DATABASE AT A GLANCE

CENTER FOR EDUCATION INNOVATIONS
An initiative of Results for Development Institute

LOW COST PRIVATE SCHOOLS
Over the past decade, the number of low-cost private schools in low- and middle-income countries has steadily increased. This growth has been especially pronounced in certain geographies. In India, for example, the number of low cost private schools has more than doubled since 1993, while in Kenya, low cost private school enrollment has tripled since 1997, despite the abolition of public school fees. Parental buy-in has been central to the growth of low cost private schools. Commonly cited reasons for sending children to low cost private schools include overcrowding and high teacher absenteeism in public schools, a lack of public schools in some remote areas, a perceived high quality of teaching in private schools, and the presence of government incentive programs that cover private school costs.

The Center for Education Innovations (CEI) has documented 40 programs that focus on the low cost private school sector in its database of education innovations. These range from chains of schools that standardize their models to keep costs down to programs that provide support services to make schools more sustainable and affordable for underserved communities. Of these 40 profiled programs, 31 were launched after 2005 and most are located in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia (especially Kenya and India).

INTRODUCTION

Photo courtesy of Bridge International Academies

1. Sandefur, Waiting for Superman in Lahore: Do Poor People Need Private Schools?, 2012
2. This spread reflects CEI’s profiling priorities and is geographically biased.
COMMON THEMES ACROSS PROGRAMS

1. Targeting underserved or marginalized populations with subsidies to improve access to education:

Several low cost private school programs profiled by CEI target out-of-school or marginalized children. For example, a considerable portion of Pudami Neighborhood Schools' enrollment strategy targets out-of-school children in Hyderabad, India. Child laborers and the children of construction workers, who remain on site, are provided with subsidized tuition and encouraged to attend one of the 29 Pudami Neighborhood Schools. Kakenya Center for Excellence Boarding School focuses on supporting primary school-aged girls from Maasai communities in Kenya. Tuition is either partially or completely subsidized based on each girl’s need. Upon enrollment, parents are also required to sign a contract with the school promising that their daughter will not undergo female genital mutilation or early marriage while a student. International Village School, another low-cost private school in Kenya, targets just under 100 high achieving marginalized secondary school students. Depending on parents’ ability to afford basic fees for school registration, tuition might be reduced or waived altogether. Breakfast and lunch are included, thus reducing the likelihood that hunger will affect performance. Similarly, The Baalabalaga School cross-subsidization model sets tuition on a sliding scale, with no student turned away due to the inability to pay.

Another program, Peru Champs, provides scholarships for students in low-income communities to attend Innova Schools, a chain of private schools in Peru. Parents are required to pay 25% of the fees, while Peru Champs covers the remainder, so long as stringent performance requirements are met by students. In a similar vein, Innovating in Uganda to Support Educational Continuation by Marginalized Girls in Relevant Primary and Secondary Education provides parents and low-cost private schools with funding to finance children’s education in Uganda. The program focuses on girls’ education and aims to promote higher school retention rates.

2. Enhancing schools’ financial sustainability through revenue-generating strategies and access to affordable capital:

CEI has documented a number of programs that provide financing to schools or offer aid directly to students. Some of these programs offer schools affordable financing options for infrastructural or technological improvements. Edify, for example,
has a specific focus on improving low-cost Christian schools by providing loans between 5,000 and 10,000 USD in Ghana, the Dominican Republic, Burkina Faso, Rwanda, Peru, and Liberia. These loans, sourced and managed through local lending partners, are typically used for enhancing infrastructure or increasing ICT capacity. Similarly, the IDP Rising Schools Program provides microfinance loans to low-cost private schools in Sub-Saharan Africa. The loans (approximately 1,000-7,500 USD) can be used to finance infrastructure development, equipment procurement (such as acquiring a school vehicle), or land acquisition. To qualify, school proprietors must go through IDP Rising Schools Program’s training program. Through nine learning modules, school proprietors are trained in 30 topics that include accounting, savings, managing credit, human resource management, and creating community ties that support the school. The rationale for requiring pre-loan training programs for school proprietors is based on the belief that loans will be lower risk after proprietors receive financial and management training.

Financially Self-Sufficient Schools uses another strategy to improve self-sustainability. The chain, functioning at scale in Tanzania and Paraguay, equips its students with business and technical skills, using a “Learning by Doing, Selling, and Earning” methodology. Each school functions as a micro-enterprise agri-business, with the generated revenue paying for the school’s operating costs and financing bonuses for teachers and other performance incentives. Likewise, the Akaa Project’s Asiafo Amanfro Community School asks parents to pay tuition with in-kind services rather than in cash (parents are expected to participate in communal labor and PTA meetings to serve the school) and runs a variety of other income-generating activities to achieve sustainability. For example, on weekends, student volunteers run the school’s shop, located near a tourist hiking trail in Ghana, with all revenue going back to the school. The Akaa project is also expanding its garden project, where students work and learn after classroom lessons. The garden produce is then sold in the community help pay the school’s operational costs.

3. Strengthening schools’ management capacity with business and operational support:

As the number of low cost private schools has grown, so have those programs that provide targeted support to schools in the form of trainings and management services. Many such programs provide much needed business or operational assistance. The IDP Rising Schools Program (mentioned above) trains school proprietors in school operation and management best practices with specific learning modules on topics including human resource management, accounting, and creating community ties. Additional examples include the Partnerships for Possibility Programme in South Africa, which pairs business leaders with school principals to improve management practices. With enhanced knowledge in organizational change and leadership, principals are ultimately better equipped to provide stronger leadership to students and their families. Eschool360 works
with existing schools in Zambia by providing a “one-stop shop” package. This package gives schools a comprehensive kit for operating schools that includes lesson plans, e-learning hardware, and a “playbook” that outlines human resources best practices.

4. Lowering the cost of services through standardized, replicable processes and technologies:

A key approach enabling the scaling of the low cost private school model is the standardization of services through replicable processes — i.e., standardized set of tools and resources that make it easier to duplicate and adapt. On such example is Ghana’s Omega Schools, a chain of over 20 low-cost private schools. Omega Schools charges parents a daily fee of roughly U.S. $0.75 for each student so that parents do not have to worry about paying tuition in large, lump sums. Omega’s model leverages detailed school operations, learning, and teaching manuals and materials, to systematically and efficiently add schools. Another, rapidly growing, low-cost private school chain with a replicable model is Bridge International Academies in Kenya, Nigeria, and, soon, in India. Having served just over 100,000 students since its launch in 2008, Bridge is able to keep costs low for students and their families by utilizing a so-called “school in a box” model, which consists of a standardized curriculum turned into scripted lesson plans delivered through data-enabled tablets. The tablets are synced to headquarters, enabling Bridge to monitor lesson pacing, record attendance, track assessment scores, and update or add lesson scripts in real time.

Kidogo in Kenya, has adopted a similar standardized approach to providing early childhood care in informal settlements. Kidogo offers women entrepreneurs (“mama-preneurs”) the opportunity to run their own business as a Kidogo “spoke” in the form of a micro-franchise. Kidogo provides micro-franchisees with standardized training, resources (e.g., curriculum materials, branding support, etc.), and ongoing support in how to run their own baby-care centers. Based on this experience, Kidogo has plans to develop the “The Kidogo Way,” a proprietary early childhood curriculum and teacher training program that combines
global best practices with traditional local child-care practices. Kidogo hopes the program will be patented and licensed to other early childhood providers worldwide. In India, **Hippocampus Learning Centres** operates in similar vein by training and employing women in rural areas as teachers for its own network of community-based kindergartens and after school primary school programs. This model has grown exponentially in South India since 2010 and now reaches over 3,000 students with more than 200 trained teachers.

5. Providing supplemental customized offerings to improve the quality of teaching and learning:

A number of profiled low cost private schools link to additional outside programming and services to benefit students. **Her VOICE** in India is aimed at girls (between the ages of 11 and 16) who are enrolled in low cost private schools. This program allows girls to attend “in-school camps” in order to give them supplementary lessons in relevant life skills and English to empower them to be more self-aware, safe, and independent. These lessons are delivered in a variety of forms, including group work, skits, quizzes, and games. **Dignitas** in Kenya focuses on teachers in the low cost private school sector. This program provides long-term training and leadership development to teachers and school management through...
activities such as one-on-one coaching. Dignitas also provides learning materials such as books. With a strong focus on empowering teachers to develop professionally, Dignitas aims to reduce teacher turnover rates and ultimately improve learning outcomes.

6. Regulating and measuring the standards of low-cost private school providers:

Parents often lack access to credible sources of information on school performance, sometimes due to their own limited educational backgrounds. Gray Matters India works across cities in India to implement an evidence-based school assessment framework so that low cost private schools have a standardized rating system that is easy for parents to interpret, thereby driving choice that is based on tangible school performance data. In a similar fashion, School Assessment for School Improvement in Pakistan has developed its own toolkit to assess low cost private school schools. This toolkit looks at information regarding teacher capabilities and satisfaction, student learning levels, school record-keeping techniques, and parent engagement and satisfaction, among other dimensions. For both of these programs, a report is generated to parents and school leaders with comprehensive results and regular follow-up school evaluations.
