

## School Violence in Kenya

A Call from Gusii Education & Advancement Resources (GEAR)

July 29, 2008

The ongoing chaos in Kenyan schools is distressing and confounding at the same time. The brutality of the student rebellion underlines a development unseen in the history of the Kenyan education system. It may portend worse things to come.

Politicians, pundits and busybodies have suggested myriad causes of the chaos. Ministers Sam Ongeru and Martha Karua said that the violence is the delayed effect of post-election violent behaviour; Prof. Ongeru further thinks that the pressures caused by mock examinations may have triggered this. The examinations, intended to be a “dress rehearsal” for the examinations in December, are said to have been commercialized and perhaps dampening their original intent. Ongeru has suggested the banning of mock examinations, saying they have no place in the formal certification program of the Kenya National Examinations Council. There have also been allusions to eliminating boarding schools to let students interact more with parents!

Popular Nation columnist Mutahi Ngunyi took a wider view of the chaos, blaming the society we have built and lack of hope for many of those in the school system. A key culprit, according to Ngunyi is the harsh socio-economic conditions the country finds itself in, where opportunities are rare and future prospects are dim. Indeed, as Ngunyi says in the article, the students may be working harder than those of earlier generations. However, today’s school kids find little to look forward to given the deteriorating economic conditions in the country.

To remedy the situation, some alternatives have been suggested, many of them made as “off-the-cuff” remarks. They range from caning the students (a remark made by President Mwai Kibaki) to banning cell phones (!) in schools (a directive from Prof. Ongeru). Others include expulsion of ring leaders and hence their removal from amongst other students. Other solution proponents have suggested “tough love” while some have commented about the heavy school workload and easing on that to “let children be children”.

All of the above, and perhaps more, could be part of the toxic milieu that has led to the explosive violence. It is important that a systematic approach be taken to get to the root of the matter; without such an approach, it is unlikely that the true causes will be identified.

The Gusii Education & Advancement Resources (GEAR) – see [www.gusiieducation.org](http://www.gusiieducation.org) – has recently done some preliminary research on this subject. It is a study that we expect to continue for a while to come, with a view to addressing the causes of poor education performance in the Gusii districts and elsewhere in Kenya. School violence, in our view, is a symptom of deep-seated causes.

In the preliminary study, those interviewed included students, teachers and parents of the top and bottom performing schools. Here is a synopsis of the findings.

### *Well-performing schools*

In the schools that did well, factors identified for the good performance include parental involvement, motivated/dedicated teachers that went the extra mile, high standards of discipline among teachers and students, and a structured approach to syllabus material. Others include regular assessment (external tests and the like) and exposure to examination-type material.

Interviewees also indicated (Prof. Ongeru should take note here!) that students benefited from mock examinations.

#### *Poorly-performing schools*

For poorly performing schools factors cited include inadequate resources, student absenteeism due to lack of fees (read poverty!) and, in some cases, students migrated from school to school leaving large fees balances behind. Further issues include failure to cover syllabuses due to student absenteeism and lack of teacher motivation; understaffing (poor student-teacher ratios), teachers with inadequate knowledge of language (English/Kiswahili), poor facilities and lack of oversight by school inspectors were also identified. In some cases, disease (malaria especially!) outbreak impacted students as some of these schools are located in swampy areas with poor drainage and sanitation.

#### *Common issues across the two categories*

There were also common issues facing both well and poorly performing schools. Political and religious interference, clanism, favouritism, lack of willingness to pool resources (spreading thin the little that is available), lack of teaching equipment, lack of emphasis on the importance of the value of higher education, and lack of sustained motivation and discipline among teachers, students and education administrators.

#### *Solutions*

There were also common responses to solutions, among them being the need for better resources (e.g. lab equipment, workshops and libraries), better teacher-student ratios, poverty eradication to decrease absenteeism and students' "nomadic" movements, greater parental involvement, less interference from politicians and religious figures and availing revision materials (past and mock examinations, books, etc.) for all students. A few other suggestions included ensuring a strong economy from which to meet resource needs, improvements in teacher student ratios and improvement of facilities. A strong economy would also offer job opportunities to graduates and hence something to look forward to when school is over. The latter would contribute significantly to student discipline.

#### *Call to action*

Although the preliminary research was in Gusii, it is possible that these problems are also issues in other parts of the country.

As well, GEAR's preliminary research only scratched the surface and focused on only one aspect of school education: performance. However, the findings, though high level, give pointers to potential sources of frustration that result in the school violence that we have witnessed lately.

The fact is that students are part of the Kenyan social fabric. They imbue and are impacted by goings on in the country, including issues like the post-election violence, poor economic conditions, skewed material distribution, lack of job prospects and the like. Recent school violence could only be a symptom of deep-seated frustration that needs sober approaches to address root causes. As one person wrote, when the watering spring floods, look for causes (a) in the spring's catchment area and (b) obstacles downstream that may be blocking its flow.

We recognize the need to stem the tide of strikes throughout the country and hence the need for rapid response. We urge that a long-range view is taken to seek and deal with true root causes of the chaos that we have seen. As our preliminary research suggests, politicians are part of the problem. They should facilitate proper management of education by qualified professionals.

GEAR will continue to collaborate with government and non-government organization, education professionals, parents and *mwananchi* to formally address matters of education through systematic assessment and solution prescription.

GEAR can be reached at [info@gusiieducation.org](mailto:info@gusiieducation.org); and visit [www.gusii.education.org](http://www.gusii.education.org) for more information.

Yours GEAR Committee.