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Principal-Led Interventions in Mitigating Student Economic Challenges in Rongai Sub-County, Kenya

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Abstract
This study examined how public secondary school principals in Rongai Sub-County, Nakuru County, Kenya, mitigate students' economic challenges that limit students' access to and participation in education. Students from economically disadvantaged households face financial barriers that may hinder their access to educational resources and participation. Guided by Transformative Leadership Theory, the study employed a convergent mixed-methods design. Quantitative data were collected through structured questionnaires from 287 Form Four students selected from a Yamane-derived sample of 360 drawn from a population of 3,587, while qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with 39 principals from a targeted census of 49 public secondary schools. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics, whereas qualitative data were analysed thematically. The findings revealed that students held favourable perceptions of principals' interventions aimed at addressing economic challenges (M = 3.67, SD = 0.60). Qualitative findings indicated that principals mitigated students' economic challenges through resource mobilisation initiatives and administrative flexibility, including staggered fee payments and, in some instances, acceptance of fees in kind. The study concludes that principals play an important role in mitigating students' economic challenges, although the effectiveness of their interventions may be constrained by limited resources. It recommends strengthening targeted capitation, establishing standardised guidelines for in-kind payments, and enhancing partnerships with stakeholders to support economically disadvantaged learners. These measures are significant in promoting educational retention, equitable access to learning resources, and inclusive education in resource-constrained public secondary schools.

Key words: Economic challenges, educational equity, fee flexibility, resource mobilisation, school leadership.

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INTRODUCTION

This study examined how public secondary school principals in Rongai Sub-County, Nakuru County, Kenya, mitigate students' economic challenges that limit students' access to and participation in education. Economic challenges remain a persistent challenge to educational equity in developing countries, particularly for learners whose families have limited resources to meet the direct and indirect costs of schooling (UNESCO, 2023). This concern intersects with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which calls for inclusive, equitable, and quality education for all learners. Despite educational reforms across Sub-Saharan Africa, poverty continues to constrain educational participation and continuity among learners from economically disadvantaged backgrounds (Zeufack et al., 2020). Poverty affects students through economic challenges such as difficulty meeting school fees, purchasing uniforms and learning materials, accessing transportation, and obtaining adequate meals (Naven et al., 2019). These constraints contribute to stress, poor concentration, absenteeism, reduced engagement, and discontinuation of schooling.

In Kenya, the government has demonstrated sustained commitment to reducing financial barriers to secondary education through initiatives such as the Free Day Secondary Education (FDSE) programme, county and constituency bursary schemes, and policy frameworks including Sessional Paper No. 1 of 2019 and the National Education Sector Strategic Plan (NESSP) 2023-2027. Yet, government financing rarely covers the entire cost of a student's education. Official policy guidelines acknowledge that families must still bear high costs for boarding, daily school meals, personal items, and uniforms. For economically vulnerable households, these costs pose a formidable financial burden. This financial strain correlates directly with regional academic disparities. For example, Rongai Sub-County, Nakuru County, had a combined average KCSE mean score of 3.21 over the three years from 2019 to 2021, compared with the national mean of 5.50.

In this context, school principals play an important role in responding to students' economic challenges. Transformational Leadership Theory suggests that principals can mitigate students' economic challenges through individualised consideration, resource mobilisation, and stakeholder collaboration. Mwenda et al. (2025) examined economic support programmes and student participation in public secondary schools in Meru County, identifying gaps in access to financial assistance. However, the study did not comprehensively examine how principals implement economic mitigation strategies and the challenges they encounter. The present study addresses this gap by examining principals' strategies for mitigating students' economic challenges in public secondary schools in Rongai Sub-County, Nakuru County.

Evidence from previous studies suggests that partnerships with NGOs, religious institutions, corporate organisations, and community groups strengthen schools' capacity to support financially disadvantaged learners. Such partnerships facilitate access to learning materials, food, uniforms, bursaries, and other essential resources (Nkosheshe, 2024). Similarly, school-based feeding initiatives are associated with improved attendance, concentration, and retention in communities experiencing food insecurity (Mwalali et al., 2024). Administrative flexibility provides another avenue for principals to respond to economic challenges. Practices such as staggered fee payments and payments in kind enable families to meet school obligations without exclusion of students because of outstanding balances.

However, implementing and sustaining such measures is difficult in resource-constrained public schools. Principals operate amid delayed government capitation, rising food and operational costs, and inconsistent fee payment by households experiencing financial hardship (Samweli & Opanga, 2025). Although external resource mobilisation is recommended, the ability to secure support from donors, NGOs, and community organisations may vary depending on the surrounding community's socioeconomic status and resource base. Consequently, principals' capacity to mitigate students' economic challenges is influenced not only by their leadership practices but also by structural conditions beyond their direct control.

Despite these dynamics, existing studies often evaluate isolated financial aid programs or specific interventions, overlooking the integrated practices through which principals coordinate resource mobilisation and administrative flexibility. Furthermore, empirical evidence remains scarce regarding whether the availability and visibility of these interventions differ between boarding and day school environments. This study addresses these gaps by examining the role of

public secondary school principals in mitigating students' economic challenges in Rongai Sub-County, Nakuru County, Kenya. Specifically, the study aimed to: (i) identify the interventions principals implement to address students' economic challenges; (ii) assess students' perceptions of these interventions; (iii) determine whether perceptions differ between boarding and day schools; and (iv) explore the constraints principals face in implementing these interventions.

The remainder of this study is structured as follows. The literature review section establishes the theoretical framework of transformative leadership and reviews the empirical literature. The methodology section details our research design, sampling methodology, and data collection procedures. The results section presents the quantitative and qualitative findings, while the discussion section discusses these results within their theoretical and practical contexts. Finally, the conclusion and recommendations section offers conclusions and actionable policy-level recommendations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

Transformative Leadership Theory

The study was guided by transformative leadership theory, originally developed by Burns (1978) and later expanded by Bass (1985). Within educational management, transformative leadership positions the school principal as an agent of social equity and systemic change. The theory provides a useful lens for examining how principals respond to students' economic challenges in contexts characterised by poverty and limited resources.

According to Bass (1985), transformative leadership operates through four dimensions: idealised influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualised consideration. In this study, these dimensions are reflected in the interventions principals employ to mitigate students' economic challenges. Individualised consideration is demonstrated through flexible fee payment arrangements and, where necessary, acceptance of fees in kind, enabling principals to respond to learners' specific financial circumstances. Intellectual stimulation is reflected in innovative approaches to addressing resource constraints, including resource mobilisation initiatives and identifying alternative funding sources. Inspirational motivation is evident in principals' efforts to cultivate stakeholder support. At the same time, idealised influence is reflected in their commitment to ensuring that financial hardship does not prevent learners from accessing education. These leadership practices underpin the key interventions examined in this study: resource mobilisation, partnerships with external stakeholders, fee flexibility, and payment-in-kind arrangements.

To fully capture these operational adjustments, this study integrates the concept of adaptive leadership. Adaptive leadership gives school principals the operational flexibility needed to handle complex, unpredictable financial problems. This combined framework provides a clear model for evaluating how principals can use creative financial adjustments to protect vulnerable students from being excluded from school.

Resource Mobilisation and Partnerships

School principals' ability to mobilise resources beyond government funding is important in supporting learners who face financial barriers to schooling. In underfunded school systems, severe household economic challenges limit parents' capacity to pay secondary school fees, directly compromising student enrolment and retention. School-level resource mobilisation serves as a necessary buffer, providing targeted material support that government funding models fail to cover.

Globally, research from different geographical contexts highlights the importance of financial assistance and effective school leadership in addressing educational inequalities. Moores and Burgess (2023) examined financial support and student retention in higher education in the United Kingdom, while Anand et al. (2023) reviewed school-management interventions across low- and middle-income countries. Beeson et al. (2024), focusing on North East England, found that addressing poverty-related barriers could improve pupils' educational outcomes. Tan (2024), using data from 35 developed countries, examined how family socioeconomic circumstances and school resources shape principals' leadership practices. Although these studies demonstrate the relevance of financial assistance, poverty-responsive interventions, and school leadership, they do not comprehensively explain how public secondary-school principals implement strategies to mitigate students' economic challenges. The present study addresses this gap by examining principals' interventions and implementation challenges in public

secondary schools in Rongai Sub-County, Nakuru County, Kenya.

In sub-Saharan Africa, school feeding initiatives provide an important response to learners' material needs. Desalegn et al. (2021), in rural schools in the Sidama Zone of southern Ethiopia, found that learners receiving school meals had lower absenteeism and higher academic scores than non-beneficiaries. Wall et al. (2022), in a systematic review of nine studies conducted in Uganda, Senegal, Ethiopia, Kenya, South Africa, Burkina Faso, and Malawi, similarly found that school feeding programmes were generally associated with improved educational outcomes. Mainje et al. (2024), reviewing school-feeding sustainability across sub-Saharan Africa, identified funding limitations, operational difficulties, and the need for community involvement as important implementation concerns. Although these studies demonstrate the educational value of feeding initiatives and highlight sustainability challenges, they provide limited insight into how individual secondary-school principals mobilise resources, coordinate stakeholders, and sustain support for economically disadvantaged learners. The present study addresses this gap by examining principal-led interventions to mitigate students' economic challenges in public secondary schools in Rongai Sub-County, Nakuru County, Kenya.

In Kenya, Oranga et al. (2020) and Nyakundi and Onsomu (2023) highlight that while public funding initiatives such as the FDSE grant remain essential, they often fall short of covering rising operational costs. Both studies therefore emphasise the need for community partnerships and localised fundraising. However, they offer limited insight into how principals establish and manage these networks or the factors that influence their effectiveness. Methodologically, the studies focus largely on financing patterns and resource adequacy at the institutional level, with little attention to students' perspectives. Moreover, existing Kenyan research tends to examine specific forms of financial support in isolation, making it difficult to understand how principals integrate resource mobilisation, stakeholder partnerships, bursary facilitation, and other strategies to address students' economic challenges. Empirical evidence also remains limited on differences in the visibility and effectiveness of these interventions across school types, as well as the challenges principals face during implementation. This study addresses these gaps by examining principals' resource mobilisation strategies, students' perceptions of these interventions, differences across school types, and the implementation constraints encountered in public secondary schools in Rongai Sub-County, Kenya.

Administrative Flexibility in Fee Management

When households experience financial difficulties and government funding is delayed, flexible administrative approaches to fee collection can prevent academic disruption. Rigid financial enforcement often forces low-income families into a cycle of student absenteeism and eventual drop-out. From a transformative leadership perspective, administrative flexibility gives principals an avenue to respond to the financial needs of individual learners while maintaining their access to education.

Empirical studies validate the utility of flexible payment schedules. Moores and Burgess (2023) found that staggered and customised fee payment schedules can reduce the financial pressure experienced by households during periods of economic difficulty and support continued student participation. By spreading financial obligations over time, these arrangements enable families facing temporary financial constraints to meet school requirements without immediately disrupting their children's education.

In resource-constrained settings, fee flexibility may also involve non-monetary forms of payment. Busa et al. (2024) reported that payment in kind can provide an alternative mechanism for financially constrained households to meet school-related obligations. In deeply marginalised or rural settings, this administrative flexibility often extends to non-monetary, payment-in-kind arrangements. Busa et al. (2024) observe that accepting physical goods or labour provides a crucial alternative for households that lack cash but possess agricultural produce, household assets, or manual skills. In Kenya, Kapiyo (2024) and Njambi Nyaga et al. (2024) document informal school practices in which principals accept firewood, agricultural commodities (such as maize and beans), or parental labour to clear outstanding fee balances. These localised interventions supply schools with operational inputs while keeping vulnerable students in school.

While existing studies focus mainly on school financing, resource adequacy, and the outcomes of financial support programs, they offer limited insight into how principals implement interventions such as payment-in-kind

arrangements and fee instalment plans, how students perceive these measures, and the challenges of implementation. This study addresses these gaps by examining principals' intervention strategies, students' perceptions, school-type differences, and implementation constraints in public secondary schools in Rongai Sub-County, Kenya.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a convergent mixed-methods design. This design was preferred because it integrated students' quantitative responses with principals' qualitative insights, enabling a comprehensive understanding of mitigation strategies. The target population comprised public secondary school principals and Form Four students. Given that the total number of principals in Rongai Sub-County was relatively small 49 principals, a census approach was adopted for this group. For Form Four students, proportionate and simple random sampling techniques were employed to select participants from a target population of 3,587 students. Proportionate sampling ensured representation of students from each school according to its population size, while simple random sampling gave each student an equal chance of selection, thereby minimising selection bias. Yamane's (1973) formula was applied to determine the sample size at a 95 per cent confidence level and 5 per cent margin of error, resulting in a sample size of 360 students.

Quantitative data were collected using a five-point Likert-scale questionnaire to measure Form Four students' perceptions of the availability of principal-led mitigation strategies, with responses ranging from strongly disagree to agree strongly. Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews with principals, allowing flexibility to explore their experiences, practices, and challenges in implementing these strategies. Completed questionnaires were obtained from 287 students, while 39 principals participated in the interviews. Supervisors vetted the instruments for content and face validity (Elangovan & Sundaravel, 2021). Pilot testing among 35 students in Mogotio Sub-County established reliability, returning a Cronbach's alpha coefficient above 0.70 (Ahmad et al., 2024).

Quantitative data were summarised using frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations. Welch's independent-samples t-test was used to compare perceptions between day and boarding schools, while chi-square tests examined associations between school type and perceptions of selected economic interventions. Statistical significance was set at $p < .05$. Interview data were analysed thematically. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected concurrently and analysed independently before integration.

Ethical Considerations

Data collection followed authorisation from ISERC and NACOSTI and permission from relevant education authorities and schools. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study and provided informed consent before participating. Participation was voluntary, and respondents could withdraw at any stage without penalty. To protect privacy, no personal identifiers were collected, and confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the study. Interview and questionnaire data were securely stored and accessed only by the researcher. Care was taken to ensure that participation posed no physical, psychological, social, or academic risk to respondents.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Student Responses on Principal-Led Economic Interventions

Students' questionnaire responses indicate that learners recognised principals as actively involved in promoting school-level interventions aimed at addressing economic challenges (Table 1. 181 students (63.1%) agreed or strongly agreed that the school receives donations from well-wishers through the principal's efforts. In comparison, 174 students (60.6%) agreed or strongly agreed that principals seek partnerships with NGOs and local organisations to support economically disadvantaged students. These findings reflect students' perceptions regarding the visibility of principal-led economic interventions.

Principals' interview responses provided evidence of these interventions' implementation. Participants reported establishing collaborations with NGOs, religious organisations, financial institutions, community leaders, and local businesses to facilitate bursaries, school feeding programmes, infrastructure development, and provision of learning materials. One principal explained:

> *We work closely with NGOs, churches and community members who provide bursaries and other support to needy students.*

Examples cited by principals included partnerships with Dandelion Africa, local churches, financial institutions, and nearby enterprises. These partnerships reportedly provided financial assistance, infrastructure support such as water tanks, and opportunities for skills development. Community leaders and local administrators also helped sponsor economically disadvantaged students.

Table 1. Student Responses on the Role of the School Principal in Mitigating Student Economic Challenges

Statement	SA	A	N	D	SD
Through the principal, the school sometimes receives donations from well-wishers.	101 (35.2%)	80 (27.9%)	49 (17.1%)	22 (7.7%)	35 (12.2%)
The principal helps identify needy students and connects them with support (e.g., bursaries).	115 (40.1%)	87 (30.3%)	47 (16.4%)	19 (6.6%)	19 (6.6%)
The principal seeks partnerships with NGOs and communities to support needy students.	79 (27.5%)	95 (33.1%)	53 (18.5%)	34 (11.8%)	26 (9.1%)
The principal notifies parents and students about bursary and scholarship opportunities.	104 (36.2%)	68 (23.7%)	69 (24.0%)	28 (9.8%)	18 (6.3%)
The school permits flexible payments of fees to ensure students learn uninterrupted.	95 (33.1%)	72 (25.1%)	68 (23.7%)	25 (8.7%)	27 (9.4%)
The principal initiates income generating projects to support low-income students.	62 (21.6%)	85 (29.6%)	75 (26.1%)	29 (10.1%)	36 (12.5%)
Our school organizes career guidance sessions that consider the economic realities of students.	77 (26.8%)	83 (28.9%)	67 (23.3%)	38 (13.2%)	22 (7.7%)
The principal supports initiatives that help poor students stay in school and avoid child labour.	74 (25.8%)	79 (27.5%)	51 (17.8%)	49 (17.1%)	34 (11.8%)

Students also recognised principals as playing an active role in facilitating support for economically vulnerable learners. A total of 202 students (70.4%) agreed or strongly agreed that principals help identify needy students and connect them with support such as bursaries, while 172 students (59.9%) agreed or strongly agreed that principals notify parents and students about bursary and scholarship opportunities. In addition, 167 students (58.2%) indicated that schools permit flexible fee payment arrangements. These responses reflect students' perceptions of the support mechanisms available within their schools.

Principals described allowing parents to pay school fees in kind using agricultural produce such as maize, beans, charcoal and firewood. Others explained that schools created casual employment opportunities for parents to enable them to raise school fees. Principal 14 stated:

> *The school gives casual jobs such as cultivating the school farm or connecting some parents to potato plantations so that they can raise school fees. We also encourage parents to pay in kind by bringing maize, beans, charcoal or firewood, which we purchase at favorable prices.*

These practices illustrate context-specific responses to economic challenges.

Students further recognised income-generating projects as one approach principals use to address economic challenges. A total of 147 students (51.2%) agreed or strongly agreed that principals initiate income-generating projects to support economically disadvantaged learners. Interview data from principals provided additional insight into how these initiatives are implemented. Principals described establishing school farms and other income-generating projects, with proceeds used to support needy students and finance essential school programmes. One principal stated:

> *We successfully acquired land from a community well-wisher to implement agricultural projects. The produce is sold, and the profits are utilized to purchase essential items for needy students.*

Proceeds from these initiatives were used to support needy students and finance essential school programmes.

Principals also reported important constraints. Donor support was often inconsistent, with unpredictable funding cycles that made long-term planning difficult. For instance, Principal 37 reported that some external partnerships were inconsistent, with unpredictable funding cycles prone to interruption. Delays in government disbursements and donor dependency complicated programme continuity. Although income-generating projects were viewed as a way to move beyond short-term aid, principals identified sustainability, limited financial resources and variation in community resources as continuing challenges.

Differences in Perceptions on Economic Interventions by School Type

To determine whether students' perceptions of principal-led economic interventions varied systematically by school type, we conducted an independent-samples Welch's t-test. The results reveal a statistically significant difference in student perceptions between school settings ($t(61.73) = -2.11$, $p = 0.039$; Table 2). Boarding school students reported significantly more favourable perceptions of principal-led economic interventions ($M = 3.822$, $SD = 0.48$) than their peers in day schools ($M = 3.644$, $SD = 0.61$). The calculated effect size was moderate ($\eta^2 = 0.067$), indicating that school type explains approximately 6.7 per cent of the variance in student perceptions.

Table 2. Independent-Samples Welch's t-test Comparing Perceptions of Students in Day and Boarding Schools on Economic Interventions

Day Schools (Mean ± SD)	Boarding Schools (Mean ± SD)	t	df	p	η^2	Interpretation
3.644 ± 0.61	3.822 ± 0.48	-2.11	61.73	0.039	0.067	Medium Effect

To examine specific interventions, we performed Chi-square tests of independence to assess whether school type was associated with student perceptions of two critical strategies: NGO partnerships and flexible fee arrangements. As presented in Table 3, the analyses revealed no statistically significant associations for either NGO partnerships ($\chi^2 = 4.84$, $df = 4$, $p = 0.304$, Cramer's $V = 0.130$) or flexible fee payments ($\chi^2 = 2.09$, $df = 4$, $p = 0.719$, Cramer's $V = 0.085$). The negligible-to-small effect sizes indicate that these two localised interventions are experienced and valued similarly by students in both day and boarding schools.

Table 3. Chi-Square Tests of Independence between School Type and Selected Principal Intervention

Selected Economic Intervention	χ^2	df	p	Cramer's V
Partnerships with NGOs to support needy students	4.84	4	0.304	0.130
Flexible fee payment arrangements	2.09	4	0.719	0.085

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that public secondary school principals in Rongai Sub-County act as transformative leaders who institute vital economic interventions to protect vulnerable students from educational exclusion. This is reflected in the overall positive student perception of principal-led economic interventions ($M = 3.67$, $SD = 0.60$). Theoretically, these leadership behaviours align closely with the core tenets of transformative and adaptive leadership. By exercising individualised consideration, school principals look beyond general administrative metrics to identify students facing financial crises and link them to constituency and county bursaries (Bass, 1985; Busa et al., 2024).

A key economic intervention highlighted by the principals is establishing external partnerships. Faced with delayed and inadequate government FDSE capitation, principals seek collaborations with local churches, NGOs (such as Dandelion Africa), corporate sponsors, and financial institutions to secure material and financial aid. These initiatives corroborate the work of Tan et al. (2020) and Selvitopu and Kaya (2023), who argue that school-community partnerships are essential for cushioning underprivileged learners. However, our qualitative findings reveal a major structural

vulnerability: donor-dependent support is highly unstable, prone to funding-cycle interruptions, and heavily dependent on the surrounding community's socioeconomic resource base. This precarity aligns with Bennell's (2024) observation that funding instability remains a primary barrier to educational continuity in low-resource settings.

Administrative flexibility in fee payment was another economic intervention to safeguard student retention. The qualitative interviews reveal creative, localised coping mechanisms. Principals sometimes permit parents to pay school fees in kind using agricultural produce like maize, beans, firewood, and charcoal, or sometimes offer parents of needy students casual labour opportunities (e.g., cultivating school land) to offset fee balances. These findings mirror previous studies by Moores and Burgess (2023) and Busa et al. (2024), which demonstrate that flexible payment structures and in-kind arrangements reduce economic challenges and prevent immediate student exclusion. They also expand upon Kenyan-specific findings (Kapiyo, 2024; Njambi Nyaga et al., 2024), illustrating how informal administrative adjustments serve as an indispensable safety net where formal state support falls short.

However, our findings also expose a critical, unaddressed logistical tension in these in-kind arrangements. Without standardised valuation templates, school principals face significant auditing and accountability challenges. Discrepancies in valuing local produce (e.g., determining the market price of maize during harvest vs off-season) or assessing the fair wage for parental labour can lead to conflicts, subjective undervaluation, or audit queries from state education officers. Consequently, while payment-in-kind is an ethical and life-saving stop-gap, its lack of formal regulatory integration threatens school accountability and leaves both parents and administrators structurally vulnerable.

The statistically significant divergence in the perceptions of day school students (M = 3.644) and those at boarding schools (M = 3.822) suggests that the visibility of principal-led economic interventions varies by school context and exposes a deep structural disparity. This result should not be interpreted as evidence that school type itself causes differences in intervention effectiveness. Rather, the qualitative findings indicate that differences in local resources, community support, donor relationships and institutional conditions may influence the extent to which interventions are available and visible to students. In Kenya, public day secondary schools are mostly found in communities of low economic standing and are chronically underfunded. The principals of such schools have to contend with erratic fee compliance and capitation from the government that does not arrive on time, putting a crimp on any economic interventions they might put in place and their sustainability.

At the same time, day secondary schools are the Kenyan government's principal means of implementing the 100 per cent transition policy for universal secondary education. Our findings show an irony: the institutions responsible for the poorest children's education are ill-prepared to shield them from economic shocks. With no cash reserves to speak of, day school principals are in a constant state of financial triage, unable to put in place feeding or material provisions of any scale and having to ration what little they have in the way of operational inputs. Boarding schools, on the other hand, have the advantage of institutional buffers and steadier fee payment, which leaves the poorest of the day scholars with the least support in an inequitable environment.

There is, however, something to be learned from the non-significant Chi-square figures on flexible feeding fees and NGO partnerships. These numbers tell us that students in both types of schools place the same high value on such interventions. NGO-backed initiatives and school feeding are indispensable lifelines; they are not optional and should be scaled and safeguarded in every setting (Desalegn et al., 2021; Mwalali et al., 2024).

The constraints identified by principals highlight the limits of school-level leadership in addressing structural economic disadvantage. Delayed capitation, low fee compliance, rising operational costs, inadequate local resources and inconsistent external support can undermine the continuity of interventions. This finding aligns with Bennell (2024) and Samweli and Opanga (2025), who emphasise financing challenges in low-resource education systems. Transformative leadership may enable principals to mobilise available resources and adapt administrative practices, but it cannot independently resolve systemic financing deficits. Stronger government financing and support are thus necessary to complement school-level leadership.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: This study concludes that public secondary school principals in Rongai Sub-County play an indispensable, transformative role in mitigating student economic challenges and preventing academic exclusion. By mobilising community partnerships, facilitating bursary access, and implementing flexible fee structures, including payment-in-kind and casual labour arrangements, principals protect vulnerable learners from dropping out. However, because public secondary schools face chronic delays and significant shortfalls in government FDSE capitation, these localised interventions remain reactive, stop-gap measures rather than sustainable institutional solutions. The financial stability of these schools remains precariously dependent on fluctuating bursary allocations, unpredictable donor cycles, and the limited socioeconomic resource base of the surrounding community. Consequently, while principal interventions are useful, their long-term efficacy is constrained by broader systemic underfunding in public day secondary schools.

Recommendations: The study recommends the following: First, Principals should strengthen partnerships with NGOs, community organisations, and other stakeholders to mobilise resources that support economically disadvantaged learners. Second, Schools should enhance mechanisms for identifying financially vulnerable learners and linking them to available bursary and scholarship opportunities.

Ultimately, schools should also strengthen sustainable income-generating activities and maintain flexible fee-payment arrangements to support learners facing economic challenges. These interventions can help reduce financial barriers and promote continued participation in education. Finally, future research should employ longitudinal designs to examine the sustainability of principal-led economic interventions and their potential association with students' educational outcomes.

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