

POLICY BRIEF

A National Competency Framework for Safe, Inclusive ECE Environments in Kenya

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A child's learning environment is one of the strongest determinants of early learning, well-being, and school readiness. A rapid review of 28 empirical studies (2015–2025) finds that leadership and management practices shape ECE learning environments in Kenya, but the evidence is uneven and rarely quantified: leadership style was examined as a driver of environment quality in 8 of the 28 studies, the physical environment (space, safety, materials) in 8 of 28, and emotional/psychological safety in 7 of 28. Only 14 of the 28 studies examined governance or leadership structures directly and within that smaller set, formal accountability and quality-assurance systems featured in just 3 studies.

The single highest-leverage response is a National ECE Leadership Competency Framework, led by the Ministry of Education and KEMI, which gives every level of Kenya's devolved system a shared standard for instructional leadership, inclusion, environment management, and resource mobilization.

BACKGROUND

Kenya has expanded access to Early Childhood Education (ECE) through the Constitution (2010), the Basic Education Act (2013), the Competency-Based Curriculum, and the devolution of ECE services to county governments. Yet the quality of the learning environment a child experiences still depends heavily on the centre they attend. Leadership extends beyond administration: centre managers decide how teachers are supported, how resources are used, how inclusive the culture is, and how parents participate determining whether policy aspirations become real classroom conditions.

METHODOLOGY

This brief synthesizes a rapid review of 28 empirical studies published between 2015 and 2025 on leadership and management in ECE. Of these, 14 studies examined leadership, management structures, or governance processes in enough depth to be analysed for this brief's focus: how leadership and governance shape safe, inclusive, and stimulating learning environments across Kenya's national, county, and centre levels.

GOVERNANCE ACROSS THE DEVOLVED SYSTEM

ECE governance in Kenya is constitutionally split across three tiers. The national level (Ministry of Education, KEMI) sets leadership standards and curriculum policy. County governments are responsible for implementation recruitment, infrastructure, and professional development for centre leaders. Centre-level leadership (head teachers and Boards of Management) is where these decisions either become, or fail to become, a safe and stimulating classroom. The review found no shared competency standard connecting these three tiers — each operates against a different, informal notion of what good ECE leadership looks like.



KEY FINDINGS

8 of 28

Leadership Style Sets the Tone

Studies identified leadership style (participatory vs. authoritarian) as a direct driver of how safe and child-friendly a centre feels.

8 of 28

Environments Bear the Cost

Studies linked leadership and resource decisions to the physical environment, and to emotional and psychological safety, respectively.

14 of 28

Governance Rarely Reaches the Classroom

Studies examined governance or leadership structures directly; formal accountability/QA systems appeared in just 3 of those.

Governance Level	Key Role	Identified Gap
National (MoE, KEMI)	Policy, standards, curriculum	No shared leadership competency standard
County Governments	Implementation, resourcing, staffing	Wide disparities in capacity and funding
Centre / School Leadership	Day-to-day operational management	Weak, inconsistent accountability
PAs & Boards of Management	Resource mobilization, oversight	Over-reliance on parental financing
QASOs / DQAS	Quality assurance	Supervision is infrequent, compliance-only

POLICY RECOMMENDATION

THE ONE ASK

MoE & KEMI: Develop and fund a National ECE Leadership Competency Framework covering instructional leadership, inclusion, environment management, and resource mobilization.

This is the one recommendation with the clearest mandate, the lowest cost, and the widest reach across all three governance tiers — everything below exists to put it into practice.

Making it work — four supporting actions

- **County Directors for ECDE:** Adopt the Framework as the basis for mandatory induction and continuous mentoring of centre leaders.
- **QASOs – Directorate of Quality Assurance & Standards:** Use the Framework to shift supervision from compliance inspection to coaching and classroom observation.
- **County Treasury & Dept. of Education:** Tie the Framework's resource-management strand to ring-fenced budget lines for child-friendly, inclusive infrastructure.
- **Boards of Management & Head Teachers:** Embed the Framework's parental-engagement strand into structured, regular participation mechanisms.

KEY POLICY MESSAGE

"One national framework, applied consistently at every level, is the fastest route from Kenya's devolved leadership system to safe, inclusive ECE environments."

CONCLUSION

The evidence on leadership and ECE learning environments in Kenya is directionally clear but thinly quantified, no more than 11 of 28 studies examine any single leadership or management theme, and only 14 look at governance structures at all. Rather than list every plausible action, this brief names the one investment, a National ECE Leadership Competency Framework, capable of aligning all three tiers of Kenya's devolved system around a shared, evidence-based standard for safe, inclusive, and stimulating learning environments.

Source: Saoke, V. O., Chege, W. L., Chege, W. L., Okal, J., Mburu, J. M., Olao, E. M., Ndolo, O. E., Tsuma, F. A., Nyaga, F. W., & Natasha, W. (2026). The Influence of Leadership and Governance Practices on Learner Experiences in Early Childhood Education Centres in Kenya: A Rapid Evidence Review. Discover Education.