



## Public vs. Private Schooling in African Urban Centers

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### Introduction

Rapid urbanization in Africa is reshaping educational choices for millions of families. Nowhere is this more evident than in the contrast between public and private schooling within urban environments, where new opportunities intersect with enduring inequalities. This paper examines the distinct characteristics, advantages, challenges, and outcomes associated with public and private education in African urban centers.

### Growth of Urban Private and Public Schools

- African cities have witnessed a rapid rise in private school enrollments, especially in the last two decades.
- By 2021, roughly 21% of African students were enrolled in private schools—a much higher percentage in some urbanized nations, with projections suggesting this will continue to rise as urbanization accelerates<sup>[1][2][3]</sup>.
- The majority (around 158 million students) remain in public schools, but the private sector, including low-fee, faith-based, and profit-driven providers, now plays an increasingly prominent role<sup>[1][4]</sup>.

**Table 1: Private Secondary School Enrollment, Selected African Countries**

Country	Private Secondary Enrollment (%)
Zimbabwe	77.4
Liberia	60
Mauritius	57
Kenya	~25
South Africa	7.5

Source: *Index Mundi*, UNESCO<sup>[2]</sup>

### Urban Socio-Economic Context and Demand

- Urbanization has created new middle-class demand for higher-quality schooling options while producing pockets of extreme poverty where educational opportunities are scarce<sup>[5][6]</sup>.
- Urban public schools serve the majority, but chronic underfunding, overcrowding (often 60-100 pupils per class), and resource disparities prompt wealthier or aspirational families to seek private schooling, which is often perceived as a path to better outcomes<sup>[7][4]</sup>.

### Characteristics of Public and Private Schools

#### Public Schools

- **Mandate:** Universal access, government-funded, free or low-cost tuition.
- **Strengths:** Broad enrollment, experienced teachers (though often uneven), and, in some well-resourced areas, high performance.
- **Weaknesses:** Overcrowding, inadequate supplies, poorly maintained infrastructure, and variable teaching quality, especially in informal settlements<sup>[7][6]</sup>.

#### Private Schools

- **Mandate:** Run by individuals, religious organizations, NGOs, or for-profit entities; tuition-based.
- **Strengths:** Smaller class sizes, better infrastructure and resources, selectivity, and often higher pass rates, especially in elite and mid-tier private schools<sup>[7][4][8]</sup>.



- **Weaknesses:** High fees limit access, exacerbating social stratification; low-fee private schools for the poor often have unqualified teachers and minimal resources. Regulatory oversight varies widely, affecting quality<sup>[4][6]</sup>.

## Access and Quality: Persistent Inequalities

- Urban education theoretically offers greater access than rural areas, but wealth inequalities sharply affect who benefits.
- In slums and informal urban settlements, insufficient or low-quality public schools and the absence of targeted government support drive families toward “low-fee” private providers. These often fall short in delivering consistent quality but fill a vital gap<sup>[9][6]</sup>.
- In many large cities like Nairobi, Lagos, and Johannesburg, elite private schools coexist with underperforming public schools and low-cost private schools within close proximity<sup>[7][6][3]</sup>.

**Figure 1: Urban Enrollment by Wealth Quintile**

Wealth Quintile	% Enrolled in Private Schools	% Enrolled in Public Schools
Poorest Urban	7	93
Middle Urban	18	82
Wealthiest Urban	43	57

Source: *Frontiers in Education*<sup>[6]</sup>

## School Performance and Parent Satisfaction

- Parent satisfaction rates are higher for private secular and faith-inspired schools than for public schools, especially among wealthier families. The key drivers of dissatisfaction in public schools are over-crowding, lack of teaching materials, and lower teacher motivation<sup>[10][7]</sup>.
- However, many well-resourced public schools, especially in wealthier urban neighborhoods, rival private schools in outcomes; the biggest gaps are among poorer neighborhoods and informal settlements<sup>[7][6]</sup>.

**Table 2: Satisfaction with Schooling by Type (Urban/Sub-Saharan Africa, % Satisfied)**

Type	Primary (% Satisfied)	Secondary (% Satisfied)
Public	57	61
Faith-inspired	73	76
Private Secular	82	77

Source: *World Bank*<sup>[10]</sup>

## Cost and Affordability

- Private education fees can range from two to ten times those of public schools<sup>[7]</sup>.
- Many urban poor must sacrifice to enroll children in “affordable” private schools, often at the expense of other essentials.
- Free or mostly subsidized public education remains the backbone of access, but funding often fails to match demand in high-growth urban centers<sup>[11][7][8]</sup>.

## Regulatory and Policy Considerations

- International and national standards require that private education be regulated and at least match the quality of public offerings<sup>[11]</sup>.
- Regulation is inconsistently enforced, especially for low-fee private providers. This can lead to the proliferation of substandard schools, but strict rules may inadvertently deny access to poor families who rely on these schools for basic education<sup>[11][4][6]</sup>.

## The Urban Paradox: Equity, Choice, and Segregation



- Urban centers, while offering greater school choice, often become sites of stark social and economic segregation in education.
- In countries such as Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa, wealthier urban households have many schooling options, while poor urban families are often consigned to the least resourced public or low-fee private schools<sup>[7][6]</sup>.
- Policies to ensure greater state investment in public urban education, more robust regulation of private providers, and targeted financial support for the poor are needed to reduce inequalities<sup>[5][6][4]</sup>.

## Recent Trends and Innovations

- Increased use of technology, school accountability initiatives, teacher upskilling, and voucher or scholarship policies are slowly improving urban school quality but remain uneven in their reach.
- Growth of franchise and networked “affordable private schools” is notable, but critics warn these often adhere to the minimum regulatory standards and extract profits from families least able to afford it<sup>[4][8]</sup>.

## Conclusion

Urban Africa’s educational landscape is complex and highly stratified. While private schooling offers perceived and real advantages for urban families able to afford it, public schools remain vital for the majority but face deep resource and capacity challenges. Bridging the urban schooling divide will require bold investments in public education, more equitable resource distribution, rigorous but flexible regulation of private schools, and focused interventions for the urban poor. Without such action, the promise of urban opportunity risks deepening social fractures instead of healing them.

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