

Public School Viability under Private Sector Expansion: The case of Masvingo Province in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

This study examines the systemic implications of private school proliferation on the viability of public schools in Zimbabwe, with particular reference to Masvingo Province. Adopting a mixed-methods design, the study analyses enrolment trends, staffing configurations, and resource utilisation patterns across 30 public primary and secondary schools, complemented by provincial enrolment data for 2025–2026. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative data were examined through thematic analysis. Findings reveal substantial enrolment declines of 25–40% at the school level, alongside a marked provincial decrease, most notably a 16.3% drop in primary enrolment within a single year. These shifts have resulted in teacher surpluses, underutilised infrastructure, and declining institutional efficiency across public schools. The study demonstrates that uncoordinated private sector expansion is reshaping demand patterns and generating systemic imbalances within the education system. Drawing on an integrated framework of education marketisation and systems theory, the paper conceptualises these dynamics as *asymmetric marketisation*, where competitive pressures produce uneven and destabilising effects on public provision. The study argues for a recalibration of policy frameworks to ensure alignment between school registration, teacher deployment, and resource allocation. It contributes to ongoing debates on education marketisation by providing recent empirical evidence from a Sub-Saharan African context and offers policy-relevant recommendations for sustaining equitable, efficient, and resilient public education systems.

Keywords: public school viability, private school proliferation, enrolment trends, resource utilisation,

1. Introduction

Education systems globally are increasingly characterised by the growing involvement of non-state actors in schooling provision. The expansion of private education is closely associated with market-oriented reforms, parental choice, and rising expectations regarding

quality, accountability, and performance (Tooley, 2009; UNESCO, 2022). While such developments are often framed as mechanisms for improving efficiency and responsiveness, emerging evidence suggests that their effects are uneven and highly context-dependent, particularly in low- and middle-income countries. In Sub-Saharan Africa, private schools have become prominent providers, especially in contexts where public systems face persistent challenges related to governance, quality, and resource constraints (Lewin, 2007; World Bank, 2018).

Zimbabwe reflects these broader global and regional trends. Over the past decade, the country has experienced a notable increase in the establishment of private schools across urban, peri-urban, and rural settings. This expansion has diversified educational provision and expanded parental choice; however, it has simultaneously introduced new pressures on public schools, which have historically served as the primary vehicle for equitable access to education since independence in 1980. As private provision grows, the distribution of learners across the education system is increasingly being reshaped by market dynamics rather than coordinated planning.

Recent evidence from Masvingo Province points to a significant shift in learner distribution, characterised by declining enrolments in a number of public schools. School-level observations indicate reductions of up to 40%, while recent provincial data further suggest a substantial contraction in overall enrolment, particularly at the primary level. These shifts have produced observable system effects, including surplus teaching staff, underutilised infrastructure, and declining operational efficiency within public schools. Such developments are consistent with earlier national reports (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education [MoPSE], 2021) but also indicate an intensification of trends that carry important implications for system sustainability.

These emerging patterns raise critical concerns within the policy framework of Zimbabwe's National Development Strategy 2 (NDS 2) and the Curriculum Framework, both of which emphasise equity, quality, and the efficient utilisation of resources (Government of Zimbabwe, 2020; MoPSE, 2015). The persistence of declining enrolment alongside relatively fixed staffing and infrastructure suggests a growing misalignment between system capacity and demand. This misalignment challenges the assumption that increased educational provision, particularly through private sector expansion automatically enhances system-wide efficiency.

Against this backdrop, this study examines how the expansion of private schooling is influencing enrolment patterns, staffing configurations, and resource utilisation in public schools. It further explores the implications of these changes for the viability and sustainability of public education in Zimbabwe. Conceptually, the study advances the notion of *asymmetric marketisation* to explain how competitive pressures within the education sector produce uneven and destabilising effects, disproportionately affecting public institutions in resource-constrained contexts.

2. Problem Statement

The expansion of private schooling in Zimbabwe is occurring alongside a sustained decline in enrolments in public schools, creating emerging structural inefficiencies within the education system. Evidence from both school-level observations and recent provincial data from Masvingo indicates significant reductions in learner numbers, particularly at the primary level. These shifts have resulted in excess teaching capacity, underutilised infrastructure, and rising per-learner costs, raising critical concerns about the efficiency, sustainability, and fiscal viability of public education provision.

While private sector participation has expanded educational choice, its growth has not been accompanied by commensurate adjustments in public system planning. Teacher deployment systems, infrastructure allocation, and school registration processes remain largely static, resulting in a growing misalignment between system capacity and actual demand. This disconnect undermines the effective utilisation of resources and challenges policy assumptions that increased provision necessarily leads to improved system performance.

Despite these developments, there is limited empirical research that systematically examines how private school expansion interacts with enrolment dynamics, staffing structures, and resource utilisation at both institutional and system levels. Existing studies tend to focus on access and learning outcomes, with insufficient attention to system-wide efficiency and public-school viability, particularly within the Zimbabwean context.

This study addresses this gap by analysing the relationship between private school proliferation and enrolment trends, staffing patterns, and resource utilisation in public schools. In doing so, it provides empirically grounded insights to inform policy responses aimed at restoring alignment between educational provision, resource allocation, and system sustainability.

3. Research Questions

To address the identified gap, the study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How has private school proliferation influenced enrolment trends in public schools in Masvingo Province?
2. What effects do changing enrolment patterns have on teacher deployment and resource utilisation in public schools?
3. How do these dynamics affect the overall viability and sustainability of public schools?
4. What policy strategies can enhance alignment between private sector expansion and public education system efficiency?

4. Literature Review

4.1 Marketisation and Education Systems

Marketisation conceptualises education as a quasi-market in which schools compete for enrolment while parents exercise choice as consumers (Tooley, 2009). This paradigm is often associated with improved efficiency, accountability, and responsiveness; however, contemporary evidence increasingly highlights its uneven and context-dependent effects. In many low- and middle-income countries, private school expansion has expanded access while simultaneously reinforcing inequalities in educational opportunity (UNESCO, 2022; World Bank, 2023).

Empirical studies demonstrate that market-driven systems tend to advantage households with greater socio-economic resources, thereby intensifying stratification (Bold et al., 2021; Zuilkowski et al., 2018). In Sub-Saharan Africa, private schools frequently attract higher-performing and more advantaged learners, leaving public schools with a disproportionate concentration of disadvantaged students (Härmä, 2020; Rolleston & Adefeso-Olateju, 2022). This selective sorting has important implications not only for equity but also for the functional balance of education systems.

While much of the literature focuses on access and learning outcomes, less attention has been given to how marketisation reshapes system-level efficiency and institutional viability. This gap is particularly relevant in contexts such as Zimbabwe, where emerging evidence suggests

that private sector expansion is altering enrolment distributions in ways that may destabilise public provision.

4.2 Enrolment Displacement and System Efficiency

Enrolment displacement refers to the movement of learners from public to private schools, typically driven by perceived differences in quality, discipline, and academic performance. Early work (Lewin, 2007) identified this as a potential source of inefficiency; however, more recent studies provide stronger empirical evidence of its systemic consequences. Nishimura and Yamano (2019) show that even modest shifts in enrolment can significantly disrupt resource utilisation patterns, particularly in systems where staffing and infrastructure are relatively fixed.

Declining enrolments in public schools often lead to underutilised facilities and reduced economies of scale, thereby increasing per-learner costs (World Bank, 2023). This creates a paradox in which public systems become less efficient as demand declines. Furthermore, enrolment displacement is rarely uniform; urban and peri-urban schools tend to experience sharper declines due to greater access to private alternatives (Härmä, 2020).

Recent scholarship also emphasises that enrolment shifts are not purely demand-driven but are shaped by perceptions, policy signals, and social dynamics (Rolleston & Adefeso-Olateju, 2022). Evidence emerging from contexts such as Masvingo Province suggests that these dynamics can operate at scale, producing widespread redistribution of learners across the system rather than isolated institutional changes. As such, enrolment displacement should be understood as a systemic process with cascading effects.

4.3 Teacher Deployment and Fiscal Sustainability

Teacher deployment represents one of the most rigid components of public education systems. While staffing policies are designed to ensure equity, they often fail to adjust dynamically to changing enrolment patterns (World Bank, 2018; UNESCO, 2023). This rigidity results in teacher surpluses in low-enrolment schools and shortages elsewhere, undermining both efficiency and equitable access.

The fiscal implications of such inefficiencies are significant. Teacher salaries constitute the largest share of education expenditure in most developing countries, and overstaffing

increases per-learner costs without corresponding gains in learning outcomes (OECD, 2021; World Bank, 2023). Bold et al. (2021) argue that inefficiencies in teacher allocation can offset the benefits of increased investment in education.

In centrally managed systems such as Zimbabwe, administrative and political constraints often limit the reallocation of teachers, reinforcing systemic inertia. Where enrolment decline is rapid, as suggested by recent provincial trends, these rigidities become more pronounced, exacerbating mismatches between supply and demand.

4.4 Resource Utilisation

Efficient utilisation of physical and financial resources is central to education system performance. However, declining enrolments frequently result in underutilised infrastructure, including classrooms, furniture, and learning materials (UNESCO, 2022). In resource-constrained environments, such inefficiencies represent a significant loss of public investment.

Global evidence indicates that infrastructure planning is often based on demographic projections rather than dynamic enrolment patterns, leading to persistent mismatches between capacity and actual demand (OECD, 2021). In Sub-Saharan Africa, these challenges are compounded by limited data systems and weak planning mechanisms, which constrain timely policy responses (World Bank, 2023).

Underutilisation also has indirect effects on school functionality. Schools operating below capacity may experience reduced funding, declining morale among teachers, and diminished community confidence (Zuilkowski et al., 2018). These factors can reinforce enrolment decline, creating a self-reinforcing cycle of inefficiency and institutional weakening.

4.5 Research Gap

Although a growing body of literature examines private school expansion and education marketisation, there remains limited empirical research on how these dynamics interact to affect the viability of public education systems in specific national contexts such as Zimbabwe. Existing studies predominantly focus on access and learning outcomes, with comparatively little attention to system-level efficiency, resource utilisation, and institutional sustainability.

Moreover, there is a lack of integrated analytical frameworks that link enrolment displacement, staffing inefficiencies, and resource utilisation within a unified systems perspective. This limits the ability of policymakers to fully understand the interconnected nature of emerging challenges.

This study addresses these gaps by providing recent empirical evidence from Masvingo Province and advancing an integrated conceptual framework that captures the systemic interactions between private school expansion and public school viability.

5. Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in the integration of Education Marketisation Theory and Systems Theory, providing a multidimensional lens for analysing the effects of private school proliferation.

5.1 Education Marketisation Theory

Education marketisation theory posits that competition among schools, driven by parental choice, can enhance efficiency, accountability, and quality (Tooley, 2009). However, contemporary scholarship suggests that these outcomes are contingent upon contextual factors such as regulatory frameworks, information symmetry, and socio-economic inequalities (Patrinos et al., 2020; UNESCO, 2022).

Recent evidence challenges the assumption of neutral competition, demonstrating that market dynamics often produce stratification rather than system-wide improvement (Bold et al., 2021; Härmä, 2020). In this study, marketisation theory is used to explain how private school expansion shapes parental decision-making and drives enrolment displacement.

5.2 Systems Theory

Systems theory conceptualises education as an interconnected system in which changes in one component generate ripple effects across others (Bertalanffy, 1968). This perspective is particularly valuable for analysing how private sector growth affects public school functioning beyond individual institutions.

Recent applications of systems thinking in education highlight the importance of feedback loops, interdependencies, and unintended policy consequences (OECD, 2021; UNESCO, 2023). Within this study, systems theory explains how enrolment shifts trigger cascading effects, including staffing imbalances, infrastructure underutilisation, and declining system efficiency.

5.3 Integrated Theoretical Perspective

By integrating marketisation and systems theory, this study moves beyond linear explanations to provide a holistic understanding of education system dynamics. Marketisation theory explains the drivers of competition and parental choice, while systems theory captures the structural consequences of these dynamics.

This integrated framework underpins the study’s central contribution: the concept of asymmetric marketisation, whereby private school expansion generates uneven and destabilising effects across the education system. Rather than producing balanced improvements, competitive pressures selectively redistribute learners in ways that undermine the efficiency and sustainability of public education systems, particularly in resource-constrained contexts.

6. Conceptual Framework

Figure 1: Conceptual Model of Public School Viability under Private School Proliferation

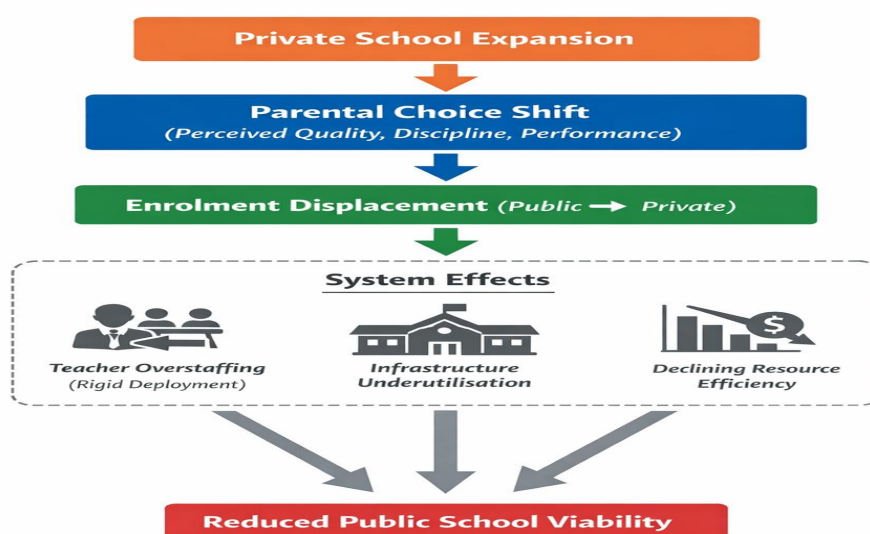


Figure 1: Conceptual Model of Public-School Viability under Private School Proliferation

Figure 1 illustrates the systemic pathways through which the expansion of private schooling influences the operational viability of public schools. The model is grounded in both education marketisation theory and systems theory, demonstrating how shifts in one sector of the education system generate cascading effects across the entire system.

The model begins with private school expansion, which has accelerated in many developing contexts due to policy liberalisation, urbanisation, and rising parental demand for perceived quality education (UNESCO, 2022; World Bank, 2023). In Sub-Saharan Africa, this growth is often driven by dissatisfaction with public school performance, particularly in relation to examination outcomes, discipline, and accountability (Day Ashley et al., 2018; Bold et al., 2021).

This expansion triggers a parental choice shift, where households increasingly opt for private institutions based on perceived advantages in quality, discipline, and learning outcomes. Empirical studies suggest that parental decision-making is not purely based on objective performance metrics but is strongly shaped by social perceptions, peer influence, and school reputation (Härmä, 2020; Rolleston & Adefeso-Olateju, 2022).

As a result, enrolment displacement occurs, characterised by the migration of learners from public to private schools. This phenomenon has been widely documented in low- and middle-income countries, where even modest private sector growth can significantly alter public school enrolment patterns (Lewin, 2007; Nishimura & Yamano, 2019). In Zimbabwe, similar patterns are emerging, particularly in urban and peri-urban areas.

The model then highlights system effects, which represent the structural consequences of enrolment decline in public schools. First, teacher overstaffing arises due to rigid deployment policies that do not adjust dynamically to declining enrolments (World Bank, 2018; UNESCO, 2023). Second, infrastructure underutilisation becomes evident as classrooms, furniture, and learning spaces remain idle despite ongoing maintenance costs. Third, these dynamics contribute to declining resource efficiency, as public expenditure per learner increases without corresponding improvements in outcomes (OECD, 2021; UNESCO, 2022).

These interconnected effects culminate in reduced public school viability, defined in this study as the diminished capacity of public schools to operate efficiently, attract and retain learners, and justify continued investment. This aligns with emerging evidence that

unregulated private sector expansion can weaken public education systems when not accompanied by coordinated planning and regulatory frameworks (Patrinós et al., 2020; World Bank, 2023).

Importantly, the model reflects what this study conceptualises as “asymmetric marketisation”, where competitive pressures do not produce balanced system-wide improvements but instead generate uneven outcomes that disadvantage public institutions. From a systems perspective, this demonstrates how sectoral growth in private education can destabilise equilibrium within the broader education ecosystem (Bertalanffy, 1968).

Overall, Figure 1 provides a holistic framework for understanding how private school proliferation, while expanding educational choice, can simultaneously introduce systemic inefficiencies that threaten the sustainability of public education systems, particularly in resource-constrained contexts.

7. Methodology

7.1 Research Design

This study adopted a convergent mixed-methods descriptive design, integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a comprehensive analysis of public school viability. Mixed-methods designs are particularly suited to complex educational phenomena, as they enable the integration of numerical trends with contextual and experiential insights (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Creswell, 2021).

The quantitative component focused on analysing enrolment trends, staffing configurations, and resource utilisation patterns, while the qualitative component explored stakeholder perceptions of school viability, system pressures, and parental choice dynamics. A convergent design was employed; whereby quantitative and qualitative data were collected concurrently, analysed separately, and integrated during interpretation to enhance validity and explanatory depth (Fetters et al., 2017).

7.2 Study Area

The study was conducted in Masvingo Province, Zimbabwe, a region characterised by diverse socio-economic and geographic contexts, including urban, peri-urban, and rural

districts. This diversity provides an appropriate setting for examining variations in enrolment patterns and school viability across different contexts.

Masvingo has experienced a notable increase in private school establishment over the past decade, alongside observable declines in enrolment in some public schools (MoPSE, 2021; ZIMSTAT, 2022). Recent provincial enrolment data further indicate significant shifts in learner distribution across districts and school levels, reinforcing the relevance of the province as a critical case for analysing system-level effects of non-state provision.

7.3 Population and Sampling

The target population comprised public primary and secondary schools in Masvingo Province, including school heads, teachers, and district education officials.

A multi-stage sampling strategy was employed to ensure representation across school types and locations. In the first stage, schools were stratified into urban, peri-urban, and rural categories. In the second stage, 30 public schools were selected using stratified random sampling to ensure proportional representation.

From these schools:

- 30 school heads were selected (one per school),
- 90 teachers were selected using simple random sampling,
- 5 district education officials were purposively selected based on their administrative roles and system-level expertise.

This sample size is consistent with mixed-methods research standards, which prioritise both representativeness and contextual depth (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010).

7.4 Data Collection Methods

Multiple data collection methods were employed to enhance triangulation, validity, and robustness:

- **Questionnaires:** Structured questionnaires were administered to teachers to collect quantitative data on enrolment trends, workload distribution, and resource utilisation. This approach enabled standardised data collection across the sample (Bryman, 2016).
- **Semi-structured interviews:** Conducted with school heads and district officials to capture in-depth perspectives on school viability, policy constraints, and parental choice dynamics. This method allowed flexibility while maintaining analytical focus (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015).
- **Document analysis:** Institutional records, including enrolment registers, staffing returns, and official reports, were analysed to obtain objective longitudinal data. In addition, provincial enrolment statistics for 2025–2026 were incorporated to validate school-level findings and provide a system-wide perspective on learner distribution.
- **Observation checklists:** Used to assess classroom utilisation, infrastructure use, and physical learning environments, providing direct evidence of resource utilisation (Cohen et al., 2018).

The use of multiple instruments enabled methodological triangulation, thereby strengthening the credibility and reliability of findings (Fetters et al., 2017).

7.5 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistical techniques, including percentages, ratios, and comparative trend analysis. These methods were used to examine changes in enrolment, teacher–pupil ratios, and infrastructure utilisation across schools and over time (Field, 2018).

Qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis, following the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006): data familiarisation, initial coding, theme identification, theme review, definition, and reporting. This approach enabled systematic identification of patterns and meanings within participant responses (Nowell et al., 2017).

Integration of quantitative and qualitative findings occurred during the interpretation stage, ensuring that conclusions were supported by converging evidence and providing a holistic understanding of the research problem (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

7.6 Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to established ethical standards for educational research, guided by the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018) and related frameworks.

Formal permission was obtained from the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MoPSE) and relevant district authorities. Participants were provided with detailed information regarding the purpose and procedures of the study.

Informed consent was obtained prior to participation, and participants were assured of their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty (Creswell, 2021). Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained through the use of pseudonyms and the exclusion of identifiable information.

Data were securely stored and accessed only by the researcher. The study ensured voluntary participation and minimised potential harm, particularly in relation to sensitive issues such as school performance and institutional viability (Wiles, 2013; Israel, 2015).

7.7 Validity, Reliability, and Trustworthiness

Ensuring methodological rigor was central to the study, particularly given the mixed-methods design.

7.7.1 Quantitative Validity and Reliability

Content validity was ensured by aligning instruments with established constructs from existing literature on enrolment dynamics and resource utilisation (World Bank, 2018; UNESCO, 2022). Instruments were reviewed by experts and pilot-tested in two non-sample schools.

Reliability was enhanced through standardised administration procedures and consistent measurement approaches. Where applicable, internal consistency of scales was assessed. Data triangulation with documentary evidence further reduced the risk of self-report bias (Bryman, 2016).

7.7.2 Qualitative Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was ensured using the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985):

- **Credibility:** Achieved through triangulation and prolonged engagement
- **Transferability:** Supported by detailed contextual description
- **Dependability:** Ensured through a clear audit trail
- **Confirmability:** Maintained through systematic coding and evidence-based interpretation

Member checking was conducted to validate interpretations with selected participants.

7.7.3 Integration Validity

Integration validity was achieved by systematically linking quantitative and qualitative findings during interpretation, ensuring that conclusions were grounded in multiple data sources (Fetters et al., 2017).

7.8 Limitations of the Study

Despite efforts to ensure rigor, several limitations should be acknowledged.

First, the study is confined to Masvingo Province, which may limit generalisability. However, the inclusion of diverse school contexts enhances internal representativeness.

Second, reliance on self-reported data introduces potential response bias, mitigated through triangulation with documentary and observational data.

Third, the use of descriptive statistics limits causal inference. While strong associations are identified, further longitudinal or experimental research is required to establish causality.

Fourth, administrative data—particularly historical enrolment records—contained minor inconsistencies, necessitating cautious interpretation. However, these did not significantly affect overall trend analysis.

Finally, the study primarily focuses on system-level and institutional dynamics, with limited exploration of household-level decision-making processes, which could provide additional insight into parental choice behaviour.

8. Findings

8.1 Overview

The findings reveal a consistent and multi-layered pattern of declining enrolment, excess teaching capacity, and underutilised infrastructure across public schools in Masvingo Province. These patterns point to emerging structural imbalances within the education system. Drawing on both school-level data and provincial statistics, the analysis integrates quantitative trends with qualitative insights to explain how private school expansion is reshaping demand and affecting public school viability.

8.2 Enrolment Trends (School-Level Evidence)

Table 1 presents changes in learner enrolment across sampled public schools over a five-year period (2019–2024).

School Category	2019 Enrolment	2024 Enrolment	% Change
Urban Schools	1,200	780	-35%
Peri-Urban	950	620	-34.7%
Rural Schools	700	520	-25.7%

Note. Negative values indicate enrolment decline.
Source: Author's field data (2024).

The results indicate substantial and consistent enrolment declines across all school categories, with urban and peri-urban schools experiencing the most pronounced reductions. The magnitude of decline in urban areas suggests that proximity to private schooling options plays a critical role in shaping parental choice. Peri-urban schools exhibit similar trajectories, indicating that these dynamics extend beyond major urban centres.

Although rural schools show relatively smaller declines, the downward trend remains significant, suggesting that enrolment redistribution is systemic rather than geographically isolated.

8.3 Provincial Enrolment Trends (System-Level Evidence)

To validate school-level findings, provincial enrolment data for 2025–2026 were analysed.

Table 2: Aggregate Enrolment Trends – Masvingo Province

Level	Year	Total Enrolment
Primary	2025	526,107
Primary	2026	440,262
Secondary	2025	150,757
Secondary	2026	138,648

Source: Masvingo Provincial Data (2025–2026).

The provincial data reveal a significant decline in enrolment, particularly at primary level, which decreased by approximately 16.3% within a single year. Secondary enrolment also declined by 8.0%, indicating that the trend extends across the education system.

These findings provide strong system-level confirmation of patterns observed in sampled schools, demonstrating that enrolment decline is not localised but widespread across the province. The sharper decline at primary level suggests early-stage learner migration, with potential long-term implications for system sustainability.

8.4 Staffing Patterns

Table 3 presents changes in teacher–pupil ratios associated with declining enrolment.

Category	2019 Ratio	2024 Ratio	Policy Standard
Urban Schools	1:35	1:18	1:30
Peri-Urban	1:38	1:20	1:30
Rural Schools	1:40	1:25	1:30

Note. Policy standard based on MoPSE guidelines.

Source: Author’s field data (2024).

The findings indicate a substantial divergence from policy benchmarks, with teacher–pupil ratios falling well below the recommended standard. Urban schools exhibit the most pronounced shifts, reflecting significant overstaffing relative to enrolment levels.

While lower ratios are typically associated with improved instructional conditions, in this context they signal inefficiency rather than pedagogical advantage. These patterns indicate that teacher deployment systems are not sufficiently responsive to declining enrolment.

8.5 Resource Utilisation

Table 4 presents classroom utilisation rates as an indicator of infrastructure efficiency.

Category	Capacity	Utilised	Utilisation Rate
Urban Schools	40	24	60%
Peri-Urban	35	22	62.8%
Rural Schools	30	21	70%

Note. Utilisation rate = utilised classrooms ÷ total capacity.

Source: Author’s field data (2024).

The results show substantial underutilisation of infrastructure, particularly in urban and peri-urban schools. These patterns reflect a growing mismatch between system capacity and actual demand.

Although rural schools demonstrate relatively higher utilisation, they still operate below optimal capacity. This indicates that inefficiencies in infrastructure use are systemic rather than location-specific

8.6 Qualitative Findings: Perceptions of Viability

Table 5 summarises key themes emerging from qualitative data.

Theme	Description	Illustrative Quote
Perceived Quality Gap	Private schools seen as offering better outcomes	“Parents believe private schools guarantee success.”
Declining Morale	Teachers demotivated due to low enrolments	“We feel like the school is slowly collapsing.”
Fear of Closure	Concerns about institutional sustainability	“If this continues, closure is inevitable.”

Qualitative findings reveal that parental choice is strongly influenced by perceived quality, discipline, and academic performance in private schools. These perceptions appear to

outweigh objective comparisons, suggesting that reputation plays a central role in shaping enrolment patterns.

Participants also reported declining morale among teachers and school leaders, particularly in contexts of excess staffing and reduced learner numbers. Concerns about school closure further reflect perceived institutional instability, which may reinforce enrolment decline.

8.7 Integrated Interpretation of Findings

Taken together, the findings indicate a systemic misalignment between learner distribution, staffing structures, and resource utilisation. Declining enrolment triggers a chain of interrelated effects, including teacher surpluses and infrastructure underutilisation.

The integration of school-level and provincial data confirms that these patterns are not isolated but reflect broader system dynamics. Qualitative evidence further highlights the role of perception, policy rigidity, and institutional response in reinforcing these trends.

Overall, the findings point to a restructuring of the education system in which public schools face increasing pressure to maintain viability under shifting demand conditions.

9. Discussion

The findings demonstrate that private school proliferation does not merely expand educational choice but actively restructures demand in ways that generate systemic inefficiencies within public education systems. While marketisation theory suggests that competition can enhance quality and accountability (Tooley, 2009; Patrinos et al., 2020), the evidence from Zimbabwe reveals uneven outcomes that may reinforce inequality and destabilise public provision (Bold et al., 2021; Härmä, 2020; UNESCO, 2022).

This study advances the concept of asymmetric marketisation, whereby private school expansion selectively attracts higher-performing and socio-economically advantaged learners, leaving public schools with declining enrolments and relatively fixed resource commitments. The magnitude of decline—reaching up to 40% at school level and over 16% provincially within a single year—highlights the scale at which these dynamics operate.

From a systems perspective, these patterns reflect interdependence within the education sector, where shifts in private provision generate cascading effects across public institutions (Bertalanffy, 1968). Teacher surpluses and underutilised infrastructure are therefore not isolated inefficiencies but indicators of systemic disequilibrium, consistent with findings from other low- and middle-income contexts (Nishimura & Yamano, 2019; World Bank, 2023).

The persistence of rigid teacher deployment systems further exacerbates these inefficiencies. As documented in global literature, staffing policies often fail to respond to changing demand, resulting in sustained mismatches between teacher supply and learner enrolment (World Bank, 2018; UNESCO, 2023). In this context, reduced teacher–pupil ratios increase per-learner costs without necessarily improving learning outcomes (OECD, 2021).

Qualitative findings reinforce the role of perception in shaping educational demand. Parental decisions are strongly influenced by narratives of quality and discipline associated with private schools, rather than purely objective measures. This perception-driven migration contributes to a self-reinforcing cycle of decline in public school viability.

Crucially, the findings challenge the assumption that private sector expansion inherently complements public education systems. While private provision can increase access, the evidence suggests that, in the absence of coordinated regulation and planning, it may undermine system efficiency and sustainability (UNESCO, 2022, 2023; World Bank, 2023).

Overall, private school proliferation is reshaping the education landscape in ways that disrupt system equilibrium and generate structural inefficiencies. These findings underscore the need for integrated, data-driven policy responses that align private sector growth with public system planning to ensure sustainable and equitable education provision.

10. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that private school proliferation in Zimbabwe, while expanding educational choice, is generating significant and unintended systemic consequences for public education. Evidence from both school-level analysis and recent provincial data from Masvingo confirms that enrolment displacement is occurring at scale, with particularly sharp declines at primary level. When combined with rigid teacher deployment systems and

relatively fixed infrastructure, these shifts produce structural inefficiencies that undermine the operational viability of public schools.

The findings reveal a fundamental misalignment between learner distribution, staffing structures, and resource allocation. Rather than improving system-wide efficiency, the expansion of private provision—when uncoordinated—reconfigures demand in ways that destabilise public education systems. This underscores the limits of market-driven assumptions in contexts where institutional adaptability is constrained.

Without deliberate and coordinated policy intervention, these dynamics risk eroding the sustainability, equity, and cost-effectiveness of state-funded education. The study, therefore, calls for a reconceptualisation of education planning as a dynamic, system-wide balancing process, in which public and private provision are managed within an integrated and responsive policy framework rather than allowed to evolve in parallel.

10.1 Contribution to Knowledge

This study makes three key contributions to the literature on education systems and marketisation.

First, it provides recent empirical evidence from a Sub-Saharan African context, demonstrating that private school expansion can generate system-level inefficiencies, particularly when enrolment shifts are not matched by adaptive planning mechanisms. By incorporating both institutional and provincial-level data, the study strengthens the empirical basis for analysing system-wide effects.

Second, the study introduces and develops the concept of asymmetric marketisation, showing how private school growth selectively redistributes learners in ways that disproportionately disadvantage public institutions. This concept advances existing marketisation theory by highlighting the uneven and destabilising consequences of competition in resource-constrained contexts.

Third, the study extends the application of systems theory in education, demonstrating how changes in one sub-sector (private provision) generate cascading effects across staffing, infrastructure, and resource utilisation in the public sector. This integrated perspective

provides a more holistic framework for understanding education system dynamics beyond linear or institution-specific analyses.

Collectively, these contributions advance scholarly debates by foregrounding the importance of system alignment, adaptive governance, and policy coherence in managing education systems in low- and middle-income contexts.

11. Recommendations

Drawing on the findings, the study proposes the following policy and practice recommendations:

1. Strategic Regulation of Private School Expansion

Establish and enforce context-sensitive criteria for school registration based on geographic need, enrolment trends, and existing system capacity. This would prevent oversaturation in high-density areas and reduce unregulated competition that destabilises public schools.

2. Dynamic Teacher Deployment Systems

Reform teacher allocation mechanisms to enable real-time responsiveness to enrolment changes. This includes periodic redeployment, flexible staffing models, and the use of data-driven decision systems to minimise teacher surpluses and shortages.

3. Adoption of Enrolment-Based Funding Models

Align resource allocation with actual learner numbers through enrolment-driven funding frameworks. Such models would improve efficiency, enhance accountability, and ensure more equitable distribution of public resources.

4. Strengthening Quality and Accountability in Public Schools

Invest in instructional leadership, teacher professional development, and performance monitoring systems to improve learning outcomes and restore public confidence. Addressing perception gaps is critical to stabilising enrolment.

5. Development of Integrated Public–Private Policy Frameworks

Promote coordinated planning between public and private sectors through data-sharing mechanisms, joint planning platforms, and regulatory alignment. This would ensure that private sector growth complements rather than undermines public system sustainability.

11. Recommendations

Drawing on the findings, the study proposes the following policy and practice recommendations:

11.1 Strategic Regulation of Private School Expansion

Establish and enforce context-sensitive criteria for school registration based on geographic demand, enrolment trends, and system capacity. This will help prevent oversaturation in urban and peri-urban areas and minimise destabilising competition with public schools.

11.2 Dynamic Teacher Deployment Systems

Reform teacher allocation mechanisms to enable **adaptive and data-driven deployment**. This should include periodic redeployment, flexible staffing models, and decentralised decision-making to align teacher supply with real-time enrolment patterns.

11.3 Enrolment-Based Funding Models

Adopt **learner-centred funding frameworks** that allocate resources based on actual enrolment figures. This approach would enhance efficiency, improve accountability, and ensure more equitable distribution of public resources.

11.4 Strengthening Quality Assurance in Public Schools

Enhance instructional quality through continuous professional development, instructional leadership strengthening, and performance monitoring systems. Addressing perceived quality gaps is critical to restoring public confidence and stabilising enrolment.

11.5 Integrated Public–Private Policy Frameworks

Develop coordinated frameworks that align public and private sector planning through regulatory harmonisation, data sharing, and joint strategic planning mechanisms. This will

ensure that private sector growth complements rather than undermines public system sustainability.

11.6 Strengthening Education Data Systems (EMIS)

Develop robust Education Management Information Systems (EMIS) capable of tracking enrolment trends, staffing patterns, and infrastructure utilisation in real time. Such systems are essential for enabling proactive, evidence-based policy responses and reducing systemic lag.

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