
[Sub-Saharan Africa's Secondary Education Challenges](#)

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Quality of education

Mary Burns explores how technology can be used as part of educational reform. She helps governments plan for technology use and designs, delivers and researches online and face-to-face teacher professional development.

In 1926, a group of boys in Nairobi, Kenya partook of an opportunity never before offered any student in Sub-Saharan Africa—they enrolled in secondary school. [Alliance High School](#), the region's first secondary school, focused on inculcating, among an elite group of boys, and later girls, scholarship, character, Christian faith and European values—considered at that time the essential canon for full participation in academic, professional and civic life.

Nearly a century later, secondary education has expanded across Sub-Saharan Africa. Unlike colonial administrations, which saw no need for a post-primary school education for Africans, Sub-Saharan African governments today recognize that the expansion of secondary education directly confers great public benefits—high economic returns in the form of growth, poverty reduction, equity and social cohesion. They recognize, too, that secondary education offers private benefits—in the form of better economic and life outcomes and access to specialized knowledge, higher education and employment in the formal sector. Indeed, across the globe, those countries that have experienced the most rapid and sustainable increases in educational attainment and economic growth have done so by improving access, equity and quality of primary, secondary, and tertiary levels of education.

In 2018, I was invited by [the MasterCard Foundation](#), which focuses on the nexus between secondary education and formal work, to lead a study on how educational technology is being deployed to improve the quality and delivery of secondary education in Sub-Saharan Africa¹. The next two posts address some key findings of this study ([found here in its entirety](#)). This post begins with five observations about the status of secondary education in Sub-Saharan Africa. The second post (forthcoming) examines the status of technology in improving access to and quality of secondary education in the region.

1. Secondary education is expanding across Sub-Saharan Africa

Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) has made significant progress in secondary school enrollment—from an overall net enrollment rate of 11% in 1970 to 32% and 22% for lower and upper secondary,

respectively in 2018 (UNICEF, 2019).

This increase has been larger in poorer countries. For example, in Mozambique, enrollment jumped from 7% in 1999 to 34% in 2012. In almost every SSA country, as more children complete primary school, demand for secondary education continues to increase as does pressure on the secondary education system to meet this demand. Several governments, like those in Malawi, Sierra Leone and Ghana have responded to increased demand by abolishing secondary fees.

2. But it is characterized by high rates of exclusion

Yet, despite enrollment increases, for most young Africans, education still ends at primary school. The region suffers from vast within- and across-country differentials in terms of access to secondary education. For example, 80 percent of students in Botswana, South Africa and Cape Verde attend secondary school compared to approximately 20 percent in Central African Republic, Chad and Niger. Across SSA, completion rates for lower and upper secondary school students stand at 42% and 30%, respectively.

Much as it was in 1926, the biggest beneficiaries of secondary education are wealthier, urban boys. Rural students, poor students, girls, internally displaced students and refugees, disabled students and religious and ethnic minorities suffer from high rates of exclusion from secondary education. Conflicts across Central Africa and the Sahel region and government policies that limit compulsory education to six years have exacerbated this exclusion.

Above all, it is the region's economic inequality and high rates of poverty that limit access to secondary education. Even in countries like Zimbabwe and Zambia, with high primary school access for rich and poor children alike, secondary education is far more accessible to the richest, versus the poorest, 50 percent of students.

3. Girls are particularly disadvantaged in terms of secondary education

As secondary enrollment has increased in Sub-Saharan Africa, so too have gender disparities in accessing secondary education. SSA has the world's lowest female secondary enrollment rate, though again there are wide variations among countries. For instance, the [female gross enrollment](#) secondary education rate exceeds 100 percent in South Africa versus 12 and 16 percent in the Central African Republic and Niger, respectively (UNECA, 2017).

These gender disparities correlate with poverty and rurality. In Malawi, only five of every 100 of the poorest rural girls attend secondary school but barely one will complete her secondary education. In Nigeria, 3 percent of the poorest rural girls will complete secondary school in contrast to 92 percent of the wealthiest urban boys.

Numerous factors keep girls out of secondary school—high fertility rates, conflict, child and teen marriages, the prevalence of sexual violence and harassment, safety fears associated with staying in dormitories, lack of toilets, gender discrimination, and traditional views of girls' working and care-giving obligations that preclude attending school.

4. SSA faces a shortage secondary teachers

Across the region, there are not enough secondary school teachers, not enough well-prepared teachers, and even fewer teachers of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM). Many teachers have not been prepared in either their content area or in pedagogy. Consequently, many show evidence of competency gaps in content (particularly in STEM subjects) and resort to highly traditional instruction. There are other challenges associated with teacher education—a lack of quality teacher educators; variable quality and duration of teacher education, with little time devoted to pedagogical and professional training and mentoring. Most teachers in sub-Saharan Africa receive no continuous professional development or support; where they do, efforts are fragmented between pre-service and in-service training.

5. The secondary education system faces challenges in balancing access, quality, and equity

Sub-Saharan African countries must allocate more resources to expand access to secondary education so it serves, not just elites, but all students. Governments will need to balance expanding access with simultaneous improvements in both quality and equity. The magnitude of this challenge in the next few decades is historically unprecedented. Improving access to secondary education and ensuring quality and equity, will require significant policy changes and large investments of human and financial resources. It will also require greater investment in both primary and tertiary education since secondary systems are inextricably linked to, and influenced by, both.

The use of various educational technologies can play an important, if limited, role in addressing some of these pressing challenges. “Limited” because policy shifts and successful implementation will be the key to bolstering secondary education. But when part of an overall system of reform, with the right policies and supports, governments can leverage the potential of technology to address some of the more vexing issues facing secondary education. These include issues surrounding access to education, content delivery, improving the quality of teaching and learning, and teacher professional development.

The next blog post focuses on the status of such efforts.

¹ In addition to desk research and interviews, this work involved case study visits to Botswana, South Africa, Mauritius and Cabo Verde.

References

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