

## **Arson epidemic in Kenyan boarding Secondary Schools; is the Government addressing the symptoms and disregarding the epidemic?**

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**Abstract:** Oxford advanced learners dictionary describes an epidemic as something bad occurring more frequently in a particular place or community. In the recent past, nearly every week, there have been cases of fierce fires in secondary schools leaving a trail of damages and losses. In most cases these fires are blamed on school administration on management of students. This article seeks to ventilate on the issue of the current frequent arsons that have left serious damage to property and loss of lives; the paper seeks to explore the root causes of the arsons and the measures that should be taken by both Government and education stakeholders to address the menace. Boarding secondary schools have experienced the highest and most fatal arsons in Kenya since 1980's, with day schools recording very minimal if any, this trend has been on the upward scale causing jitters to the school administrators, ministry of education and the security apparatus. Looking at this trend from a nonpartisan view it manifests a more deep rooted problem than just the students' indiscipline that the Government is heaping volumes of blame whenever such cases arise. This therefore leaves one with the big question, Could the Government be treating the symptoms, the more reason the cases are rising in frequency and fatality? This paper will probe on some possible root/main causes of arsons in secondary schools and the possible alternative solutions towards a holistic approach in managing this rapidly growing threat.

**Key words:** Secondary schools, Arson, epidemic

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### **Introduction**

According to Binder (2012) arson is a criminal offense where one deliberately sets on fire or aids in burning a building, dwelling or property belonging to another. Any person who willfully and unlawfully sets or attempts to set fire to any building or structure, whether completed or not; or any vessel, whether completed or not; or any stack of cultivated vegetable produce, or of mineral or vegetable fuel; or a mine, or the workings, fittings or appliances of a mine, is guilty of a felony and is liable to imprisonment for life (Kenya Penal Code, CAP 63, section 332 & 333). Quality education is a key pillar in achievement of sustainable development goals and Kenya Vision 2030; hence any serious Nation should put all the necessary mechanisms in place to ensure that its youth get equipped with the best knowledge and skills. School unrests are an indicator of insufficiency in the education sector and the entire social system which offer informal education to the young generation.

Secondary schools in Kenya have in the recent past recorded several cases of arson which have resulted to school closure, disrupting school calendars, injuries, loss of property and in some instances loss of lives which is greatly hampering quality education delivery. Despite the tough talks by Government on the issue, cases have escalated to double digits within a span of a single school term, with public boarding secondary school having the lions share.

Boarding schools were introduced during the colonial period in Kenya to teach selected students basic mannerism and skills with the intention of using the school "graduates" as cheap labor by the colonial Government upon graduation. Students were drawn from different backgrounds and pooled together to be taught basic craft works and language to be used to offer cheap manpower for the colonial economies and as administrators.

Today, boarding secondary schools are a common thing, students and parents prefer boarding schools to day schools due to perception that boarding offer more privileges and facilities for learners while some students view them as "prisons" as most homes today have better conditions than schools compared to the past.

Arsons in schools have been blamed on various issues by various stakeholder, Indimuli Kahi, the Kenya Secondary School Heads Association chairman, in his recent statement about the rising cases said that the nine-month closure of schools could have fuelled the return of arson attacks in schools. National Parents Association

chairman Nicholas Maiyo said this year's wave of unrest has been blamed on fear of exams, dislike of principals, peer influence, change in education policies, indiscipline and feeling of imprisonment by students in boarding schools. Students on their part blame school administration for preventing them from having meaningful dialogue and peaceful resolutions, high-hardiness, unaccountable styles of management, poor quality diets and inadequate learning resources; students resort to arson and riots as they feel is the only avenue administration acknowledge their dissatisfaction.

The Cabinet Secretary for education, Prof. George Magoha remarked recently that despite the magnitude of the students' grievances, hooliganism should never be considered an option as there are other better alternatives to channel their concerns. Looking at these remarks from the main stakeholders in regard to the subject at hand, it's clear that there is no common opinion on the causes of the problem hence the approach on resolving the menace is as divergent as their opinion.

### **Statement of the Problem**

In Kenya, the rate at which schools have been burned has been increasing tremendously; some notable cases though will remain as reference in the current history, in 2001 a fire started by disgruntled boys in Kyanguli mixed secondary school resulted to loss of life for over 60 boys, this shook the entire Nation as the magnitude of destruction experienced had not been manifested in Kenya's history, three years before in 1998, a similar fire had gutted down a dormitory in Bombolulu girls killing 26 girls, this was just 7 years after St Kizito secondary school fire tragedy that saw 19 girls perish in the inferno. These are the worst school fire tragedies to have occurred in Kenya's history that saw a raft of reactive measures being taken by the Government.

Recently, in a span of a single school term, there have been over 30 fire cases with over 20 dormitories going down into ashes; some of the notable cases include Kakamega high school where property worth 21 million Kenya shillings was destroyed and Buruburu girls dormitory fire that saw over 50 girls hospitalized and property damaged. Every time such cases happen in schools, school administration bear the biggest brunt from Government, parents and students; school security organs and procedures are challenged, few students are arraigned in court and their cases don't see the light of the day due to lack of tangible evidence, Government issues tough warnings, mostly directed to students and school administration and cases are quickly forgotten as they happened until another one occurs and the cycle is repeated.

Addressing the problem of arsons in school requires a sober holistic approach to identify the root cause so as measures taken are geared towards addressing the cause rather than the effects, for this to be achieved it requires a multi-sectoral approach, with getting a permanent solution being the primary objective rather than seeking scapegoats to heap blames upon.

Students' unrests are majorly caused by drug and substance abuse and educationists ought to formulate strict policies and reforms in the entire sector to prevent cases of violent crimes within the school setting (Kavutha, 2015).

Majority of scholars who have researched on this subject conclude that education stakeholders have not been approaching this problem jointly to find a common and binding solution, rather, policy guidelines have been issued from the Government with little or no input from school administrators, parents, students, security apparatus and other stakeholders.

### **Literature Review**

Education sector in Kenya is an important pillar in the realization of the objectives of Vision 2030 with regard to the attainment of socio-economic and political development of the country (National Research Crime Centre, 2016).

The ship of progress of any Country is pegged on the hard work and dedication of its young generation and their innovative thoughts. Their recognized great force is essential for achieving the Country's development agenda. In this regard, education and training is vital for the achievement of the objectives of the Country's strategies. Students protests pose a serious threat to the education system and to the Nation at large. They result to destruction of property, loss of learning time, and physiological effects to staff and students. All these translate to low achievement in learning outcomes hence affecting the quality of education provided (Republic of Kenya, National Assembly Committee on education and research, 2019). This therefore means that education should be the first and most important priority that the Government should invest in, protecting it from any form of incursion that may impact negatively on its quality delivery.

Student's protests were a preserve of Public Universities in the early years, however of late secondary schools have become synonymous with all forms of unrests. The 1960s- 1970s periods recorded few student protests actions that were less violent and which took the form of boycott of classes, mass walk -outs and simple protests (Sagini Report 1991). The period from 1980s through to 2000s saw an increase in both the frequency and intensity of students' protests. Student protest became acts of deadly violence targeting other students rather than more generalized protests against school conditions (Republic of Kenya, 2001).

According to a report tabled in Parliament by the Cabinet Secretary for education in 2019, out of 8900 public and 1800 private secondary schools, 107 schools in 2018, 123 in 2017 and 483 in 2016 were affected by various forms of unrest. 126 incidences of school unrests have been recorded between January and November 2021 in the Country, this is according to a recent statement tabled before the National Assembly by education committee chairperson in response to a statement sought by former Kenya National Union of Teachers Secretary General, Hon. Wilson Sossion, pertaining the recent school unrests. The report prepared by the CS for education blamed poor parenting, poor school infrastructure, drug and substance abuse, among others, as possible causes of the upsurge.

Drugs and substance abuse, peer pressure, tough rules unveiled in 2016 by CS education, ethnicity, tribalism and corruption have a role to play in influencing arson attacks in schools (Akoko, 2017). According to Akoko, before formulation of any policies and rules aimed at curbing this behavior, all stakeholders need to be objectively engaged.

Psychological, behavioural factors, drug abuse, family and society problems play greater contribution on student unrests and rioting .Guidance and counseling ,with professional experts need to be done in schools actively to address psychotic and psycho-social problems in students. Professional counselors should be deployed full time to all schools (Modi et al., 2020).

Odeh (2013) affirmed that moral decadence is the failure to uphold sound morality in our society. According to Muraiwo and Ugwumba (2014) moral decadence is the process of behaving in a way that shows low moral standards. This implies that moral decadence is dwindling or collapse in the moral values, beliefs, norms and ethical standards of a particular society. The resulting effects of such decay on the moral fabric of a society are manifested more in the younger generation as they replicate what is practiced by their elders. Of late we have seen the general public lead by senior citizens/ politicians, barricade roads, light bonfires on busy roads and such decadent behaviors, teachers and lectures have been on the streets whenever they feel disgruntled by their employer and Government. Students too are bound to copy from what is happening around to air their grievances.

The Government of Kenya has not shown sufficient initiatives to employ an effective method for moral development through education in our students; this failure is manifested by the prevalence of immoral activities such as strikes and substance abuse by learners in secondary schools (Munene, 2016). Munene further states that the community plays a great role in shaping the morality of a child before and after joining the school. On the other hand it is the community that produces the raw materials for the school; that is the learners.

Therefore one cannot talk of moral development of the learners without involving the community or the role played by the community.

Nyachieo (1994) indicated that the indigenous African education developed character building, moral qualities and social knowledge in the individuals which were necessary for playing an active role in the society. For its achievement every member of the community was of paramount importance. This means the moral fabric of each community is critical in shaping the destiny of any society and it's the role of the community members to ensure these morals are instilled to our young generation informally and formally.

### **Methodology**

The paper used review of secondary data complimented by simple electronic questionnaire administered to a population of teachers and parents; a sample size of 20 was drawn from the population who were randomly sampled. To find out the perception of these key stakeholders two simple questions were asked. Firstly, what is the root cause of the arson epidemic in boarding secondary schools and secondly, what is the solution to this problem? The results gathered from both sources were analyzed and conclusion delivered.

### **Findings and discussions**

The questionnaire administered to a sample size of 20 had a 65% response rate, which in aggregation with the secondary sources was sufficient to be used to draw generalized conclusion.

In science, every action has a reaction of an equal measure, as such according to the findings of the questionnaire, school arsons are a reaction resulting from actions by various stakeholders in the education sector.

Results of the findings reveal that the arsons are a consequence of work load or pressure to perform (19%), peer pressure (15%), drug and substance abuse (11.5%), school administration and operations (11.5%), poor parenting (11.5%), general student indiscipline (11.5%), policy (8%), media influence (4%), society indecency (4%) and demotivated workforce (4%). These findings agree with the various scholarly works referenced in this paper and other works not referenced; the findings reveal that the problem is not school administration as it has been previously labeled but it's a national problem that require a national approach that is practical and embraceable by all stakeholders.

According to these findings, the causes of arsons in our secondary schools can be categorized into three major categories; Policy formulation, Moral decadence and parenting insufficiency, as discussed herein.

**i. Policy formulation:** Policy is a set of ideas or a plan of what to do in particular situations that have been agreed to officially by a group of people, a business organization, a Government or a political party (Cambridge English Dictionary).

According to the Basic Education Act of Kenya No.14 of 2013 article 36 (1) & (2) no child should be subjected to torture and cruel, inhumane or degrading treatment or punishment, in any manner, whether physical or psychological and any person who contravenes this provision commits an offence punishable by imprisonment not exceeding six months or a fine not exceeding one hundred thousand shillings or both. The Children Act of Kenya CAP 141 as revised in 2012, defines a child as any human being under the age of eighteen years, the Act as well defines child abuse as any act that includes physical, sexual, psychological and mental injury. These policy documents, among others, means that any child of primary or secondary age should not be punished in any way, regardless of the magnitude of his/her offence. These policies have rendered teachers almost powerless on instilling discipline and this has been a major contributor of indiscipline in our secondary schools. The bible in the book of proverbs chapter 23 verse 13 and 14 states "don't hesitate to discipline children, a good spanking won't kill. As a matter of fact, it may save their lives". This is a confirmation that the withdrawal of punishment in schools was not well thought of; we might have borrowed this policy from foreign cultures without a thorough thought on their repercussions.

Implementation of free education (Education for all), 100% transition to the next level, review of school calendar, delocalization of teachers and other policies have resulted to strained learning environment which has resulted to a demotivated and disengaged work force (Teachers) manifested in the frequent abrasive engagement between the Government and the Teachers' unions. This has resulted to the loss of vigor, drive and passion that was characterized with the teacher of the good olden days. The Government intention to cover the lost school calendar due to Covid 19 lead to a raft of policy guidelines which in turn has led to heavy work load to students and teachers who are under pressure to deliver the content and results. These policy guidelines by the Government complimented by every school set of policies have in one way or another impacted negatively on the school community exploding into various forms of unrests.

**ii. Moral decadence:** According to Oxford advanced learner's dictionary, decadent is having or showing low standards, especially moral ones, and an interest only in pleasure and fun rather than serious things. Children of school going age are the easy target of hard drugs, terrorism, cults and other ill practices, school neighborhoods have the highest dens of illicit brews with the target customers being students. Petrol used to torch schools is purchased from petrol stations by students who are times assisted to sneak out of school by those that are supposed to guard them against such conducts. All these activities are undertaken by adults of sound mind whose main intention is to make quick money at the detriment of our children. Terror groups are targeting youth in expanding their army; the intentions of terrorism is to cause fear, destruction and death, could it be, terror groups have spotted schools as soft targets and are using students to achieve their goals?. During school holidays, bars are overflowing with students who share the same spaces with adults, and at times adults are the sponsors of these drinking sprees. The frequent fires in our market places, notably Gikomba market, are blamed on electric faults but other reports claim otherwise, indicative of intentional fires by ill intended people to achieve their ill intentions. In the past and current parliament, honorable members of parliament have displayed disrespectful behavior, even to the highest office in Kenya, setting a bad precedence to the young generation who now take violence as an illegality accepted by the society to air and resolve their grievances. In general the

moral fabric of our Nation is seriously tattered to the extent that the youth are learning the bad elements from their seniors as bad role models and the seniors are deprived of moral authority to discredit the young generation conduct.

**iii. Parenting insufficiency:** A parent is a mother or father of a child and includes any person who is liable by law to maintain a child or is entitled to his custody (The Children Act of Kenya CAP 141, 2012). The act defines parental responsibility as all the duties, rights, powers, responsibilities and authority which by law a parent of a child has in relation to the child and the child's property in a manner consistent with the evolving capacities of the child. One of the responsibilities stipulated in the Act is education and guidance which is defined as giving of intellectual, moral and spiritual instructions or other training to a child. Parent in view of this law is broader than just provision. Today's parent has neglected some of his/her duties in the disguise of hard economic times, changing social set up in the society and showing parental love, in the process the children are over pampered. Children are supposed to learn basic morals and life skills from home, a teacher is only supposed to reinforce what the child learns from home; most of secondary school children do not know how to do basic domestic chores which are supposed to prepare them for secondary and later life. Most children have been trained by their parents, involuntarily, that things have to be done their way, when they get to secondary schools they are unable to cope with life which is majorly independent and governed by rules and regulations, which is why they result to burning dormitories so that they can get back to the comfort of their homes. Families are facing myriad of challenges such as divorce, separations, single parenting, serial fights whose effects are revealed in the children of the affected families, such children can result to violent behaviors as a way of shedding off stress. The inadequacies of parenting are manifested in the children and younger generation in form of irresponsible behaviors that are inconsistent with the society norms.

### **Conclusion and recommendations**

Arson in Kenyan secondary schools is a problem of Nation concern based on the frequency and magnitude of the incidences and should be addressed with sobriety and holistically. It is evident from this study that the Government has been addressing the symptoms while the disease was spreading rapidly and ravaging resources of insurmountable value. Subject to these finds, the study makes the following recommendations:

- i. Policy formulation whether by the Government or school administration should be all inclusive to capture the aspirations and thoughts of all key stakeholders which make adoption and execution smooth and flawless; the policies need to be well thought and not rushed.
- ii. Moral Decency, as a Nation we need to get back to basics and repair our morals and norms that have been eroded heavily. This will be assisted by strict implementation of laws reinforcing moral decency, for example, why should we have bars and illicit brew dens near schools yet there are laws abolishing such.
- iii. Parenting, Parents need to take Centre stage in the upbringing of their children, they should constantly monitor, counsel, coach and guide their children towards the right path and prepare them for every stage of life. Parents need to know pampering their children is a precursor of most irresponsible behaviors of our youth; parents who have over delegated their parental duties to housemaids, teachers, and the public to resume their roles with vigor and vitality.
- iv. Students target on boarding facilities could be a strong pointer to the Government that boarding schools are overtaken by time; hence the Government should reconsider the importance of boarding schools.
- v. All previous committee and task force reports on this subject to be consolidated and reviewed to advise on the policy development and execution.
- vi. A Further and in-depth study to be carried out on the subject matter from a long term solution seeking perspective.

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