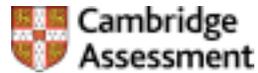


**Accountability and school performance:  
evidence from “Big Results Now” in Tanzania**

**Parental preferences and government  
delivery in Tanzanian primary schools**

Commentary by Aidan Eyakuze

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## About the author

**Aidan Eyakuze** (@aeyakuze) is the Executive Director of Twaweza East Africa. Twaweza works to enable children to learn, citizens to exercise agency and governments to be more open and responsive in Tanzania, Kenya and Uganda. He is on the global Steering Committee of the Open Government Partnership (OGP) and the Board of the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development Data (GPSDD). Before joining Twaweza, Aidan was Associate Regional Director of the Society for International Development (SID) and Head of the SID Tanzania office. Aidan is an Archbishop Desmond Tutu Leadership Fellow and a Board Member of the African Leadership Institute (South Africa).

## Accountability and school performance: evidence from “Big Results Now” in Tanzania

– Jacobus Cilliers, Isaac Mbiti, and Andrew Zeitlin

[Slide presentation](#)

## Parental preferences and government delivery in Tanzanian primary schools

– Andrew Zeitlin and Sam Solomon

Unpublished

*Commentary by Aidan Eyakuze*

Two themes have recently dominated the public debate on education in Tanzania. The first was prompted by a [steep decline](#) in the rankings of historically high-performing public schools in Tanzania ([ACSEE 2018](#)). In 2018, many of the schools which in the past had ranked near the top in terms of exam results were languishing towards the [bottom of the national league tables](#). [One girls’ school](#) in particular came in for some deeply critical, almost insulting criticism. What happened to these schools? Can their disastrous performance be reversed? If so, how?

The second was the issue of parental contributions to improving the quality of primary education. In the context of a well-publicised government policy of fee-free basic education, any suggestion that parents might contribute

towards improving school infrastructure (or even contributing to the cost of school meals) were met with **strong pushback** from both cash-strapped parents and vote-conscious politicians. Headteachers faced summary **dismissal** for even calling meetings to discuss parental contributions. Ministerial **clarifications** on this issue – school administrators can solicit but not compel voluntary parental contributions and must obtain permission from local government authorities to do so – were timid. The result: more **confusion**.

These two papers speak directly to these two pressing issues. And they both suggest that the solution lies in providing salient information to those who take the decisions that make the biggest difference to children’s learning outcomes: school headteachers and parents.

The first paper by Jacobus Cilliers, Isaac Mbiti and Andrew Zeitlin (2018) uses evidence from a major Tanzania education reform programme called “Big Results Now” (BRN) to answer the following question:

*‘Can public rankings improve school performance?’*

BRN was a systemic, top-down accountability reform that published both nationwide and within-district school rankings, among other policies, starting in 2013. Combining data on the universe of school performance from 2011–2016 with EMIS and Service Delivery Indicator datasets from the post-reform period, we identify the impacts of the dissemination of within-district rankings by using a difference-in-difference strategy that exploits a key feature of such rankings—that they exert pressure in particular on schools at the top and bottom of their respective districts. We find that BRN improved learning outcomes for schools in the bottom fifth of their districts. While we find no evidence that these

gains resulted from zero-sum transfers of resources from schools at the center of their district distribution to schools at the tails, we also find no evidence of impacts on physical, human, or financial inputs into schools. By contrast, we do find that the number of test-takers falls in schools facing pressure from within-district rankings; this appears to be driven by strategic exclusion of students rather than forced repetition within schools or sorting across schools.

I like this paper for two main reasons. First, the authors did not spend copious amounts of money and time (which is not to say they skimmed on the level of effort) to collect new data. They used existing administrative data and leveraged the World Bank’s investment in producing service delivery indicators (SDIs). Their substantial value addition was in applying the powerful difference-in-difference methodology to surface their findings and conclusions.

The second reason I like it is because the solution hit me between the eyes as soon as I saw the presentation: just show headteachers how their school ranks relative to others in the district, and watch them respond. Simple and cheap. Information on district school rankings does matter for learning outcomes.

However, there is a downside. If schools can exclude weaker students from taking the final exams in order to boost rankings, some will probably do so. Encouragingly, the study finds that overall, despite this “gaming”, there is still a real net positive improvement from the new incentives. The question for policymakers is whether they can prevent the negative consequences.

If the first paper seeks to understand the effects of salient information on school managers, the second examines

matters from the consumer's perspective. Parents' views are important, but, they are often ignored. They are rarely asked what they think or care about.

The second paper entitled 'Parental preferences and government delivery in Tanzanian primary schools', by Andrew Zeitlin and Sam Solomon, asks:

*'What do Tanzanian citizens value in their primary education system?'*

Zeitlin and Solomon hypothesise that knowing what parents want will help governments do a better job of delivering value, while encouraging parents to engage with a school system that is responsive to their expressed needs.

Using Africa's largest mobile phone survey platform, "Sauti za Wananchi", they ask parents 'to express their preferences between alternative pairs of [primary] schools – to understand the extent to which parents value proximity, infrastructure, teacher-pupil ratios, and learning outcomes, in the primary schools to which they have access.'

They find three things. First, parents prefer schools that are close and that produce learning. Secondly, this preference varies across regions (i.e. it is neither static nor universal across the country). The paper notes for example that 'households in Mara region (north west Tanzania), for example, reveal a willingness to walk 1.86 km for an improvement of 10 points in average exam scores while respondents in Pwani region (on the coast adjacent to Dar es Salaam) reveal they are only willing to walk 0.64 km for the same improvement.'

Finally, they find that there is a gap 'between the strength of parents' preference for learning over convenience and

the efficiency with which regions actually deliver learning outcomes, suggesting scope for improved alignment between government and citizen priorities.'

This paper tells us what parents want from primary schools, and with what intensity, and it also highlights how service delivery results fall short of their expectations. These have hitherto been understood only through anecdote. We now have a stronger evidence base – client preferences – from which to make decisions on where schools are built and how they are resourced. Will Tanzania's education administrators have the courage to incorporate such feedback in their decisions? I hope so.

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