

THE ALUMNI'S ROLE IN REVERSING THE DWINDLING NEP ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

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We all know that education is the key to a successful society but the trends in Kenya are disturbing with North Eastern Province (NEP) schools always trailing in national examinations both at the primary and secondary level. Every year NEP schools lead Kenya's national examinations from the bottom, with the best student from the entire region not anywhere close to the publicly announced top 100 spots in any of the other 7 provinces. Despite the fact that these are known trends, nobody seems to reverse the situation. Infact, we only get concerned when the results are announced earlier in the year and forget about it all together, till the next time we realize the dismal performance of our schools. We all understand that the current educational crisis looming in our region has a long historical perspective that probably goes beyond the scope of this article yet we do know that the long term solution to all of NEP's problems including poor education, healthcare, food security, and water resources, among others lies in improved educational standards. A literate society will not only be able to understand its rights, but will champion for them and above all will ensure relevant authorities are made accountable for their actions. It is therefore an open secret that unless we place a high premium on education, the springboard of development, we will be dealing with a vicious cycle of poverty and hopelessness.

Generation for Change and Growth (GCG) that deeply cares about making an effort to changing these trends felt that it was necessary to have volunteers to make the long trip to Mandera, so that the alumni from these schools can act as role models for the students. In a follow up to my summer 2003 Kenyan visit to my old primary school, Rhamu-Dimtu Primary School, which I had previously, wrote about in the GCG site (www.thegcg.org), I felt obliged to be one such volunteer again, with a meager two hundred dollar (\$200) GCG support. I arrived at Rhamu on June 14th 2007 and told my former IRE teacher at Sheikh Ali High School, Maalim Matker of my interest in giving a motivational speech to the students. He was extremely impressed noting that a former student will be the ideal person to inspire the students. He then talked to the school headmaster, Maalim Ibrahim Shetto and within a few hours the school car was at my place that evening. Meanwhile, Matker and Ibrahim had arranged the entire school to be assembled under the big acacia tree adjacent to the F2 class. I was delighted to see my 1994 classmate Mr. Aftin Kullow Dube as the school deputy headmaster. Aftin and Matker first gave a short speech telling the students about me and how they would want them to emulate some of my achievements.

When my turn to give the speech came, I asked them a few questions first. What are your career goals? Where do you see yourself in the next 5-10 years? How many vacancies are available in the Kenyan public Universities and Colleges? Who are your competitors for these competitive spots? Do you have any plans of pursuing studies abroad? As a teacher myself and based on my own experiences as a student, I wanted to know how much they know to get the discussion going. As I anticipated the students had no clue how to answer

these questions. My goal was to give them the bigger picture that they are not just competing with their classmates Mr. Hassan and Abdi, but with all KCSE candidates like Mr. Kamau and Omondi, who have a better head start than them for very limited university and college positions. Another aim was to let them know that they are as intelligent as or even better than students at Starehe Boys Center, but they start at a disadvantage and have to compensate by working extremely hard. That is “If you start behind, you must work extra hard to catch up or forever remain behind”.

I used a similar approach when I visited Rhamu-Dimtu Primary school a few days later as the school deputy headmaster Mr. Mukaji introduced me to the Standard eight class. The headteacher Mrs. Kaltuma Abdullahi Bulle had gone to pursue a Garrissa-based Kenyatta University degree program leaving Mukaji as the school boss. I gave envelopes containing presents to the top three students so that the rest will try to be inspired to do better next time. To even encourage them more, I promised a big present, which I think GCG and I can provide, for any student that qualifies for a national school based on the 2007 KCPE exams. I had also told Sheikh Ali High school students earlier to expect a thank you present for any candidate that scores grade “A” in the 2007 KCSE Exams. Mr. Mukaji joked that since I was visiting from the US, the present could be something really big. “It could be a car, it could be an aeroplane, and it could be anything really” he said. He later told me that he just wanted them to think of a big present, but that I can give whatever reward I had in mind. I told the newly posted Mukaji of my 2003 trip and how my own interest in qualifying for Starehe Boys Center, a national school, 17 years ago when I graduated from this school was the main motivation behind my current trip and the presents promised. Both him and the Sheikh Ali headmaster, Mr. Ibrahim, who generously gave me the ride from Rhamu to Rhamu-Dimtu, had little knowledge of GCG, but were very wary of people in the diaspora that come to take their pictures every once in a while. “I always wondered what they get from this?” posed Mr. Ibrahim to which I replied that I am not taking any of their pictures if that makes them more comfortable to know that mine, as a GCG representative, was totally voluntary work. However, I was quick to notice the challenges that we face in promoting our agenda there and appreciate the honesty of their concerns in bringing up such an issue instead of discussing it after my departure.

I told both gatherings that the common approach is to blame the government for all our failures and that is completely true for the white settlers and Kenya’s three administrations have neglected the Somali-dominated Northern Kenya. We have always been promised rhetorical “big changes” during the election season but nothing tangible is ever implemented. This translates to an endless sorry state where dreams are shattered for many bright students. We can continue blaming the government for all our problems but in my view, I emphasized that while we can pressure the Gov’t to achieve some goals, we, the stakeholders of these institutions ought to undertake the bulk of the necessary reforms to make our educational system at par with the rest of Kenya. I also told them that while it is the teachers and school administrators that usually bear the bulk of the blame game for our poor performances, NEP teachers are as equally qualified as the rest of Kenyan teachers having gone through the same training colleges and universities. The teachers particularly liked that line. The students in both schools burst into laughter when

I asked whether they themselves are the culprits or put differently, whether NEP students are less intelligent than Mr. Kamau elsewhere. However, I was quick to state that given a chance the few lucky students to make it through to national schools or universities have excelled very well, out-competing their colleagues from prestigious schools elsewhere in Kenya and the rest of the world. That implies that there is nothing wrong with the students *per se* but something is terribly wrong with our educational institutions or it could also mean that whatever was wrong with the students is rectified in the new institutions that they excel exceptionally well. It also suggests that if we gave more opportunities to these students, the sky is the limit. Logically then, we tend to blame lack of resources including books, laboratory equipment, harsh climate etc but while this may be valid to some extent, it cannot explain the large discrepancy between NEP schools and other places in Kenya with similar problems including Ukambani, Turkana, Lodwar, Pokot etc.

As highlighted above, my audience and I both agreed that we cannot blame a single group; teachers, school administrators, students, parents or even the resources to be completely responsible for our dwindling annual performances. Perhaps, it is a combination of all of the above but I personally believe that the failures are more to do with unclear systems for rewarding excellence or motivating the above (teachers, students, and parents) and unconcerned or uninformed alumni suggesting that a complex web of strategic policy changes may help resolve the underlying issues. What can you do as an individual, group, or as a society? Can we all agree that such a visit to your old schools can inspire students or a financial contribution can make a change? How many of us are willing to take the next GCG trip to inspire students in our old schools? I am asking these questions because, as we may know, change does not suddenly happen; somebody has to take the initiative to try to alter our attitude. That probably fits with the name GCG; it is our generation that needs to bring much needed change to our educational institutions and to our society at large. While we do not expect our efforts to be a panacea to the enormous challenges facing our region, herein, I discuss a few strategies that I shared with students and teachers at both of my old schools, which if implemented can be instrumental in bringing the much-needed radical change to our system.

1. Active Alumni that acts as role models, provide career advice, and other support

A major problem facing NEP students is the lack of career information. As they say “knowledge is power”, students equipped with the knowledge of their future opportunities, will be more likely to be motivated to work hard towards that goal in addition to making the right career choices when the time comes. In the United States, schools maintain current lists of their alumni wherever they are in the world and efforts are made to invite them annually. This way, they interact with current students and provide necessary career advice based on their experiences. I think we could easily emulate that in Northern Kenya. Unless, we the former students of this schools act, the dwindling performance of our schools may never change forever. We can all make simple contributions to our society and impact it in ways that we may not have ever imagined. How many engineers, scientists, medics, teachers, lawyers, pharmacists,

accountants, etc have been nurtured through these systems, and what advice do they have for the current students? I would suggest we have annual events to bring together such hitherto untapped potential, which can definitely act as role models for the students and discuss their professions with the students. The former students may even suggest a few ideas to improve the situation, and more importantly the event could be used as prize giving day, where the alumni gives incentives to bright students and hardworking teachers determined as in 3) above.

2. Efficient time management policies to enable syllabus completion

Another common problem in NEP schools is poor time management. Due to inefficient planning, most North eastern schools may not be able to complete the syllabus let alone having time for revision before the final exams. In the United States, every minute of the school time is accounted for and on the first day of school, teachers provide a detailed outline of what they will be teaching that term including specific dates for exams and practicals. Since this is strictly followed everyday, it means that the students already know what topics will be covered in class 4 months in advance. While the situation is not as developed, Kenya's national schools have similar programs where school time is efficiently utilized. For as long as we, North easterners open our schools late and close them early, we should not expect miracles to complete the syllabus in a timely manner as the saying goes "time and tide waits for no man". It is like at the Olympics, if you start the competition, minutes or hours after the race starts, what are your chances that you will catch up with the winning group? Absolutely zero. No wonder then that we are not up to the challenge in competing with the rest of the country.

3. Accountable and transparent administration that honours merit based appraisals

Accountability and transparency is a key ingredient of efficient management but is hardly appreciated if not completely lacking in NEP schools. We need to have clear administrative policies to reward hardworking students and teachers purely on merit and nothing more. A departure from the current political promotions replaced by rewarding excellence through incentives, awards, and promotions will definitely encourage others to work extra hard so that they can emulate similar achievements in subsequent years and in the long run motivate all stakeholders for a common goal of academic excellence. For example, how many non-somali teachers are involved in NEP's school administration? I guess very few but the majority of this lot are highly qualified graduates with vast experience in key subjects like mathematics and the sciences. So if they are not entitled to merit based promotions, what do you think will motivate them to honestly teach well in a harsh climatic environment far from their homeland?

4. Knowing your competitors for the few positions in national schools and universities

That brings me to another area that we need to critically think about, who are our competitors? Most North eastern students do not see the overall picture of competing with Mr. Kamau in Nairobi or other parts of Kenya, but focus on competing with each other in their local schools. That means that so long as you are number one in your class,

you are fine and worse still parents are contented with their children's performance because "everyone else" in that school performed poorly. That is really unfortunate. Northern students need to understand the real competitors for the few spots in national schools (KCPE) and universities (KCSE). If that was the case, I am sure; the students will make every effort to rise up to the challenge in the midst of their shortcomings.

5. Establishment of quality centers of excellence instead of many underperforming schools

Although the existing schools are already failing, ironically we tend to build more schools by the day. This situation is like a businessman opening more non-profit generating branches, what do you expect of such a business? I think we need to focus on "a few" schools as centers of excellence in the region and probably use them as models in future. May be lobby with the ministry of education for those chosen "few" schools in the vast province to be made national school(s). At least that way we have some schools to be very proud of. I know we already have a few success stories to build on to as we probably remember that in 1989, Northern Kenya drew the attention of the education ministry courtesy of Sheikh Ali and Garissa high school's awesome performance in the previous year's "A" level exams. This was the year when these two schools surprised Kenyans after they scooped positions 10th and 72nd respectively, prompting the suggestions of various stakeholders to establish a national school in the region with my former school, Sheikh Ali high school, running high as the most likely candidate. Although some schools like Balambala, Umusalama, Wajir high, Mandera, and Takaba secondary schools have also performed well since the inception of the 8-4-4 system, they have not been to the level of 1989, which I am pretty sure if replicated for even a few consecutive years, the Gov't would have by now implemented the elusive national school in the North.

Finally, I would like to point out that my trip was extremely successful. However, the students kept asking me whether there were any financial assistance that we could help them with. Generally, I noticed that there are many bright students in many parts of North Eastern Kenya that may be left out of school as a result of lack of school fees and other basic needs. This is because many of these students may be orphans and/or hail from extremely poor families and the Kenyan Government has little programs to support them. Don't you think those poor students deserve to have a chance too? Imagine if all those bright students pursued further education. How many Doctors, Engineers, Accountants, Lawyers, Scientists etc will come out of the forgotten land of Kenya? I even used the \$200 (and more) that GCG provided for my trip for this noble cause. The current trip also reinforced my 2003 idea of establishing an Academic Excellence Fund with the goal of supporting these students as we believe the best way to empower the society is to invest in education. As I earlier proposed, GCG will carefully vet all student applicants for this program and carry out some background checks to ensure that only qualified students that meet our selection criteria, purely based on merit and need, successfully benefit from this generous fund. These students will be expected to refund the money in yearly installments upon graduation so as to eventually have a revolving fund that can be utilized to cater for future students in similar situations.

If you share the same Academic Excellence Fund initiative as I do, you can sponsor a child by paying only \$20 a month. Think about all the blessings and opportunities that God has bestowed upon you and what sharing just a meager \$20 can do for a poor orphan in North Eastern Kenya. This may be your chance to give a precious opportunity to a bright student, who would have otherwise dropped out of school. GCG will make every effort to ensure that the sponsors will have an opportunity to have constant academic progress reports from the student(s). We will also try to have direct contacts between the sponsors and students so you can get to know each other better and may be exchange pictures etc. We sincerely appreciate your effort in helping someone else have access to education.