

POLICY BRIEF

Basic Education

WHY WE NEED A NATIONAL SCHOOL LEADERSHIP FOR LEARNING FRAMEWORK: A PRACTICAL GUIDE



To: Cabinet Secretary for Education

Policy focus: Institutional leadership for effective CBE delivery

DECISION REQUESTED: Direct the Ministry of Education, Teachers Service Commission and KEMI to establish a national School Leadership for Learning Framework and embed it in leadership selection, induction, continuous development, appraisal, and county/sub-county support.

The policy issue

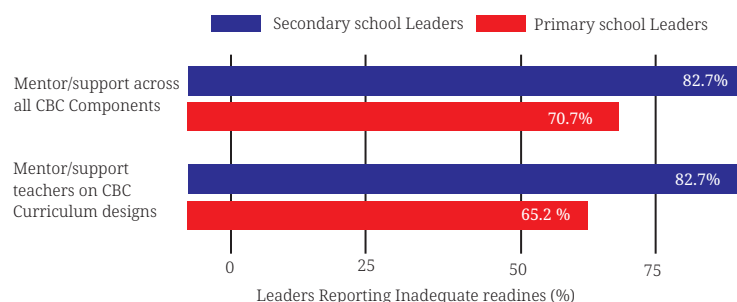
Kenya has invested heavily in curriculum design, teacher retooling, assessment reform, and learning materials. However, institutional leadership remains a weak link. Schools and teacher-training institutions are expected to deliver competency-based, inclusive, digitally enabled, and resilient learning, yet many leaders are still trained and assessed as administrators. As a result, national policy is translated unevenly into classroom practice. The solution is not another stand-alone workshop, but a formal, supported, and measurable leadership-for-learning function within the education system (Education Evidence for Action [EE4A], 2025a, 2025b; Ministry of Education [MoE], 2024).

What the evidence says

Leadership preparation is not keeping pace with reform.

Evidence area: The Kenya-specific leadership gap is not speculative. A Ministry-commissioned Kenya Education Management Institute (KEMI) Training Needs Assessment found that 82.7% of secondary school leaders and 70.7% of primary school leaders did not feel adequately equipped to mentor and support teachers across all components of the Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC). The gap was also evident in curriculum design: 80.2% of secondary school leaders and 65.2% of primary school leaders reported inadequate readiness to mentor and support teachers in CBC curriculum design. These are self-reported readiness measures rather than observations of practice, but the consistency across school levels points to a substantial leadership-capacity gap that warrants a national response focused on instructional leadership rather than another generic management course. [KEMI], 2023).

Figure 1. Proportion of primary and secondary school leaders reporting inadequate readiness to support teachers in CBC implementation and curriculum design.



Source. KEMI (2023), Training Needs Assessment commissioned by the Ministry of Education.

Transformational practice is teachable: Reflective evidence from more than 800 early-years leaders across Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania linked a practice-based course to shift from task management towards mentoring, collaborative planning, action research, and stronger community partnerships. These are the routines through which a vision becomes better teaching, not motivational language (Gioko, 2025).

Leadership must be distributed and locally supported: Institutions using shared leadership reported greater responsiveness to climate education, gender equity, green entrepreneurship, and digital literacy. Evidence on education systems in East Africa highlights the middle tier as a critical link between national policy and classroom practice, with Kenya's Curriculum Support Officers among the actors who collaborate directly with schools to support implementation. Strengthening this layer therefore requires clear roles, adequate preparation and resources, and mechanisms for localized instructional support (IIEP, 2025; Ndire, 2025).

Resilience is part of curriculum delivery: COVID-19 demonstrated that curriculum delivery depends not only on teachers and learning materials, but also on institutional leaders' ability to keep teaching and learning functioning when normal school routines are disrupted. Kenyan principals reported that the pandemic shifted their roles beyond managing human and material resources to include health management, counselling, community mobilization, and more complex school-level decision-making. They also reported gaps in disaster preparedness, technology, financial management and resource mobilization, highlighting the need for leadership preparation that enables schools to adapt delivery arrangements, maintain learner and teacher support, mobilize resources, and sustain engagement during disruption (Wakiaga & Merchant, 2025).

Training works when it changes routines and is followed up: A government-scale randomized trial in Malawi combined school-leadership training with follow-up visits and found that participating schools recorded 0.1 standard-deviation higher test scores, alongside improvements in progression rates. Put simply, the estimated learning gain was equivalent to about eight additional weeks of learning compared with pupils in the comparison schools.

The policy lesson is not that training alone produces these gains, but that leadership development is more likely to influence learning when training is combined with follow-up support that helps leaders apply new practices in their schools (Asim et al., 2024).



EVIDENCE CONFIDENCE: The Kenyan evidence consistently identifies a leadership-readiness problem, but much of it is qualitative, self-reported or programme-based. It justifies a measured pilot with rigorous follow-up, not blind to national rollout. The Malawi trial provides causal proof of concept, not automatic transferability to Kenya.

The recommended policy package

Policy objective: Make every head of institution accountable and equipped to improve teaching, support teacher capacity development, use evidence, protect equity, and sustain learning during disruption (Global Education Monitoring Report Team, 2024).

- **Adopt one national competency framework.** Adapt the leadership domains to the Kenyan education context, drawing on evidence presented at the 2025 Sixth Biennial Evidence for Education for All (EE4A) Conference, Kenya's curriculum and quality-assurance priorities, and the emerging evidence on institutional and instructional leadership. The adapted framework should define observable standards across six domains: **setting a shared learning vision; instructional leadership and use of learner evidence; teacher mentoring and distributed leadership; equity, gender, and inclusion; digital, financial and crisis leadership; and parent/community engagement.** It should apply across pre-primary, primary, junior, and senior schools, Teacher Training Colleges (TTCs) and the middle tier, with expectations contextualized by role. This adaptation would translate Kenya's curriculum and quality priorities into the specific leadership practices required to improve teaching and learning.

- **Professionalize the leadership pathway.** Use competency, not seniority alone, to inform readiness for appointment. Require structured induction within the first year, followed by periodic practice-based certification. This should build on KEMI's existing Effective School Leadership programme and associated digital learning resources, while strengthening the pathway through coaching, peer learning, school-based inquiry, and a verified improvement project. Prioritize new appointees, leaders managing junior-to-senior school transition, and institutions in marginalized or crisis-affected areas (Asim et al., 2024; KEMI, n.d.).
- **Shift accountability from paperwork to learning routines.** Align the head-of-institution Teacher Performance Appraisal and Development (TPAD) process, quality assurance, institutional performance targets, and school improvement planning to manageable set of practices. This should comprise; regular review of learner work and assessment evidence, classroom observation and actionable feedback, protected time for collaborative planning, follow-up on learners who are falling behind, and inclusive resource allocation. Avoid using examination scores alone. Triangulate leader practice, teacher experience, learner progress, and equity data to reduce gaming and perverse incentives (Global Education Monitoring Report Team, 2024).
- **Turn the middle tier into an implementation support system:** Clarify complementary roles across county and sub-county offices. County Directors of Education should provide overall coordination and resolve system-level implementation bottlenecks; Sub-County Directors of Education should coordinate school-level support and follow-up; Quality Assurance and Standards Officers should focus on standards, evidence, school-improvement actions and documented follow-up, while Curriculum Support Officers should provide direct pedagogical support to teachers and school leaders. Organize school clusters for peer learning and use low-bandwidth digital support where travel and staffing constraints limit reach (IIEP, 2025).
- **Finance, phase, and evaluate before national scale.** Create a protected leadership-development line within basic education implementation budgets and require partner investments to use the national framework rather than parallel models. Begin with a representative equity-weighted demonstration, establish a baseline, review implementation, and only scale the components that show changes in leader practice, teacher support, and learner outcomes. This should be embedded in the current National Education Sector Strategic Plan (NESSP) implementation cycle and its successor plan (MoE, 2024).

The hard truth: If leadership development remains fragmented, curriculum reform will continue to be judged by policy directives and training attendance while classroom delivery remains uneven.

A practical route to implementation (In a 24-month period)

Time	Priority action	Lead and evidence
First 100 days	Issue a Cabinet Secretary directive establishing a joint MoE–TSC–KEMI task team, map existing leadership standards and programmes, approve the competency domains and implementation design.	State Department for Basic Education; TSC; KEMI. Output: approved framework and costed implementation plan.
6–12 months	Revise KEMI modules; prepare coaches and middle-tier officers; align TPAD, quality assurance and school-improvement tools; and launch an equity-weighted demonstration with baseline data.	KEMI, TSC, DQAS, KICD, and KNEC. Output: a trained cohort, functioning coaching cycle and a baseline dashboard.
12–24 months	Evaluate leader practice, teacher support, and learner outcomes; identify and strengthen weak elements of the leadership framework, training, coaching, and implementation support; finance phased national expansion through the sector plan and partner alignment.	MoE Planning/M&E with an independent evaluator. Output: public learning report and scale roadmap.

Implementation principle: Use existing institutional machinery; cut on duplication; make follow-up visible.



Means of Verification

1. Percentage of heads completing practice-based certification and receiving coaching follow-up.
2. Percentage of schools holding monthly evidence reviews and collaborative planning sessions.
3. Teacher-reported usefulness and frequency of instructional feedback.
4. Percentage of school-improvement actions completed and verified at the next visit.
5. Learner progress, attendance, retention and transition, disaggregated by sex, disability, and location; and
6. Time between identification of an implementation bottleneck and documented middle-tier response.

Guardrails

- **Avoid a compliance course:** Leaders should not merely attend training, receive certificates, and return to business as usual. The Ministry should verify that they apply the skills through teacher mentoring, classroom support, and documented school improvement actions.
- **Avoid digital exclusion:** Online-only training could exclude leaders in schools with poor internet access or inadequate devices. Delivery should combine online, offline, and face-to-face learning, with connectivity support where necessary.
- **Avoid score-chasing:** Leaders should not be judged only by examination results. That could encourage teaching the test, manipulation of results and neglect of learner wellbeing and inclusion. Performance should also consider leadership practice, teacher support, learner progress, and equity.

Bottom line: Kenya does not need a new leadership slogan. It needs a coherent leadership system that changes what institutional heads do every week and can demonstrate whether those practices improve teaching and learning.

References

- Asim, S., Gera, R. C., Harris, D., & Dercon, S. (2024). Does effective school leadership improve student progression and test scores? Evidence from a field experiment in Malawi (Policy Research Working Paper No. 10846). World Bank.
<https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstreams/57e70d49-7f4b-400d-a7b0-68606db443a5/download>
- Education Evidence for Action. (2025a). Conference brief: Re-imagining education in Kenya—Reforming teacher education for sustainable development [Conference brief].
- Education Evidence for Action. (2025b). EE4A 2025 conference report: Re-imagining education in Africa—Reforming teacher education for sustainable development [Conference report].
- Gioko, M. (2025, August 21). Shaping transformational instructional leaders in early childhood education: A reflection on the ‘Foundation for Learning’ course impact across Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania [Conference abstract]. Sixth Biennial Evidence for Education for All Conference, University of Embu, Kenya.
- Global Education Monitoring Report Team. (2024). Leadership in education: Lead for learning (Global Education Monitoring Report 2024/5). UNESCO.
<https://www.unesco.org/gem-report/en/publication/leadership>
- International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP). (2025). Unlocking the potential of middle-tier leaders in East Africa’s education reform. UNESCO IIEP.
- Kenya Education Management Institute. (n.d.). Welcoming the inaugural cohort to our Effective School Leadership for Junior Secondary Schools programme. Retrieved July 20, 2026, from
<https://www.kemi.ac.ke/welcoming-the-inaugural-cohort-to-our-effective-school-leadership-for-junior-secondary-schools-esl4jss-program/>
- Ministry of Education. (2024). National education sector strategic plan 2023–2027. Government of Kenya. <https://www.education.go.ke/node/670>
- Ndire, L. A. (2025, August 21). Empowering institutional leadership for curriculum leadership: A pathway to sustainable teacher education in Kenya [Conference abstract]. Sixth Biennial Evidence for Education for All Conference, University of Embu, Kenya.
- Wakiaga, L., & Merchant, B. (2025, August 26–28). Leading through the storm: Exploring key school management qualities for principals in times of crisis [Conference presentation]. Sixth Biennial Evidence for Education for All Conference, University of Embu, Kenya.