

## Exploring Institutional Based Practice of Reward System on Student Academic Performance in Public Secondary Schools in Makueni County, Kenya

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### Abstract

In many countries, student academic success is often measured by the outcomes of their final examinations at the end of basic education. This research focused on assessing how the reward system affects students' academic performance in the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) within public secondary schools in Makueni County, Kenya. The study was based on the Path-goal Theory and employed a descriptive research design. Various sampling methods were used, such as simple random sampling, stratified sampling, and purposive sampling to choose participants. Data was collected through questionnaires distributed to principals, teachers, and student leaders, along with scheduled interviews exclusively with the principals. The validity of the research tools was verified by experts from the School of Education, while reliability was evaluated using the test-retest method. The quantitative data obtained from the questionnaires were coded and analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software, which allowed for the generation of descriptive statistics and chi-square tests. The analysis included frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, with hypothesis testing performed at a 0.05 significance level using Pearson's correlation coefficient in line with the study's objectives. Conclusions and recommendations were then drawn. The results suggested that public secondary schools in Makueni County implement a reward system that positively affects KCSE performance, as indicated by an  $r$  value of 0.527. This study is important as it highlights how institutional reward practices influence students' academic performance in the KCSE. Based on the findings, the research recommends that the Kenyan government, through the Ministry of Education, provide essential instructional materials and create supportive school environments by allocating necessary funding and logistical assistance. It is also advised that public secondary school administrations devise strategies to motivate both teachers and students to enhance academic performance. Additionally, the study encourages the adoption of leadership styles that foster effective communication and motivation, which would lead to better learning practices and increased performance, ultimately addressing the issue of declining academic achievement.

**Keywords:** Institutional based practice, Reward system, Student academic performance

### 1. Introduction

Education is widely accepted as the key to the well-being of any society (Qizilbash, 1998). The educational level is very important for national development. Therefore, the foundation of a nation's development is perceived to lie in the level of its basic education (Uduma, 2020). The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2013) states that treaties and laws worldwide acknowledge education as a fundamental human right and an indispensable role in imparting desired knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Quality education is one of the sustainable development goals established by the United Nations (Nazar, 2018). The worldwide trend towards attaining quality education has generated heated discussions on the institutional-based practices for the effective implementation of curriculum to yield high-quality education output (Stewart, 2012).

Study findings by Day (2016) found that school leadership requires competitive transformation leadership practices that contribute to good student academic performance in national examinations. Interventions have not been able to raise students' performance in standardized national tests or widen participation in the United Kingdom (UK). In December 2012, the International Association for the Evaluation Achievement (IAEA) released a national average result from the Zollo Administration of Trends International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS). United States (US) Secretary of Education Ann Duncan issued a press release calling the results "unacceptable" saying that they underscore the urgency of accelerating achievements in secondary schools and the need to close a large, persisting gap.

Many countries in Africa, especially in the sub-Saharan region, have introduced Free Primary Education (FPE) and Free Day Secondary Education (FDSE) to make education basic for all children. The population increase in both primary and secondary schools has strained the few resources found in schools, leading to poor student academic performance in national exams. Siphon (2016) stated that the education system in South Africa would not work effectively until undue union influence and critical educational factors were resolved. This calls for school management to plan well for school-based practices, which would enable them to achieve their educational goals, the main one being student academic performance.

In Kenya, the government has affected education by giving extra funds to secondary schools to fulfil certain criteria and follow guidelines. Despite the government's interventions to improve performance in Kenya, students' academic performance in the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) has remained low in many schools.

Secondary school administration and its equivalent practices are considered key factors in the attainment of improved student academic achievements in the KCSE. This study investigates the influence of the institutional-based practice of rewarding teachers and students on students' academic performance in the KCSE in public secondary schools in Makueni County.

The rewarding system is a strategy used in learning institutions to build learning habits. The school management can use ways such as; use of incentives, such as to m monetary rewards, trips and scholarships for motivation of both teachers and students. Scholarships are awarded to students to enable them to attain higher learning motivateates them to work hard in secondary schools (Abugu, 2015). Study findings by Harms (2012) found that student academic performance can improve drastically if they are offered rewards just before and after standardized tests. Field trips promote learning because they are participatory, interesting, and provide a link between the real application of science and classroom work (Esokomu, 2018). Adhiambo (2016) concluded that school management should comprehend the types of rewards that lead to improved performance of teachers, which may positively affect the general academic performance of students in the KCSE. The study findings indicate that rewarding both teachers and students leads to improved student academic performance in national exams.

## 1.2 Statement of the Problem

School management has a responsibility to ensure that students excel in their academic pursuits at the secondary level. Unfortunately, many public secondary schools in Kenya, particularly in Makueni County, are facing challenges related to low academic performance in the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE). Data from the Makueni Education Office (2025) indicates unsatisfactory outcomes in national exams for the years 2020 to 2024. The proportion of students qualifying for university admission (those achieving a C+ or higher) has been significantly lower than those receiving a D grade or below. This situation necessitates research to identify solutions. The researcher believes that if the management of public secondary schools emphasizes rewarding both teachers and students as part of their institutional practices, there may be an improvement in students' academic performance in the KCSE. Consequently, this study aims to explore the impact of institutional practices on the academic performance of students in the KCSE across public secondary schools in Makueni County, Kenya.

## 1.3 Objectives of the Study

The study sought to address the following objectives

- i. To assess the levels of academic achievement in public secondary schools in Makueni County.
- ii. To examine the extent to which institution-based reward systems influence students' academic performance in the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) in public secondary schools in Makueni County, Kenya.

## 1.4 Research Questions

- i. What are the current levels of academic achievement among students in public secondary schools in Makueni County?
- ii. To what extent do institution-based reward systems influence students' academic performance in the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) in public secondary schools in Makueni County?

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## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Reward System and Student KCSE Performance

A rewarding system encompasses all forms of monetary, non-monetary, and psychological benefits that educational institutions provide to teachers and students in exchange for strong academic performance (Awuor, 2022). Research

conducted by Harms (2012) in Chicago indicated that student academic performance can significantly improve when rewards are offered immediately before standardized tests and when students are incentivized afterward. Additionally, studies have produced mixed outcomes regarding the impact of merit-based financial aid on the academic achievements of secondary students (Henry, 2002). In a 1994 survey conducted in the United States, Hahn highlighted initiatives like the Quantum Opportunity Program (QOP) and Ohio's Learning, E-learning, and Parenting (LEAP), which demonstrated improvements in graduation rates, academic performance, and behavioral outcomes for high-risk youth due to incentives given to teachers (Rodríguez-Planas, 2010). Findings from Zihan (2023) in the USA further indicated that reward systems in schools positively influence student development and enhance motivation. In a study conducted by Siphon (2016) in South Africa, it was found that the educational systems could not operate effectively until issues related to undue union influence and essential educational factors were addressed, including motivational practices for both teachers and students. Gbollie (2017) conducted research in Nigeria focusing on motivational beliefs and learning strategies, concluding that students remain extrinsically motivated by rewards and penalties, even while valuing their tasks and experiencing low anxiety. Ali (2016) explored the relationship between teacher motivation and student academic performance in Somalia, revealing significant correlations. Abugu's (2015) research in Nigeria identified scholarships as financial incentives that can motivate students to improve their academic performance.

This study employed a descriptive survey design with a sample size of 689 respondents and aimed to evaluate the impact of rewards on the academic performance of students in Makueni County, Kenya. Adhiambo's (2016) research in Kenya on the effectiveness of institutional reward systems demonstrated that there needs to be a clear method for linking rewards to teacher performance. The study found that monetary rewards enhance teacher commitment, thereby improving student academic performance. Ritho (2015) also examined the influence of student motivation in Kenya and concluded that intrinsic motivation positively affects both teacher and student performance. School management's commitment to rewarding students encourages them to exert extra effort, resulting in enhanced academic outcomes (Ong'eng'e, 2016). Esokomi (2018) found that field trips foster learning by connecting real-world applications of science with classroom lessons. Collectively, these studies illustrate that reward systems contribute to increased commitment in teaching and learning, ultimately leading to improved student academic performance.

## 2.2. Theoretical Framework

This study is based on the Path Goal Model developed by House and Mitchell in 1974, which was initially proposed by Martin in 1970. The model outlines the leadership behaviors that are most effective in helping employees and work environments achieve specific outcomes or goals. The original path-goal model identifies four types of leadership behaviors: achievement-oriented, directive, participative, and supportive. In this study, the researcher utilized the Path Goal Model, suggesting that institution-based reward practices (the path) should lead to the desired outcome of improved performance in the KCSE (the goal). Farhan (2018) examined the pros and cons of the path-goal theory in their research on leadership and professional development. The Path-goal Model has several advantages, such as its flexibility, its appropriateness for crisis situations and those with time limitations, and the clarity of its concepts. However, it also has weaknesses, including its inapplicability in contexts with ineffective leadership, its insufficient explanation of the link between leadership behavior and motivation for achieving goals, and its excessive reliance on the leader's system. Other related theories include Henry Fayol's Classical Management Theory, which stresses the importance of applying general management principles, and Hangreaves' Capital Theory of school effectiveness and improvement.

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## 3. Research Methodology

This study utilized a descriptive survey design, targeting a population of 380 schools, 380 principals, 1,520 teachers, and 1,140 student leaders, resulting in a total of 3,040 participants. To determine the sample size of 76 schools, a 20% rule was applied as recommended by Gharaibeh (2010) for calculating the optimum sample size for percent-within-limits. Purposive sampling was employed to select all 76 principals from the identified schools. Yamane's formula was then utilized to derive a sample size of 304 teachers and 304 student leaders. Data collection involved administering questionnaires to principals, teachers, and student leaders, while qualitative data was gathered exclusively from principals through an interview guide. A pilot study was conducted involving four schools, four principals, 16 teachers, and 16 student leaders, representing 5% of the study sample to test the research instruments. Descriptive statistics were applied to analyze the quantitative data, and inferential analysis was conducted using Pearson's product-moment correlation analysis, with results presented in graphs and tables. The qualitative data were analyzed thematically in alignment with the study's objectives, and the findings were presented in narrative form.

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## 4. Results

The results indicate that over 80% of public secondary schools in Makueni County reward students who perform well academically. The respondents provided an average mean rating of 4.04 for this statement. These findings align with Aisha's (2021) conclusion that rewards serve as a driving force for students, thereby enhancing their academic achievements. Additionally, the study revealed that secondary school management motivates teachers primarily through monetary incentives. This is further supported by Owan (2018) in Nigeria, which emphasized the importance of providing intrinsic

or extrinsic rewards to teachers who excel in their subjects. The study also found that only 35% of secondary school administrators in Makueni County organized outings for both teachers and students who demonstrated strong academic performance. This finding is consistent with Esokomi (2018) in Kenya, who recommended that field trips be utilized more extensively as an effective teaching and learning method in secondary schools.

The study highlighted a lack of support from public secondary school administrators for such field trips, as they tend to prioritize non-academic activities. It was noted that these outings could enhance academic performance through the promotion of participatory learning. Therefore, the findings suggest that school administrators should engage various stakeholders to facilitate trips, positively influencing academic performance for both teachers and students. The research aimed to assess whether public secondary schools offered scholarships to students excelling in the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE). Results revealed that fewer than 20% of schools provided scholarships to their students. This finding is consistent with Omoje (2015) in Nigeria, which noted that scholarships are typically awarded by governments, individuals, religious organizations, and non-governmental entities.

The study suggests that management in Makueni County's public secondary schools should consider introducing scholarships to motivate students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, to invest more effort into their studies. The absence of scholarships could contribute to underperformance in KCSE (Wambui, 2014). The findings indicate that rewarding practices in secondary schools positively influence KCSE performance. This aligns with Zihan (2023), who found that rewards foster student interest, encourage good learning habits, create a positive environment, and enhance motivation. Therefore, the results support the recommendation for all schools to implement rewarding practices that positively affect academic outcomes. The analysis showed a statistically significant positive correlation ( $r = 0.527$  at  $p = 0.04$ ) between the reward system and student academic performance in KCSE among public secondary schools in Makueni County, Kenya. Consequently, the null hypothesis was rejected in favor of the alternative hypothesis, affirming a statistically significant relationship between the reward system and student performance. The qualitative phase of the study, involving interviews with principals, echoed these findings. The principals noted that for the reward system to effectively enhance student performance, it must be implemented consistently and effectively. They were also asked to share types of rewards used in their schools that positively influence academic performance, citing monetary incentives and outings for teachers, as well as materials, certificates, luncheons, outings, and monetary incentives for students. These findings resonate with research conducted by Harms (2012) in Chicago, Owan (2018) in Nigeria, and Athiambo (2016) in Kenya, which demonstrated that both intrinsic and extrinsic rewards serve to motivate both teachers and students, thereby positively impacting academic performance. In light of these study findings, the researcher advocates for educational institutions to adopt rewarding practices for both teachers and students to enhance student academic performance.

#### 4.1. Statistical insights

The study indicated a correlation coefficient ( $r$ ) of 0.532 for reward system practices, suggesting a positive relationship between these practices and KCSE performance. The findings demonstrated that the significance level for reward system practices was highly significant at  $p = 0.03$ , which is below the alpha threshold of 0.05. This implies a notable impact of reward practices on KCSE performance. The results suggest that the implementation of an effective reward system is associated with higher levels of KCSE performance. The data also indicate that increased involvement of school management in reward systems leads to improved performance, reinforcing the rejection of the hypothesis asserting no statistically significant relationship between reward systems and student performance in KCSE within public secondary schools in Makueni County. This underscores the importance for secondary school administrators to adopt reward practices to positively influence student outcomes in KCSE examinations.

#### 4.2. Qualitative insights

The principals who were interviewed confirmed that the implementation of rewards has significantly enhanced morale and fostered a culture of excellence within the school environment. They provided examples of marked improvements in student discipline, punctuality, and attendance among those who received rewards. Teachers observed a rise in enthusiasm and participation in the classroom among high-achieving students. Furthermore, students recognized that these rewards served as a motivating factor, encouraging them to exert greater effort and engage in healthy competition.

#### 4.3. Challenges Identified

Despite the positive impact of rewarding system in the schools, challenges were noted which included;

- i. Budget constraints: Some schools lacked funds to implement elaborate reward schemes.
- ii. Equity concerns: In some schools, poorly designed systems led to perceptions of favoritism or demotivation among students who didn't receive awards.
- iii. Sustainability: Schools struggled to maintain consistency in offering rewards due to changing administrative priorities and inadequate support.

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## 5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The study determined that reward systems serve as an effective institutional practice that significantly enhances academic performance in the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) among public secondary schools in Makueni

County. To achieve optimal results, it is essential that these reward programs are well-organized, inclusive, and sustainable. The findings not only support existing literature but also contextualize it within the distinct socio-economic and educational landscape of Makueni County.

### Recommendations

- i. School administrators should develop clear and inclusive reward frameworks.
- ii. The Ministry of Education should allocate funds to support reward initiatives.
- iii. Further training should be provided for school leaders on the psychological foundations and strategic implementation of reward systems.

### Reflection

This study highlights the essential importance of motivation in education. The findings support the theory that when students and teachers receive recognition for their efforts, they become more engaged in the educational process, resulting in improved academic performance. Accordingly, reward systems should not be viewed as optional enhancements, but rather as fundamental components in the pursuit of educational excellence.

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### Declaration of Competing Interests

The authors declare that they are not aware of any competing financial interests or personal relationships that may have influenced the work described in this document.

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### Ethical considerations

The article followed all ethical standards appropriate for this kind of research.

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