

## **Are Low-cost Private Schools Worth the Investment? Evidence on Parent Preferences and Student Outcomes in Nairobi Primary Schools**

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**Abstract:** Low-cost private schools (LCPSs) represent a large and growing share of schools in many low- and middle-income countries, including Kenya. In some Nairobi neighborhoods, more than half of children attend LCPSs, despite policies providing free access to public education. Parents generally choose LCPSs because they believe they are higher quality, although there is little conclusive evidence supporting this belief. In this study, we aim to add to the evidence available on the comparison between LCPSs and public schools by using student gains over time as our outcome, thus controlling for the initial level of achievement and instead examining improvement. The randomly selected longitudinal sample was composed of 326 children attending 47 LCPSs and government schools in several of Nairobi's geographic zones. These children's literacy and numeracy outcomes were tracked over two academic years to determine their learning gains over time. We found that these LCPSs did not produce significantly higher student growth than public schools under the status quo condition. However, among schools participating in an instructional improvement intervention supported by the United States Agency for International Development and the UK Department for International Development, LCPSs increased performance more than public schools in English, Kiswahili, and mathematics, with the largest differences in English. These findings offer a cautionary note to the rapid expansion of LCPSs in low-resource settings. The fees paid to LCPSs by low-income households are often burdensome for families and, in some contexts, may not be worth the trade-offs that families make to afford them.