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Student unrest in Kenyan secondary schools: A documentary case study of the gap between national educational aspirations and school reality in Migori County

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Abstract

This study examined the extent and severity of student unrest in public secondary schools in Migori County, Kenya, during the second term of 2026, in relation to the National Goals of Education. A qualitative documentary case study design, complemented by descriptive analysis, was employed. Data were obtained from school investigation reports and county administration records to establish the prevalence, causes and implications of unrest for school management, curriculum implementation, student welfare and security. Findings revealed that 88 (29.6%) of the 297 public secondary schools experienced unrest across 11 of the 12 sub-counties. Reported incidents included five cases of dormitory arson, 20 attempted arson incidents, 15 cases of window destruction and 48 instances of students being released following unrest. The primary trigger was students' demand for an early mid-term break, influenced partly by reports of other schools releasing learners. However, the unrest escalated into threats against staff and destruction of property, highlighting weaknesses in institutional communication, student participation, conflict management and values-based education. The study concludes that student unrest extends beyond indiscipline, reflecting broader institutional and systemic challenges. It recommends a whole-school approach incorporating effective communication, student engagement, guidance and counselling, critical thinking and proactive conflict resolution. Strengthening early-warning systems, crisis preparedness and quality assurance is also essential for safeguarding school communities, sustaining curriculum implementation and promoting peaceful learning environments

aligned with national educational goals.

Key terms: student unrest, secondary education, critical thinking, student voice, school governance

1.0 Introduction

The education systems will play a wider role than just the provision of knowledge. Schools are institutions which aim to develop individuals who have values, attitudes, identities and social behaviour which enable them to become active participants in society.Kenya has clearly articulated its aspirations for the education system through the National Goals of Education and the Basic Education Curriculum Framework (BECF). The BECF envisions an education system that nurtures every learner's potential and develops an "engaged, empowered and ethical citizen" (KICD, 2019). To achieve this vision, the framework emphasizes the development of core competencies, including citizenship, critical thinking and problem-solving, communication and collaboration, alongside the integration of values into the learning process. These competencies are intended to equip learners with the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values necessary to address national priorities and contribute meaningfully to society (KICD, 2019).

National Goals of Education play a key role in understanding the causes and consequences of student unrest. Goal one states that education should contribute to nurturing nationalism, patriotism, national unity and promoting a culture of peace. Likewise, goal four requires education to nurture Kenya's moral and religious values and produce disciplined and honest citizens.Similarly, education in Kenya is expected to produce socially responsible citizens and encourage patriotism and a culture of peace while promoting critical thinking and sound judgment.

A learner may find oneself at odds with certain rules, policies, or directives in a school. Such a position is entirely consistent with being a responsible citizen in a democracy. Challenging a rule, policy, or directive is a legitimate expression of dissent, and voicing such a challenge is a manifestation of citizenship. The challenge becomes problematic when it manifests itself beyond verbal dissent, for instance, through threats, violence, setting school buildings on fire, or damaging property.

The mid-term break for the second term of 2026 calendar year provided a useful lesson on this matter. Indeed, on 4 June 2026, the Ministry of Education acknowledged student unrest in several secondary schools and decided not to declare an early national mid-term break. The reason given was that the Ministry would conduct inspections in the affected schools, ensure safety measures were implemented, and sensitize teachers and students to alleviate tensions.

The Ministry resolved to permit the term two mid-term break, which had been scheduled for 24 – 28 June 2026. It instructed schools to maintain a high level of vigilance, improve security, and reinforce grievance mechanisms along with guidance and counselling. The Ministry further called for parental engagement in tackling the unrest through dialogue with their children.

The scale of unrest that triggered this nationwide response was significant, particularly in Migori County. Indeed, administrative data used in this study indicate that 88 of the 297 secondary schools (29.6%) were affected by the student unrest. Of the 12 sub-counties in Migori, 11 experienced at least one of the following: burning of dormitories, attempted arson of buildings, breaking of windows, and release of students following threats. Specifically, five schools reported dormitory burning; 20 schools, attempted arson of school buildings; 15 schools, breaking of windows; and 48 principals, releasing students following threats.

This situation raises a critical question:

What does the student unrest tell us about the mismatch between the aspirations of Kenya's education system?

This question is of utmost importance to competency-based education (CBE). Indeed, with its emphasis on mastery of competences demonstrated in appropriate settings, CBE highlights the role of schools in shaping young people's ability to deal with real-life situations. One such demonstration is the learner's capacity to respond appropriately to a dispute, grievance, or a perception of unfair treatment.

Statement of the Problem

Kenya's Basic Education Curriculum Framework (BECF) aims to cultivate learners into empowered, ethical, responsible and active members of society with appropriate critical thinking, problem solving, communication and collaboration skills to solve problems in their community (KICD, 2019). Coupled with the Competency-Based Education (CBE) reforms, there is a focus on promoting a holistic approach to learning, ensuring learners obtain necessary key competencies and adopt values that promote responsible citizenship. Despite this, there have been issues of unrest among learners in Kenyan secondary schools.

There was a lot of unrest in secondary schools in Migori County in 2026. Learners threatened staff, tried to set fire to the school and damaged school property. Windows were smashed and fires broke out in dormitories. Some of these issues were due to learners being disgruntled about wanting to leave school early but there was variation between schools. This suggests that there must be more to the issue than just learner grievances. There seems to be a lack of connection between the values, competencies and responsible citizenship that are promoted in the national education system and what the learners are doing.

The problem, therefore, is not simply the occurrence of student unrest, but the evident gap between Kenya's national education aspirations and the realities of learner behaviour in secondary schools. There is a need to establish the extent and forms of unrest in Migori County, to examine how the incidents relate to the National Goals of Education and the aspirations of the BECF, and to explore the implications for school leadership, learner participation, communication, guidance and counselling, and curriculum implementation. Understanding this gap is essential for determining how schools can translate national educational aspirations into everyday practices that foster peaceful conflict resolution, responsible behaviour and constructive learner engagement.

1.3 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the 2026 student unrest in secondary schools in Migori County and explore what the incidents reveal about the relationship between Kenya's educational aspirations and the lived realities of school life.

1.4 Objectives of the Study

The study sought to:

determine the extent and geographical distribution of student unrest in secondary schools in Migori County;

examine the forms and severity of incidents associated with the unrest;

examine the relationship between the observed incidents and Kenya's National Goals of Education;

explore the apparent gap between secondary education objectives and learner behaviour during periods of conflict;

identify implications for school leadership, learner participation, guidance and counselling, curriculum implementation and quality assurance.

1.5 Research Questions

The study was guided by the following questions:

What was the extent and geographical distribution of student unrest in Migori County during the second term of 2026?

What forms of unrest and property-related incidents were reported?

What do the incidents reveal about the implementation of Kenya's educational goals and secondary education objectives?

What institutional processes may influence the escalation of learner grievances?

What strategies can strengthen the prevention and management of student unrest?

2.0 Conceptual Framework

The study conceptualized student unrest as an outcome of interactions among contextual conditions, learner grievances and school-level mediating factors.First, the conceptual framework described above not only accommodates all five objectives but also supports the descriptive and geographical analysis that Objectives 1 and 2 require.

Second, it brings the educational dimension into explicit view. Objectives 3 and 4 lie at the heart of the study. Kenya's National Goals of Education encompass goals concerning national unity, national development, individual development, self-fulfillment, sound moral and religious values, social equity, positive attitudes towards other nations, international consciousness, and good health and environmental protection. Third, it connects findings to practical action. The final component ensures that the study does not simply describe unrest but instead draws evidence-based implications for school leadership, learner participation, guidance and counselling, curriculum implementation and quality assurance.

Fourth, it avoids the assumption that every incident stems from the same causes. The framework enables the author to examine possible contributing factors without assuming that peer influence, leadership weaknesses, social media or any other single factor accounts for all incidents.

Figure 1: Proposed conceptual framework for analyzing student unrest in secondary schools in Migori County.

3.0 Theoretical Framework

The study was informed by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and Conflict Theory.

3.1 Ecological Systems Theory

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory suggests that human development is affected by the bidirectional relationship between the individual and the different systems that they interact with. In terms of this study, student unrest can be seen as a product of the interaction between the learner, their peers, family, school environment, community and wider sociocultural environment.

This theory was relevant to the present study as there was a flow of information between learners during the 2026 unrest in Migori County about students from other schools going home. The theory provided insight into how peer pressure, school leadership, communication, relationship between the family and school and broader social influences could have had an impact on the unrest. This also helps to understand why similar issues were experienced in different schools but the outcome varied.

3.2 Conflict Theory

Conflict Theory is associated with Marx (1978) and focuses on how conflict can be created through competing interests and differing power. This can be used within the school context where conflict can be present between learners and those in authority due to disagreement around rules, decisions, interests and perceived inequality. Learners may feel that decisions are unfair, there isn't enough communication and that they aren't being given enough opportunity to participate, so conflict can increase. This theory doesn't justify any destructive behaviour however it can help to understand why conflict can occur if there are unresolved disagreements.

This theory was relevant to this research as learners may have had conflicts with school authorities due to their grievances about the early closure of school. It has helped to analyze what the learners were upset about, how they felt decisions were unfair, use of authority, how much opportunity was given to them to participate and how the school leadership reacted. It has also helped to investigate how the way grievances were dealt with may have been linked to varying levels of unrest between the different schools.

3.3 Complementary application of the two theories

The two theories provided insight to the difference between Kenya's national educational aims and the realities of secondary education in Migori county. The Ecological Systems Theory looked at the external factors influencing the students' disturbances. The Conflict theory looked at the different interests and perceived injustices leading to learner grievances. The theories allow perception at the bigger picture of why there is a disturbance and what particular conflict has occurred between learners and the school. This can help identify how school management, communication, learner involvement and conflict management are linked to Kenya's Basic Education Curriculum Framework's promotion of responsible values, citizenship, respect and peaceful living.

3.4 Literature Review

3.4.1 National Goals of Education and Ethical Leadership

The expected standards of behaviour from learners, school leaders and outcomes are outlined in the Kenya National Goals of Education. The Basic Education Curriculum Framework discusses the importance of creating active, empowered and responsible citizens (KICD, 2019). Values, citizenship, critical thinking, problem-solving, communication and teamwork are highlighted as significant outcomes of education. This suggests that education should be focused on creating learners who have the skills to solve disputes and respect others rights and responsibilities. However, when there are instances of unrest, threats, damage to property or arson the link between the values taught through education and the behaviour of learners can be questioned. Learners can be affected by the environment, management and situations experienced.

A major factor identified in the literature is the extent to which school leaders effectively implement national educational goals through ethical and responsive leadership practices. Ethical leadership encompasses fairness in decision-making, accountability, consistency in the application of school rules and respect for learners' rights and dignity. A study by Otengah and K'odero (2026), which examined school policies and instances of student involvement in arson in public boarding secondary schools in Migori County, established a statistically significant correlation between the implementation of school policies and student involvement in arson. This finding suggests that the manner in which institutional authority is exercised and school policies are implemented may be important considerations in

understanding student behaviour and school unrest. However, the existence of a statistically significant correlation does not establish a causal relationship between disciplinary practices and incidents of arson, nor does it imply that all instances of student unrest originate from dissatisfaction with school policies.

A complementary perspective is provided by Doyle et al. (2025), whose quasi-experimental study investigated the effects of a teacher empathy-based intervention on disciplinary outcomes and students' perceptions of school in secondary schools in England. The study highlights the potential influence of teachers' interpersonal approaches, particularly empathy, on student behaviour and the overall school experience. Although the findings are drawn from the English education system and cannot be directly generalised to Kenyan schools because of differences in school governance, resource availability, institutional expectations and disciplinary frameworks, they offer useful insights into the importance of relational approaches to educational leadership. Taken together, these studies suggest that effective school leadership requires not only consistent enforcement of institutional policies but also fairness, empathy, meaningful learner engagement and respect for students. These dimensions are important in examining how school leadership practices may influence student behaviour and the management of unrest in Kenyan secondary schools.

Overall these studies highlight that although the expected educational values are outlined (KICD, 2019), the Kenyan and international studies show that school management and the relationship between teachers and learners may affect how they are felt. However, the literature does not show how much the documented instances of unrest in Migori County reflect a wider issue with the national educational goals and learner behaviour. This study will look at the different areas of unrest, the ways they occur, how severe they are and what implications this has for ethical leadership, peace, responsible citizenship and protecting property. This will be seen as an analytical question and not assumed that individual instances of unrest reflect a general issue with moral education.

3.4.2 Critical Thinking and Rational Judgement

Critical thinking and rational decision making are key educational outcomes that can help learners to evaluate information, analyze different arguments and consider possible explanations. In situations where there is conflict, these skills can prove useful. When learners are provided with information, such as other learners have been let out of school or a certain action is being undertaken, they may decide to react based on their assessment of the reliability of the information. Unfortunately, learner unrest cannot be solely attributed to a lack of critical thinking skills as even those with critical thinking skills may feel negatively about situations they feel are unfair, due to peer pressure or because there are unresolved issues with the institution.

Critical thinking and problem-solving are identified as key competencies to be developed in the basic education curriculum of Kenya (KICD, 2019). This shows what the education system should promote however, does not show whether learners will consistently apply these skills in times of conflict.

Rombout et al (2024) conducted research into a philosophy dialogue intervention aimed at promoting value-based critical thinking in secondary school learners. The study aimed to encourage learners to provide reasons for their answers, consider alternative viewpoints and discuss moral dilemmas through a structured dialogue. This supports the notion that critical thinking can be promoted through specific methods however, improving critical thinking performance in the classroom does not necessarily mean that there will be less learner unrest. This would need to be analysed through research.

Research done in Kenya has shown that there are issues with school policies. Otengah and K’odero (2026) found there was a relationship between applying school policies and learner arson in public boarding secondary schools in Migori County. This suggests that when considering learner responses to a

situation they should also consider how the institution is running, including whether they feel it is fair and if they feel they have a voice. Learners will also consider the information they have available to them, whether they trust the school authority and if they feel the processes in place to resolve grievances are legitimate.

Overall, research shows that there is a two-way relationship between individual competencies and the institution. Critical thinking can help learners to evaluate rumours, challenge negative decisions made by groups and consider non-violent options. However, clear communication and fair processes will ensure rational engagement can take place. None of the research shows whether learners involved in the unrest in Migori County had difficulty evaluating information, whether peer pressure was mainly the reason for their decisions or whether they felt the grievances were legitimate. This study looks at documented incidents and the circumstances leading up to them. It does not assume that destructive behaviours are due to a lack of critical thinking skills. It looks into the implications of this for curriculum delivery, learner discussion and school leadership.

3.4.3 Student Participation and School Governance

Involving learners within schools can often be seen as a way to create better discipline. Learners can be involved in student councils, have a voice in meetings, consultation and development of rules. Whether or not this is effective will depend on how much real influence the learners have rather than being a representative. Merely having a student council would not represent effective participation.

Salina et al. (2022) conducted a study into the extent to which principals involve learners in making decisions in public secondary schools in Baringo County. This supports the idea that involving learners in areas such as welfare and the running of the school can be beneficial in developing positive relationships between administrators and learners. This is relevant as it acknowledges that learners are involved in governance. However, there is evidence from one county and looking specifically at decision making and discipline so we cannot automatically assume involvement will have the same effect in every type of school or will automatically prevent issues.

A further perspective on learner participation in school governance is provided by Adhanja and Achola (2026), whose study examined the extent to which student councils are involved in the management of secondary schools in Migori County. The study considered areas such as learner welfare, formulation and implementation of school rules, communication and decision-making. Its geographical and institutional relevance makes it particularly useful to the present study. It provides a basis for examining whether formal structures for learner participation can strengthen communication between school management and students by enabling school leaders to understand learners' concerns and respond to them before they escalate into unrest. However, the effectiveness of student councils depends on several contextual factors. Where student representatives lack legitimacy among their peers, fear victimisation for expressing learners' concerns, or operate in an environment where school management is unresponsive to their recommendations, their capacity to facilitate meaningful participation may be limited.

Similarly, Luti-Mallei (2025) conducted a study examining the involvement of student leaders in school management meetings in Machakos County. The study provides insights into the potential contribution of learner participation to institutional governance and decision-making. Establishing formal structures through which student representatives interact with school administrators can provide learners with opportunities to express their concerns and contribute to discussions before management decisions are made. Nevertheless, representation in management meetings does not necessarily translate into meaningful influence over decisions. Furthermore, the presence of student representatives does not automatically guarantee that the interests and concerns of the wider student population are adequately articulated. Consequently, the effectiveness of learner participation should be assessed not merely by the

existence of student councils or their attendance at management meetings, but also by the extent to which their contributions are considered, acted upon and communicated back to the learners they represent.

Overall, the evidence from Kenya shows student involvement should be considered when looking at school governance however cannot be assumed that more involvement will result in better discipline. This could depend on whether the learners believe they are genuinely involved, the decisions are clearly explained and school leaders actually respond to any legitimate concerns. Studies looking at involvement and discipline do not necessarily explain why there may be collective issues within the school such as threats, arson or damage to school property. These may have different processes involved.

This study can add to the literature by looking at how the documented issues have impacted school governance and whether the pattern of issues provide reason for considering the complaints systems, student councils and how much learners are involved in decisions. As the incident reports may not include how much or how well learners were involved before the incident, any conclusions must be proportional to the evidence. This can show what issues there are within the governance of the school due to the issues.

3.4.4 Communication and School Climate

Communication and school climate are related but not interchangeable variables. Communication refers to how information is communicated and received. School climate refers to how safe, fair, inclusive, and positive the school environment is. Having positive communication can lead to a positive school climate, however, a school may have good communication but still have poor relationships and unfair discipline. Therefore, a consideration of student unrest needs to be looked at in terms of communication style and school environment.

Owuor et al. (2022) looked at communication styles and student discipline in public secondary schools in Kisumu County. They found that there was a positive correlation between communication styles and student discipline. They also found that 25.6% of variation in student discipline could be explained by communication styles. This provides evidence that communication is relevant in school management. However, this does not show causation and just because there is a high percentage of variation does not mean that good communication will prevent unrest. There are other variables to consider such as leadership, school resources, discipline and relationships with learners.

Kasau et al. (2022) looked at communication styles and student discipline in terms of how principals relay information to learners in Kitui County. Communication styles are important to consider when looking at how information is being communicated to learners in schools. Good communication styles need to be timely, clear, trustworthy and allow learners to ask questions. If learners do not trust the source of the message being communicated then even if it is being communicated it may not help to resolve their issue.

Renick et al. (2025) look at school climate research from a developmental perspective. This is an important consideration as students experience school based on relationships, inclusion and their development needs. This means that communication of rules may not be the only consideration as learners will feel safe, supported and have positive relationships with staff. However, a general school climate framework does not provide evidence of what specific areas of school climate are related to unrest in Migori County.

Evidence from Africa shows that unrest should not just be looked at from a disciplinary perspective. Lupindo et al. (2025) looked at a systematic review of community and school violence exposure in Africa. This shows the importance of considering the psychological impact of violence and the environment

learners are in. However, evidence relating to exposure to violence should not be used to assume that the poor school climate caused the incident of unrest.

Overall, these studies show that communication and school climate could be complementary. Trustworthy communication can help to clarify decisions and having fair relationships and a supportive environment can help to improve communication. However, the current research does not fully explain how poor communication, perceived unfairness and school climate interact in group incidents of unrest. This study provides some insight into documented incidents of unrest in Migori County and considers the impact on timely communication, resolving issues, learner wellbeing and quality assurance. Whilst administrative reports may give information on the circumstances and progression of an incident they will not be able to show that communication or school relationships were the cause unless they specifically mention communication styles or school relationships.

3.4.5 Peer Influence and Ecological Context, Guidance and Counselling

Student unrest is unlikely to be explained by any individual factors. Students will operate within a network of social contexts including peers, family, teaching staff, school leadership and the wider community. An ecological perspective can help to understand how individuals work with the expectations, policies and influences around them. Peers may encourage pro-social and cooperative behaviours but may also encourage students to feel aggrieved, take risks and encourage collective behaviours. It depends on the context.

The literature by Lupindo et al. (2025) provides evidence on the impact of experiencing community and school based violence during adolescence in African countries. This helps to understand students' experiences within a social context. This also helps with the current study by identifying that issues may arise from within schools. However, this does not provide evidence that peer influences lead to student unrest.

The literature by Rtbey et al. (2025) provides evidence on bullying and factors influencing bullying in school aged adolescents in Africa through a systematic review and meta-analysis. While bullying and collective unrest are separate factors, they can be relevant to understanding the social context students are operating within. Evidence was found to identify the importance of interpersonal relationships for students. However, there was no evidence to identify that bullying leads to unrest.

Evidence from Kenya can provide more direct evidence. Otengah and K'odero (2026) looked at how policies were being used and the involvement of students in arson incidents within public boarding secondary schools in Migori County. Findings indicated that policies and students feeling that they were treated fairly were relevant factors. This indicates that the peer factor should be considered alongside school leadership and policies. If students have common grievances then their collective response may depend on how trustworthy school leaders are and whether there are trustworthy ways to resolve issues. However, this cannot be directly linked to peer pressure as multiple students were involved in the incident and there should be evidence to support this.

An ecological perspective can provide evidence on whether unrest varies depending on the characteristics of the school. Boarding schools, day schools, single sex schools (girls and boys), mixed schools and schools of different sizes may all have different routines, levels of supervision, wellbeing requirements and interactions. This can provide reasonable evidence to compare. However, this should not be considered a reason why unrest is occurring unless there is evidence to support this. Comparisons could be made between schools with incidents and those without in the current study if the records had reliable information around these factors. If this information is missing then this should be identified as a limitation in the manuscript.

Guidance and counselling can also play a key role within the ecological perspective. These can provide students with structured support if they have any emotional, interpersonal, academic or authority issues. However, just having a counselling policy in place does not necessarily mean students have access to it, feel they can trust it or receive the right support. How effective the service is will depend on staffing, confidentiality, referrals, awareness and school leadership.

Ngeno (2022) looked at how students viewed guidance and counselling programmes and how this meets their academic needs within secondary schools in the Rift Valley region of Kenya. This helps to provide a student focused perspective on whether students see the counselling as helpful. This is relevant as it shows that guidance and counselling services should be considered from a student's perspective. However, meeting academic needs does not provide evidence that counselling reduces unrest. This should not be cited as evidence to show that counselling helps prevent unrest.

Majimbo et al. (2023) looked at a three part guidance and counselling framework within selected public secondary schools in Kenya. This provides evidence on how counselling services are set up. This is relevant as if the counselling is not working with the discipline, student involvement and wellbeing of the school this can reduce the effectiveness. However, proposing or looking at a framework does not provide evidence that this reduces unrest amongst students. It is important that there is evidence to show that this is being put into practice.

Rutto et al. (2026) looked at peer counselling and managing learner behaviour within public secondary schools in Baringo County. This expands the discussion to consider how students with training can be used as peer counsellors. Peer counselling can be an accessible way to discuss issues however it depends on the students having the correct training, supervision, confidentiality and referral processes. Peer counsellors should not be expected to deal with serious threats, violence or safeguarding issues. Peer counselling should not be seen as a replacement for accountable school leadership and professional support.

Overall the literature shows that an integrated approach should be taken when looking at peer relationships, school leadership, counselling and the wider social context. However, there is a large gap in the evidence. The studies looked at tended to focus on one aspect of student behaviour, violence, counselling or school leadership and did not consider how these are related to the geographical distribution and severity of unrest amongst students in the county. The current study provides evidence on documented incidents within Migori County and considers how this impacts student wellbeing, guidance and counselling, leadership, implementation of the curriculum and quality assurance. If there is no direct evidence within the administrative records on peer influence, counselling access or family/community context then these should be seen as areas for further investigation.

3.4.6 Synthesis of the literature and research gap

The literature examined under the five subheadings reveals a number of interrelated dimensions of student unrest. KICD (2019) sets out the educational expectations associated with ethical citizenship, critical thinking and responsible conduct. Kenyan studies emphasize the significance of school rules, student participation and communication, whereas African and international research extends the discussion to school climate, peer relationships, exposure to violence and learner support. Considered collectively, the evidence indicates that student unrest ought to be analyzed as a complex educational and institutional phenomenon rather than ascribed to any single cause.

Three limitations are of particular importance. First, much of the existing research concentrates on individual factors, such as communication practices, participation in decision-making or counselling, instead of investigating how these factors may interact during episodes of collective unrest. Second,

findings from studies of general discipline, bullying or exposure to violence cannot automatically account for incidents involving threats, attempted arson, destruction of windows or dormitory fires. These outcomes vary in form and severity and call for direct evidence. Third, research carried out in particular schools or counties may not account for the geographical variation in unrest within Migori County or determine whether affected and unaffected schools differ systematically.

The present study addresses these limitations by examining the extent and geographical distribution of unrest in secondary schools in Migori County, the forms and severity of documented incidents, and their implications for Kenya's National Goals of Education. It further considers the apparent gap between educational expectations and learner behaviour, together with implications for school leadership, participation, communication, guidance and counselling, curriculum implementation and quality assurance. Its contribution lies in integrating these dimensions through an analysis of county-level administrative records, rather than treating each factor as an isolated explanation.

The study does not presume that every documented incident arose from weak leadership, poor communication, inadequate counselling or negative peer influence. Rather, it draws on the available evidence to establish the distribution and characteristics of unrest and to identify the implications that can reasonably be inferred from the records. Where the records do not establish causal relationships or supply sufficient detail for comparisons among school categories, these limitations should be acknowledged. This distinction enhances the study's analytical credibility and assists in identifying priorities for future research employing interviews, school-level comparisons or other complementary methods.

4.0. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

The study employed a qualitative documentary case-study design supported by descriptive quantitative analysis. The case comprised student unrest incidents in secondary schools in Migori County during the second term of 2026.

4.2 Study Population

The county had 297 public secondary schools. Administrative records indicated that 88 were affected by the unrest.

Therefore:

(88 x100) = 29.63%

297

Thus, approximately 29.6% of secondary schools were affected.

The remaining 209 schools, representing 70.4%, were not reported as affected within the administrative dataset used.

4.3 Data Sources

The study used:

county administrative records;

investigation reports concerning affected schools;

school-level incident summaries;

Kenyan education legislation;

Ministry of Education policy statements;

the Basic Education Curriculum Framework; and

peer-reviewed and academic literature on student unrest, communication, learner participation, school governance and school climate.

The county incident figures constitute administrative evidence for this case study rather than estimates derived from a sample.

4.4 Data Analysis

Frequencies and percentages were used to describe the distribution of affected schools. The incident categories were analyzed independently because they were not mutually exclusive. For example, a school may have experienced attempted arson and also released learners following threats.

Qualitative information was analyzed thematically under:

learner grievance;

peer influence;

communication;

learner participation;

leadership;

safety;

property destruction; and

Curriculum-policy/practice gap.

4.5 Ethical Considerations, Administrative Authorization and Access to Records

This study used secondary data collected from the following sources: Reports from investigations carried out in schools with students' unrest in secondary schools in Migori County, Kenya. Incident reports and other related school records. As a County Quality Assurance and Standards Officer accessing the data is part of my job as I have management of the documents. This study was conducted using official records.

As this study used official records, it followed all relevant rules and regulations set up by the Ministry of Education. The research was undertaken as an academic activity and findings were presented in such a way that the confidentiality of learners, staff and others involved was ensured. Personal information and other sensitive information was not included in the research report where it wasn't needed to address the aims of the study.

4.6 Limitations of the Study

There were various limitations to this study. The first limitation was that much of the data was obtained through administration and documentation. The second limitation was that this study only looked at one county and a single time period of unrest. Therefore results cannot be generalized to all secondary schools in Kenya. The third limitation was that there was no causality to be drawn from the data. It could not be concluded that poor communication, leadership and learner involvement were the cause of the 2026 unrest. Lastly, the categories were overlapping. This means that the percentages of dormitory burning, attempted arson, window breaking and release after threats could not be added together to

make 100%.

5.0. Results

5.1 Overall Extent

Table 1. Overall distribution of affected schools

Status	Frequency	Percentage
Affected	88	29.6
Not reported as affected	209	70.4
Total	297	100.0

Approximately three out of every ten secondary schools in Migori County were affected.The finding indicated that the phenomenon was sufficiently widespread to warrant county-level educational analysis rather than being treated only as a series of isolated disciplinary cases.

Sub-County Distribution

Table 2. Distribution of affected schools by sub-county

Sub-county	Frequency	% of affected schools
Rongo	7	8.0
Nyatike West	5	5.7
Mabera	7	8.0
Kuria West	4	4.5
Awendo	8	9.1
Uriri	16	18.2
Kuria East	3	3.4
Migori	10	11.4
Suna West	14	15.9
Nyatike North	4	4.5
Nyatike South	10	11.4
Ntimaru	0	0.0
Total	88	100.0

Uriri recorded the largest number of affected schools, with 16 schools (18.2% of all affected schools), followed by Suna West with 14 (15.9%). Migori and Nyatike South each recorded 10 schools (11.4%).

The cases were therefore distributed across 11 of the county's 12 sub-counties. Importantly, the available data do not provide the total number of secondary schools in each sub-county. Consequently, the figures should not be interpreted as sub-county-specific prevalence rates.

5.2 Severity of Reported Incidents

Table 3. Reported incident categories

Incident	Number of schools	Percentage of 88 affected schools
Learners released after threats	48	54.5%
Attempted arson	20	22.7%
Destruction of glass windows	15	17.0%
Dormitory burning	5	5.7%

The percentages do not sum to 100 because categories may overlap.

The most widespread reported institutional response was the release of learners following threats, occurring in 48 schools (54.5%).

Attempted arson occurred in 20 schools (22.7%). Window destruction occurred in 15 schools (17.0%), while five schools (5.7%) experienced dormitory burning.

Severity Matrix

Table 4. Proposed severity classification

Level	Observable incident	Educational significance
1	Learner dissatisfaction/grievance	Potential early-warning stage
2	Collective pressure or threats	Emerging safety/governance concern
3	Pre-emptive release of learners	Major disruption and institutional risk
4	Destruction of windows/property	Physical damage and disciplinary concern
5	Attempted arson	Critical safety and property risk
6	Dormitory burning	Critical safety, property and continuity-of-learning incident

The matrix should be understood as an analytical tool rather than an official Ministry classification. It illustrates the importance of intervening before grievances progress to higher-risk stages.

6.0. Discussion

6.1 A Common Grievance, Different Outcomes

One key finding was the apparent discrepancy between the grievance and the outcome. While there was clearly a grievance (or preference) to return home, it did not lead to the destruction of property per se. The increased levels of escalation seen in some schools indicates the presence of other factors which can contribute towards the link between grievance and behaviour. This might include peer pressure, communication, perception of a fair situation, leadership within the school, inclusion, counselling and school climate. However, as we did not gather matching information at the school level for all the 297 schools, it is important to note that these are just possible explanations that have been identified through theory and empirical evidence.

6.2 The Curriculum-Implementation Gap

An important aspect of this study was to consider student unrest as a problem with the implementation of the curriculum. Whilst the BECF aims to develop ethical citizens, placing emphasis on critical thinking, problem solving, being a citizen, communicating and collaborating, this cannot happen without the student having these skills. Although they may know how to define critical thinking during exams, they may not practice this when they become frustrated. They may know what patriotism is but not realize that they should protect school property. They may know what dialogue is but have no real systems in place to help them negotiate their differences.

6.3 Patriotism as Responsible Citizenship

This National Goal is relevant as patriotism and national unity are very important aspects of life. Patriotism can be shown in many ways such as respecting institutions, being peaceful, using resources wisely and respecting the rights of others. This is why the destruction of school property can be seen as an issue of citizenship as it is a shared resource. It can cause problems for students who had nothing to do with the looting and can cause an issue for students, parents and the government. Students should be taught about the link between stewardship and citizenship.

6.4 Moral Values and Self-Discipline

The National Goal concerning moral and religious values aims at bringing up self-disciplined and ethical citizens. It is of utmost importance that moral education includes opportunities for making ethical decisions. Such a dilemma emerges for a learner who is dissatisfied with a school decision: choosing between negotiation or representation and threats or destruction. Therefore, moral education ought to integrate practice sessions of ethical decision-making through discussions, debates, peer mediation, community service and student councils.

6.5 Critical Thinking and Rational Judgement

The situation provides a valuable opportunity to use rational thinking. Rational responses to problems involve identifying the issue, gathering evidence, considering options, predicting outcomes and then making a suitable choice.

This is why the BECF focus on critical thinking and problem solving is relevant. Schools must intentionally use everyday problems within the school setting as learning opportunities. For example, asking learners ‘if you feel that the term is too long, what are five ways to communicate this problem?’ This helps create critical thinkers by turning them into citizens.

6.6 Student Voice: Participation without Coercion

The study showed that student voice and student power through coercion were two different concepts. Learners’ participation means that they were provided with proper avenues for expressing their concerns, airing their grievances, and being heard. This did not imply that the learners had absolute power to dictate school policies.

Kenyan laws mandate that school governance structures should be used to foster consultation and participatory democracy. Research also shows that there is a need to improve student participation in schools decision making. Nyaga, (2000) cited some dissatisfaction with student involvement in governance and identified lack of dialogue as one of the causes of student unrest. There is a need to make sure that student councils are used as avenues for consultation and participation and not just a

forum for the principals and teachers.

6.7 Communication as a Preventive Mechanism

Effective communication was an important aspect to consider from the literature and within the Migori case study. A study into public secondary schools found there was a positive relationship between how effectively the head of schools communicated and student discipline Salina et al. (2021). They recommended improving the effectiveness of the open door policy so that communication can be improved between school management and students to combat the issue of indiscipline. In this example if students are causing issues it is important to communicate effectively with them. If students are believing incorrect information, for example “other schools are already at home”, effective communication will need to take place quickly, clearly and in a way that will be seen as credible by students. If communication is not provided quickly, unclear or inconsistent then this can lead to students believing the rumour is true. This may cause more anxiety, lack of trust and cause issues. Therefore, communication should be implemented in a preventative manner within schools.

Communication channels in schools should be effective, clear, easy to access, consistent, bidirectional and trustworthy.

6.8 The Role of School Leadership

This can be a tricky balance to achieve. Principals have a duty to protect students, staff and property but also have to maintain the integrity of their institutions.

It was evident that principals in 48 schools released students despite the threats made against them. Although a pre-emptive closure could be appropriate if there were real concerns about the safety of students; however if it becomes a regular occurrence and the school doesn’t engage further it may mean that the actual cause of the issue isn’t addressed.

Training around conflict resolution, negotiation, crisis management, adolescent development, collaborative governance, emergency decision making and conflict resolution should be included within leadership training.

6.9 Implications for Quality Assurance and Standards

The finding indicated that quality assurance should go beyond typical indicators of curricular breadth, physical infrastructure and academic achievement. A school may have good infrastructure and qualified teachers but still have a fragile institutional climate.

A quality assurance framework addressing student unrest should therefore consider:

Learner voice: Is there a functional student council? Can learners raise concerns safely? Do learners get feedback?

Communication: Are school decisions communicated clearly? Is there an accessible open door mechanism? Are rumours dealt with quickly?

School climate: Are teacher-learner relationships constructive? Do learners feel respected? Are there exclusions and persistent conflicts?

Guidance and counselling: Is counselling preventive? Are high-risk learners identified? Are peer-support mechanisms in place?

Governance: Does the Board of Management encourage dialogue? Are learner welfare issues systematically dealt with? Are disciplinary processes transparent?

Safety: Are fire-safety procedures functional? Are emergency drills carried out? Are dormitories and other high-risk facilities secure?

These indicators were aligned with the legal responsibilities of school governance structures in relation to welfare, safety, guidance and counselling and participatory democratic governance.

6.10 A Whole-School Student Unrest Prevention Model

Based on the findings and literature, the study proposes a six-phase model.

Phase 1: Prevention: Schools should establish a culture of: respect; responsibility; dialogue; inclusion; critical thinking; citizenship; and ethical decision-making.

Phase 2: Early Warning: Schools should monitor: rumours; unusual gatherings; sudden collective dissatisfaction; threats; social-media mobilization; learner withdrawal; rising disciplinary incidents.

Phase 3: Early Intervention: Emerging concerns should trigger: dialogue; student council engagement; counselling; parent engagement; teacher consultation; and communication with relevant education officials.

Phase 4: Crisis Management: Where serious threats occur: protect life; activate emergency plans; secure facilities; communicate accurately; involve relevant authorities.

Phase 5: Recovery: Following unrest: provide psychosocial support; restore learning; investigate incidents; repair facilities; engage affected stakeholders.

Phase 6: Institutional Learning: Schools should conduct a post-incident review:

What happened → What warning signs existed → What was done → What worked → What failed → What should change?

This converts crisis management into continuous institutional improvement.

6.11 Policy and Practice Implications

This has important implications at school level, in order to ensure that learners can practice skills in a safe environment. County level should ensure county education structures provide early identification, school climate evaluation and targeted support to schools that consistently have problems related to discipline and safety. The national education system should also ensure alignment between curriculum delivery, school management, and learner well-being and safety policies.

The Ministry of Education have responded to the unrest in 2026 by addressing some of these areas with strategies such as safety checks, communication, complaints, guidance and counselling and parent engagement.

7.0. Conclusion

It was established that student unrest was an issue in the second term of 2026 in secondary schools within Migori County. 297 secondary schools exist in Migori County and 88 experienced some form of unrest. This shows that it was a pervasive issue. The highest number of schools affected by unrest were in Uriri (16), Suna West (14) while no schools experienced unrest in Ntimaru. This therefore indicates that both county and sub-county levels should be analysed to see what patterns occur and where preventative measures can be targeted.

It was found through the administrative records that there were 5 fires in dormitories, 20 attempted arson cases, 15 reported window breakage cases and 48 cases where principals had released learners

due to threats. This shows that there is more to student unrest than just disciplinary issues. It shows that there are threats to safety, possible damage to property and disruption to learning. Therefore, a system needs to be in place to log incidents, assess threats and manage safety within schools.

From the findings there appears to be a contradiction between the Kenyan National Goals of Education and the incidents recorded. This is because incidents such as threats, attempted arson and damage to property do not align with the goals. However, this does not necessarily mean that the education system has failed to meet the goals. It does however suggest that we need to improve the application of the educational values.

There seems to be a discrepancy between the goals set for secondary education and the behaviour of learners during times of conflict. While the education system aims to teach learners knowledge and values, this does not necessarily mean that learners will behave responsibly. While there were incidents recorded that did not match the expected behaviour of learners, the administrative records do not provide enough information on why learners were involved in student unrest. Factors such as leadership styles, communication, peer pressure, school policies and learner involvement may have played a part. This therefore needs to be further investigated.

In terms of school leadership, learner involvement, guidance and counselling, curriculum delivery and quality assurance it was found that effective systems need to be in place. School leadership and Boards of Management need to ensure that there are effective ways of dealing with complaints, clear and fairly enforced school policies, learner involvement and effective communication with learners and parents. Guidance and counselling needs to be responsive to any new concerns. Curriculum delivery should be practical to allow learners to develop conflict resolution, ethical decision making and responsible citizenship. Quality assurance officers and education administrators play an important role in monitoring safety within the school, ensuring incidents are accurately recorded, patterns can be identified and follow-ups are carried out.

To prevent and manage student unrest, collaboration between the Ministry of Education, Teachers Service Commission, school administration, Boards of Management, learners, parents and relevant stakeholders needs to take place. Priority should be given to the early warning systems, anonymous reporting systems, regular safety checks, quick communication, psychosocial support and clear protocols. From the study it can be concluded that monitoring through the administration is key to understanding how much unrest there is and where it is occurring. However, more research is needed to understand how to prevent it from occurring in the long term. This can be achieved by comparing schools that have had incidents and those that haven’t. This would help provide evidence to support interventions to address the safety concerns and factors linked to student unrest.

8.0. Recommendations

The Ministry of Education should ensure there are national guidelines in place for dealing with student unrest. These should include minimum standards relating to incident logging, risk assessments, safe schools, emergency communication and recovery. County education offices should monitor incident patterns regularly and log any actions taken to address issues.

The CDEs should work with CQASOs and SCQASOs to create a county level monitoring register of student unrest incidents. This register should include date, location, school details, type of incident, incident severity, response, impact on learning and actions taken. The CDE should review this register every term and use this information to prioritize visits, safety checks and preventative support within schools. Quality assurance officers should ensure that the information being reported is accurate and that schools have implemented agreed actions.

The TSC should ensure that professional development is available to improve skills relating to conflict management, communication, adolescence, fair process and appropriate referral of safeguarding concerns for Principals, Deputy Principals and staff. Training should be provided based on real scenarios that may occur in schools around threatening situations, escalating complaints, suspected arson and emergency learner release.

KICD should assist with creating or distributing practical resources to help staff implement Citizenship, Ethical Responsibility, Critical Thinking, Communication and Collaboration. Principals and staff should include structured discussions, problem solving and peaceful conflict resolution activities within the correct curriculum and extra-curriculum areas.

BOMs and Principals should ensure that behaviour policies and complaint processes are reviewed annually. Policies should be clear and consistently applied. Schools should ensure there is a documented process in place for learners to voice their concerns. This could be through student councils, class reps and anonymous reporting. Principals should have a documented policy in place to respond to threats and serious safeguarding concerns. Incidents should be logged, assessed quickly and referred to the correct people. In an emergency, decisions should be made with the safety of learners at the forefront and clearly communicated to parents/guardians.

The MoE, TSC and Principals should review if there are sufficient guidance and counselling services within schools. Schools should have referral processes in place and appropriate support provided following serious incidents. Student councils should have regular opportunities to voice learners concerns and receive feedback from school management. If peer counselling is used, student counsellors should have appropriate training and supervision. Serious safeguarding or mental health concerns should be referred to the correct people.

8.1 Suggestions for Further Research

The following are two areas of further research which could be investigated:

A comparison between schools where unrest occurred and those who did not. Research could be conducted to compare boarding and day schools, boys', girls' and mixed schools, looking at factors such as school size, security measures, leadership styles, student involvement and guidance/counselling. This would help to determine what factors are linked to unrest within schools.

A qualitative study into the causes of unrest. Interviews could be conducted with principals, teachers, student representatives, parents and education officers. This would help gain information on how complaints are formed, information is shared, how discipline is perceived and how incidents occur. This would be a good addition to the information gathered from administrative documents.

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