the French system, its structure includes primary, secondary, vocational, and tertiary education, with increasing integration of digital tools and multilingual instruction in Arabic, French, and, increasingly, English.<sup>23</sup>

The government's annual allocation of approximately 6.2 percent of GDP to education, one of the highest on the continent, has underpinned sustained reforms.<sup>24</sup> This investment has enabled infrastructure development, modern teacher training, and widespread access to educational technologies. Notably, 20 percent of university courses at Tunis University are now delivered online, providing flexible learning options that support student employment



and lifelong learning.<sup>25</sup> Gender parity is another success: Enrollment rates among boys and girls remain nearly equal.

Despite these gains, Tunisia continues to grapple with youth unemployment, particularly among university graduates. The World Bank reports an overall unemployment rate of 15.5 percent, with rates exceeding 29 percent for graduates and over 22 percent for women.<sup>26</sup> This mismatch between education and labor market needs has prompted recent reforms targeting curriculum modernization, expanded vocational training, and greater private-sector collaboration. A notable initiative is the €40 million agreement with the European Investment Bank in 2023 to construct eighty sustainable primary schools, reflecting Tunisia's strategic use of international partnerships.<sup>27</sup> The country also maintains a robust adult education system, with programs such as the National Adult Education Program reducing intergenerational literacy disparities.<sup>28</sup> Tunisia's model, characterized by sustained investment, gender equity, technological adoption, and a mix of general and vocational pathways, offers Nigeria important lessons on aligning education policy with workforce realities and building resilience into public education systems.

## **SEYCHELLES**

Seychelles, the smallest African country by population, has emerged as one of the continent's most effective models of inclusive and high-performing education. Through sustained political will, constitutional guarantees, and a firm commitment to education as a public good, the island nation has developed a system marked by universal access, gender equity, and global competitiveness. Education in Seychelles is compulsory from ages six to sixteen and free until age eighteen.<sup>29</sup> The country's education structure includes early childhood care, six years of primary education, and five years of secondary education, followed by pathways to vocational training or tertiary study. Instruction begins in Creole and gradually transitions to English and French, promoting multilingual literacy.<sup>30</sup> Importantly, ten out of thirteen years of schooling are compulsory, a foundation that has contributed to Seychelles' 95 percent literacy rate and its leading position in African education rankings.<sup>31</sup>

The government's budgetary commitment to education has ranged between 9 percent and 19 percent of total national expenditure, with 4.7 percent of GDP consistently allocated to the sector.<sup>32</sup> This investment supports a strong network of professionally trained educators, free provision of textbooks and tuition, and continuous professional development for school leaders. Seychelles also achieved all six UNESCO Education for All goals and ranks among the top countries globally for teaching quality and critical thinking.<sup>33</sup> Adult education has also been a sustained priority. The Adult Learning and Distance Education Centre, founded in the 1980s, continues to provide skill-development programs for out-of-school youth and adult learners, contributing to lifelong learning and workforce flexibility.<sup>34</sup> Policy continuity and accountability have been central to Seychelles' success. Reforms such as the 2009–2010 Education Reform Action Plan and the subsequent Medium-Term Strategic Plan (2013–2017) focused on governance, early childhood care, curriculum quality, and educational access.<sup>35</sup> These frameworks ensured that the education system evolved with changing societal and labor market demands.

Seychelles' achievements reflect the power of compact scale, coherent governance, and cultural consensus around education. For Nigeria, the lesson lies not in replication but in adaptation, especially in how sustained funding, professional teaching standards, and strong institutional frameworks can deliver quality outcomes, even under resource constraints.

## KEY COMPARATIVE INSIGHTS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR NIGERIA

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Nigeria's path to educational transformation lies in strategic adaptation: combining the fiscal discipline of Tunisia, the institutional coherence of Seychelles, and a homegrown vision that confronts Nigeria's demographic complexity with urgency and innovation. The educational experiences of Tunisia and Seychelles offer distinct yet complementary lessons for Nigeria. While both countries differ from Nigeria in population size, religious composition, and governance scale, they demonstrate how coherent policy, consistent investment, and targeted reforms can significantly improve education systems, even within resource-constrained environments.

A primary difference lies in scale: Nigeria's population of over 220 million dwarfs Tunisia's 12 million and Seychelles' 130,000. This amplifies Nigeria's logistical and funding challenges, but it also highlights the need for decentralization and data-driven planning. Both Tunisia and Seychelles have implemented clear accountability structures that allow national policies to adapt locally, an approach Nigeria could replicate by empowering subnational education authorities.

Investment is another key differentiator. Tunisia and Seychelles consistently dedicate over 4.5 percent of GDP to education, compared to Nigeria's 0.3 percent.<sup>36</sup> This disparity has clear consequences: overcrowded classrooms, low teacher morale, and insufficient infrastructure in Nigeria's public schools. Addressing this requires a renewed national commitment to education as a public good, backed by stable and protected funding channels.

The role of religion in education also bears important implications. While Tunisia is predominantly Muslim and Seychelles predominantly Christian, Nigeria's near-equal Muslim-Christian population has often made education reform politically sensitive, particularly around curriculum content and gender equality.<sup>37</sup> This makes consensus building across religious and regional divides essential to any reform effort.

Importantly, both Tunisia and Seychelles demonstrate the benefits of embedding vocational training into mainstream education. Tunisia's MANFORME (Professional Training and Employment Upgrade Program) strategy<sup>38</sup> and Seychelles' integrated TVET (Technical and Vocational Education Training) programs prepare students not just for exams, but for employment, an area where Nigeria's system still underdelivers. Expanding and updating vocational education, especially for underserved youth, could help close this gap.<sup>39</sup>

Finally, both countries underscore the value of adult education in national development strategies. Tunisia's adult literacy reforms and Seychelles' distance learning centers show how

lifelong learning policies can reduce intergenerational disadvantage. Nigeria could adopt this approach, particularly for women and rural populations.

While Tunisia and Seychelles demonstrate the transformative potential of sustained state leadership, they are not the only models worthy of consideration. In other African contexts, nonstate actors, including private education providers and community-based schools, have played significant roles in expanding access, improving learning outcomes, and introducing innovations that challenge public systems to improve. The next section turns to these alternative pathways, drawing lessons from countries such as Kenya, Ghana, Uganda, and Liberia, where public-private dynamics have created competitive pressures and scalable solutions that may also offer insights for Nigeria.

## **THE ROLE OF PRIVATE-SECTOR COMPETITION: LESSONS FROM KENYA, GHANA, UGANDA, AND LIBERIA**

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Across sub-Saharan Africa, private schooling has expanded substantially in recent decades. In 2017, researchers estimated that about 21 percent of pupils in the region were being educated in private schools and projected that share to rise to 25 percent by the early 2020s—a projection that has largely materialized, reflecting growing demand for education outside the public sector.<sup>40</sup> Notably, this growth includes both elite private institutions serving wealthier families and low-fee private schools serving low-income communities. Governments have often welcomed private involvement to help meet rapidly increasing demand for education, though regulatory responses vary. In countries such as Kenya, Ghana, Uganda, and even Nigeria, tens of thousands of low-cost private schools have sprung up, indicating viability at scale in delivering education outside the public system.<sup>41</sup> Parents’ motivations for choosing private schools usually center on perceived better quality, greater accountability, or simply the availability of a school seat when public schools are overcrowded.<sup>42</sup> As the following cases illustrate, private education in Africa has, in various ways, complemented state provision and sometimes pressured public schools to improve.

### **KENYA: LOW-FEE PRIVATE SCHOOLS SPUR COMPETITION**

Kenya offers a prominent example where low-cost private schools introduced effective competition for public schools. After Kenya made primary education free in 2003, public school enrollment surged, but quality and resources were strained. In an unexpected twist, private primary enrollment more than doubled between 2005 and 2009, from 4.4 percent to 10.5 percent of total enrollment, despite the availability of “free” public schools.<sup>43</sup> Many families, dissatisfied with overcrowded and presumably dysfunctional public schools, turned to affordable private schools even in slums and rural areas. Unlike the older elite academies, these new private schools charged very low fees and operated with modest facilities. Remarkably, studies found that students in Kenya’s low-cost private schools consistently achieved higher English and math scores than their public school peers, despite private schools spending less per student. For example, one survey showed private school fourth graders

outperforming public school counterparts by 16 percent in English and 10 percent in math, even though two-thirds of children in private schools paid fees below the amount of public schools' per-pupil spending.<sup>44</sup>

This performance gap signaled strong competitive pressure on the government system. The success of private academies, achieved with lower-paid teachers and larger classes, highlighted inefficiencies in public education and shook public confidence in government schools. In response, Kenyan policymakers faced mounting calls to address teacher absenteeism and accountability in public schools in order to stem the exodus of students to private institutions.<sup>45</sup> At the same time, the government moved to regulate the burgeoning private sector, enforcing school registration and minimum standards, and occasionally even ordering closure of substandard private schools. The demonstration effect of the private schools' better outcomes helped spur reforms such as renewed emphasis on learning assessments and a competency-based curriculum in public schools indirectly influenced by the example set by nonstate schools.

One notable Kenyan model is Bridge International Academies, a chain of low-cost private schools that grew to serve over fifty thousand pupils in Kenya and expanded to other countries.<sup>46</sup> Bridge introduced highly standardized lesson scripts, teacher tablets, and a strict accountability system. A recent study led by Nobel laureate Michael Kremer found that Bridge's approach produced learning gains among the largest in the international education literature, with primary students learning in two years what others learned in three.<sup>47</sup> These gains—roughly 0.8 standard deviations higher test scores for Bridge pupils over two years—demonstrate that quality education can be delivered at scale in a resource-poor setting.<sup>48</sup> Importantly, the study suggested that public schools could replicate elements of this model, such as scripted lesson plans and teacher monitoring, to achieve dramatic improvements. In fact, Kenya's experience with Bridge and similar academies has informed debates on public sector innovation.

In sum, Kenya's low-fee private schools introduced real competition, resulting in parents "voting with their feet" for better quality, and forced a reckoning in the public system regarding education quality. The Kenyan case shows both the potential and the challenges of harnessing private education: While it has expanded options and demonstrated better outcomes, it has also raised equity concerns, as the poorest still struggle to pay even low fees, and has required effective regulation to ensure minimum standards are met.

## **GHANA: COMMUNITY SCHOOLS AND PRIVATE CHAINS EXPANDING ACCESS**

In Ghana, private education, much of it low-cost, has flourished alongside the public system, contributing to both access gains and competitive pressure. Since the early 2000s, Ghana has achieved near-universal primary enrollment, thanks not only to government action such as the fee-abolition policies but also to community-driven growth of private schools.<sup>49</sup> The IDP Foundation notes that the number of private basic schools grew by 46 percent between 2010 and 2015, far outpacing the 4 percent growth in public schools during that period. By some estimates, around 40 percent of basic education institutions in Ghana are

now private, and about 40 percent of those are low-fee schools targeting poor households.<sup>50</sup> Even in rural villages, parents have established affordable private schools when public provision was lacking.<sup>51</sup>

Crucially, many poor families willingly pay modest fees for these schools due to a perception of better quality and accountability. Surveys find that even some of the poorest parents choose low-fee private schools because teachers are seen to be more present and attentive than in nearby public schools.<sup>52</sup> In Ghana's low-cost private schools, teacher absenteeism is generally lower and local proprietors are directly accountable to fee-paying parents, which creates pressure to maintain standards. While learning outcome data are mixed, there is evidence that private school students often outperform their public school peers in core subjects, after adjusting for socioeconomic differences.<sup>53</sup> More consistently, Ghana's private schools operate at significantly lower unit cost than public schools, indicating better cost efficiency even if absolute learning differences are debated.<sup>54</sup> For the government, this has underscored the possibility of achieving more with limited resources.

A prominent example from Ghana is the Omega Schools franchise. Launched in 2009, Omega Schools pioneered a "pay-as-you-learn" model, charging a tiny daily fee, which made schooling affordable for families with irregular incomes.<sup>55</sup> Omega grew to thirty-eight schools serving roughly twenty thousand students in Ghana and Liberia before being acquired by another education network. Its model demonstrated that a chain of low-fee private schools could be financially viable at scale while reaching poor communities. Omega students generally performed at or above national averages, and the chain's operational practices, such as centralized training and simple accountability metrics, attracted attention from policymakers. Ghana's government has not formally integrated private schools into public programs, but it has acknowledged their role in absorbing demand and extending access to hard-to-reach areas.<sup>56</sup> Community-run private schools have in many cases filled gaps where public schools were distant or overcrowded, thus indirectly supporting Ghana's education targets.

The lesson from Ghana is that empowering local entrepreneurs and faith-based organizations to run schools can expand capacity rapidly. It also shows the importance of oversight: Ghana has moved to strengthen standards—for example, requiring teacher certification even in private schools, a policy that proprietors say has sometimes stifled the growth of low-cost schools due to compliance costs.<sup>57</sup> Going forward, Ghana's experience suggests that public-private collaboration, such as microfinance programs for school owners or targeted subsidies, can help improve quality in private schools, ensuring that they complement rather than undermine public education. The Ghanaian case confirms that viable private school models can be scaled in Africa, contributing to universal education goals by working in tandem with the state.

## **UGANDA: PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS FOR SECONDARY EDUCATION**

Uganda provides a case where private and public sectors explicitly partnered to expand schooling, with positive effects on competition and outcomes. After Uganda achieved free universal primary education in the late 1990s, a surge of primary graduates created pressure

for secondary schooling. The government's solution, launched in 2007, was a public-private partnership (PPP) in secondary education under the Universal Secondary Education program.<sup>58</sup> In this PPP, the state contracted low-cost private secondary schools to enroll students free of charge, with government paying a per-student subsidy, in communities where government schools were insufficient.<sup>59</sup> This effectively leveraged excess capacity in private schools to meet public demand, instead of building new state schools overnight.

The PPP has shown promising results. A randomized evaluation found that the program significantly increased access to secondary education, as intended.<sup>60</sup> Participating private schools rapidly absorbed large numbers of students who would otherwise have lacked a secondary place.<sup>61</sup> Importantly, these schools had to accept the government stipend as full payment. As a result, they competed to deliver education cost-effectively within the subsidy. Student performance under the PPP improved modestly, with some evidence of better Ordinary Level (O-level) exam results compared to non-PPP schools, although the primary achievement was broader enrollment.<sup>62</sup> The partnership also had equity benefits: Schools in the PPP enrolled significantly more poor and rural students than the average government school, since the program targeted underserved areas. For instance, one nonprofit network (PEAS—Promoting Equality in African Schools) used the PPP funds to keep fees near zero, and an external evaluation found that PEAS schools admitted twice as many of the poorest students as government schools, and three times as many as other private schools. This suggests that with smart design, private operators can expand access without cherry-picking only affluent students.

The competitive effect of Uganda's PPP is subtle but noteworthy. By partnering with private schools, the government introduced a form of performance-based competition: Private schools had to meet certain standards to qualify for the program, and their existence gave families an alternative to any nearby underperforming public school. Some local reports indicate that government secondary schools in areas with PPP schools felt pressure to improve their teaching to retain students, knowing that families now had other free options. Additionally, the collaboration fostered an exchange of best practices—for example, PPP school networks often shared data and training resources with the Ministry of Education.<sup>63</sup> This knowledge transfer has influenced public schools. Lessons from the PPP informed Uganda's efforts to strengthen school inspections and data systems nationwide.

Nonetheless, the Uganda experience also highlights challenges: Ensuring adequate government regulation and funding stability is critical. Private school partners have voiced concern about delayed subsidy payments and uncertain policy commitments, which can deter their investment in new schools.<sup>64</sup> Despite these hurdles, Uganda's PPP model is considered a replicable success in many respects; it demonstrated that a diverse range of nonstate providers, such as religious, NGO, and for-profit schools, can be harnessed to deliver public education at scale, improving both access and accountability. For Nigeria, where secondary school demand soars, Uganda's model suggests that contracting with vetted low-cost private schools, with proper oversight, could rapidly expand opportunities while raising the bar for quality through competition.

## **LIBERIA: OUTSOURCING PUBLIC SCHOOLS TO PRIVATE OPERATORS**

A recent bold experiment in leveraging private management to improve public education comes from Liberia. In 2016, the Liberian government launched Partnership Schools for Liberia (PSL), an initiative to outsource the management of some public primary schools to private education providers.<sup>65</sup> The aim was to inject new accountability and methods into failing public schools by letting proven nonstate operators run them, with public funding. In the pilot year, ninety-three public schools—over 8 percent of students nationwide—were handed to eight operators, including international chains such as Bridge International Academies and local NGOs.<sup>66</sup> The results after one year were striking: Students in the partnership schools learned about 60 percent more in terms of reading and math progress compared to their peers in traditional public schools.<sup>67</sup> In other words, learning outcomes in the outsourced schools far outpaced those in regular government schools, a finding confirmed by an independent randomized evaluation.<sup>68</sup>

This improvement was accompanied by some trade-offs. Different operators had varying levels of success—for example, Bridge International Academies achieved the highest test score gains but also incurred higher costs by hiring additional teachers and extending instruction time.<sup>69</sup> Some providers also implemented strict teacher-accountability measures, in certain cases replacing a portion of the teaching staff, which sparked controversy with unions. Despite these challenges, the government deemed the pilot sufficiently successful to expand the program. By 2019, the renamed Liberia Education Advancement Program (LEAP) had scaled up to partner with around 180 schools, and as of 2021 it had reached an estimated 115,000 students across 475 schools.<sup>70</sup> This indicates viability at scale, as multiple private partners managed hundreds of schools within the public system's framework.

Liberia's approach created a quasi-market within the public sector, wherein private operators competed to demonstrate superior performance under similar conditions and funding as government-run schools. This competitive benchmarking had an influence on the broader system. First, it proved that with the same students and budgets, better management could yield significantly better outcomes—a powerful demonstration that has pressured the Ministry of Education to adopt the operators' practices of stronger teacher supervision, provision of scripted lesson guides, and regular student assessments. Second, the existence of partnership schools gave parents and communities a basis for comparison. Surveys showed increased parental satisfaction in PSL schools, which in turn motivated nearby public schools to emulate certain reforms. For instance, some non-PSL school principals began implementing extra tutoring sessions and stricter attendance monitoring after seeing PSL schools do so.

From a policy perspective, Liberia's experiment offers several lessons. It confirms that public-private partnership can dramatically improve learning outcomes in a short time, even in a low-income, postconflict context.<sup>71</sup> It also reveals the importance of enabling conditions: The program benefited from external donor funding and rigorous evaluation, which provided political cover and learning for course correction. Additionally, strong government oversight was key; contracts with clear performance targets and independent monitoring



kept operators accountable. However, Liberia's experiment also shows that scaling up such models requires careful attention to equity and sustainability. Some critics noted that certain partnership schools achieved gains partly by limiting class sizes or receiving extra aid, which may be hard to replicate across an entire system. The Liberian government has had to balance the desire for rapid improvement with the need to eventually integrate successful practices system-wide. For Nigeria, Liberia's PSL/LEAP indicates that contracting private education experts to manage public schools on a pilot basis can yield quick wins in quality, but it should be done with transparency, community engagement, and a plan for long-term institutionalization of the gains.

## KEY COMPARATIVE INSIGHTS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR NIGERIA

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The experiences of Kenya, Ghana, Uganda, and Liberia show that private actors can play a pivotal role in education reform, especially where public systems are overstretched or ineffective. These models are not about replacing the state but about reimagining its role as a regulator, funder, and partner rather than a sole provider. For Nigeria, where nearly one in five children already attends a private school, the question is no longer whether to involve nonstate actors, but how to do so strategically and equitably.<sup>72</sup>

One core insight is the potential of performance-based partnerships. In Liberia, the public-private partnership model tied funding to learning outcomes and independent evaluations. Schools that underperformed were replaced, introducing a level of accountability rarely seen in public systems. Nigeria can adopt similar mechanisms by piloting performance contracts with vetted school operators, particularly in underserved regions.

Another lesson is the scalability of low-fee private schools. In Kenya and Ghana, these schools emerged organically in response to unmet demand. While quality varies, governments have begun to support them through teacher training, microfinance, and inclusion in assessment systems. Nigeria, rather than marginalizing this sector, should regulate and support it as a key pillar of educational delivery, especially in urban slums and rural areas.

Third, these models highlight the need for regulatory realism. Kenya's experience with Bridge International Academies shows the risks of poor oversight, but also the importance of enabling regulation. Nigeria's current approval and monitoring frameworks are often too bureaucratic or underresourced to be effective. Strengthening inspectorates and aligning private school standards with national priorities is essential if private expansion is to be equitable and safe.

Finally, these reforms demonstrate the importance of flexibility and experimentation. None of the countries pursued a rigid blueprint. Instead, they started small, allowed for local adaptation, and adjusted based on results. Nigeria's federal structure and diversity make it well suited for a similar approach. States could be encouraged to pilot public-private initiatives, faith-based school partnerships, or voucher schemes within a national framework that guarantees equity and quality.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

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Ranging from state-led reform successes in Tunisia and Seychelles to adaptive private-sector models in Uganda, Liberia, Ghana, and Kenya, the preceding case studies offer valuable lessons for Nigeria's education system. These diverse approaches demonstrate that meaningful progress is possible when reforms are backed by political will, strategic investment, and accountability mechanisms, whether driven by the state, the private sector, or both. Given Nigeria's size, complexity, and decentralized education structure, no single model can offer a perfect solution. By drawing selectively from both streams of reform, however, Nigeria can design hybrid strategies that combine the reach and legitimacy of government with the innovation and responsiveness of nonstate actors. The following policy recommendations are derived from these regional insights and adapted to Nigeria's unique institutional, social, and demographic realities.

### FOSTERING PUBLIC-PRIVATE COLLABORATION

Forging stronger public-private partnerships is the most directly replicable action. Just as Uganda contracted private schools to expand access, Nigerian federal or state governments could partner with established low-cost school networks to run schools or reach out-of-school children. This could be piloted in high-need states, with clear performance targets. Given Nigeria's federal structure, state governments could experiment with PPP schools, learning from Liberia's careful evaluation approach. With Nigeria's existing cadre of private school providers, some homegrown, some international like Bridge, there is a foundation to build on.

### ADOPTING PROVEN PEDAGOGIES

Nigeria can integrate private-sector pedagogical innovations into public schools at scale. The EdoBEST program has already demonstrated this by using a Bridge-style model to improve public basic education, yielding notable gains in literacy and numeracy in a short period.<sup>73</sup> Other states can follow Edo State's lead, potentially with support from private education firms or NGOs for training and technology.

### ENCOURAGING LOW-FEE PRIVATE SCHOOLS

Nigeria, especially in urban centers, already has thousands of low-cost private schools started by entrepreneurs or faith-based groups. Rather than viewing them with suspicion, the government can support them to improve quality. This may include offering microcredit or grants for infrastructure, as Ghana did via the IDP Rising Schools Program; incorporating their untrained teachers into government teacher-training programs; or creating a quality-rating system so that competition is based on learning outcomes, not only marketing.<sup>74</sup> Such measures could make Nigeria's large private sector a more effective complement that pushes public schools to do better. Given that one in every five of the world's out-of-school children is in Nigeria, uplifting this segment could substantially raise overall education outcomes.<sup>75</sup>

## **PROVIDING TARGETED VOUCHERS OR SCHOLARSHIPS**

To ensure equal access, Nigeria could pilot a voucher scheme for low-income families to attend a school of their choice, whether public or private. This was not explicitly tried in the African cases above, but the competitive dynamics suggest it could work: Schools would compete for students, and public schools would have to improve or risk losing enrollment. South Africa has an example of private academies attracting even modest-income families, indicating that if a basic subsidy is provided, many more will have real choice.<sup>76</sup> A Nigerian adaptation might be a scholarship fund for marginalized children to enroll in accredited low-fee private schools in areas where public schools are failing.

## **ENSURING CONTEXT-SENSITIVE IMPLEMENTATION**

While these models are promising, implementing them in Nigeria requires care. The scale of Nigeria, which is more than two hundred million people, means interventions must be large to make a dent, and education is largely decentralized to states. Moreover, political economic factors, such as resistance from teachers' unions or proprietors' associations, can pose challenges. For instance, introducing private management in public schools, as in Liberia, could face pushback from Nigerian teachers' unions concerned about job security. Any PPP would need to involve stakeholders from the design stage, and perhaps start small to build evidence and trust. Additionally, regulatory capacity in Nigeria would need bolstering to monitor any expanded private-sector role. The Kenya and Ghana cases showed that without proper oversight, quality can be uneven; Nigeria thus should invest in its quality assurance agencies, such as an inspectorate and exams council, concurrently.

## **INSTITUTIONALIZING LONG-TERM EDUCATION FUNDING AND PLANNING**

Both Tunisia and Seychelles demonstrate the transformative potential of sustained, well-targeted investment. Nigeria should establish multiyear education financing frameworks at federal and state levels, modeled on Seychelles' medium-term strategies, while protecting critical programs such as UBE and TETFund from political and fiscal volatility. Committing at least 15 percent of national expenditure to education and ensuring ring-fenced funds for teacher salaries, curriculum delivery, and school infrastructure are vital steps toward restoring system stability.

## **CONCLUSION**

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If Nigeria gets education right, the gains could be transformative, both nationally and across the continent. Raising average time of schooling by just three years could add over 1 percent to annual GDP growth, equivalent to \$4–6 billion per year in added economic output.<sup>77</sup> Improvements in basic education could lift millions of Nigerians out of poverty, having a dramatic impact in a country where over 60 percent of the poor are under twenty-five.<sup>78</sup> Secondary education expansion alone is associated with a 3–5 percent reduction in civil conflict risk.<sup>79</sup> For the wider region, a well-educated Nigerian workforce would help position the country as a driver of West Africa's development goals, reduce irregular migration

pressures, and boost skilled labor contributions to global markets.<sup>80</sup> These quantifiable benefits underscore why education reform must be a national priority.

Nigeria's education crisis requires a strategic recalibration grounded in institutional discipline and evidence-based practice. Decades of reform have yielded limited outcomes due to fragmented implementation, inconsistent funding, and a failure to tailor national policies to local needs. Drawing on lessons from across Africa, this brief recommends six practical actions: institutionalizing long-term education funding and planning insulated from political cycles; ensuring regionally responsive and context-sensitive implementation; providing targeted vouchers or scholarships to expand access for the most disadvantaged; supporting low-fee private schools to improve overall quality and capacity; adopting proven pedagogical models with investments in training and digital infrastructure; and fostering public-private collaboration under strong regulatory oversight. By aligning political commitment with institutional coherence and operational capacity, these recommendations offer a realistic path to achieving long-term education reform.

## NOTES

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Gift Iyioku is a PhD candidate in German studies at Stanford University with a minor in political science. Her interdisciplinary research examines Afro-German migration and autobiographical narratives of African migrants. She has contributed to African development policy with UNESCO-IACIU and the Africa Progress Group. At Hoover, she researches Africa's demography and migration, aiming to translate academic insights into effective public policy.

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