

Illegal school levies are driving learners out of classrooms, new survey shows

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Illegal school levies are pushing learners out of classrooms and turning Kenya's constitutional promise of free and compulsory basic education into a reality that increasingly depends on a family's ability to pay.

A new survey by the Elimu Bora Working Group shows that more than nine in 10 households surveyed either paid an illegal levy in 2025, expect to pay one in 2026 or expect to pay more than the gazetted school fee. The survey covered 388 parents, guardians and grandparents across 11 counties and found illegal charges in every county, school cluster and school category.

The counties were Baringo, Kakamega, Kiambu, Kisumu, Makueni, Mandera, Meru, Mombasa, Nairobi, Nakuru, and Uasin Gishu. The most troubling finding is that when families cannot pay, children are kept out of school.

Nearly half of learners surveyed (45.9 per cent) are occasionally or very often sent home or barred from class because of levies. For 17.5 per cent, this happens very often. The burden is even heavier in day schools, where 64.9 per cent of learners are sent home or barred from class, compared with 40.5 per cent in boarding schools.

Among day-school learners, 60.6 per cent miss school days because of levies, 51.1 per cent miss examinations or tests, 48.9 per cent lose motivation to attend school, and 42.6 per cent face discrimination because of unpaid illegal levies.

The survey also shows that the poorest families bear the greatest harm. Some 61.3 per cent of learners from households earning less than Sh10,000 a month are sent home at least occasionally, compared with 23.1 per cent of learners from households earning between Sh30,001 and Sh60,000. As such, exclusion is driven by who cannot pay, not by how much is demanded.

The financial burden on families is substantial. Six in 10 households (61.6 per cent) said extra levies were difficult or impossible to afford. Nearly 37 per cent reported borrowing money or selling assets very often to meet these illegal costs.

Remedial tuition and motivation fees affect 49.2 per cent of households, with a median charge of Sh5,000. Development levies affect 32.2 per cent, also with a median charge of Sh5,000, while some families reported charges as high as Sh50,000 to Sh60,000.

Development levies are also the charges most commonly enforced by sending learners home, with 83.3 per cent of affected households reporting such threats.

The impact does not end when a learner is sent home. The survey found cases in which schools withheld certificates or refused to clear learners, particularly Form 4 candidates, until illegal charges were settled. Such practices can obstruct access to higher education and employment after a learner has completed secondary school.

The Constitution guarantees every child the right to free and compulsory basic education. A child must not be denied lessons, examinations or the opportunity to complete school because their family cannot pay the illegal levy.

Illegal levies are a barrier to the right to education, and the government must not allow schools to impose them and then punish children for their parents' inability to pay.

The Ministry of Education must urgently audit school fee structures, enforce the law against institutions imposing illegal levies, ensure full and timely capitation, and establish confidential complaints mechanisms that protect parents and learners from retaliation.

Signed

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