

*Review*

# In search of remedy to secondary school dropout pandemic in Kenya: Role of the principal

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As a nation, Kenya hopes to achieve Education for All (EFA) by the year 2015. This is an uphill task given the various challenges in the education sector. The year 2015 is also significant globally because it is the target year for the fulfillment of the eight- millennium goals. Kenya looks forward to have her people achieve the millennium goals together with other people worldwide. The pivotal hinge for these important target goals is education levels of the people involved and look forward to benefit from the fruits of EFA, millennium goals and industrialization. For such matters therefore, Kenya is trying her best to have her people educated. The secondary school segment in the education cycle of a Kenyan is important for three major reasons: a) It delinks one from elementary (primary) learning. b) It provides a chance for one to complete the cycle for basic education. c) It anchors as the springboard to either tertiary or higher learning. However, pandemic secondary school dropout in Kenya is alarming. For instance, in a period of ten years, 1992 - 2002, every secondary school cohort suffered not less than ten percent school dropout e.g. the highest dropout rate for the girls was fifty percent in the 1997/2000 cohort. The average dropout and completion rates for girls in the period under consideration were twenty percent and eighty percent respectively. For the boys they were fourteen percent and eighty-seven percent respectively. Some of the reasons that lead to the pandemic secondary school dropouts have been elucidated in this paper. They include poverty, early pregnancies/marriages, HIV/AIDS, drug-abuse and low- self esteem. Importantly, every secondary school dropout in Kenya signifies unfulfilled objective, goal, and aim for the individual as well as for the community at large. Emerging from this fact is perhaps a crucial question, where do the individuals who dropout of the learning cycle without basic education go? Alternatively, what do these persons do wherever they go? The most critical issue in this conundrum is perhaps the role of secondary school principals. In their endeavor to check dropout rates and concurrently enhance retention rates, they ought to change their managerial approaches to suit this twenty-first century that is apparently full of challenges to secondary school retention of students. In this article, the author discusses some of the approaches secondary school principals (managers) may use to alleviate dropout rates in Kenya. There is hope.

**Keywords:** Pandemic, Retention, Dropout, Remedy and Role.

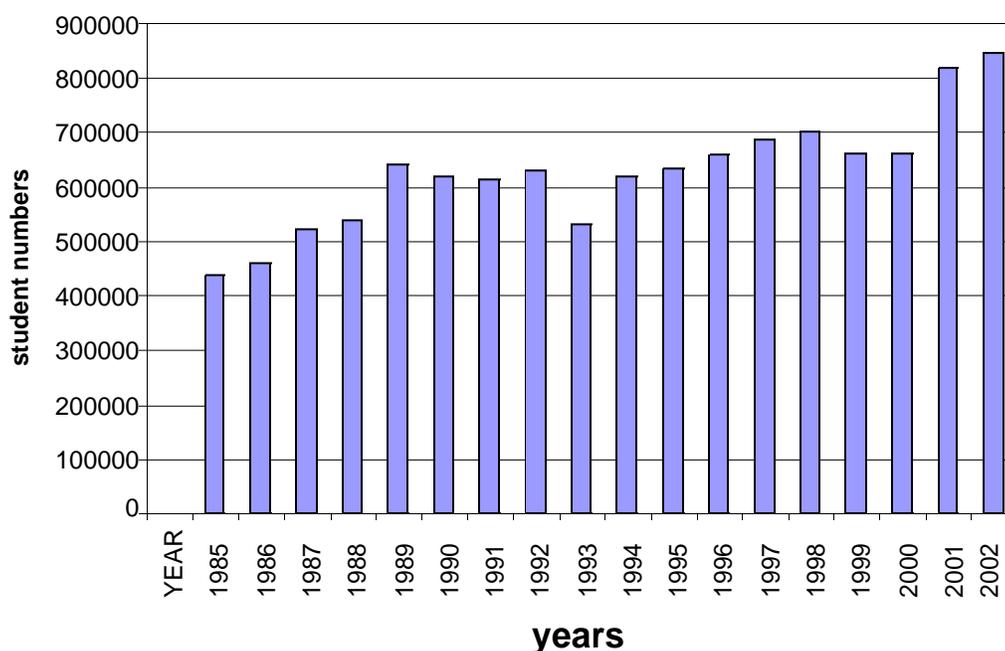
## INTRODUCTION

The universal declaration on human rights in 1948 by the United Nations Organization embraces education as a basic human right. Kenya subscribes to this declaration. She is also a signatory to the international protocol that established Education for All (EFA) agenda in Jomtien, Thailand, 1990. In addition, Kenya is a signatory to the World Educational Forum (WEF), which was held in Dakar, Senegal, in the year 2000. Consequently, Kenya

is committed to: (a) Elimination of poverty as a hindrance to educational development. (b) Promotion of human rights through provision of Education. (c) Attainment of sustainable development by the provision of quality basic education for all (Republic of Kenya, 2003; 1998).

Towards achievement of her determination to provide EFA by the year 2015, Kenya has supported remarkable increment in secondary school enrolment since indepen-

### Secondary School Enrolment: 1985-2002



**Figure 1.** Secondary School Enrolment: 1985-2002. Source: Statistical Abstracts (1994 – 2003); Economic Surveys (2000 – 2004); National Development Plans (1994 – 2008); MoEST Strategic Plans; and, Education Act, Kenya.

dence in 1963, countable decreases notwithstanding. For instance, for a period of 18 years, that is, 1985 – 2002, Kenya had increased enrolment at the secondary school level except for 1989/90/91, 1992/93, 1998/99/2000 see bar graph in Figure 1 for the actual descriptive statistics.

Importantly, the secondary school educational cycle lasts 4 years in Kenya. It is recognized as the springboard to tertiary and/or higher education and training. For this matter therefore, it is a significant juncture in the national and educational development.

Some of the objectives of this sector of education are to: (1) Promote experience and growth of the whole person through integrated development of mental, physical and emotive attributes and abilities. (2) Promote communication skills, numeracy, scientific concepts and skills.

(3) Promote social equity through provision of education to all Kenyans including those from disadvantaged communities and households, girl - child and the handicapped (Republic of Kenya, 2003; 1998; 1980).

However, the secondary school cycle in Kenya faces some challenges. Among them are challenges such as low transition rates between primary and secondary schools as well as high dropout rates (Republic of Kenya, 2003; 1998). Furthermore, it is noted that some of the perennial causes of secondary school education dropouts

are: early girl-child marriages; inability to pay school fees due to poverty; hazards of HIV/AIDS pandemic; violence; and, drug abuse (Achoka, 2007; 2006; Republic of Kenya, 2003)

Amidst the challenging environment of the secondary school education in Kenya, the role of the school principal is to propel the learning institution to successful performance academically and otherwise. This role is heavily laden. Besides its initial functions of planning, organizing, staffing, leading and controlling (Republic of Kenya, 1998; 1980), other emerging roles necessitated by contemporary situations are noted. These include management of businesses for the school; drug abuse; human rights; constitutional rights; information technology; parents' teachers' association activities; and, guidance and counseling (Achoka, 2007). To say the least, the role of the secondary school principal in Kenya seems to be an uphill task. The principal is expected to succeed albeit a myriad of challenges. The remaining part of this article is sectionalized into four major parts: (i) Retention and completion rates of secondary school education in Kenya. In this section, data from various Government documents are computed and tabulated for statistical analyses of retention, completion, and dropout rates for ten (10) cohorts' girls and boys from 1990 to pertinent from the data presented in 2002. (ii) The second section

**Table 1.** 10 secondary school cohorts between 1990 - 2002.

S/NO.	YEARS
1	1990-1993
2	1991-1994
3	1992-1995
4	1993-1996
5	1994-1997
6	1995-1998
7	1996-1999
8	1997-2000
9	1998-2001
10	1999-2002

**Source:** Compiled from statistical Abstracts; Economic Surveys; and, National Development Plans, Kenya.

features discussion of points emerging section (i) above. The discussion dwells on issues propelled by dropout rates in Kenya using the period under consideration, 1990 – 2002 as measure of gravity of the matter. (iii) Section three of this article contains the author's re-examination of the role of the secondary school principal in Kenya giving emphasis on new perspectives that need attention. Brief outlines of the types of secondary school principals in their capacity as change agents are presented urging contemporary principals to be "initiators" in their principalship approach. (iv) The fourth section throws light on conclusions drawn from data presented above and discussion of emerging points.

### **Retention and completion rates of secondary school education in Kenya**

The data under consideration in this section are drawn from the period 1990 to 2002 inclusively. Simple descriptive statistics have been computed to show retention and completion rates between years and within cohorts respectively. Table 1 contains the ten (10) cohorts used for analyses. The next ten (10) more tables, that is, 2 – 11, reflect the retention, completion and dropout rates for each of the ten cohorts in table 1. Data for the first cohort, 1990 -1993 are presented in Table 2 and the last cohort, 1999-2002, in Table 11. Sources of computed data are Government Documents such as, Economic Surveys; National Development plans; Statistical Abstracts; and, Educational Strategic Plans. Asterisks (\*) stand for Figures rounded to the nearest tenth (10<sup>th</sup>); the actual calculations are bracketed. Table 12 consists of drop outs and completion rates (%) per cohort by gender. The boys

in cohorts 1998/2000 and 1999/2001 had 100% completion rates. No girl cohort registered 100% completion rate.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Dropout rates**

Dropout rates for the ten cohorts ranged between 10 and 50%. The highest drop out rate for the girls was 50% in the 1997 - 2000 cohort while that of the boys was 30% in the 1992 - 1995 and 1998-2001 cohorts.

Most importantly, every cohort suffered not less than 10% dropout rate. In 1997/00 cohort, 50% of the girls dropped out. In 1990/93, 1992/95 cohorts, 30% of enrolled girls dropped out! Similarly, 30% of boys enrolled in 1990/93 and 1998/01 cohorts dropped out! These are very high percentages. Average dropout rate for the boys was 17% while for the Girls it was 21%.

### **Completion rates**

Completion rates ranged between 70 and 100%. Very high completion rates of 90 –100% could be due to repeaters in Form 3 and Form 4 which is a common occurrence in some parts of Kenya. The average completion rate for the boys is 87% while for the girls it is 81%, see Figures 3 and 4.

Thus, the above statistical analysis show that every cohort in Kenya within the period considered 1990 - 2002, had drop out rates. Emerging from this fact is a crucial question, where do the girls and boys who drop out of these cohorts go? And what do they do wherever they go?

More importantly, certain characteristics of these dropouts are noted. For instance: (a) These dropouts are aged between 15 - 20 years; (b) They do not have complete basic education; and, (c) They are therefore not able to positively contribute to their individual, community, and national development of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Be thus as it may, one may thus say, the future of these dropouts is bleak in our highly technological world. This is a sad story to reckon with, indeed.

Moreover as a nation, Kenya incurs a loss whenever there is a dropout in any educational sector. The drop out signifies unfulfilled aim, goal, and objective for the individual, community, and nation as a whole. For instance, for any drop out at the secondary school level, the country loses potential work force towards the target year, 2020 for national industrialization and vision 2030 when Kenya hopes to achieve total development. In addition, the country also falls short of her aim to provide Education For All (EFA) by the target year 2015. What, then, can one therefore say about fulfillment of the which Millennium Development Goals by 2015? Can a nation, is not

**Table 2.** 1990 - 1993 secondary school cohort.

	BOYS			GIRLS		
	1990 / 91 (F1 – F2)	1991/92 (F2 – F3)	1992/93 (F3 – F4)	1990/91 (F1 – F2)	1991/92 (F2 – F3)	1992/93 (F3 – F4)
Retention (%)	92.82	94.67	86.04	94.21	93.68	75.48
Dropout (%)		*20 (24.39)			*30 (33.61)	
Completion (%)		*80 (81.46)			*70 (66.62)	

**Table 3.** 1991 - 1994 secondary school cohort.

	BOYS			GIRLS		
	1991 / 92 (F1 – F2)	1992/93 (F2 – F3)	1993/94 (F3 – F4)	1991/92 (F1 – F2)	1992/93 (F2 – F3)	1993/94 (F3 – F4)
Retention (%)	95.50	79.65	108.2	95.60	76.22	112.45
Dropout (%)		*20 (23.94)			*20 (17.14)	
Completion (%)		*80 (82.30)			*80 (81.95)	

**Table 4.** 1992 - 1995 secondary school cohort.

	BOYS			GIRLS		
	1992 / 93 (F1 – F2)	1993/94 (F2 – F3)	1994/95 (F3 – F4)	1992/93 (F1 – F2)	1993/94 (F2 – F3)	1994/95 (F3 – F4)
Retention (%)	75.18	108.13	93.70	78.33	108.45	92.11
Dropout (%)		*30 (29.90)			*30 (28.38)	
Completion (%)		*70 (74.17)			*70 (61.24)	

**Table 5.** 1993 - 1996 secondary school cohort.

	BOYS			GIRLS		
	1993 / 94 (F1 – F2)	1994/95 (F2 – F3)	1995/96 (F3 – F4)	1993/94 (F1 – F2)	1994/95 (F2 – F3)	1995/96 (F3 – F4)
Retention (%)	107.91	93.90	94.53	110.05	91.28	94.51
Dropout (%)		*10 (12.13)			*10 (13.10)	
Completion(%)		*90 (93.78)			*90 (93.94)	

**Table 6.** 1994 - 1997 secondary school cohorts.

	BOYS			GIRLS		
	1994 / 95 (F1 – F2)	1995/96 (F2 – F3)	1996/97 (F3 – F4)	1994/95 (F1 – F2)	1995/96 (F2 – F3)	1996/97 (F3 – F4)
Retention (%)	97.76	94.55	95.89	97.21	107.22	95.46
Dropout (%)		*10 (11.37)			*10 (12.13)	
Completion(%)		*90 (88.63)			*90 (87.87)	

able to fulfill its own national goals, fulfill global goals? As far as it may be understood, accumulated effects of

school drop out rates may be exhibited in various forms upon the individual as well as the society. Some of these

**Table 7.** 1995 - 1998 secondary school cohort.

	BOYS			GIRLS		
	1995 / 96 (F1 – F2)	1996/97 (F2 – F3)	1997/98 (F3 – F4)	1995/96 (F1 – F2)	1996/97 (F2 – F3)	1997/98 (F3 – F4)
Retention (%)	97.06	95.55	92.47	97.36	95.15	87.42
Dropout (%)	*10 (14.25)			*20 (16.93)		
Completion (%)	*90 (85.75)			*80 (83.07)		

**Table 8.** 1996 - 1999 secondary school cohort.

	BOYS			GIRLS		
	1996 / 97 (F1 – F2)	1997/98 (F2 – F3)	1998/99 (F3 – F4)	1996/97 (F1 – F2)	1997/98 (F2 – F3)	1998/99 (F3 – F4)
Retention (%)	98.09	94.51	86.33	147.42	89.66	85.78
Dropout (%)	*20 (19.97)			*20 (23.44)		
Completion (%)	*80 (80.03)			*80 (77.74)		

**Table 9.** 1997 - 2000 secondary school cohort.

	BOYS			GIRLS		
	1997/ 98 (F1 –F2)	1998/99 (F2 – F3)	1999/2000 (F3 – F4)	1997/98 (F1 – F2)	1998/99 (F2 – F3)	1999/2000 (F3 – F4)
Retention (%)	99.57	92.07	88.29	99.09	49.85	156.97
Dropout (%)	*10 (9.82)			*50 (51.11)		
Completion (%)	*90 (89.94)			*70 (72.75)		

**Table 10.** 1998 - 2001 secondary school cohort.

	BOYS			GIRLS		
	1998 /99 (F1 –F2)	1999/2000 (F2 – F3)	2000/01 (F3 – F4)	1998/99 (F1 – F2)	1999/2000 (F2 – F3)	2000/01 (F3 – F4)
Retention (%)	65.85	127.88	116.54	101.82	95.18	97.86
Dropout (%)	*30 (33.15)			*10 (6.98)		
Completion (%)	*100 (96.14)			*90 (93.84)		

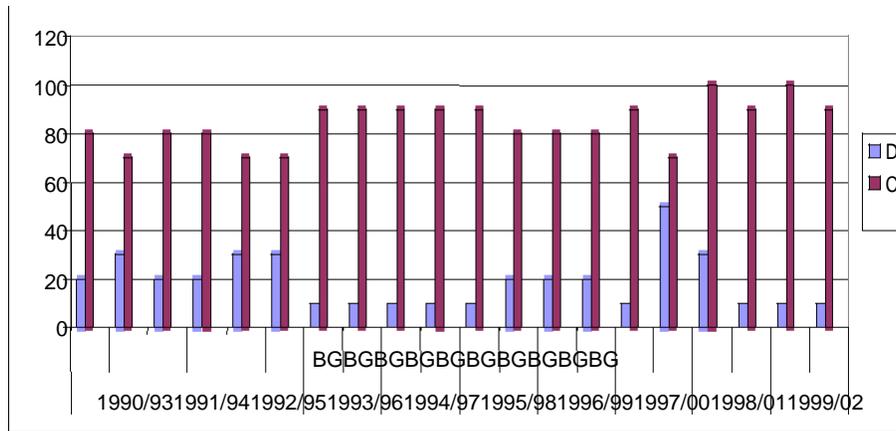
**Table 11.** 1999 - 2002 secondary school cohort.

	BOYS			GIRLS		
	1999/2000 (F1 – F2)	2000/01 (F2 – F3)	2001/02 (F3 – F4)	1999/2000 (F1 – F2)	2000/01 (F2 – F3)	2001/02 (F3 – F4)
Retention (%)	107.64	98.80	96.23	104.15	99.63	90.07
Dropout (%)	*10 (5.50)			*10 (10.69)		
Completion (%)	*100 (102.13)			*90 (93.46)		

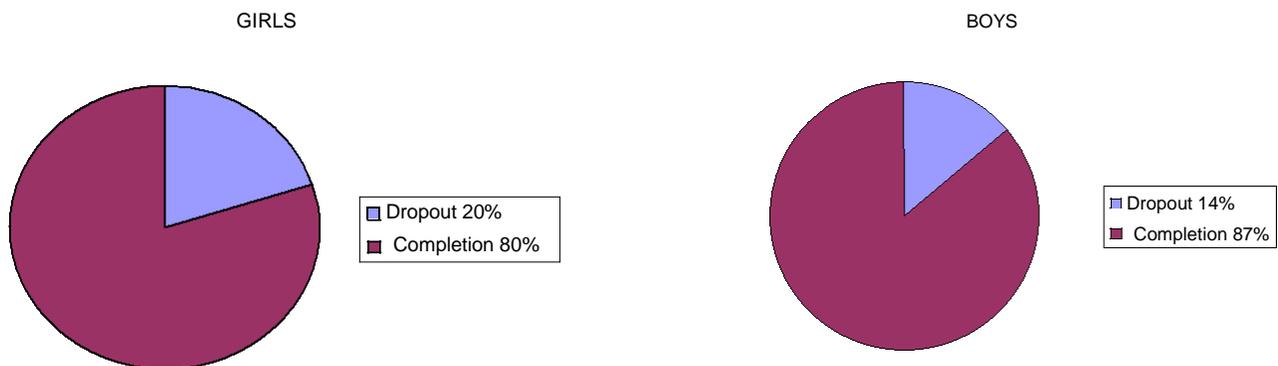
**Table 12.** Dropout /completion rates for 10 cohorts by gender.

	1990/93		1991/94		1992/95		1993/96		1994/97		1995/98		1996/99		1997/00		1998/01		1999/02	
	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G
D (%)	20	30	20	20	30	30	10	10	10	10	10	20	20	20	10	50	30	10	10	10
C (%)	80	70	80	80	70	70	90	90	90	90	90	80	80	80	90	70	100	90	100	90

SOURCE: Computed from Literature. KEY: B = Boys. G = Girls. D = Drop out rate (%). C = Completion rate (%).



**Figure 2.** Drop out and completion rates per cohort by gender.



**Figure 3.** Average drop out and completion rates by gender

**Figure 4.** Average drop out and completion rates by gender Sources: Developed from literature.

effects are already evident in Kenya. Table 13 indicates some of the causes and effects of secondary school dropouts in Kenya.

Therefore, in Kenya, we must ponder over some of the specific factors that contribute to our high rates in secondary school drop out and purpose to address them. Otherwise, there could be high possibility of losing higher rates of learners to hopeless life and national underdevelopment in future. Perhaps, the secondary school principal could be encouraged to intervene with a view to alleviate the situation.

### The role of contemporary secondary school principal in Kenya, Circa 2000: search for remedy to dropout rates

Initially, the role of the secondary school principal in Kenya was clear and manageable (Achoka, 2003). In summary, since 1985 when a new education system was ushered in Kenya, the role of the secondary school principal widened to include management of increased parents involvement in school functioning. Moreover, secondary school principals have to manage mature learners, more

**Table 13.** Some causes and effects of secondary school dropouts in Kenya

Causes	Effects
1. Poverty	1. Increased crime, restlessness
2. Early pregnancies/marriage	2. Impoverished persons/Misfits
3. HIV/AIDS	3. Sickly people/ Frustration/Death
4. Drug	4. Drug addicts/Social misfits
5. War	5. Tormented people
6. Violence	6. Unskilled people, dangerous criminals
7. Ignorance	7. Unemployment
8. Politics	8. Disoriented people
9. Low self esteem	9. Low life expectancy rate, semi-illiterate
10. Peer pressure	10. Malfunctional people

Source: Developed from Literature and Experience.

enlightened parents, an aggressive public, meager school resources and facilities, social issues such as drug addictions in society and schools, high rates of poverty, demeaning cultural practices that affect mostly girls and so forth (Achoka, 2006; Wekesa, 1993). Most importantly, the current role involves liaising with the Ministry of Education Science and Technology to prepare learners for their end of secondary school four year education examinations.

Given the above data, it is possible to understand that contemporary secondary school principals in Kenya should no longer be seen as mere school-based principals. Apparently, they have to contend with widened role expectations and act in various capacities. Initially their role was mainly to plan, organize, staff, lead, and control. Emerging from the current expectations for the present principals, their roles are inclusive of the need to be:

**Advisor:** Currently, the effective secondary school principal should be one who acts as advisor to students, teachers and community e.g. against adverse cultural traits/practices that affect retention of students in school. Thus, he/she should endeavor to identify possible threats against retention rates and reverse the situation. Such are the threats like drug pushing and consumption.

**Counselor:** We need our secondary school principals to act as counselors to not only the students but also to parents and teachers. This could assist all parties interested in the education life of the learner to appreciate the need for one to be educated.

**Initiator:** The twenty-first secondary school principal in Kenya should endeavour to provide the best school climate to entice students to complete schooling e.g. make school free of violence, threats, intimidations, hatred, witch hunting e.t.c. and develop rich co-curriculum, remedial

interventions (services) for slow learners to avoid repetition, frustration and dropout.

**Developer:** The secondary school principal should put more effort in developing academic and co-curriculum programmes that are attractive and competitive in order to fully occupy all students while at school.

No doubt therefore, the role of a contemporary secondary school principal in Kenya should be seen as more complex to-day than yesteryears. This is because this role concomitantly requires sacrifice, wisdom, determination and love -- for we deal with human beings some of who don't understand implications of their present actions for their future lives. For that matter, in addition to all other measures designed to check secondary school dropout rates in Kenya, I think that the school principal is better situated to provide the relevant spectacles through which the students, parents, and community may perceive the future in its proper perspective. In other words, in our search for a remedy to secondary school dropout rates, there is need for change so that, for instance, school principals move away from the traditional routine chores of school management to comprehensive hands-on nursing approach in order to improve school retention rates. Change does not always come easily. In fact, it is often difficult. However, change can be made easier when someone takes the lead. In this case, the individual Kenya is looking for, in my view, is the secondary school principal.

Scholars of organizational change and its management (Owens, 1998; Hoy and Miskel, 1987) have noted that there are three types of managerial approach to organizational change. Managers (principals) who make change to occur, exercise the first approach. These principals are initiators. Characteristically, they set clear, long-range goals, and know what they want to accomplish. These principals expect a lot for themselves, their

teachers, and their students. These principals seek change in programmes so that they may better suit the needs of the school/students. These principals are better suited to experience more complete implementation of changes in their schools. Perhaps, our present secondary school principals need to exercise such tactics in order to improve student retention rates in Kenya. This would mean being more keen or sensitive to students' and individual school's peculiar needs for maximum retention rates. Whereas some principals would be unwilling to challenge their managerial norms to suit current requirements to change for the better, I think that secondary school principals in Kenya should strive to increase retention rates at their work stations by initiating change for the better.

The second approach to change is cherished by principals who help changes to happen. These principals work closely with teachers to implement a change once others have introduced it. These principals seldom initiate change on their own. They protect their teachers from what they perceive as excessive demands. Such type of principals may not be deemed useful in our present - day secondary school management in Kenya. Their lack of power to initiate change for the better could perpetuate if not worsen, the mystery of perennial secondary school dropout rates. Could some of our secondary school principals be managing their schools using this paradigm?

The third approach to change attracts principals who simply let changes happen. They are responders who allow teachers and other people to take the lead. They provide little guidance in introducing change. They tend to avoid making decisions. They have only short-term goals that change as circumstances dictate. Their teachers feel no one is really in control. In my understanding, this is the least attractive approach to secondary school principalship in Kenya to-day. Yet, some of our principals may be counted in this category.

Be that as it may, it is herein suggested that in order for our secondary schools to retain students, contemporary secondary school principals should learn to be more aggressive in initiating change at their base levels to encourage learners. Accordingly, principals should endeavour to set long-term goals based on what is best for the students. Principals should not wait to be told that a change needs to take place. They should take the lead in sorting out new ideas vis-à-vis what is best for schools and students. Moreover, current principals should make it clear that a school is a work place and set high standards as well as expectations for teaching and learning. They should offer timely support and guidance to staff, students and significant others. In short, contemporary secondary school principals should be seen to be courageous initiators, participators, supervisors and leaders of change at the school level. Coupled with other relevant factors, it is hoped that the role of the school principal in secondary school management is critical in checking

both school dropout and retention rates in Kenya.

## Conclusions

The need to curb dropout rates at the secondary school education level in Kenya cannot herein be overemphasized. Government policies outlined in the National Action Plan on Education for All, Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (2000 - 2005), Economic Recovery Strategy Paper, 9<sup>th</sup> National development Plan, 2002 – 2008 among others, all point to desired outcomes for education.

The secondary school principal is stationed at the critical point at the delivery (school) level. She/he is the pilot of the education aero plane airborne in Kenyan space. Whether or not the plane lands safely, much depends on the pilot to provide and take the necessary / relevant action.

It is most desirable for the secondary school principals to endeavor to enhance retention and completion rates at their learning stations. This is challenging but possible and achievable a task. Let secondary school principals realize that their role is critical in educational development. Let our principals take cognizance of their highly fluid and changing school environments in order to become effective change agents. Let the secondary school principals start as individuals, regional and finally national teams of principals who are determined to check endemic secondary school dropout rates for the sake of Kenya's national development. Whatever the secondary school principal can do to better this course, let them be encouraged to do it. Do it now!

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