LEARNING BRIEF

Opening the School Gate: Strengthening Parental Empowerment and Engagement in ECDE

Key Lessons from the ECDE Teacher Survey Conducted in Kajiado, Kirinyaga, Kisumu and Marsabit Counties, September 2026



BACKGROUND

Parents are a child's first and most enduring teachers, and their involvement shapes learning outcomes, character and long-term wellbeing. Parental Empowerment and Engagement (PE&E) equips parents with the knowledge, skills and confidence to support learning at home, communicate openly with teachers and take part in decisions that affect their children. When this happens, learners attend school more regularly, perform better and develop positive values. Empowerment also ensures that every parent, regardless of their level of education or income, understands their rights and responsibilities and is treated as a genuine partner. This partnership builds trust and accountability between schools and communities.

PE&E is one of the core pillars of Competency-Based Education in Kenya, and the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development set out the role of parents in its Guidelines on Parental Empowerment and Engagement (2019). International evidence confirms its value: the Education Endowment Foundation rates parental engagement in the early years as a low-cost approach that adds about five months of learning progress over a year. The early years matter most because the foundation laid in ECDE determines how a learner performs in later grades. Investing in PE&E is therefore a low-cost measure with significant benefits for teaching and learning.

Despite this, engagement between ECDE centres and parents remains weak. In a September 2026 survey of ECDE teachers in Kajiado, Kirinyaga, Kisumu and Marsabit, teachers reported that parents show little or no interest in their children's schooling, especially in rural areas.

Depending on the county, between 64.3 and 84.8 per cent of teachers met parents only once a term, and most attributed this to a lack of commitment by parents, as shown below.

Most teachers meet parents once a term, and blame commitment

Per cent of teachers	Kirinyaga	Kisumu	Kajiado	Marsabit
Met parents once a term	84.8	64.3	71.9	72.7
Barrier: lack of commitment	75.9	79.8	70.2	63.8
Barrier: ignorance by parents	66.8	55.4	57.0	54.3
Barrier: poverty	43.8	64.3	35.9	54.1
Barrier: parents' literacy	50.4	45.8	48.4	59.8
Barrier: lack of initiative by school leaders	11.5	6.8	14.9	8.7

Source: Full coverage results (20). Barriers: Teachers could name several. | *Source: ECDE Teacher Survey, September 2026.*

The data reveals a clear pattern. Teachers were about seven times more likely to blame parents' commitment (72.4 per cent on average) than a lack of initiative by school leaders (10.5 per cent). Poverty was a major barrier in Kisumu (64.3 per cent) and Marsabit (54.1 per cent), while low parental literacy was highest in Marsabit (59.8 per cent). As this was a teacher survey, parents' views were not collected. However, the root causes below show that much of the solution lies within schools, and that both teachers and parents need to take the initiative.

Root Cause 1: Meetings are poorly planned and framed around money

Parents are often called to meetings when money is on the agenda, or assume this is the case. Meetings are also frequently called at short notice. As a result, many parents choose not to attend and miss important information about their children's learning.

Implication: *When parents see school meetings only as requests for money, they disengage from their children's learning altogether. Every meeting should have a clear written agenda, shared in advance through learners, that places the child's progress first. A structured termly calendar of meetings would allow parents to plan ahead and signal that the school values their time.*

Root Cause 2: Broken trust and token participation

Teachers reported that trust between schools and parents has broken down in some schools. Selected parents are sometimes used to endorse a decision that has already been made, while the majority are left out of the process. This sends the message that parents need not take part in decisions about their own children.

Implication: *Empowerment depends on parents believing that their voice counts. Open nomination of parent representatives, genuine consultation and shared minutes are essential to rebuild trust and restore parents as real partners in decision-making.*

Root Cause 3: The belief that education is entirely free

Many parents believe that education is completely free and that they should not contribute anything further. This leads some to distance themselves from school matters, especially meetings on finances. In practice, government and county support does not cover every need of an ECDE centre.

Implication*: Transparency turns suspicion into shared ownership. Schools should explain clearly what the national and county governments provide, where gaps remain and how any parent contribution is used, so that parents engage from a position of understanding.*

Root Cause 4: Competing livelihood demands

Some parents prioritise income-generating activities over time spent at school, which is understandable for households that depend on daily earnings. At the same time, most ECDE learners are brought to school by parents, guardians or relatives, creating a daily opportunity for contact that teachers rarely use.

Implication*: Engagement must fit into parents' lives rather than compete with them. Short, punctual meetings and brief conversations at drop-off and pick-up times can keep parents informed about their child's progress without costing them a day's income.*

Root Cause 5: Low literacy among parents

Parents, particularly in rural areas, often have low literacy levels. This discourages them from engaging with formal meetings and written communication from the school

Implication*: PE&E should meet parents where they are. Teachers can engage parents informally in barazas, chamas, places of worship and other community gatherings, using local languages, rather than waiting for formal meetings.*

Root Cause 6: ECDE parents are overlooked by school leadership

Head teachers tend to focus on Grade 1 and above, leaving ECDE parents on the margins of school life, even though a learner's performance in later grades depends on the foundation laid in ECDE.

Implication: *: ECDE parents should be treated as equal partners alongside parents of learners in higher grades. Head teachers should involve ECDE teachers in whole-school engagement and ensure ECDE parents are represented in all parent forums.*

Proposed Actions

The following actions are drawn directly from the implications above. They are low cost and can be implemented within existing school structures from Term 1, 2027.

1. **Share a clear agenda in advance.** ECDE teachers and head teachers should send a written agenda for every parent meeting at least one week ahead, with the child's learning as the first item.
2. **Publish a termly engagement calendar.** Head teachers and Boards of Management should share a calendar at the start of each term, with at least two learning-focused meetings kept separate from finance meetings.
3. **Make school finances transparent.** Head teachers should present a simple statement at parent meetings showing government and county support, the remaining gaps and how parent contributions are used.
4. **Use everyday contact.** ECDE teachers should hold brief conversations with parents and guardians at drop-off and pick-up times, aiming to reach every parent at least twice a term.
5. **Engage parents in community spaces.** ECDE teachers, working with chiefs and county ECDE officers, should hold informal sessions in barazas, chamas and places of worship, using local languages.
6. **Rebuild trust through open processes.** Boards of Management should elect parent representatives openly and share meeting minutes with all parents.
7. **Include ECDE parents in school leadership.** Head teachers should include ECDE parents in all parent forums and reserve a seat for an ECDE representative on the Parents Association.

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