

We must make our public primary schools efficient

Given a choice between private and public service, most people will pick the former. We ought to worry about our continued preference of private over public institutions, education and health being classic examples.

Many a citizen elect to take their children to private schools, which are deemed efficient. Instructively, most teachers don't enroll their children in the public primary schools where they teach. We have turned so cynical to the extent that we view it as normal when public institutions perform below par. Instead of pressing for reforms, we quietly shun them and opt for dearer private ones. Sloppiness and lethargy are normalised, leaving children from poor backgrounds to suffocate under negligence.

Among the challenges of implementing the new Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) is the cost factor. Interestingly, most private schools were cited as leaders in the commercialisation of most learning materials, including those that could be improvised. But parents keep their children in the schools since they pass as a better option to public ones. Indeed, most register good grades, never mind the means.

But we equally have public primary schools that do well, resulting in congestion. Most of them have been identified to host the Junior Secondary School stream (JSS). Yet, we never stop to ask why they perform much better than their counterparts that are equally endowed. Whereas some genuinely suffer from limited resources, most are run down through inept leadership emboldened by lethargic local education offices. It's worse for the far-flung schools.



Form One admission at Metkei Girls High School, Elgeyo-Marakwet County, on February 6.

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Whereas private schools serve a critical role of augmenting public education, especially in densely populated areas, they don't have to be the first point of call. The negligence attending most public institutions has boosted private ones and even sparked calls for privatisation. But the purposes of privatisation differ. In essence, it serves to shift accountability of managers from the public, the major shareholders, to a few profiteers. But the new managers are not bound to work in the best interest of the shareholders, as seen in private firms that have collapsed.

Poor customer service

We've seen private chain stores tumble, not necessarily due to poor business environment but mischievous management and poor customer service. Hence, change of ownership, say from public to private, may not be the panacea. What is required is enforcement of standard management practices, with insistence on quality service delivery. Public services were established for reasons beyond profit.

It is time we reckoned that private services are not always perfect. Whereas there exist success stories in sectors such as transport, telecommunications, energy and industrial plants where structured privatisation has borne fruits, the same may not be said of education and health, where systemic failures push clients out into unstructured arrangements.

We must demand service from public institutions as long as they draw life from public coffers.

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