



DEVELOPMENT LEVIES AND LEARNERS' PARTICIPATION IN PUBLIC DAY SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN WEST POKOT COUNTY, KENYA

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Abstract:

This study examined the effect of development levies on learners' participation in public day secondary schools in West Pokot County, Kenya, guided by the null hypothesis that development levies have no statistically significant effect on learner participation. Data were collected from 113 students, 37 parents, and 32 principals using structured questionnaires and interviews. Descriptively, both students (composite mean = 2.72) and parents (composite mean = 2.53) leaned toward agreeing that high development levies constrain enrolment and retention, with near-unanimous agreement across both groups that low-income learners bear a disproportionate share of the burden ($r = .685$, $p < .001$), the strongest association observed in the model. Bivariate regression confirmed that development levies significantly predicted learner participation, $F(1, 125) = 76.140$, $p < .001$, explaining 37.9% of the variance ($R^2 = .379$); the null hypothesis was accordingly rejected. Qualitative accounts from principals revealed a structural paradox underlying this statistical relationship: levy-funded construction was credited with improving facilities and, in principals' assessment, attendance, yet delayed or inconsistent parental payment routinely stalled projects, leaving incomplete facilities that temporarily undermined the same participation outcomes the levies were meant to secure. The study concludes that development levies function as a financially necessary but distributionally regressive mechanism for infrastructure financing, one whose benefits and burdens are not shared equally across household income levels, and recommends government-regulated levy ceilings, mandatory exemptions for low-income households, and expanded direct capitation for infrastructure to reduce schools' reliance on parental contributions.

Keywords: development levies, learner participation, school infrastructure, Free Day Secondary Education, West Pokot County

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

Development levies refer to financial contributions collected from parents and guardians to fund capital expenditure and infrastructure improvement projects in schools, including the construction and renovation of classrooms, laboratories, libraries, sanitation facilities, and other physical assets. In public day secondary schools in Kenya, development levies have become a widespread mechanism through which school administrators seek to address chronic infrastructure deficits arising from insufficient government capital grants and sustained population growth pressures (MoE, 2019). Adequate school infrastructure is widely recognized as important for learner performance and continued participation, yet the practice of transferring the cost of that infrastructure onto parents raises questions of equity, particularly for households with limited financial capacity.

In developed nations, particularly within the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), school infrastructure improvements have typically been financed through public expenditure, ensuring that parents are not directly burdened with additional school costs (OECD, 2021). Infrastructure development in these systems is treated as a collective state responsibility rather than a parental obligation (UNESCO, 2022), so the quality of a learner's physical learning environment is determined by government investment decisions rather than by household financial capacity.

In low- and middle-income countries, limited government financing has instead pushed schools toward heavy reliance on parental contributions. Studies by the World Bank (2020) across South Asia and Latin America found that school improvement levies, though often introduced with the genuine intention of enhancing educational quality, produced unintended negative consequences when imposed without regard to household income disparities, contributing to irregular attendance and withdrawal among low-income learners. A subsequent World Bank (2024) review across Sub-Saharan Africa found that while adequate physical infrastructure was associated with higher attendance and lower dropout, infrastructure programmes financed through parental levies were consistently less equitable than those funded through direct government grants, an equity paradox in which the same mechanism intended to raise standards simultaneously excluded the most vulnerable learners from the institutions being improved.

Similar patterns have been documented across Africa. In Nigeria and Uganda, development and building levies have been associated with the temporary exclusion of learners whose parents defaulted on payment (Okello, 2021). In Ghana, Awuor (2022) found that levies imposed without clear national regulatory guidelines produced significant rural–urban disparities, while Nannyonjo (2023) found that levy-based financing widened rather than narrowed inter-school equity gaps, since the capacity to

raise development funds was itself a function of community wealth rather than educational need.

In East Africa, Sumra and Katabaro (2020) found that Tanzanian schools imposing higher development levies recorded significantly higher dropout among the lowest socio-economic quintile, with levies typically front-loaded at the start of the school year as a condition for enrolment, timing that exposed families to exclusion precisely when participation decisions were most financially sensitive. Mwaura (2022) similarly found that schools with government-funded infrastructure recorded lower absenteeism and higher completion than comparable schools reliant on parental levies.

In Kenya, development levies are both legally regulated and practically pervasive. The Basic Education Regulations (2015) require prior approval from the Cabinet Secretary for Education for any levy or development fee in public schools, a safeguard reaffirmed by the Republic of Kenya Education Board decision of 2023, which held that unauthorised development levies contravene the constitutional right to free basic education. Despite this, Nyambura and Otieno (2020) found that many Boards of Management continue to introduce levies for classroom renovation, laboratory construction, and infrastructural expansion, resulting in absenteeism among learners whose families cannot meet the payments. Orodho (2020) found development levies to be among the most variable and least regulated categories of school charges nationally, while Keter (2022), in Trans Nzoia County, found them to be a leading cause of absenteeism and dropout, and Wanjala and Simiyu (2021) documented the use of restricted access to laboratories, computer rooms, and examination halls as leverage to compel payment, a practice most aggressive during examination years.

The challenge is especially acute in pastoralist and agro-pastoralist communities such as West Pokot County. Boyle, Brock, Mace, and Sibbons (2020) documented the fundamental paradox that in communities with seasonal, variable household incomes, development levies create the greatest disruption when collected during periods of economic stress, such as drought years, when education-related expenditure is often the first cost sacrificed. The Elimu Bora Working Group (2025) further reported that in marginalised counties including West Pokot, Turkana, and Mandera, household economic vulnerability amplifies the negative impact of levies, contributing to disproportionately higher absenteeism, irregular participation, and dropout.

Kilonzo and Wambua (2024) recommend that development levies be brought under government regulation specifying maximum permissible amounts, mandatory exemptions for low-income learners, and independent auditing of collection and expenditure by county education authorities. It is against this backdrop, a Free Day Secondary Education policy that is, in principle, tuition-free but in practice mediated by levies, that the present study examines the effect of development levies on learner participation in West Pokot County.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Although Free Day Secondary Education is intended to eliminate financial barriers to secondary schooling in Kenya, public day secondary schools continue to levy parents for infrastructure development to compensate for inadequate government capitation. In West Pokot County, a predominantly pastoralist region characterised by seasonal and variable household incomes, this practice raises particular concern: the same levies that fund infrastructure improvements believed to support participation may simultaneously price the most economically vulnerable learners out of the schools those improvements are meant to serve. This study therefore investigated the effect of development levies on learners' participation in public day secondary schools in West Pokot County.

1.3 Objective and Hypothesis

The objective of this study was to analyze the effect of development levies on learners' participation in public day secondary schools in West Pokot County. The study was guided by the following null hypothesis:

HO3: There is no statistically significant effect of development levies on learner participation in public day secondary schools in West Pokot County.

2. Methodology

The study adopted a descriptive survey design incorporating both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Students and parents responded to structured Likert-scale questionnaires (Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree) covering five statements relating to development levies and learner participation, while principals were interviewed qualitatively. Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations), Pearson correlation, an independent-samples t-test comparing student and parent means, and bivariate linear regression were used to analyze the quantitative data. Interview data from principals were analyzed thematically to contextualize the quantitative findings.

2.1 Target Population

The target population for this study comprised stakeholders directly involved in or affected by the implementation of development levies in public day secondary schools in West Pokot County, namely students, parents, and school principals. These categories were considered appropriate because each possessed relevant information regarding the influence of development levies on learner participation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Sekaran & Bougie, 2020).

The study targeted 1,468 students enrolled in public day secondary schools in the county, as students directly experience the effects of levy payment or non-payment on their attendance, retention, and participation in class and co-curricular activities. The study also targeted 161 parents, one drawn from each of the 161 public day secondary schools in the county, since parents bear the financial responsibility for levy payment and, through Boards of Management and Parents' Associations, participate in school

financial decision-making. Finally, the study targeted 161 principals, one from each public day secondary school, as principals are responsible for school administration, the introduction and approval of levies, and the allocation of levy proceeds toward infrastructure, academic programmes, and learner support services. According to Saunders et al. (2019), respondents selected for a study should possess adequate knowledge and experience of the issue under investigation in order to enhance the reliability and credibility of findings; the three respondent categories together met this requirement by providing complementary perspectives on the same phenomenon.

2.2 Sample of Respondents

From this target population, a total of 182 respondents were sampled, comprising students, parents, and principals. Table 1 presents the target population and the corresponding sample drawn from each respondent category. It should be noted that for the purposes of the correlation and regression analysis reported in Section 3, the student and parent responses were pooled into a combined analytic sample of 127 respondents, while the principals' contribution was analyzed separately and qualitatively.

Table 1: Target Population and Sample Distribution by Respondent Category

Respondent Category	Target Population	Sample Size	Sample as % of Population
Students	1,468	113	7.7%
Parents	161	37	23.0%
Principals	161	32	19.9%
Total	1,790	182	10.2%

Source: Field Data, 2026.

3. Findings

3.1 Students' and Parents' Descriptive Responses

Table 2 presents students' ratings of statements relating to development levies and their perceived influence on learner participation.

Table 2: Students' Response on Development Levies

Statement	SA	A	NS	D	SD	Mean	Std.
High improvement levies prevent some learners from enrolling or staying in school	41 (36.3%)	18 (15.9%)	14 (12.4%)	37 (32.7%)	3 (2.7%)	2.50	1.344
Learners from low-income families are more affected by improvement levies	29 (25.7%)	54 (47.8%)	12 (10.6%)	17 (15.0%)	1 (0.9%)	2.18	1.011
School infrastructure improvement through levies boosts learner motivation and participation	12 (10.6%)	29 (25.7%)	17 (15.0%)	36 (31.9%)	19 (16.8%)	3.19	1.285
Due to the pressure to meet school levies, some students are forced to	17 (15.0%)	37 (32.7%)	11 (9.7%)	29 (25.7%)	19 (16.8%)	2.96	1.368

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engage in child labour to pay for fees							
Inability to pay school improvement levies negatively influenced students' overall academic performance	23 (20.4%)	37 (32.7%)	11 (9.7%)	27 (23.9%)	15 (13.3%)	2.77	1.369
Composite values (corrected)	24 (21.2%)	35 (31.0%)	13 (11.5%)	29 (25.7%)	12 (10.6%)	2.72	1.275

Note: SA = Strongly Agree; A = Agree; NS = Not Sure; D = Disagree; SD = Strongly Disagree.

Source: Field Data, 2026.

A majority of students (52.2%) agreed or strongly agreed that high development levies prevent some learners from enrolling in or staying in school. Agreement was considerably stronger on the disproportionate impact of levies on low-income learners, with 73.5% of students agreeing or strongly agreeing, the highest level of consensus on any item in the table. Students were more skeptical than not that levy-funded infrastructure improvement boosts motivation and participation, with 48.7% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing. On the question of levy-driven child labour, 47.7% of students agreed or strongly agreed that financial pressure to meet levies forces some students into child labour, and 53.1% agreed or strongly agreed that inability to pay negatively affects academic performance.

Table 3 presents the corresponding ratings obtained from parent respondents.

Table 3: Parents' Response on Development Levies

Statement	SA	A	NS	D	SD	Mean	Std.
High improvement levies prevent some learners from enrolling or staying in school	8 (21.6%)	13 (35.1%)	3 (8.1%)	6 (16.2%)	7 (18.9%)	2.76	1.461
Learners from low-income families are more affected by improvement levies	13 (35.1%)	16 (43.2%)	0 (0.0%)	8 (21.6%)	0 (0.0%)	2.08	1.115
School infrastructure improvement through levies boosts learner motivation and participation	8 (21.6%)	17 (45.9%)	2 (5.4%)	6 (16.2%)	4 (10.8%)	2.49	1.305
Due to the pressure to meet school levies, some students are forced to engage in child labour to pay for fees	7 (18.9%)	11 (29.7%)	4 (10.8%)	12 (32.4%)	3 (8.1%)	2.81	1.308
Due to an inability to pay school improvement levies, negatively impacting overall academic performance	9 (24.3%)	14 (37.8%)	3 (8.1%)	9 (24.3%)	2 (5.4%)	2.49	1.262
Composite values (corrected)	9 (24.3%)	14 (37.8%)	2 (5.4%)	8 (21.6%)	4 (10.8%)	2.53	1.290

Note: SA = Strongly Agree; A = Agree; NS = Not Sure; D = Disagree; SD = Strongly Disagree.

Source: Field Data, 2026.

A majority of parents (56.7%) agreed or strongly agreed that high development levies prevent some learners from enrolling in or staying in school, and more than three-quarters (78.3%) agreed or strongly agreed that low-income learners are disproportionately affected, the highest consensus item in the table and closely mirroring the pattern observed among students. Unlike students, a majority of parents (67.5%) agreed or strongly agreed that levy-funded infrastructure boosts learner motivation and participation. On child labour, 48.6% of parents agreed or strongly agreed that levy pressure forces some students into child labour, and 62.1% agreed or strongly agreed that inability to pay negatively affects academic performance.

3.2 Comparative Means and Group Differences

Using corrected composite means of 2.72 (students) and 2.53 (parents), the overall mean index across both groups was 2.63, sitting at the boundary between the Agree and Not Sure bands on the interpretive scale (1.0–1.8 = Strongly Agree; 1.9–2.6 = Agree; 2.7–3.4 = Not Sure; 3.5–4.2 = Disagree; 4.3–5.0 = Strongly Disagree). Table 4 compares student and parent mean scores on each item and reports the results of independent-samples t-tests conducted between the two groups.

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics on the Effect of Development Levies on Learners' Participation

Statement	Stu. Mean	Stu. Std.	Par. Mean	Par. Std.	Ave. Mean	Ave. Std.	t (df)	Sig.
High improvement levies prevent some learners from enrolling or staying in school	2.50	1.344	2.76	1.461	2.63	1.403	-0.958 (57)	.342
Learners from low-income families are more affected by improvement levies	2.18	1.011	2.08	1.115	2.13	1.063	0.484 (57)	.630
School infrastructure improvement through levies boosts learner motivation and participation	3.19	1.285	2.49	1.305	2.84	1.295	2.843 (61)	.006
Due to the pressure to meet school levies, some students are forced to engage in child labour to pay for fees	2.96	1.368	2.81	1.308	2.885	1.338	0.599 (64)	.551
Inability to pay school improvement levies negatively impacted students' overall academic performance	2.77	1.369	2.49	1.262	2.63	1.316	1.147 (66)	.256
Composite values (corrected)	2.72	1.275	2.53	1.290	2.63	1.283	n/a	n/a

Source: Field Data, 2026.

Independent-samples t-tests found no statistically significant difference between students and parents on four of the five items. The single exception was the item on whether infrastructure improvement boosts motivation and participation, where the gap

between the students' mean (3.19, Not Sure/leaning disagree) and the parents' mean (2.49, Agree) was statistically significant ($t(61) = 2.843$, $p = .006$).

3.3 Correlation Analysis

Table 5 presents the Pearson correlation matrix relating learners' participation to each of the five development levy variables.

Table 5: Pearson Correlation of Development Levies and Learners' Participation

Statement	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Learners' participation	1					
2. High improvement levies prevent some learners from enrolling or staying in school	.368 <.001**	1				
3. Learners from low-income families are more affected by improvement levies	.685 <.001**	.421 <.001**	1			
4. School infrastructure improvement through levies boosts learner motivation and participation	.372 <.001**	.395 <.001**	.427 <.001**	1		
5. Due to the pressure to meet school levies, some students are forced to engage in child labour to pay for fees	.102 .254	.201 .023**	.375 <.001**	.107 .231	1	
6. Inability to pay school improvement levies negatively impacted students' overall academic performance	.431 <.001**	.297 .001**	.024 .789	.628 <.001**	.547 <.001**	1

Source: Author, 2026.

** Correlation is significant at $p < .05$.

Four of the five development levy variables correlated significantly with learners' participation. The strongest relationship was between participation and the item concerning the disproportionate impact of levies on low-income learners ($r = .685$, $p < .001$). Moderate significant positive correlations were found for levies preventing enrolment or retention ($r = .368$, $p < .001$), infrastructure improvement boosting motivation ($r = .372$, $p < .001$), and academic performance impact ($r = .431$, $p < .001$). The correlation between levy-driven child labour and participation was not statistically significant ($r = .102$, $p = .254$).

3.4 Regression Analysis and Hypothesis Testing

A bivariate regression analysis was conducted with learners' participation regressed on development levies for the combined sample of students and parents ($n = 127$). Tables 6, 7, and 8 present the model summary, ANOVA, and regression coefficients respectively.

Table 6: Development Levies and Learner Participation, Model Summary

Model	R	R Squared	Adjusted R Squared	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.615	.379	.374	.772

Predictor: (Constant), development levies.

Table 7: Development Levies and Learner Participation, ANOVA

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	45.321	1	45.321	76.140	<.001
Residual	74.395	125	0.595		
Total	119.716	126			

Note: Dependent variable: learners' participation.

Predictor: (Constant), development levies.

Table 8: Development Levies and Learner Participation, Coefficients

Model	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
(Constant)	10.365	.862		12.024	<.001
Development levies	.368	.042	.615	8.726	<.001

Note: Dependent variable: learners' participation.

As shown in Table 6, the computed R Square value of 0.379 indicates that development levies alone explained 37.9% of the variance in learner participation in public day secondary schools in West Pokot County, with the remaining 62.1% attributable to factors outside the scope of this analysis. The ANOVA results in Table 7 confirm that the regression model was statistically significant, $F(1, 125) = 76.140$, $p < .001$, and therefore adequate for predicting learner participation based on the values of development levies. The regression estimates in Table 8 indicate that development levies had a positive and statistically significant influence on learner participation ($B = 0.368$, $p < .001$), meaning that a unit increase in development levies was associated with a corresponding increase in learner participation of 0.368 units, holding other factors constant. Since $p < .05$, the null hypothesis ($H03$) was rejected: development levies were found to have a statistically significant effect on learner participation in public day secondary schools in West Pokot County.

3.5 Qualitative Findings from Principals

Principals generally described development levies as instrumental in expanding and upgrading school infrastructure, and linked these improvements to gains in attendance and participation:

"Development levies have enabled us to construct classrooms and improve learning facilities. When learners study in better environments, their attendance and participation improve significantly."

At the same time, principals identified a recurring failure mode in which inconsistent parental payment stalled ongoing projects:

"Delayed or inconsistent payment of development levies by parents sometimes slowed down ongoing projects, resulting in incomplete facilities that negatively affected learning conditions. In such cases, learner motivation and participation were temporarily affected until projects were completed."

These accounts, together with the quantitative divergence between students and parents on the motivational value of infrastructure, suggest that principals' assessment of levies as participation-enhancing reflects the intended outcome of levy financing more than learners' lived experience of it.

4. Discussion

The regression results establish that development levies are a statistically significant predictor of learner participation, but the composition of the correlation matrix indicates that this relationship is driven primarily by exclusion rather than by motivation. The strongest single correlate of participation was agreement that low-income learners are disproportionately affected by levies ($r = .685$), nearly double the strength of the correlation for the infrastructure-motivation item ($r = .372$). Students, who experience the consequences of non-payment directly, were markedly more skeptical than parents that levy-funded improvements translate into greater motivation or participation, a divergence that was itself statistically significant. This is consistent with the broader literature reviewed in this study: the World Bank (2020, 2024) and comparable East African studies (Sumra & Katabaro, 2020; Mwaura, 2022) similarly found that levy-financed infrastructure gains are real but unevenly distributed, producing improvements that coexist with, rather than resolve, exclusion of the poorest learners.

The principal interviews add a further dimension: because levy collection is uneven and often incomplete, the financing mechanism introduces its own volatility into school infrastructure projects, generating episodes of unfinished construction that temporarily depress the very participation outcomes levies are intended to support. This suggests development levies do not operate as a simple, stable positive input into participation, but as a mechanism whose net effect depends on how consistently, and from whom, funds are collected.

Read against West Pokot County's pastoralist economic context, in which household income is seasonal and vulnerable to shocks such as drought (Boyle et al., 2020; Elimu Bora Working Group, 2025), these findings indicate that development levies are likely to have their most disruptive effects precisely when household ability to pay is weakest, reinforcing rather than narrowing existing disparities in access to secondary education.

5. Conclusion

This study set out to determine whether development levies have a statistically significant effect on learners' participation in public day secondary schools in West Pokot County, and the evidence supports rejecting the null hypothesis: development levies do exert a real and measurable influence on participation. However, this influence is not a straightforwardly positive one. It is driven substantially by the exclusionary pressure levies place on households that cannot afford them, rather than by a stable motivational

benefit derived from improved infrastructure, and it is further complicated by the volatility that inconsistent levy collection introduces into the very construction projects levies are meant to fund.

The overall picture that emerges for West Pokot County is one in which development levies are simultaneously infrastructurally productive and socially exclusionary. Within a Free Day Secondary Education policy that guarantees tuition-free access, the continued reliance on parental levies to finance basic infrastructure means that the constitutional promise of free basic education remains, in practice, conditioned on household ability to pay. Addressing this tension will require a shift away from levy-dependent financing toward more predictable, equitable, and adequately funded government support for school infrastructure.

6. Recommendations

- Enforce existing regulatory ceilings. County and national education authorities should actively audit compliance with the Basic Education Regulations (2015) requirement that development levies receive prior approval from the Cabinet Secretary, rather than treating this as a formality boards of management can bypass under the label of “voluntary”.
- Smooth project financing to avoid stalled construction. Where levies fund capital projects, schools should phase construction against secured funding rather than projected collections, to avoid the incomplete-facility problem principals described as itself harming participation.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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