

# Secondary Education Costs in Malawi: What Financial Barriers Persist?

Evidence from the Malawi Secondary Education Expansion for Development (SEED) Impact Evaluation Midline Survey

## Introduction

In Malawi, fewer than half of primary school students transition to public secondary schools, with the transition rate increasing from 37% in 2021 to 43% in 2022.<sup>1</sup> Students who enroll in a Form 1 school often have to travel long distances or board, and the cumulative costs of secondary education pose a financial burden for many families. The Malawi Ministry of Education (MoE) announced a 2018–19 strategy to increase secondary school enrollment that included:

- **Secondary school expansion and construction.** A \$90 million SEED project investment co-funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the U.S. President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) to expand existing urban Community Day Secondary Schools (CDSSs) in Blantyre, Lilongwe, Mzuzu, and Zomba and the construction of new CDSSs in rural areas. The first group of 30 new rural SEED schools opened in January 2023.
- **Abolishing select secondary fees.** Tuition fees, the textbook revolving fund, and general purpose fund fees were abolished in all government secondary schools in January 2019.

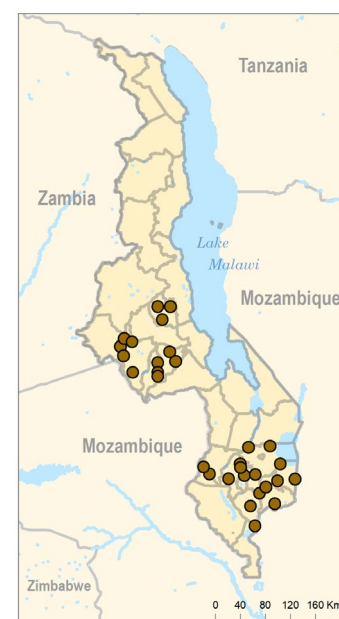
Despite the elimination of these fees, secondary education costs persist as a predominant barrier to schooling. This brief presents quantitative and qualitative data triangulated from the Malawi SEED midline impact evaluation survey respondents, including rural students, their caregivers, and head teachers about perceived and actual barriers to educational achievement, including the financial costs of sending children to school. A corresponding [brief](#) from baseline evaluation data was published in 2022.

## Methods

Midline quantitative data were collected between June 2023–July 2023 in Central and Southern Malawi through surveys with students, their caregivers, community leaders, and primary and secondary school head teachers; these respondents were sampled from rural primary schools in intervention and comparison areas at baseline. The midline panel included 469 prospective cohort students enrolled in Standard 7 during the 2021 academic year, including 141 students who had transitioned to Form 1 during the 2022–2023 academic year, 40 public primary schools, and 76 public secondary schools.<sup>2</sup> Aggregate results are presented as there were no significant differences in cost-related indicators among study groups at midline.

Rural qualitative data were collected through focus group discussions (FGDs) with Standard 7 youth, Form 1 students at new SEED CDSSs, caregivers, and key informant interviews with Form 1 teachers and community leaders. Additional details can be found in the [midline report](#).

Figure 1. New rural SEED schools



<sup>1</sup> Ministry of Education. (2023). 2023 Malawi Education Statistics Report: Electronic Management Information Systems (EMIS). <https://www.education.gov.mw/index.php/edu-resources/documents-and-publications/category/8-press-release?download=143:2023-emis-report-final>.

<sup>2</sup> All secondary schools were CDSSs except for one Open Day secondary school in the Central Malawi comparison group.

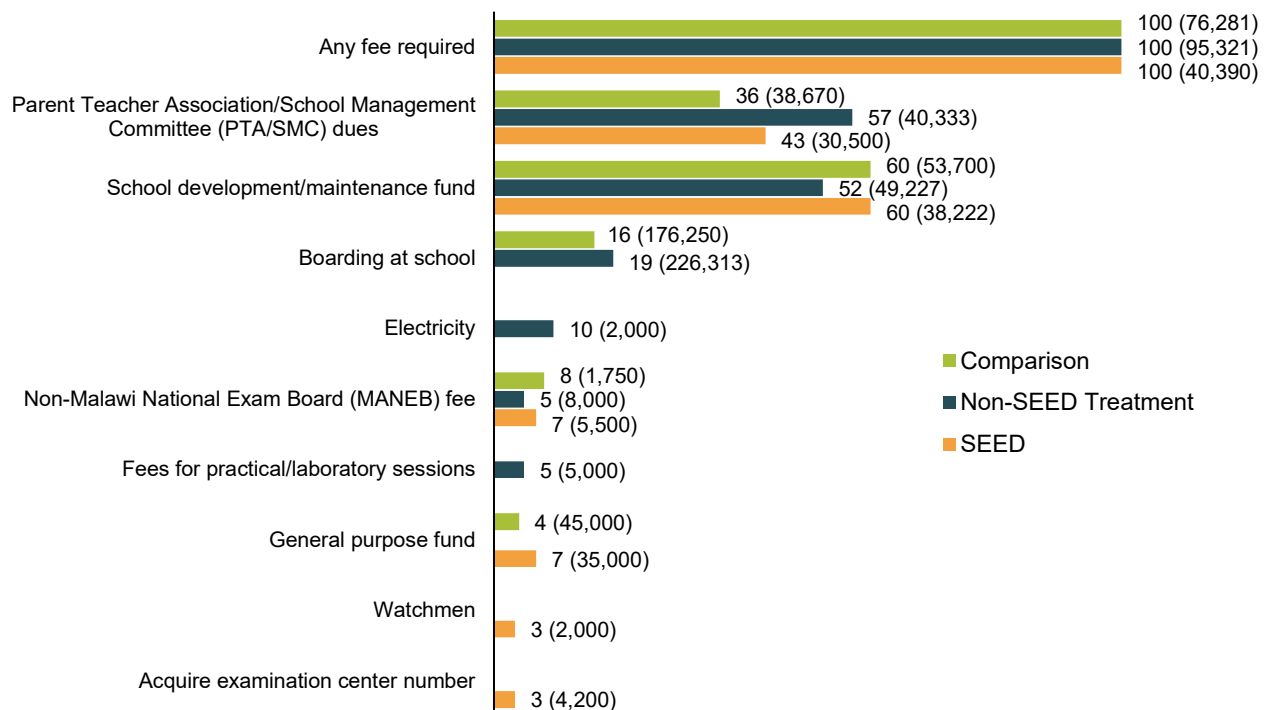


## Key Findings

### School-Reported Costs

Figure 2 indicates the percentage of secondary schools that require a specific fee, with the average annual cost (MWK) in parentheses. Overall, all schools (comparison, treatment, and SEED) required any fee. Forty-three percent of SEED schools required contributions from Parent Teacher Associations/School Management Committees (PTAs/SMCs); 60% from school development funds; and less than 10% reported contributions for a general purpose fund, watchmen, and examination center number. More than half of non-SEED treatment schools reported contributions from PTAs/SMCs and school development funds; nearly 20% for boarding at school; and 10% or less for electricity, exam board fees, and laboratory sessions. Among comparison schools, more than one-third reported PTA/SMC contributions, 60% school development funds, and 16% for boarding. Less than 10% of comparison schools received contributions for exam board fees and general purpose fund.

**Figure 2. Percentage of CDSSs reporting required annual contributions from learners at evaluation midline (average MWK)<sup>3</sup>**



### Household-Reported Costs

Overall, 99% of prospective cohort students who transitioned to Form 1 had an average of MWK 103,091 in education-related expenditures during the 2022–2023 academic year (N=140 students).

### School Dropout

Fifty prospective cohort students in Standard 8 during the January–September 2022 academic year dropped out of school at evaluation midline. Among these 50 students, 71% reported financial/cost issues and 3% reported lacking money for development funds as their main reasons for dropping out.

<sup>3</sup> The secondary school sample includes 25 comparison schools, 21 non-SEED treatment schools, and 30 SEED schools. Only one school reported requiring contributions for a school watchman, and this SEED school indicated the contribution would not be required in subsequent academic years.



Secondary schools reported whether any Form 1 students dropped out of school during the current academic year due to an inability to pay financial contributions required by the school. Thirty percent of both comparison CDSSs (N=23) and non-SEED treatment CDSSs (N=20), reported any dropouts due to financial constraints, compared to 48% of SEED schools (N=29).

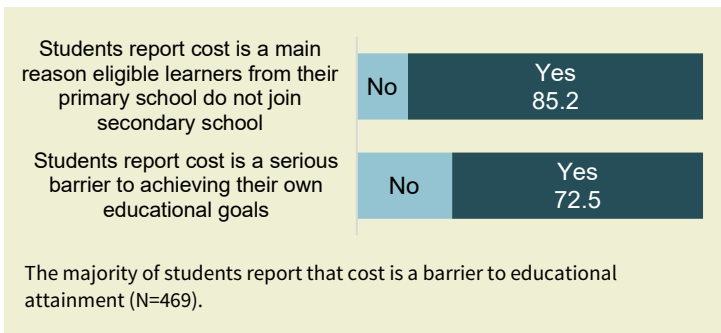
*“My parents, they struggle to pay my school fees. So that gives me worries that although I work hard at school but one day I will leave school because of that.”*

—Form 1 male student, FGD

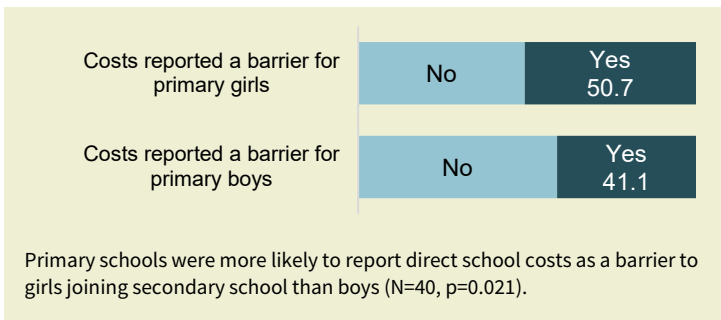
## Cost Concerns

Anticipation of high costs to attend secondary school was widespread and shaped the expectations and aspirations of youth.

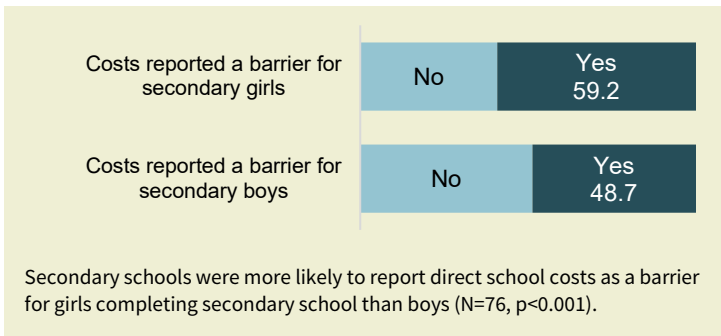
**Figure 3. Students report that cost is a barrier**



**Figure 4. Primary schools report that cost is a barrier**



**Figure 5. Secondary schools report that cost is a barrier**



## Recommendations

Two critical recommendations for increased community involvement are:

- Recent national regulations require any school fees exceeding MWK 1,000 to receive clearance from the MoE. PTAs/SMCs should be informed of this restriction by their local school to improve oversight of secondary school fee structures and empower students and caregivers to be aware of their financial obligations and rights.
- Parents want to support and sustain local secondary schools but are unsure how. MoE partners working with students, caregivers, and secondary schools could encourage PTAs/SMCs to organize volunteer-based income-generating activities at the school to offset school development costs and replenish consumables such as soap and chalk. Examples of such activities include school gardens or handicrafts for sale.

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