



# Education

## Private education

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Against the concerning background outlined in the previous sections, the rise of private education in Africa has become a source of hope for some and controversy for others. Historically, private schools were often purely charitable undertakings, with mission schools providing education of a quality far higher than the colonial or segregated public school system at the time. However, today, the proliferation of private schools is associated less with charity, and more with government failures, commodification and profit-seeking.[1] Due to the poor quality of education at public schools, many parents, especially in urban areas, send their children to private schools if they can afford to. However, a significant proportion of the population still relies on public/government schools.[2]

The number of students in private schooling in Africa, in both aggregate and proportional terms, has been growing rapidly since the 1990s. Enrolments in private primary schools approximately doubled during the 1990s, while public school enrolments grew at approximately half that rate. By 2017, 19 sub-Saharan African countries had 20% or more of their primary and secondary school students being taught in non-state facilities. In Equatorial Guinea, 54% of its primary school students are in private schools. At 60%, Liberia has the largest proportion of secondary school students in private schools, followed closely by Mauritius (57%).[3]

Much of the growth in the number of private educational institutions has been driven by foreign investors and also by the World Bank's active promotion of private education through advice and lending.[4] The argument in favour of private education is that it fulfils a need which African governments have failed to meet, with respect to both the quantity and the quality of education across much of Africa. In some cases, private education appears to be providing a much needed quality service. In Kenya, for example, private education (previously viewed as an unnecessary extravagance) has become highly sought after. This is particularly so in the context of overcrowded public schools, where 40% of Grade 2 students were found to be illiterate or innumerate and where teachers can sometimes be expected to teach classes of up to 100 students. Top schools in many countries, especially at the basic level, including in Ghana and South Africa, are usually private schools, although they serve a very small proportion of the population.[5]

However, there is considerable criticism of and opposition to the mass roll-out of private education in Africa, as private education is seen to serve only a small proportion of the population, exacerbates inequality and diverts resources from the public education sector. The widening gap in achievement between wealthy and poor people is not only driven by improvements in quality education by private schools but also by a simultaneous drop in standards in public schools, as (better) teachers and resources are drawn to better pay and working conditions.[6]

Although many private schools in Africa consistently achieve high rankings in school achievement indices, there are also many that fail to provide a better education than the public sector, while costing more. This can generally be ascribed to the loosening of regulations of private schools, which allow profit-seeking investors to run schools at extremely low cost, translating to inadequate resources and facilities and poorly qualified, underpaid teachers.[7]

## Endnotes

1. UNESCO, *The pros and cons of private and public education in Africa*, 2018.
2. I Kaledzi, *Why education remains a challenge in Africa*, *Deutsche Welle*, 24 January 2022.
3. D Evans, *How well does regulation of private schools work in Sub-Saharan Africa?*, *World Bank Blogs*, 20 November 2017.
4. K Malouf Bous, *False promises: How delivering education through public-private partnerships risks fuelling inequality instead of achieving quality education for all*, Oxford: Oxfam, 2019.
5. L Vives, *Private schools gain a foothold in Africa*, *Africa Renewal*, 2017.
6. UNESCO, *The pros and cons of private and public education in Africa*, 12 November 2018.
7. K Malouf Bous, *False promises: How delivering education through public-private partnerships risks fuelling inequality instead of achieving quality education for all*, Oxford: Oxfam, 2019; UNESCO, *The pros and cons of private and public education in Africa*, 12 November 2018.

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