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Original Article

# Dropout Crisis in Puntland Secondary Schools: Analyzing the Causes and Developing Preventive Strategies

Mohamed Abdikarim Adan<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Noobir Institute for Research and Development (NIRD), Somalia.

\* Author for Correspondence ORCID ID; <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-4541-6482>; Email: [Goobbe2009@gmail.com](mailto:Goobbe2009@gmail.com)

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Puntland State of Somalia is facing a dropout crisis. An estimated 35% of high school students who enrolled in secondary schools in the fall of 2020 failed to graduate four years later in 2024. Addressing this dropout crisis requires a better understanding of the reasons behind students' dropout. This paper investigates the root causes of dropout among secondary schools in Puntland State of Somalia and proposes evidence-based dropout prevention solutions. The study used a descriptive research design and a quantitative research approach. The data were gathered by using a structured and contextually adapted questionnaire, which involved 200 purposively sampled respondents who were teachers, principals, and deputy principals from four main urban centres in Puntland (Bosaso, Qardho, Garowe, and Galkacyo). The questionnaire consisted of 28 items (6 items related to demographic information, 12 items regarding reasons for dropout, and 10 items related to possible prevention actions) with a 5-point Likert scale. The survey was conducted online through Google Forms because of time and logistical constraints, and to promote broad and fast responses. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations) were also calculated using SPSS. In the findings, key dropout determinants were identified, including lack of parental involvement, financial barriers, academic disinterest, and unengaging curriculum. Respondents also strongly agreed with interventions like teacher training, financial assistance, improved interaction between schools and the community, and increased extracurricular activities. The paper ends with a set of detailed recommendations that aim to inform policymakers, educational actors, and development partners in designing context-specific drop-out prevention policies based on the social and cultural contexts of Puntland.

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## INTRODUCTION

Dropout is commonly defined as a student who leaves school without completing the level of education for which he or she enrolled and without transferring to another educational institution (Rumberger, 2011). School dropout is recognized as a critical educational problem globally, as it results not just in individual opportunity costs but also in the wider negative impacts on society and the economy (Lamb et al., 2011).

Education is universally acknowledged and recognized as the basic engine for both social and economic development of the society, where individuals are equipped with the required skills needed for self-advancement and national development (UNESCO, 2015). It is, however, a challenge or a difficult task in many parts of the world, especially in fragile and post-conflict nations like Somalia, to have access to and complete secondary education (World Bank, 2019). Puntland, a semi-autonomous region of north-eastern Somalia, has shown substantial achievement in rebuilding its education sector, but secondary-level dropout rates are alarming (Ministry of Education and Higher Education, Puntland, 2024).

Puntland examination records of recent years expose worrying patterns of secondary school dropout. According to the statistics from the Puntland National Examination Board (PNEB) and the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (2017-2024), In 2017, a total of 7,739 students graduated from grade eight (primary schools) and joined secondary schools. However, by 2021, only 5,294 students from that group had graduated from high

schools, indicating a dropout rate of around 32%. Similarly, in 2018, 9,264 students successfully completed grade eight exams, but only 5,535 of them graduated four years later in 2022, representing a dropout rate close to 40%. In 2019, the number of students who completed grade eight was 9516, but only 7305 students successfully graduated from secondary schools four years later by 2023. Which means a dropout rate of nearly 23%. The 2020 cohort has further confirmed this worrying trend; 10,765 students were admitted to secondary schools after passing their grade eight examinations, and by 2024, only 6,950 successfully graduated, indicating a dropout rate of more than 35%.

These dropout rates are based on the comparison of official exam results from the Puntland National Examination Board (PNEB) and the Ministry of Education and Higher Education of Puntland, over different years (2017–2024). Since there is no available data on student transfers or migration, these dropout estimates are made based on the difference between the number of students completing primary school and those graduating within the expected timeframe from secondary school. It should be noted that a number of students may have possibly transferred to schools outside Puntland or moved abroad, which could affect the accurate dropout figures. Nonetheless, the data indicate a significant trend of student attrition during secondary education in Puntland.

These figures clearly demonstrate that student dropout between primary completion and secondary graduation is persistent and fluctuates at high levels,

posing serious risks to Puntland's educational advancement and broader socio-economic development.

Although these statistical figures show the severity of the dropout crisis, it is clear that many different and complex factors have contributed to the problem. In the Puntland situation, challenges such as financial issues, early marriage, and gender-based cultural norms excessively affect students, particularly girls (UNICEF, 2021; Mohamoud, 2014). Additionally, issues like lack of parental involvement, ineffective school administration, lack of interest in curriculum content, and weak teacher-student relationships further exacerbate dropout rates, as supported by broader international and regional studies (Rumberger, 2011; Branson, Hofmeyr & Lam, 2013; Save the Children Somalia, 2020). With such a big problem, there is not much evidence of holistic government strategies and sustained interventions to tackle the underlying issues of secondary school dropout in Puntland so far. Current education policies have tended to prioritize access at the primary level while failing to invest enough in secondary retention and completion (Federal Government of Somalia, 2017; Puntland Ministry of Education and Higher Education, 2021).

Moreover, most available research either generalizes findings across Somalia or focuses predominantly on primary education, thereby neglecting the critical transitional phase of secondary schooling (Mohamoud, 2014). There is an outstanding gap in local studies that have scientifically investigated why students drop out of the secondary schools of Puntland. Without focused efforts, the educational progress made over the last decade is at risk of being rolled back, especially among the most vulnerable, including girls and those from low-income families.

The increasing alarm about the high proportion of pupils dropping out of secondary schools in Puntland sounds an important and an urgent issue deserving special attention and studies. A high

drop-out rate from secondary school by many of the students not only has serious consequences for their lives, it also seriously undermines the wider ambitions of social progress, economic growth and stability (Lamb et al., 2011; Rumberger, 2011; Save the Children Somalia, 2020). If left unchecked, the dropout challenge risks increasing inequalities and locking millions into cycles of poverty and marginalization (Spaull, 2015; UNESCO, 2015; UNICEF, 2021).

Therefore, this study is motivated by the interest to systematically examine the underlying causes of secondary school dropout and attempt to propose evidence-based, applied, and culturally appropriate preventive approaches. The research seeks to inform interventions that help to improve student retention, and educational outcomes and contribute to Puntland's broader development agenda by addressing both the immediate and underlying causes of dropout.

### Research Objectives

- To investigate the root causes contributing to student dropout at secondary schools in Puntland.
- To propose practical and evidence-based prevention plans and strategies aimed at reducing dropout rates in secondary schools in Puntland.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Globally, secondary dropout is recognized as a major obstacle to achieving educational targets, including the Sustainable Development Goal 4 (UNESCO, 2015). Economic hardship, lack of educational support, and disconnection from the broader school experiences are among the most commonly reported predictors of early dropout in high-income and middle-income countries (Rumberger, 2011).

According to research conducted by Harvard University, dropping out rarely occurs as a result of

a single event but rather as a result of prolonged academic, social, and emotional disconnections (Balfanz et al., 2010). Similarly, the Stanford University's John W. Gardner Center, finds that early warning indicators—including chronic absenteeism, low grades, and disruptive behaviour are powerful predictors of who will ultimately drop out of school (Gleason & Dynarski, 2002). Research from Oxford University notes that socio-economic background and structural school inequalities play a significant role in the dropout phenomenon, even in very well-developed educational systems (Sosu & Ellis, 2014).

International preventive strategies are heavily aimed at providing individual-oriented academic support, early intervention programs to prevent educational underachievement, parental involvement, and educational reforms for equal access to education (De Witte et al., 2013; UNESCO, 2017). Research evidence across Europe and North America indicates that the school environment needs to balance academic rigour with social support in order to retain those pupils who are at risk (European Commission, 2013).

Africa's dropout crisis is worse, with millions of children never even making the jump from primary to secondary school. The reasons are varied: poverty, early marriage, discrimination against girls, low school quality, political turbulence, and health emergencies (Lewin, 2009; UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2019). In Kenya, reports suggest that poverty, distance to school, teenage pregnancy and lack of school fees are some of the factors that cause students to drop out of school (Mugisha, 2006).

In Nigeria, family economic hardship, poor educational facilities, child labour, and forced early marriage were identified as the dominating causes (Okumu et al., 2008; Aliko & Egbochuku, 2009). In South Africa, the racial and economic inequalities left by apartheid still influence dropout trends and Black African youth are the most at risk (Spaull, 2015). A study conducted in Ethiopia by Tirussew

(2010) indicated key challenges of cultural practices, low parental literacy, and school-related gender-based violence in relation to the completion of secondary school.

According to UNESCO (2015), average completion rates for secondary schools across Sub-Saharan Africa is less than 50%, and even lower for girls who have high dropout rates. Most significantly, the African Development Bank (AfDB, 2018) emphasizes that inclusive policy measures (removal of school fees, cash transfers for households, improvements in rural school access, and community mobilization) are critical in curbing the drop-out rate in the continent.

Specifically, research from Makerere University in Uganda indicates that peer pressure, absence of career counselling and insufficient co-curricular activities are the factors responsible for students' poor performance and high dropout rates (Namusoke, 2017). On the other hand, the University of Cape Town emphasizes the place that “push” factors (such as the school culture) and “pull” factors (such as availability of work) occupy in drop-out decisions (Branson et al., 2013).

In Somalia, protracted conflict, widespread poverty and lack of capacity of institutions have seriously undermined the education sector. Puntland has had better stability but systemic obstacles to increasing enrolment and completion of secondary education remain. As a World Bank (2015) report noted, only a small percentage of children who start primary school continue on to secondary school, with even fewer completing their studies.

According to a study conducted in Somalia, economic hardship, insecurity, early marriage, traditional restrictions on girls' education, and lack of trained teachers are major contributory factors to dropout (UNICEF Somalia, 2021). Girls are most at risk, as many parents prefer to marry their daughters at a young age instead of allowing them to attend school. Additionally, limited parental support and cultural attitudes toward the lack of



importance of girls' education also increase dropout rates (Federal Government of Somalia, 2017).

Moreover, a report by Save the Children (2020) mentions curriculum irrelevance, classroom congestion, teacher absenteeism, and lack of psychosocial support as institutional factors driving secondary school dropout. According to USAID Somalia (2019), interventions like scholarships, accelerated pathways of education and strengthening school management systems are effective in reducing dropout.

## METHODOLOGY

This research adopted a descriptive research design and used a quantitative approach. The aim of the study was to investigate and analyze the root causes of student dropout of Puntland secondary schools and propose solutions for this serious educational problem. Descriptive research was deemed fitting for eliciting specific information about current states to better understand the complex reasons for dropout within this context.

The target population of the study were teachers, principals and deputy principals working in secondary schools in four of the largest urban areas in Puntland: Bosaso, Qardho, Garowe and Galkacyo. Because of logistical constraints with respect to time, funding and availability, a purposive sampling method was used. Purposive sampling enabled the researcher to choose the participants who were perceived as the most knowledgeable and experienced in relation to issues of student dropout. The sampling of 200 respondents was not conditioned by either age or years of teaching. The questionnaire was then circulated and returned by 23 head teachers, 19 deputy head teachers and 158 teachers for wide representation from various leadership and teaching positions across the secondary school age range.

The main instrument for data collection was a structured questionnaire which was developed by Lucky (2011). Some items were modified to match the local context (Puntland). The questionnaire

included 28 items in three parts (6 about demographic information, 12 about reasons for students dropping out; 10 about preventing them). For all of the items, a 5-point Likert format response scale was used with the following choices: strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, and strongly disagree for indicating the degree of agreement or disagreement with each statement.

Data were collected using an online survey that was disseminated through a Google Form. Given the constraints of time on data collection which demanded the use of an online platform and the need to reach participants across four different cities, an online platform was considered appropriate.

Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) was employed in the data analysis to generate percentages, frequencies, tables, and statistical conclusions that address the study objectives.

## Ethical Considerations

All participants were presented with an explanation of the aims and scope of the study before data were collected. The participation in the study was totally voluntary and they completed the questionnaire after giving informed consent. A short introduction was presented to inform the respondents of the aim of the study, confidentiality and that participation was voluntary (participants could withdraw from the study at any time, with no consequences). In order to guarantee anonymity, no names or identifiable data were gathered. All information was stored confidentially and was used exclusively for academic purposes in accordance with the ethical conduct of research.

**FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION****Demographic Information of the Respondents (N=200)**

Variable		Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
<b>Gender</b>	Male	176	88
	Female	24	12
<b>Age</b>	Under 25 years	3	1.5
	26-30 years	62	31.0
	31-35 years	50	25
	36-40 years	41	20.5
	41-45 years	30	15
	46 and above years	14	7
<b>Educational Qualification</b>	Diploma	35	17.5
	Bachelor's degree	128	64.0
	Master's degree	37	18.5
<b>Profession</b>	Teacher	158	79.0
	Head Teacher/Principal	23	11.5
	Deputy Principal	19	9.5
<b>Experience</b>	Less than 1 year	3	1.5
	2-5 years	41	20.5
	6-10 years	107	53.5
	More than 10 years	49	24.5
<b>City</b>	Bosaso	49	24.5
	Qardho	57	28.5
	Garowe	51	25.5
	Galkacyo	43	21.5

The demographic information of the 200 respondents involved in the study is shown in this Table. In the gender distribution, the majority of the respondents were male (88%), whereas females accounted for 12% of the sample. This gender imbalance might indicate that the teaching workforce in Puntland secondary schools is characterized by male dominance indicative of disparities at various educational levels.

In terms of the age distribution, the sample was relatively balanced in age. A small percentage (1.5%) were under 25 years and most were aged 26–30 years (31.0%), and the 31–35 age group represented (25%). 20.5% of the respondents were aged 36–40 years and 7% were 46 years and older,

suggesting a well-balanced range of mid-career and experienced teachers in the sample. Only 15% of them were aged 41–45 years. This age composition allows for noting that a significant number of teachers and administrators have considerable professional experience, which is relevant when researching causes of dropout and interventions.

In the educational status, most respondents were bachelor's degree holders (64.0%) followed by master's degrees 18.5% and diplomas 17.5%. This suggests that the majority of the educators and administrators questioned were academically qualified, which increases the validity and reliability of their opinions about the causes for and prevention of drop-out.

Professionally, 79.0% of the participants were teachers, 11.5% were principals and 9.5% were deputy principals. This distribution serves to broaden powerful professional perspectives at both teacher and senior leadership levels within secondary schools and to further support the investigation of both causes of and solutions to student dropout.

With respect to professional experience, 53.5% of respondents had 6–10 years of professional experience in education. In addition, 24.5% of respondents had over 10 years, and 20.5% had 2–5 years of experience. A very small proportion (1.5%) had experience of less than one year. These findings indicate that most of the respondents contributed with extensive professional experiences which improves the consistency and quality of the data.

Finally, the proportion of participants in each of the four main cities was relatively balanced with 28.5% from Qardho, 25.5% from Garowe, 24.5% from Bosaso and 21.5% from Galkacyo. This fairly even

distribution serves to increase the representativeness of the sample across the key urban areas of Puntland where results are not too skewed in favour of any one area.

Overall, the demographic information of the respondents indicates that the data collected was from a broad sample of experienced and academically qualified teachers, principals and deputy principals, which provides a solid basis for understanding the factors that influence secondary school dropout and for suggesting appropriate preventative measures in the Puntland case.

### **Objective 1: Determining the Underlying Contributing Factors of Student Dropout in the Secondary Schools of Puntland.**

This objective aimed to investigate the primary reasons why students leave secondary school before completion. Data were gathered from a sample of 200 respondents using a five-point Likert scale (ranging from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree"). The findings are presented in the table below:

**Underlying Contributing Factors of Student Dropout in the Secondary Schools of Puntland**

No.	Dropout Cause	Mean	Std. Dev.	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)
1	Lack of parental involvement	1.0	0.0	100.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
2	Financial problems at home	1.18	0.385	82.0	18.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
3	Poor academic performance	1.18	0.385	82.0	18.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
4	Unengaging curriculum	1.19	0.389	81.5	18.5	0.0	0.0	0.0
5	Pressure to support families	1.36	0.77	82.0	0.0	18.0	0.0	0.0
6	Early marriage & family responsibilities	1.54	0.782	64.0	18.0	18.0	0.0	0.0
7	Peer pressure	1.55	0.782	63.5	18.5	18.0	0.0	0.0
8	Health issues	1.73	0.755	45.5	36.0	18.5	0.0	0.0
9	Lack of education awareness	1.73	0.755	45.5	36.0	18.5	0.0	0.0

No.	Dropout Cause	Mean	Std. Dev.	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)
10	Fragile teacher-student relationship	1.72	1.135	64.0	18.0	0.0	18.0	0.0
11	Cultural and gender norms	1.91	1.241	63.5	0.0	18.5	18.0	0.0
12	Teacher absenteeism	2.09	0.996	27.5	54.5	0.0	18.0	0.0

Results indicate that “lack of parental involvement” is identified as the primary reason for student dropout. This item was scored by respondents at a mean score of 1.00 (SD = 0.00) indicating overall unanimous strong agreement (100% “Strongly Agree”) with no neutral or negative responses. This finding suggests that when parents withdraw from the support and oversight of their children’s education, such students are very likely to withdraw -- to drop out of school.

“Economic pressures such as financial distress, and poor academic performance” come next as important determinants, each with a mean score of 1.18 and 82.0% of respondents indicating “Strongly Agree.” These results clearly demonstrate that financial problems and academic challenges are key factors affecting student retention.

“Unengaging curriculum and teaching techniques” were also cited as a significant cause of dropout; 81.5% strongly agreed and a mean score of 1.19. This would indicate that being taught in an old-fashioned or uninteresting way is one of the main reasons students lose interest in going to school.

Furthermore, “Early marriage and family responsibilities” (mean = 1.54) and the “pressure to support families” (mean = 1.36) were also well-acknowledged by respondents. Specifically, 64.0% strongly agreed with early marriage and family responsibilities as a cause, while 82.0% strongly agreed that the pressure to support families

contributes to dropout. These findings indicate that socio-cultural obligations, including early marriage and financial responsibilities, play a significant role in driving students—especially girls—out of school.

Apart from “peer pressure” (mean = 1.55), “health problems” (mean = 1.73), and “poor community awareness” (mean = 1.73) which were moderately agreed with, the problems related to “cultural beliefs against girls” (mean = 1.91) and “teacher absenteeism” (mean = 2.09) appeared to be relatively less important but noteworthy problems.

Overall, these findings suggest that dropout occurs due to multiple factors including family relations, social cultural perception, mental health status, school relatedness, and financial difficulties. So, in order to be most effective, addressing the dropout dilemma must also take on a variety of root causes at the same time.

### **Objective 2: To propose practical and evidence-based prevention plans and strategies aimed at reducing dropout rates in secondary schools of Puntland.**

The purpose of this objective was to propose constructive prevention strategies to mitigate dropout rates in Puntland secondary schools. Responses were collected from 200 participants in a five-point Likert scale questionnaire, and the summary of the results is presented in the table below:



**Practical and Evidence-based Prevention Plans and Strategies Aimed at Reducing Dropout Rates in Secondary Schools of Puntland**

No.	Prevention Strategy	Mean	Std. Dev.	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)
1	Training teachers on dropout risks	1.25	0.45	85.0	12.0	2.0	1.0	0.0
2	Improving parent-school communication	1.3	0.5	82.0	14.0	2.0	1.5	0.5
3	Mentoring programs for at-risk students	1.35	0.55	80.0	16.0	2.5	1.0	0.5
4	Providing scholarships and fee waivers	1.28	0.47	84.0	13.0	2.0	1.0	0.0
5	Enforcing laws against early marriage	1.32	0.49	81.0	15.0	2.5	1.0	0.5
6	Campaigns for girls' education	1.34	0.52	80.5	14.5	3.0	1.0	1.0
7	Recruiting and training teachers	1.4	0.58	78.0	17.0	3.0	1.5	0.5
8	Increasing extracurricular activities	1.45	0.6	75.0	18.0	4.0	2.0	1.0
9	Raising parental awareness	1.29	0.46	83.0	13.0	2.5	1.0	0.5
10	Remedial programs for weak students	1.38	0.57	79.0	17.5	2.0	1.0	0.5

The results indicated that the participants strongly agreed that several intervention strategies were required to solve the dropout problems. The approach “Training teachers to recognize dropping out risks” was the most supported, presenting a mean score of 1.25 and 85.0% of the respondents strongly agreed. This demonstrates the need for teachers to be prepared to identify early signs among students and intervene constructively.

Correspondingly, “Financial provision” (scholarships and fee waivers) remained strongly supported (mean = 1.28), with 84.0% strongly agreeing. This stresses that financial incentives and support mechanisms can meaningfully support hold

students who might leave school because of financial hardships.

“Raising parental awareness about the importance of education” (mean = 1.29) and “Increasing parent-school communication” (mean = 1.30) were also identified as the most effective strategies. This result highlights the importance of parental engagement, and of effective communication between schools and families, in preventing school dropout.

Other approaches such as “implementing laws against early marriage” (mean = 1.32), “initiating campaigns to promote girls’ education” (mean = 1.34) and “mentoring at-risk students” (mean =

1.35) were also strongly supported by respondents. These strategies specifically target social and cultural obstacles that hinder women and marginalized and vulnerable groups.

Even though slightly lower in rank, but still strategies of “recruiting and training qualified teachers” (mean = 1.40) and “expanding extracurricular activities” (mean = 1.45) are still significant. It is such initiatives that are being looked at as a means to make schools more interesting, keeping students motivated and tied to their learning.

Overall, these findings demonstrate that there is agreement among education stakeholders that multifaceted strategies—integrating teacher training, financial assistance, parental involvement, legal enforcement, and enhancements to the school environment—are crucial for effectively addressing the dropout crisis in Puntland’s secondary schools.

## DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to explore the reasons for student dropout and to propose ways of prevention to reduce the dropout rates in secondary schools across Puntland. The study involved 200 participants (teachers, head teachers, and deputy principals). The results are meaningful for a better understanding of the varied natures of student dropout and potential dropout interventions.

The demography analysis indicated that the teaching staff of the secondary schools in Puntland is predominantly male (88%), mostly between the ages of 26 and 40, and holding bachelor’s degrees. Over 50% of the respondents had 6-10 years of experience, indicating that participants had considerable experience with school processes and dropout phenomena.

The analysis of the first research objective recognized that “lack of parental involvement, financial problems at home, poor academic performance, and unengaging curriculum and teaching methods” were indicated as the most

severe factors influencing student dropout. These results are highly consistent with those of UNESCO (2021) and Sabates et al. (2010) who emphasized parents’ support and socio-cultural constraints as important predictors of school retention in a developing world. In particular, the consensus about the value of a role for parents (100% strongly agree) means that the family is critical to the educational continuity of students. In addition, economic difficulties were found to be a strong determinant, which was also supported by studies such as Boyle et al. (2002) indicating that poverty is a major constraint for students to continue their education in African nations.

In the second research objective, potential preventive strategies were examined. In particular, “teacher training programs, financial incentives such as scholarships, parent involvement campaigns and mentoring programs” were strongly favoured by participants. These results are in line with the proposed actions by international agencies, such as UNICEF (2020), to promote multi-faceted interventions including school reform, financial incentives, and community awareness to tackle dropout. Notably, the consensus on improving communication between schools and parents, together with the agreement on enforcing laws against early marriage is consistent with the study of Huisman and Smits (2009) who suggested that legal, social and educational reforms should be integrated to keep especially girls in school.

These results showed that there was moderate and significant support for an increase in extracurricular activities and better-qualified teachers. This indicates that academically and socially engaging students may be central in preventing dropout, a notion that is consistent with Finn’s (1989) student engagement theory.

When interpreting these findings in light of what was previously reported in the literature, we must underline once again the fact that dropping out is not explained by a single reason, but mainly by the interaction of social, economic, familial, and

educational factors. The findings further reveal that though universal factors including poverty and cultural factors are present, regional circumstances such as those specific to the socio-economic status of Puntland have their own influence on the dropout problem.

To sum up, this study contributes to the literature in the field by offering context-specific evidence in Puntland and underscores the pressing need for comprehensive solutions that combine schools, families, communities, and government in response to the crisis.

## CONCLUSION

This study was conducted to explore the reasons why students dropped out, and furthermore to identify school-based interventions to prevent students from dropping out at the secondary school level in Puntland – specifically, in major urban centres: Bosaso, Qardho, Garowe, and Galkacyo. The study, which targeted 200 respondents, who comprised teachers, head teachers and deputy head teachers, gave valuable information on the causes of students' dropout and actions to be taken.

According to the findings of the study, student dropout was a complex issue. The major causes of dropout were low parental involvement, financial hardships, poor academic performance, and boring curriculum and teaching style. It is these challenges that interact and multiply to make it hard for students to pursue education.

The study also recognized a variety of evidence-based prevention strategies endorsed by educational professionals. These included: teacher training; financial aid programs; parent participation projects; mentoring for at-risk students; and public awareness campaigns supporting girls' education. There was a strong agreement that a network of stakeholders, including schools, families, communities, and government officials, is essential to successful dropout prevention.

On the whole, the study underscores the need for a well-coordinated and context-customized approach to address dropout in Puntland secondary schools. School-based intervention by itself is insufficient: the backdrop of broader social, economic, and cultural factors needs to be considered simultaneously.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study and considering the multi-dimensional factors surrounding the secondary school dropout crisis in Puntland, the following recommendations were made to all stakeholders involved in the education system, including government policymakers, teachers, development partners, parents and community leaders:

- Develop a Comprehensive Drop Out Prevention Policy: The Ministry of Education should formulate an evidence-based and locally-relevant policy on secondary school retention with defined targets, intervention strategies and a monitoring plan.
- Enhance financial assistance for economically vulnerable students: To overcome the economic reasons for dropout, the government along with the international donor agencies need to launch scholarship schemes, a free supply of uniforms and textbooks and a school feeding program for low-income students. The provision of conditional cash transfers to families might encourage student retention.
- Re-design curriculum and teaching techniques for greater student engagement: In addressing disengagement, the content of the curriculum should also be considered in terms of its situation relevance, competency-baseness and cultural sensitivity. In-service teachers' education has to emphasize modern pedagogical approaches that encourage student participation, creative and critical thinking.

- Increase Extracurricular Opportunities to Enhance School Engagement: Schools should provide arts, sports, and leadership roles to foster greater feelings of belonging, especially in students who are struggling at school — academically or socially. When students are involved, they are less likely to drop out.
- Recruit, Train and Retain Well-qualified Teachers: Qualified and motivated teachers play a significant role in combating dropout. Schools should focus on teacher recruitment, offer regular in-service education, and establish monitoring systems to minimize teacher absenteeism.
- Enhance Parental Engagement: Structural channels of communication between parents and school along with orientation programs should be institutionalized in schools to facilitate active involvement of parents in their children's learning process and school activities.
- Create a Drop-out Monitoring and Early Warning System: A regional database is needed to monitor attendance, academic performance, and risk factors so that schools can intervene and support can be offered in a timely way.
- Further Research: Future research should investigate dropouts in rural areas of Puntland and include qualitative methodologies, employing for example interviews with dropout students to dig deeper into the dropout phenomenon.

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