

## **The phenomenon of School fires in Kenyan Public Secondary Schools: Blame-games, scape-goats and the real culprits.**

By

Dr Charles Kinanga Moywaywa\*

Lecturer, Department of Geography, History & Religious Studies, South Eastern Kenya University

### **Abstract**

In any country, the task of caring and moulding the behavior of the youth requires a partnership between parents, teachers and the government. In Kenya, children in public secondary schools are often considered to be under the watch of these three segments. In recent times, Kenya has witnessed a series of student-instigated school fires affecting dormitories, classrooms among other school structures. This paper reflects on this phenomenon of school fires and attempts to interrogate the real causes of the school-burning incidents. It argues that though parents are the chief custodians of discipline for their children, the government cannot detach itself from this enormous task. The layout of school discipline systems and structures also requires some enhancement, necessarily by reinstating caning but by creating a conducive environment in schools for student behavior management through a self-regulatory learner focused discipline enhancement programmes. The paper also argues that the time has come when religious leaders should be involved in the moral and spiritual nurture of school-going youth in a more structured manner.

### **Key Words**

School fires, 100% school transition, blame-games, scape-goats, culprits

### **1. Introduction**

It is often assumed that all children originate from a home, from a family. This means that parents have the foremost responsibility to mould the behavior and character of their kids. But the government is also a major stakeholder in this mantle. The state is usually aware of the existence of a child even as early as the conception stage since all expectant women are required to attend ante-natal clinic in an established health facility. Upon birth, the baby is issued with a birth notification certificate and shortly after a birth certificate. So the government usually has knowledge of the children right from their infancy.

When the child attains school-going age and begins to attend school, he or she is introduced to the third segment of a child's development and that is the teacher.

The education system in Kenya is structured into three phases. The first phase is the primary level which ordinarily caters for learners aged between 3 to 14 years of age. The second phase – which is the focus of this paper- has learners aged between an average of 15 to an average of 18. The third phase is tertiary which includes college and university education.

In Kenya, individuals attain adult age at 18 years. This means that there are some learners who are of adult age and who are liable for prosecution in the adult courts in case they commit a felony.

## **2. The phenomenon of School fires**

The phenomenon of school fires in Kenya is an enigma that baffles everyone. The occurrence of school fires in public secondary schools featured prominently in Kenya towards the end of the year 2021. This was, however, not the first time. In previous years, fires in schools had often reported from time to time and from place to place. But the incidents in 2021 were previously unmatched in frequency, scale and depth of damage.

In terms of frequency, the 2021 case outmatched any previous ones in that occurrence was in quick succession or in some cases two or more schools would be affected concurrently, unlike the case before. In terms of scale, the latest instances were more widespread. They were not confined to any particular region but rather assumed a national trend. To this extent some politicians called for the government to declare the school fires a national disaster (Daily Nation, 6/11/2021). Similarly, there is a group of schools that previously were considered to be immune from such display of indiscipline from learners but which not soared in the 2021 wave. When schools like Lenana, Buru-buru, Kakamega and Maranda became affected, there was an outcry since they are among the respected National or inter-county schools. National and Inter-county group of schools are the best two categories of schools in Kenya (Standard, 7/11/2021. Daily Nation 6/11/2021). Students who join these schools are carefully selected and only those with a good performance at KCPE (the secondary school entrance examination) are picked. Also, girls-only schools featured prominently, unlike the case before where such incidents were reported only among boys-only schools.

The depth of damage in the latest cases was similarly startling and previously unmatched. The act of gutting down whole block of dormitories and classrooms was far beyond previous cases. Schools like Kaka.mega, Buru-buru and Maranda imposed hefty fines on the entire student population to foot the extensive damage caused by some students in those schools.

The key question mostly asked is what it is that would irk students to the level of making them burn down their classrooms and dormitories. According to reports, petrol is what the students use to burn the targeted school structures. Most parents wonder how it is that these students are able to access the petrol. For the, the government has failed in its primary role of ensuring a safe environment for learners in and around schools. The government and teachers believe parents are to blame, and so the blame game continues. But the question that begs is who is really to blame in the whole issue of school arson.

## **3. Blame-games, scape-goats and the real culprits.**

The issue in question here is which of the three pillars of child-care should be held responsible for what is happening at schools. As hinted earlier, parents have taken the view that the government is to blame for not providing sufficient security around schools to curb against cases of drugs and other outlawed substances from getting their way into schools. Similarly, the recently introduced government policy of 100% transition from primary to secondary school has been cited as another area in which the government has disrupted the education system stirring congestion in dormitories and classrooms. The 100% school transition in itself is a good policy that was welcomed and celebrated by all stakeholders as it is a step towards eradicating illiteracy. However, the Implementation of the policy

was done hurriedly. The government did not construct enough classrooms, dormitories or hire sufficient teachers in preparation for the anticipated increase in enrollment resulting from the new school transition policy. Thus, learners in most schools are congested in classrooms and dormitories and teachers are overwhelmed.

The government on the other hand views parents as having contributed to the prevailing situation by failing to inculc good character among their kids. According to this view, which is collaborated by some teachers, it is the primary responsibility of parents to raise their children in such a manner that they are not capable of even imagining of damaging school property. To stress its point, the government has declared that all parents whose children are enrolled in affected schools would meet the resultant cost of repairing the damaged facilities.

Teachers also take the view that they are only victims of mistakes committed by both the government and the parents. The government, by failing to provide adequate facilities and to hire enough teachers has caused the teachers to become overwhelmed as they work under difficult circumstances due to strained facilities.

The parents are also accused by teachers for poor upbringing of their children. Don't mind the fact that the same teachers may be parents in other schools which are similarly affected.

Among the students, the mention of school fire evokes the memory of drug and alcohol-abuse. But there is also the likelihood that power-games between some students (particularly those from rich background) and some teachers. School arson cases may also be attributed to mere protest gymics among students which may arise from perceived or actual injustice meted out by the school authority against the all of some students (Daily Nation 17/2/2022). Sometimes, the student protests are due to incitement by powerful individuals in the society who use the students as conduits to settle their political or commercial scores.

#### **4. The real culprits**

Identifying the real culprits can sometimes be an hercurious test. This is so because, those identified as the trigger masters may not actually be the ones. It is also important, when treating such a complex matter that one widens the scope to think beyond the obvious. From the data collected, this paper suggests the following –not as as the real culprits but- as potential areas of weakness that require to be fixed in order to solve the problem of arson in our public secondary schools.

##### **4.1 enhancing school inspection**

this should apply to all public schools without any exception. Teams from specialized security agents shpuld be dispatched to conduct mandatory and impromptu inspections in all schools. This should be well co-ordinated to ensure the students are caught unawares so as to forestall those with ill intentions. Such inspections are meant to flush out things like drugs and other prohibited substances. School authorities can augment this process by staging internal student inspection operations on a regular basis. During such operations, all students have their belongings in school inspected.

##### **4.2 Enhancement of security patrols around school**

This is meant to cut off the channels through which drugs and other prohibited substances it js meant to make it difficult for petrol to find its way into schools.

#### 4.3 Collaboration with para-school organizations

There are groups of people who provide essential services that enhance the smooth running of school functions. These include public transport vehicles that ferry students to and from school, motor-bikes (boda boda), used by staff in their home-to-office travels and vendors who come into the school compound to vend their wares on certain occasions.

#### 4.4 Integrity among school administrators and teachers

Some school administrators may be driven by potential for personal gain to bent rules and policies so as to favour their malpractices. This is one of the ills that the teacher delocalization program was meant to cure. However, there still persist cases of Impropriety among teachers and school administrators which call for urgent solution.

#### 4.5 Parenting conscientization programs

There is need for the government to develop programs meant to assist parents with necessary skills on the task of parenting. These can be rolled out to parents through the media, churches and school functions such as Annual General Meetings. This is meant to equip parents with requisite skills for effective parenting, and thus cure the problem of poor parenting of which parents are often accused.

#### 4.6 Adequacy in school facilitation

It is not enough to talk about quality education in policies yet on the ground, existing facilities cannot support such quality. In some schools, classrooms are so congested that some learners develop breathing challenges. The number of teachers remains small yet the workload is increasing each year. Stress levels can easily increase in such conditions.

### **5. Towards an enhancement of the student discipline management system.**

There exists vibrant youth behavior management systems from whence can be developed suitable discipline management models for secondary school students. The ultimate objective of such a system is to mould the young minds into responsible citizens once they hit adult age.

A well-grounded school discipline should focus on drilling student behavior towards achieving the three vital respects: respect for self, respect for others and respect for the environment.

Basically, an effective school discipline carries the potential to create a positive learning environment in schools. Greater emphasis should be placed on cultivating and nurturing of self-discipline. To this extent, school mottos, slogans, songs and anthems must be given proper elevation to serve as a constant reminder to students of their singular and corporate obligation to observe self-discipline.

In order to achieve a positive learning environment, there is need to design the correctional framework towards a positive model. The students who violate school rules must be met by the full force of school punishment. But such punishment must be moderated upon the higher goal of curbing or countering school drop-outs.

## 6. Conclusion

**There** is need for the government to crack down on those responsible for the arson episodes in schools. Even as this paper was in progress, another secondary school in the heart of the city of Nairobi had one of its dormitories housing up to 300 boys up in flames (NTV 9 PM News; Citizen 9 PM News 14/11/2021). One common characteristic about most of these school fires is that no one ever gets to know the cause of the fire nor who the culprits are. There is an urgent need for the government to partner with the clergy to come up with a permanent solution to this menace. The clergy needs to unite and rally their forces behind a joint programme aimed at moulding our young ones and thus laying the proper foundation for a prosperous nation.

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