The 2003 free primary education (FPE) program essentially aimed to make primary education accessible and affordable to all children, particularly for previously excluded and disadvantaged groups. This is congruent to the millennium development goal (MDG) that calls for achieving universal primary education by 2015; where all school-age children not only enroll in primary schools but also complete a full course of primary schooling. Despite a rapid increase in primary school enrollment following the FPE program, primary completion and progression rates have remained very low. Low completion and progression rates are a major challenge and a concern of achieving the MDG on universal primary education by 2015.

Abolition of primary school fees was first introduced in grade 1-4 in 1974 and in grades 5-7 in 1978. These two initiatives had significant impact in increasing enrollment in standard one. However, evidence shows that the gain did not last long. As the enrollment size increased dramatically, classrooms became overcrowded and the quality of education declined. A recent study by APHRC in two informal settlements in Nairobi indicated that despite free education in public schools, the majority of children (about 60%) are enrolled in fee charging non-state schools.

According to the Ministry of Education, the national level primary completion rate has declined from 83% in 2009 to 77% in 2010. This suggests that just like its predecessors, the current FPE program may not be sustainable due to the massive surge in enrollment which leads to a decline in the quality of education, high grade repetition and dropouts.

A Wasteful Education System?

While significant progress has been observed in increasing the primary school enrollment rate, little attention has been paid concerning high grade repetition and low completion rates. Universal primary education cannot be realized without understanding and addressing high wastage in the primary education system due to grade repetition and dropout. High grade repetition and low completion rate is particularly a problem among children from disadvantaged groups such as the urban poor, rural residents, pastoralists and girls. Research from both developed and developing countries indicates that pupils who

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repeat grades are more likely to drop out of school than those who do not repeat\textsuperscript{5}. A study of 44 African countries found that a 1\% repetition rate on average leads to a 1.3% increase in the dropout rate\textsuperscript{6}. Many families question the value of keeping their children in primary school if they are already struggling and have repeated one or more years. This policy brief highlights the challenges of grade repetition and low primary completion among disadvantaged groups in urban informal settlements in Nairobi city and its implication on the achievement and sustainability of universal primary education.

**Patching Up the Holes**

To reduce wastage due to high grade repetition and low primary completion rate, it is of paramount importance to address high grade repetition particularly in the specific context of urban poor communities. To reduce the problem of high grade repetition and dropouts among disadvantaged groups, policy measures need to address the reasons behind poor attendance, the quality and relevance of curriculum and provide sufficient support for teachers. It is also important to address individual pupils’ needs, particularly those who are slow learners and at risk of repeating and consequently dropping out before completing primary education.

**Why Low Completion and Transition Rates?**

Among the sample of 2,322 children residing in informal settlements and enrolled in grades 3-6 in 2005, about 76\% completed primary education in 2010, while only 46\% made the transition to secondary education. Out of the 556 sample students in formal settlements, 92\% completed primary education and 72\% proceeded to secondary education (see Figure 1). The graph depicts a wide gap in primary school completion and transition between children residing in informal settlements and their counterparts living in formal settlements\textsuperscript{7}. This result shows that children living in poor urban communities have a lower probability of completing primary education as well as a lower probability of transitioning to secondary school. Low primary completion rate and transition rate from primary to secondary education are an indication of systematic disadvantage to children living in urban informal settlements.

The low primary completion and transition to secondary schools are mainly attributed to high grade repetition rate in informal settlements which in turn is associated with low quality of education. Results in Table 1 reveal that about one-third of pupils repeat a grade at least once


\textsuperscript{6}Ibid

\textsuperscript{7}Computed based on longitudinal household-based schooling survey data (2005-2010) by APHRC in two slum and two non-slum areas in Nairobi city.
in the primary cycle. In general, the results show that grade repetition rate was higher in 2010 than it was in 2009. The results also indicate higher repetition rates in government schools than non-government schools. A recent study by APHRC in informal settlements in six major towns reveals that pupils attending public schools scored lower in literacy and numeracy tests than their counterparts in non-government schools (see Table 2). These results suggest the fact that low quality of education in free public primary schools leads to low learning outcomes, grade repetition and consequently dropping out of school.

Studies identify that disadvantaged groups such as children living in poor communities, children on wage labor and orphaned children as most vulnerable to poor attendance, repetition, early dropout and exclusion.

In general, causes of repetition and dropout in developing countries are related to three main factors:

1. School-related factors (ineffective teaching, insufficient qualification of teacher, absence of textbooks and inappropriate learning assessment system)
2. Student characteristics (poor motivation, learning difficulties, health and nutrition status, and behavioral problems)
3. Family-related factors (illiteracy or low education of parents, income of family).

**Policy Recommendations**

Students who repeat grades are made to do so due to low academic performance mainly due to poor quality of teaching in classrooms. Secondly, irregular attendance of students and teacher absenteeism results in decreased amount of learning time. Therefore, a policy reform to reduce high grade repetition would primarily improve quality of teaching as well as address multiple factors that lie behind teachers and students absenteeism. Specifically, the following policy recommendations are suggested to the Ministry of Education and the Teachers Service Commission to reduce grade repetition and improve primary completion rate:

1. Improving pre-service and in-service teacher training
2. Ensuring adequate and sufficient infrastructure and teaching materials
3. Establish proper mechanism to monitor teachers’ absenteeism.
4. Provide sufficient pedagogical support to teachers in dealing with large class sizes and heterogeneity in learning ability of students in the same classroom.
5. Support children with learning difficulties who are at risk of grade repetition and dropout.
6. Provide financial support for children from the poorest households to reduce direct and indirect costs of schooling
7. Provision of school-based health and nutrition intervention for poor communities to reduce students’ absenteeism due to sickness and improve their learning ability.

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Table 2: Grade 3 literacy and numeracy test mean scores by gender and school types

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Background</th>
<th>Literacy</th>
<th>Numeracy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>63.6</td>
<td>63.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>60.8</td>
<td>64.1</td>
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<td><strong>School type</strong></td>
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<tr>
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<td>59.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Private-formal schools</td>
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<td>77.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-formal schools</td>
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<td>65.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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