

Understanding Financial Barriers to Secondary Education in Rural Malawi

Mixed-Methods Results from the Malawi SEED Impact Evaluation Baseline Survey

In Malawi, only 29% of primary school students transitioned to public secondary schools in 2019. Students that do enroll in Form 1 often have to travel long distances or board, and the cumulative costs of secondary education pose a financial burden for many families. The Government of Malawi announced a strategy to increase secondary school enrollment in 2018-2019 that included:

- **Secondary school expansion/construction.** US \$90 million SEED project investment co-funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the U.S. President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) to expand existing urban Community Day Secondary Schools (CDSS) in Blantyre Lilongwe, Mzuzu and Zomba and construction of new CDSSs in rural areas.
- **Abolishing select secondary fees.** The Government of Malawi introduced free primary education in 1994. Tuition fees, textbook revolving fund, and general-purpose fund fees were abolished in all Government secondary schools effective September 2018 (tuition) and January 2019 (textbooks and general purpose).

29% of primary schools and 100% of CDSSs disclosed charging non-tuition fees.

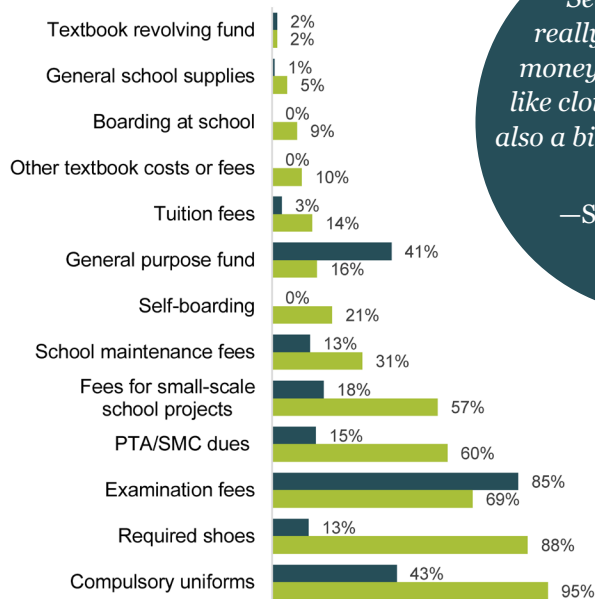
Average total fees among primary schools charging any fees: **MWK 632** per term

Average total fees among all CDSSs: **MWK 16,939** per term (**MWK 11,580** excluding boarding)

- All CDSSs charged general fees (average **MWK 10,587** per term)
- 28% of CDSSs charged other fees (average **MWK 21,133** per term)

Despite the elimination of these fees, secondary education costs persist as a predominant barrier to schooling. In 2021, Data for Impact (D4I), with funding from USAID, undertook a mixed-methods impact evaluation to assess the impact of the SEED activity in Malawi. This brief presents data triangulated from quantitative and qualitative interviews with rural students, their caregivers, and head teachers about actual and perceived barriers to educational achievement, including the financial costs of sending children to school.

Percent of schools reporting half or more Standard 7 and 8 (primary) or Form 1 (secondary) students incur costs related to:



“Secondary school really requires a lot of money to buy necessities like clothes, soap, fees and also a bicycle since the CDSS is very far.”
 —Standard 7 male student

School-reported support programs available to students

	Primary Schools (N = 64)	CDSSs (N = 58)
Bursaries/fee waivers	12%	97%
Uniforms	49%	33%
Textbooks	20%	21%
Exam fees	19%	19%
Supplies	29%	35%

Few students reported receiving tuition or materials/supply support during the current academic year:

- 2% prospective cohort students
- 6% retrospective cohort students who transitioned to Form 1

Methods

Quantitative data were collected through surveys with public school female and male students from 64 rural primary schools in intervention and comparison areas between October – November 2021. The prospective cohort included students enrolled in Standard 7 during the 2021 academic year (N = 761) and the retrospective cohort included students enrolled in Standard 8 during the September 2019 – December 2020 academic year (N = 599). Qualitative data were collected in 12 focus group discussions (FGDs) with Standard 7 students, 12 FGDs with caregivers of Standard 7 students, and six key informant interviews (KIIs) with community leaders. Additional details can be found in the baseline report ([placeholder for final report URL](#)).

Prospective cohort

Youth enrolled in Standard 7 at baseline

Retrospective cohort

Youth enrolled in Standard 8 during academic year prior to baseline

Primary school experience

- Over 95% of prospective cohort students had education-related expenditures during the current academic year (average MWK 15,850 from January - October/November 2021)
- Caregivers and head teachers reported Primary School Leaving Certificate Examination (PSLCE) fees and related costs as the largest financial barrier to completing primary school

“I see my future [as] not really good because I mostly rely only on my mother who doesn't have money for my school fees.”

—Standard 7 female student

Secondary school experience

- 98% of retrospective cohort students who transitioned to Form 1 had education-related expenditures during the current academic year (average MWK 74,074 from January - October/November 2021)
- CDSSs reported inability to pay school fees as a dropout reason for 18% of female Form 1 and 38% of male Form 1 dropouts
- 53% of retrospective cohort students who dropped out of school cited not having money for fees or uniforms as a reason for dropout

Cost concerns

Anticipation of high costs to attend secondary school is widespread and shapes expectations and aspirations of youth and their caregivers.

Photo credit: Matt Harder, Tetra Tech

Prospective cohort students

- 63% reported direct school costs and 60% reported exam fees/related costs as barriers to reaching their educational goals
- 83% reported cost as the main barrier to students at their primary school advancing to secondary school

“When children have been selected to secondary school after writing PSLCE, as parents we tend to get worried because it becomes very difficult for us to find money to pay school fees, to buy school uniform, school shoes and other basic necessities.”

—Male community leader

Caregivers

Caregivers cited school costs and inability to afford boarding/self-boarding as barriers to secondary school transition among household youth who had been selected to secondary school but did not go.

- School costs: 29% female and 30% male
- Boarding/self-boarding: 30% female and 32% male

Caregivers reported exam fees and boarding/self-boarding costs as top reasons community youth do not go to secondary school and do not complete secondary school.

- Exam fees: 15% barrier to secondary transition, 23% barrier to secondary completion
- Boarding/self-boarding costs: 21% barrier to secondary transition and completion

Primary and CDSSs head teachers

Primary schools reported direct costs and exam costs as barriers to students' ability to join secondary school.

- Direct costs: 57% female and 53% male
- Exam fees: 55% female and 56% male

CDSSs reported direct costs and exam costs as barriers to students' ability to complete secondary school.

- Direct costs: 47% female and 43% male
- Exam costs: 43% female and 36% male