

GENERAL INFORMATION ABOUT EDUCATION IN MALAWI

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Education in Malawi, Africa

RIPPLE Africa receives many general enquiries each month asking about the conditions of education in Malawi, Africa. To help those wishing to learn more, we have created this document which contains information about what education is like in Malawi and, most specifically, in the Nkhata Bay District where RIPPLE Africa is based.

For RIPPLE Africa, one of its three main pillars of activity is education. To improve local education in Malawi, RIPPLE Africa supports eight pre-schools, five primary schools, one secondary school, provides a secondary school bursary scheme, and runs a community library in and around the community of Mwaya, in the Nkhata Bay District of Malawi, Africa.

Important general education indicators for Malawi include the national adult literacy rate which is 67.3% for women and 76.5% for men. In the Nkhata Bay District, adult literacy is slightly higher, at 74.6% for women and 88.3% for men. There are approximately 13.1 million people in Malawi, and 215,000 people in the Nkhata Bay District where RIPPLE Africa is based.

Please note that all information presented in this document is from RIPPLE Africa's own local knowledge on the ground, and from the Nkhata Bay District Socio-Economic Profile (2010-2012) unless otherwise stated.

Pre-school Education

Pre-school education provides an important foundation for learning and development. The government of Malawi



Katenthere Pre-school which is held in a local church building



Mazembe Pre-school has about 70 children



Chitungulu Pre-school, held in an old chicken house, which volunteers have painted with bright pictures

recognises the importance of pre-school education, and encourages communities to set up their own pre-schools, but does not support pre-schools financially. With no funds to support pre-schools, most of them are run on a voluntary basis and are unregistered. Most teachers work for free, and have no resources to help them teach, lacking the very basics including blackboards and chalk, let alone books and toys which might commonly be associated with pre-school education in the West. It is rare that pre-schools have their own school buildings, and many pre-schools share facilities with local churches or other buildings built for a different purpose. Not all children have access to pre-school education as access is dependent upon location and upon voluntary community involvement. Official data on the number of pre-schools in Malawi is difficult to find because schools are unregistered.

RIPPLE Africa supports eight pre-schools in Malawi by paying teachers' salaries, building new classroom blocks, and providing learning and teaching materials.

Primary Education



In some primary schools, lessons have to be taught outside due to a lack of classrooms



At Makwalakwata Primary School, the classrooms are very basic and very small



A new double classroom block at Mwaya Primary School built by RIPPLE Africa

Primary school education in Malawi is made up of eight years (referred to as Standard 1 to Standard 8.) Although the official primary school age group in Malawi is categorised as 6-13, it is very common for students of varying ages to attend primary school, as many students have to repeat some primary years. There are three school terms a year for primary schools in Malawi, running generally from September to December, January to April, and April to July. Primary school students in Malawi learn a variety of subjects, and take examinations in English, ChiChewa, maths, science, and social studies. Students must gain a Primary School Leaving Certificate based on their Standard 8 final exam results in order to progress to secondary school. In the Nkhata Bay District of Malawi, there are 184 primary schools which serve 75,368 pupils.

Primary school education in Malawi is provided by the government, and is free to all students in Malawi. Free primary school education was introduced to Malawi in 1994, and in the first year after the policy change, primary school enrolment in Malawi tripled from 1.6 million students, to over 3 million students. However, while primary school enrolment increased, there was a national shortage of classrooms and qualified teachers to deal with the huge increase in students. Although more students now have access to education in Malawi, the quality of education has decreased. Today, most primary schools in Malawi are under-resourced, under-staffed, and under-funded, creating extremely challenging teaching and learning conditions for teachers and students alike.

Most primary schools in Malawi are very basic, lacking the most fundamental resources, including textbooks and basic teaching materials. Although many primary schools have brick classroom blocks, many students learn outside in temporary structures, making teaching impossible during the rainy season. There are only 25,796 desks in the Nkhata Bay District for its 75,368 pupils, meaning that, on average, three students have to share one desk, if they are lucky enough to have desks at all. It is extremely unusual for primary schools to have access to electricity. Although the government of Malawi provides government-paid teachers, there are rarely enough teachers for each primary school, and often not even enough teachers for each school year class. In the Nkhata Bay District of Malawi, the average student to teacher ratio for primary schools is 96:1, when the government of Malawi recommends 60:1 (and even this is very high!). The shortage of teachers in Malawi is due to two main reasons. Firstly, there are not enough trained teachers who have completed all their necessary qualifications to go around, and, secondly, primary schools in Malawi must provide teachers' houses to attract good teachers to their school. Teachers' houses can be very expensive to build but, without them, it is impossible to attract new teachers to the area. (There are just 536 teachers' houses for 1,500 teachers in the Nkhata Bay District between both primary and secondary school, meaning that roughly three teachers have to share one teacher's house across the education sector in Nkhata Bay!)

Although primary education in Malawi is free, students are required to purchase their own school uniform, pens, and notebooks, which many families find difficult. Rates for drop-outs are high, and, according to UNESCO, only 58% of children will complete a full course of primary school, and 20% of children repeat one or more school years,

often several times, if they have had to take significant time out of school and have fallen behind. It is very common for children in Malawi to come in and out of school depending on their family situation, employment responsibilities, pregnancy and marriage at a young age, sickness, and more. By the time students leave primary school, many of them are far older than primary age, having repeated several years, and many lose interest and drop out all together. Just 72% of primary school children in Malawi pass their Primary School Leaving Certificate and a lower average of just 57% in the Nkhata Bay District. However, in RIPPLE Africa's practical experience on the ground, we have found most rural schools to have pass rates as low as 15%.

For most people in Malawi, primary education is the highest level of education they will achieve. As a result, primary education is an essential aspect of community life in Malawi, and is critical to the development of Malawi as a whole. Many of the basic skills and foundational knowledge required for life must be learned in these formative years. Therefore, it is critical to Malawi's development to support primary education.

RIPPLE Africa supports five local primary schools in Malawi, including paying for teachers' salaries, building new classroom blocks, providing additional books, desks, resources, and materials, and our overseas volunteers who help as teaching assistants in the classroom.

Secondary Education



Teachers' houses under construction at Kapanda Secondary School. Houses are needed to attract and retain good teachers



Most secondary schools have either very few or no textbooks. Kapanda Secondary School is lucky to have had textbooks provided by RIPPLE Africa



A second double classroom being built at Kapanda Secondary School by RIPPLE Africa

Secondary school education in Malawi is provided by the government as well as privately, but is not free to students who must pay school fees. Secondary school fees vary greatly, but can range from as low as £20 per year at local community day secondary schools, to £700 per year or even higher for private secondary boarding schools. Fees, even at the lower amount, pose a huge burden to families in Malawi who struggle to raise enough money to send their children to secondary school at these rates. Secondary schools in Malawi are run in four years (referred to as Form 1 to Form 4), and split into three terms which run generally from September to December, January to April, and April to July. Students have to pass their Junior Certificate of Education (JCE) in Form 2, and their Malawi Secondary Certificate of Education (MSCE) in Form 4. They cannot progress to Form 3 without passing the JCE and cannot graduate from secondary school without passing the MSCE. Students study English, maths, agriculture, physics, biology, geography, history, bible knowledge, social studies, and ChiChewa. Both for their JCE and MSCE, students can choose to be tested on any combination of these subjects, and can drop their lower scores and keep their best six. However, they are required to pass English and maths in order to proceed. The MSCE is often considered an adequate credential for most jobs, as very few students in Malawi will proceed from secondary school on to university. The official secondary school age group is defined as 14-17. However, ages vary drastically as many children don't leave primary school until they are much older, and many drop in and out of secondary school according to their ability to pay their school fees. According to UNICEF's Malawi Annual Report, only 13% of secondary school aged children actually attend secondary school.

Although many secondary schools are better resourced than their primary school counterparts, secondary school education in Malawi still varies greatly and is extremely under-resourced. Secondary school students in Malawi still struggle with poor student to teacher ratios, access to books and learning materials, adequate classroom facilities, and adequately trained teachers. In 2008, only 34% of all secondary school teachers in the Nkhata Bay District of Malawi were fully qualified, with 50% of teachers at secondary level never having studied beyond their own MSCE. There are also additional challenges to education in Malawi which are unique to secondary school. In addition to prohibitive school fees, a lack of secondary schools in total means that many students in Malawi have to walk great distances just to attend school each day, which obviously has a huge impact on attendance as well as significantly cutting into study time. In the entire Nkhata Bay District, there are just 37 secondary schools which serve just 5,514 pupils, compared to 184 primary schools which serve 75,368 pupils. Many secondary school subjects, such as physics and biology, also require special facilities such as a laboratory for students to study and take a practical exam

for their MSCE. Out of the 37 secondary schools in Nkhata Bay, only nine have laboratories, of which only four are listed as “conventional” and only two are test centres for the entire district. Most schools cannot even attempt to teach physical science, yet students wishing to study the subject will still be tested on the topic, for which they have never been properly taught. Only 19 of the 37 secondary schools in the district have libraries.

In general, national secondary school pass rates for the MSCE are extremely poor, and were just 47% in 2008, down from 65% in 2006. The decrease is due to shortage of staff, inadequate teaching and learning materials, unqualified teachers, orphanhood and general poverty, and absenteeism of both teachers and pupils. At household level, many children have lost their parents, thereby increasing orphanhood, and net enrolment continues to be very low. In the Nkhata Bay District, drop-out rates for secondary school are very high, at 11.7% for boys and an enormous 20.1% for girls! Drop-out rates are due largely to the prohibitive cost of tuition fees, sickness and family responsibilities, and for girls, 42% of drop-outs were due to early marriage or pregnancy. Overall, however, expensive tuition fees remain the most prominent and universal factor in drop-outs for secondary schools in Malawi.



With the benefit of good buildings, textbooks, and conscientious teachers, Kapanda Secondary School is achieving good exam results



Happy students at a Form 4 graduation party with Chaz, a RIPPLE Africa volunteer

Although secondary school education remains a basic public service in many countries across the world, for most people in Malawi, the chance to attend secondary school is something very special, and millions of children in Malawi will never get the chance to experience secondary education at all. For those who do attend, inadequate teachers and a lack of proper facilities will still prove a challenge to their education. By the time the few students who will attend secondary school get to the end of their schooling, only the smallest fraction will ever go on to university. Secondary school education in Malawi remains something of great importance to most Malawians, and a goal which most young people strive towards.

RIPPLE Africa is helping to improve secondary school education in Malawi by supporting Kapanda Community Day Secondary School, which the charity has built. RIPPLE Africa also runs a Secondary School Bursary Scheme to help support individual students through the cost of secondary school fees.

University Education

With all the challenges facing children in Malawi, only the very few will ever make it through to tertiary education. According to the World Bank Working Paper No. 182 entitled “The Education System in Malawi”, average university enrolment during the period 2003 to 2008 was 51 enrolments per 100,000 inhabitants.

All higher education in Malawi is ultimately controlled by the University of Malawi, which was founded in 1964. The university is located in Zomba, Malawi’s former capital, which is now a university town. The Vice Chancellor and Registrar run the university. The President is the Chancellor, which is purely a ceremonial office. There are four constituent colleges, each of which has its own Registrar. Bunda College specialises in agriculture; Chancellor College offers arts, education, sciences, social sciences, law, and public administration; Kamuzu College offers nursing, community health, mental health, maternal and child health care, and medical surgical nursing courses; and the Polytechnic College offers technical courses. The University also operates a hotel training college and a marine training school. The University is governed by a council, whose members are appointed by the government. The faculty Senate insures that academic matters are governed by professors. The university awards both degrees and diplomas, as well as certificates for short courses. Government grants pay for 91% of university costs and miscellaneous income accounts for the remaining 9% of the University’s income.

Access to higher education is based on passing the Malawi Secondary Certificate of Education (MSCE). A student must earn at least five credits, including English. This exam may be taken after completing eight years of primary and four years of secondary education. Students wishing to be accepted by the university must achieve excellent scores in these exams.

The first, or Bachelor's, degree is normally earned after four years of concentrated study in residence. It takes five years to complete courses in law, education, agriculture, and commerce, and six years to finish the full engineering programme. Honours degrees are awarded in some subjects. A professional qualification is awarded as a diploma after three years of study.

A second stage, or Master's degree, requires two years of full time study to complete. A third stage, or Doctorate degree, is awarded after finishing three to five years of study beyond the Master's degree, a successful defence of a thesis or dissertation, and at least six months in residence at the university.

In 1990, approximately 4,829 students enrolled in universities in Malawi. Of these, 26% or 1,352 students were females. In 1994, some 5,358 students were enrolled, and 30% were females. By 1996, there were 5,561 students enrolled in universities in Malawi, and the percentage of females held constant at 30%. As of 2000, only 1% of Malawi's population was enrolled in universities. Approximately 72% of all college students were pursuing degrees in education, 10.9% were taking degrees in the social sciences, 12.2% were pursuing science degrees, 3.9% were taking degrees in medicine, and 0.4% were pursuing degrees in the humanities. Given Malawi's growing need for high-powered labour, Malawi will be dependent on expatriate skilled labour far into the foreseeable future, unless the university system expands.

Further Information

To learn more about what RIPPLE Africa is doing to help with education in Malawi, please go to the Education section of our website — www.rippleafrica.org.