

**Williams College – Center for Development Economics**  
**Policy Brief**

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**The Politics of Education in Uganda**

*Can politics help or hurt Teacher reform?*

**1. Introduction**

*Politics, Education & History of Uganda*

In 1986, the National Resistance Army (NRA), under the leadership of Gen Y.K. Museveni ascended to power having fought a successful liberation war against the dictatorial government of Dr. Apollo Milton Obote. Following a turbulent political history starting from the attainment of independence in 1962, the new leader characterized the new regime as a ‘fundamental change’ from the past, a decisive break from the conflict-riddled and destructive political competition of the preceding 23 years. True to promise, the National Resistance Movement, as the political party came to be known, eagerly commenced necessary reforms to transform Uganda. Shortly after, the famous NRM Ten-Point Program was developed. It was heavily skewed toward democracy, security, and institutional development. Notably, it did not, in any material way, address a vision for the health and education of Ugandans.

An award-winning documentary conveniently titled “Our Friends at the Bank” produced in 1997, serialized the budding relationship and discussions between the World Bank and the newly formed fragile Ugandan state in the late 1980s. It captured in great detail, the opposing ideas for Uganda’s development needs between the Bank and the new Ugandan Government. Whereas the World Bank favored investment in education spending, among a raft of other liberal trade reforms, the President was partial towards if not adamant about the need for “hard infrastructure” like roads as well as military spending to stave off civil conflict in the nascent state.

The President was motivated by his ideological interpretation of the needs of Uganda at the time as well as the high political capital available to him to pursue these objectives. Though, initially successful, mounting pressure from the multi-lateral neo-liberal funding agencies viz World Bank, and the IMF, coupled with a quickly rising young population and more local political pressure to solve social issues, the NRM government finally capitulated. In 1997, they embarked on a far-reaching and pioneering reform to unconditionally remove any cost barrier to basic education-making it free for all!

This lesson from Uganda’s political history illustrates an important point - Education is deeply Political

In a previous brief on stemming the learning crisis in Uganda<sup>1</sup>, I argued for the reformation of teacher-student interaction by targeting teacher productivity, through either performance-related incentives and/or training and community participation. This paper seeks to functionalize the recommendation on how to deliver performance-related incentives (pegged to teacher attendance) whose only chance of success is by ably navigating the murky politics that surround education governance. The next section, will anchor the importance of politics in the delivery of education outcomes and lay the foundation for why

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<sup>1</sup> (Okot 2023)

it must be tackled explicitly. The third section deals with the specific politics surrounding the proposed reform in Uganda. The fourth section will outline the key approaches to ensure political arrangements facilitate instead of frustrate the reforms. The final section will provide a conclusion.

## **2. Why Is Politics Important**

*Politics have no relation to morals. - Niccolo Machiavelli*

### ***Adverse outcomes***

The starting assumption that all education programs are designed to maximize learning outcomes is simplistic and easily falsifiable. In fact, decisions in the education sector are influenced by elite preferences on what purpose education should serve and notions of national identity.<sup>2</sup> It is also a function of other important dynamics such as fiscal position, and many times is used as a performative tool of political posturing. In sum, education is at its core instrumented by political dynamics. For instance, it explains why politicians prefer tangible education projects like school construction that are visible by the electorate and can be conveniently claimed by the political elite. Conversely, bureaucrats and politicians alike shy away from complex intangible education reforms that are more long-term and effortful to implement.<sup>3</sup>

### ***Corruption***

The overall political context, if lacking in accountability influences downstream provincialism and short-sighted behavior within the education system which ultimately culminates in the vice of corruption. This is exemplified in the cases of the billion-dollar civil service entrance exam scam in India and irregular awards of contracts by schools in New York.<sup>4</sup> Inevitably, such behavior, toxifies the reform environment and radicalizes actors. Using one of the canonical assumptions in the theory of political science which is: where a small group with concentrated benefits (corrupt bureaucrats) and a large group with diffuse costs (poor beneficiaries of public education) have cross purposes, the majority group's interests may not be realized.<sup>5</sup> This reinforces an important mechanism for the effect of politics on education through corruption.

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<sup>2</sup> (Ochieng'Opalo 2022)

<sup>3</sup> (World Bank Group 2018)

<sup>4</sup> (World Bank Group 2018)

<sup>5</sup> (Olson 1971)

### 3. The Politics of Teaching In Uganda

#### *I shall Teach you a Lesson*

In June 2022, Ugandan teachers laid down their tools. This industrial action follows what has become an almost annual trend in primary, secondary as well as higher education, over the last decade. The main bone of contention, unsurprisingly, is teacher welfare, proxied by wages. Science Teachers demanded a fourfold salary increase, in line with an earlier commitment for pay enhancement by The President. Teachers of Arts subjects are demanding an equal increment in under a year.

Teachers are able to commandeer public sympathy because of the perceived nobility of their profession. Furthermore, they can channel the public disdain for a faceless unresponsive government to secure passionate public support for their cause.

As such, as tends to be the case, Government has succumbed to the immense pressure and started with the enhancement for science teachers in July 2022. Moreover, because of the absence of any observable link between pay rise and better performance<sup>6</sup>, this increment may unfortunately not result in better learning outcomes

#### *Teacher Unions – pivotal actors*

*Figure 1: The Cartoon below appeared in a Ugandan newspaper during the most recent teacher strike. The Head of State is talking to his wife, the First Lady who is also the Minister of Education and Sports (MoES). She is seen to be caring for an infant – who in this case is the Uganda National Teachers Union (UNATU), the body supposedly responsible for challenging the MoES to meet teachers' demands. This speaks to the curious relationships between the Government and the leadership of the Teachers' Unions and the public skepticism that comes as a result*



<sup>6</sup> (World Bank Group 2018)

In many countries, the key political actor of interest with respect to teacher reform is the Teachers' Unions. Teachers are a large number relative to the labor force and because of their high degree of organization based on their homogeneity,<sup>7</sup> they are a magnet for 'sympathetic' politicians seeking affiliation. Uganda is no exception. The Uganda National Teachers Association (UNATU) comprises over 130,000 members<sup>8</sup>. With an electorate of roughly 10 million voters and a labor force of 17 million, this proportion is not insignificant. If you also consider that there are 341,219 teachers in total, including those not part of the union, the sheer power in numbers is undeniable. UNATU is larger than any other single labor union and dwarfs the farmers' and transport workers' unions who are second and third in terms of size of membership.

The immersion of UNATU in local electoral politics is further evidenced by the fact that the last two Chairpersons for the Unions have attempted to join electoral politics after their terms expired. This calls into question the independence of the institution as a vehicle for serving member interests.

As things stand, therefore, there are overlapping interests and unobservable undercurrents governing relationships between national politicians, teacher lobby groups as well as the general public. However, because of their very nature, these relationships are not institutional and remain largely unpredictable. To that extent, the prevailing political configurations with teaching in Uganda, fragmented and inconsistent, are not inherently conducive for implementing an elaborate reform like tracking and rewarding teacher attendance.

It is therefore necessary, that carefully crafted political strategies are paired with the implementation of these reforms for the sake of viability.

#### 4. Approaches to Make Politics Work For Education

*Figure 2 below shows a summary matrix of different strategies and approaches with varying degrees of impact and levels of friction of political actors in the process of the proposed teacher reform of teacher attendance-based pay incentives*

		IMPACT	
		LOW	HIGH
FRICTION	LOW	Activate auxiliary partners Agility/Experimentation/Innovation	Sweeteners: capacity building for low performing school (districts)
	HIGH		Building Coalitions Performance Information

<sup>7</sup> (Burns, Macdonald and Schneider 2019)

<sup>8</sup> (UNATU n.d.)

## i. Coalitions

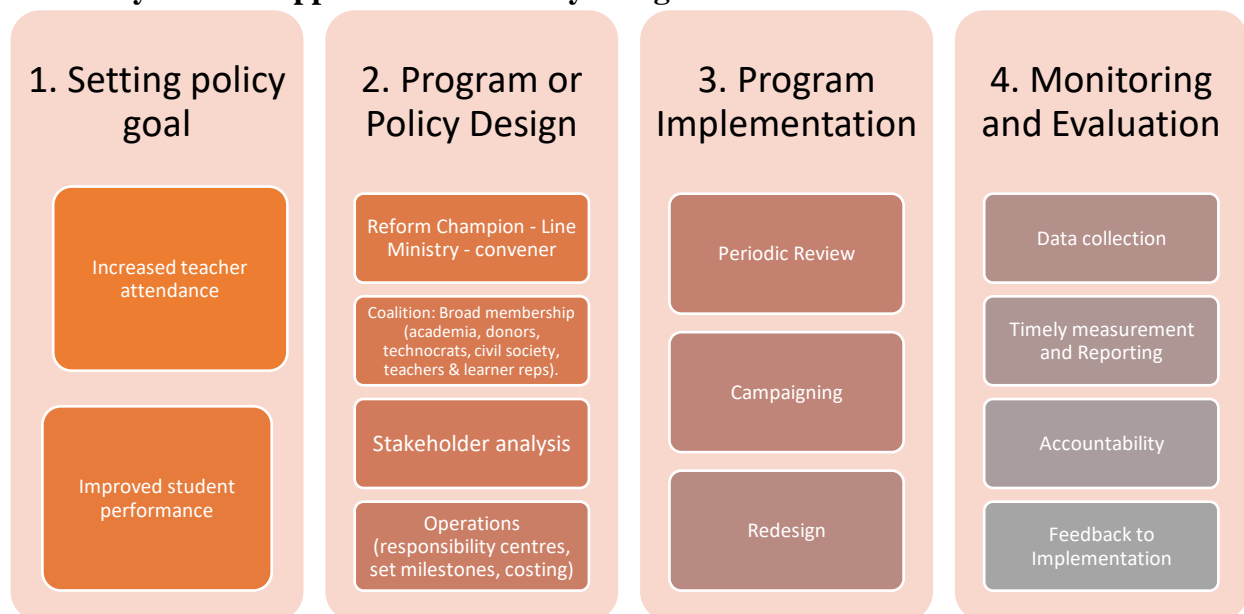
*The Enemy of my Enemy is my friend*

The most effective panacea for bad politics is to forge collective action. Mobilizing a coalition will be a central pillar of implementing attendance-based incentives so as to encourage ownership, alignment, and consensus. The coalition must be a highly consultative<sup>9</sup> and objective platform for debating specific elements of the policy reform. It should be as broad-based as possible to include, unions, academia, civil society, political leaders, technocrats and other development agencies. This co-optation must be constructive and deliberate for instance using the model of the 6-week service delivery labs set up in Tanzania to push deep reforms in their education sector.<sup>10</sup> This is also advantageous for purposes of visibility of the reform.

To elicit the involvement of a pivotal political actor like the Uganda National Association of Teachers Union, the Government may consider a show of goodwill by financially facilitating their internal efforts to improve accountability, governance, and teachers' capacity.

Whereas adversarial methods of engaging with unions to shave their political power have shown some results in Ecuador and Mexico, in other areas like Chile, we noted significant gains in curating a productive low-friction collaboration with the teachers' unions. This will be more sustainable even as regimes change.<sup>11</sup>

**A more systematic approach for delivery using a coalition is illustrated below:**



<sup>9</sup> (Burns, Macdonald and Schneider 2019)

<sup>10</sup> (World Bank Group 2018)

<sup>11</sup> (Burns, Macdonald and Schneider 2019)

## **ii. Coupling inducements**

### *The Carrot and the Sweet*

Relatedly, in addition to rewarding teacher attendance; engagements with Teachers should be strengthened by providing ongoing teaching support in low-performance areas. This can be done by creating a feedback mechanism that annually compiles teacher concerns that limit their capacity to attend class – with a view toward systematically addressing them in a more customized fashion based on specific constraints.

## **iii. Information**

Publishing timely and accurate information on results can be vital. There is already evidence from within Uganda, where publishing capitation grants to schools led to higher accountability in the management of these funds by school authorities.<sup>12</sup> Improving the tracking of reforms<sup>13</sup> can have a positive impact on teacher's responsiveness to attendance. It is critical to track these leading indicators of attendance in the interim because lagging indicators of outcomes related to learning take longer and yet managing expectations for immediate results in the short term is problematic.

## **iv. Agility/Experimentation/Innovation**

Implementing attendance-based pay incentives has to be agile and respond to feedback within the system that is tracking its efficacy. To secure political support, government should demonstrate to counterparts in the process, a genuine willingness to review, re-evaluate and re-deploy where areas for improvement become apparent.<sup>14</sup> The way to accomplish this will be by codifying it in negotiated agreements with stakeholders indicating that administrative measures will respond to new information within a set time frame and using a clear methodology such as mid-term reviews or annual reviews. However, these changes or improvements must be based on accurate and credible information to prevent infiltration by motivated political opportunists.

## **v. Activate Auxiliary Partners**

Government must expand the role of other important actors such as development partners (e.g. the World Bank, USAID, DFID, IDB etc) who have made substantial investments in improving education in Uganda. Such institutions should be encouraged to support efforts

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<sup>12</sup> (World Bank Group 2018)

<sup>13</sup> (Burns, Macdonald and Schneider 2019)

<sup>14</sup> (Burns, Macdonald and Schneider 2019)

to finance key aspects of the reform, provide technical assistance, share data for decision making and spearhead the conduct of relevant research.<sup>15</sup>

Effectively onboarding such external support will be an opportunity for fairly objective influence on the policy actions taken to implement the reform.

## **5. Conclusion**

The politics of education involve a multiplicity of actors, with varying interests and different levels of bargaining power. However, this balance of power keeps changing in ways that are hard to predict or control.

Taming the fluctuation of shifts in agency and political bargaining power implies a need for using an approach that is broadly inclusive to key stakeholders, for it to be sustainable. In this specific case of using teacher attendance to provide added incentives – the key political constituency is the teachers and their Union.

The implication, therefore, is that their involvement as key stakeholders is paramount for this reform; but for it to succeed ultimately, building an effective coalition comprising more skills, resources, and influence from a wide spectrum is unavoidable.

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<sup>15</sup> (Burns, Macdonald and Schneider 2019)

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