EdinBurg Peer-Reviewed Journals and Books Publishers
Journal of Sociology, Psychology & Religious Studies
Vol. 6||Issue 4||pp 47-59||June||2026
Email: info@edinburgjournals.org||ISSN: 2790-0118

Effects of Dysfunctional Family Backgrounds on Academic Performance: A Case Study of Selected Secondary Schools in Tharaka Nithi County, Kenya

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Accepted: 23 April 2026 || Published: 08 June 2026

Abstract

This study examined the effects of dysfunctional family backgrounds on the academic performance of secondary school students in Tharaka Nithi County, Kenya, focusing on emotional, motivational, behavioural, and academic outcome dimensions. A descriptive cross-sectional mixed-methods design was adopted. Quantitative data were collected from 319 students using the Family Assessment Device questionnaire, while qualitative data were obtained through interviews and focus group discussions with teachers, counselors, and students. Stratified random and purposive sampling techniques were applied. Data were analyzed using SPSS for descriptive, correlation, and regression analysis, while qualitative data were thematically analyzed. The study found that family dysfunction had a statistically significant but weak negative effect on academic performance. Emotional distress, low motivation and self-esteem, behavioural problems, and reduced concentration emerged as key pathways linking dysfunctional family environments to poor academic outcomes. Although many students maintained average performance, a notable proportion faced academic challenges, including absenteeism, low engagement, and difficulty concentrating. Support strategies, such as counseling and mentorship, were present but had limited impact when implemented in isolation. The findings highlight the need for comprehensive and integrated interventions that address both psychosocial and academic needs of students. Schools, families, and policymakers should collaborate to strengthen counseling services, mentorship programs, and resource support, while addressing broader socio-economic challenges that contribute to family dysfunction.

Keywords: *Dysfunctional family, academic performance, emotional distress, student behaviour, secondary schools, Kenya*

How to Cite: Ngari, A. K. N., Ireri, N., & Gachuri, E. (2026). Effects of Dysfunctional Family Backgrounds on Academic Performance: A Case Study of Selected Secondary Schools in Tharaka Nithi County, Kenya. *Journal of Sociology, Psychology and Religious Studies, 6*(4), 47-59.

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1. Introduction

The relationship between family background and students' academic performance is widely recognized as a critical determinant of educational outcomes globally. Dysfunctional family environments, characterized by conflict, instability, neglect, and limited parental support, can negatively affect learners' emotional well-being, concentration, and motivation, ultimately impairing academic achievement. Evidence from various contexts shows that students from unstable family backgrounds are more likely to experience academic challenges than those from stable environments (Omondi & Wanjiku, 2023; Chilan & Cedeño, 2022; Ndunda & Zindiye, 2023).

Globally and within Africa, the effects of dysfunctional family backgrounds are intensified by socio-economic challenges such as poverty, domestic violence, and limited access to social support systems. These factors contribute to psychological stress, reduced cognitive functioning, and poor school engagement among students. Although interventions such as school counseling and support programs have been introduced, their effectiveness is often limited by resource constraints and cultural barriers, particularly in developing regions (Sun & Li, 2021; Mujica & Kalpana, 2022; Kamau & Njoroge, 2022).

In Kenya, and specifically in Tharaka Nithi County, these challenges are more pronounced due to high levels of poverty, limited educational resources, and inadequate support infrastructure. Students from dysfunctional families often face absenteeism, low academic motivation, and additional responsibilities such as income generation, which further hinder their academic performance. Despite efforts by government and non-governmental organizations, gaps remain in addressing the emotional and academic needs of these learners, necessitating context-specific interventions to improve educational outcomes (Ndegwa & Chege, 2022; Ngugi & Karanja, 2023; Wanjiru & Mwangi, 2023).

1.1 Problem Statement

In Tharaka Nithi County, many students originate from dysfunctional families marked by conflict, neglect, and instability, negatively impacting their academic performance and emotional well-being (Masindano & Kimathi, 2021). Global and regional studies link family dysfunction to poor academic outcomes, absenteeism, and behavioural problems (Bowers et al., 2022; VanderWeele et al., 2021; Ochieng & Mungai, 2020). Students face emotional stress, lack of parental support, and exposure to negative behaviours like substance abuse, leading to low self-esteem, poor concentration, and underachievement (Kibet et al., 2020; Oketch et al., 2019). Rural challenges such as poverty and inadequate support services exacerbate these issues (Muturi & Waweru, 2020). Despite growing concern, limited localized research exists, creating a gap in evidence-based interventions (Ngigi & Wairimu, 2022). This study addresses this by examining the effects of dysfunctional family backgrounds on student performance.

1.2 Specific Objectives:

1. To assess the emotional distress caused by dysfunctional family backgrounds on students' academic performance.
2. To evaluate low motivation and self-esteem resulting from dysfunctional family backgrounds on students' academic performance.
3. To examine increased behavioural issues associated with dysfunctional family backgrounds on students' academic performance.

4. To investigate poor academic outcomes linked to dysfunctional family backgrounds.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical review

This study is guided by two theories: Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and Bowlby's Attachment Theory.

2.1.1 Ecological Systems Theory

Bronfenbrenner's theory posits that human development is influenced by interrelated environmental systems: microsystem (immediate family), mesosystem (interactions between home and school), exosystem (indirect influences like parental work stress), and macrosystem (broader cultural norms). In dysfunctional families, microsystem elements like conflict and neglect disrupt emotional well-being and academic focus. Mesosystem tensions, such as poor home-school relations, increase absenteeism. Exosystem factors like economic instability exacerbate dysfunction, while macrosystem stigma around mental health limits help-seeking. This framework highlights how layered environments affect academic performance.

2.1.2 Attachment Theory

Bowlby's theory emphasizes the role of early caregiver bonds in emotional regulation. Secure attachments foster stability and social skills, while insecure ones, from neglect or unavailability, lead to anxiety, low self-esteem, and relational difficulties (Bowlby, 1969; Ainsworth, 1978). In dysfunctional families, insecure attachments contribute to emotional distress, behavioral issues, and poor academic outcomes by impeding concentration and motivation.

2.2 Empirical Review

Dysfunctional family backgrounds hinder academic success through emotional, motivational, behavioural, and outcome-related effects (Lamborn et al., 2020). Family conflict causes stress and anxiety, reducing focus and participation (Smith & Johnson, 2023). Neglect leads to insufficient supervision, lowering motivation and self-esteem (Miller et al., 2021). Emotional instability from substance abuse or violence results in distress, absenteeism, and behavioral problems like aggression or withdrawal (Mujica & Kalpana, 2022). These manifest in poor grades, disciplinary issues, and underachievement (Lamborn et al., 2020). Globally, Bowers et al. (2022) found that family instability mediates the relationship between school engagement and achievement, while VanderWeele et al. (2021) linked parental divorce to lower adolescent academic outcomes in Europe. In rural contexts, Chilan and Cedeño (2022) reported significant negative impacts on students in Ecuador. In Africa, socio-economic factors amplify these effects, with poverty and violence linked to cognitive disruptions and low achievement (Mujica & Kalpana, 2022; Kamau & Njoroge, 2022). Kenyan studies show neglect and conflict correlate with absenteeism and poor performance (Omondi & Wanjiku, 2023; Ndegwa & Chege, 2022; Kibet et al., 2020). Ochieng and Mungai (2020) highlighted discipline problems in informal settlements, while Masindano and Kimathi (2021) noted socio-economic influences in rural Kenya. Interventions like counselling mitigate these, but gaps persist in rural areas (Mason & Sweeney, 2022; Ngugi & Karanja, 2023).

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Vol. 6||Issue 4||pp 47-59||June||2026
Email: info@edinburgjournals.org||ISSN: 2790-0118

3. Methodology

This study used a descriptive cross-sectional mixed-methods design in Tharaka Nithi County, Kenya, targeting 15,000 students, 750 teachers, and 40 counselors from 40 secondary schools. Stratified random sampling selected 390 students; purposive sampling chose 30 teachers and counselors. Data collection involved the Family Assessment Device (FAD) questionnaire (Epstein et al., 1983) for quantitative data on family functioning, semi-structured interviews with teachers/counselors, and focus group discussions (FGDs) with students. A pilot in Meru County tested instruments; validity was ensured through expert review, and reliability through Cronbach's alpha (≥0.7). Quantitative analysis used SPSS for descriptives, correlations, and regression; qualitative data underwent thematic analysis. Ethical approvals were obtained from AIU-ISERC and NACOSTI; informed consent was obtained to ensure confidentiality.

4. Results

4.1 Demographic Characteristics

Of 390 questionnaires, 319 were analyzed (82% response rate). Demographics: 52% male, 48% female; 60.5% aged 17-19; 75.9% boarding schools; 52.4% lived with both parents. Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents (N=319).

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	166	52.0
	Female	153	48.0
Age	17-19 years	193	60.5
School Type	Boarding	242	75.9
Living Arrangement	Both parents	167	52.4

FAD scores (mean 2.7-3.2) indicated moderate dysfunction. Objective

4.2 Descriptive and Thematic Analysis Results of Key Variables

4.2.1 Prevalence of Family Dysfunctionality

The first objective of the study was to determine the prevalence of family dysfunction in schools in Tharaka Nithi County. The findings indicated that family dysfunctionality among students was generally moderate, with varied experiences in conflict, communication, emotional connection, and stress. While many students reported relatively stable environments, a considerable proportion experienced emotional strain and inconsistent support. These findings support the ecological systems theory, which emphasizes the influence of the family environment on child development, and are consistent with Omondi's (2021) study, which shows that a significant proportion of students in Kenya come from unstable family settings.

Qualitative results further confirmed that family dysfunction is common and often manifests through conflict, neglect, and emotional instability, affecting students' concentration and classroom behavior. This aligns with Smith and Johnson (2023) and Kariuki et al. (2021), who

found that exposure to family conflict leads to anxiety, withdrawal, and reduced academic engagement among learners, reinforcing the strong link between family environment and student outcomes.

4.1.2 Factors Contributing to Family Dysfunctionality

The second objective of the study was to identify the factors contributing to family dysfunction in Tharaka Nithi County. The study identified economic hardship and parental separation as the main contributors to family dysfunction, alongside neglect and frequent conflicts. These findings are consistent with Mugisha and Otieno (2022), who established that financial stress disrupts family stability and reduces parental ability to support children's academic needs. Similarly, Ndunda and Zindiye (2023) found that economic challenges negatively influence students' engagement and access to learning resources.

Although many students reported parental guidance, a substantial proportion still experienced neglect and financial strain, suggesting inconsistencies in family support. These results align with those of Miller et al. (2021) and Njeri and Kamau (2022), who found that neglectful parenting and parental absenteeism contribute to emotional distress, low self-esteem, and reduced academic motivation among students.

4.2.3. Academic Performance

The third objective of the study was to assess the effects of dysfunctional family backgrounds on students' academic performance in selected secondary schools in Tharaka Nithi County. The findings revealed that most students performed at an average level, with family dysfunction contributing to reduced concentration, emotional distress, and lower motivation. This is consistent with Smith and Johnson (2023), who found that family conflict increases anxiety and reduces students' ability to focus in class, and with Lamborn et al. (2020), who linked dysfunctional family environments to lower academic achievement.

While many students-maintained attendance and participation, a notable proportion experienced absenteeism, incomplete assignments, and behavioral challenges. Qualitative findings showing low self-esteem, withdrawal, and limited participation among affected students are consistent with Mujica and Kalpana (2022), who associated emotional distress with poor academic outcomes, and Lamborn et al. (2020), who highlighted maladaptive coping as a barrier to effective learning.

4.2.4 Strategies to Support Students from Dysfunctional Families

The fourth objective of the study was to examine the strategies that help students from dysfunctional families maintain strong academic performance in Tharaka-Nithi County. The study found that most schools had support systems, such as counseling, mentorship, and peer support programs, to help students cope with family-related challenges. These findings align with Mason and Sweeney (2022) and Kimani and Wambua (2023), who found that school-based counseling and mentorship programs enhance students' emotional well-being and academic engagement.

However, the effectiveness of these interventions was limited by inadequate resources, lack of follow-up, and low parental involvement. This is consistent with Miller et al. (2021), who found that limited parental engagement weakens intervention outcomes, and Kariuki et al. (2021), who emphasized the need for coordinated school-community approaches. These findings

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Journal of Sociology, Psychology & Religious Studies
Vol. 6||Issue 4||pp 47-59||June||2026
Email: info@edinburgjournals.org||ISSN: 2790-0118

highlight the importance of integrated support systems to effectively address the academic and emotional needs of students from dysfunctional family backgrounds.

4.3 Inferential Analysis

4.3.1 Linear Regression Analysis between Family Dysfunction and Academic Performance

The model summary results in Table 2 show the relationship between family dysfunction and students' academic performance. In particular, the correlation coefficient (R) of 0.148 showed a positive but weak relationship between the two variables. This implied that the increase in family dysfunction affected students' performance only slightly, not in a strong or consistent way. More specifically, the R-squared value of 0.022 indicated that only 2.2% of the variation in students' performance can be explained by family dysfunction. Therefore, the remaining 97.8% of the effects on academic performance could be attributed to other factors, such as peer influence, personal motivation, and the school environment. Furthermore, the Adjusted R Square of 0.019 indicated that the model's explanatory power remained quite low (1.9%) even after adjusting for the number of variables. Therefore, based on these results, family dysfunction influences student performance, but the effect is not strong in isolation. There are other possible emotional, social, and school-related factors that contribute to students' academic outcomes in Tharaka Nithi County.

Table 1: Model Summary of the Relationship between Family Dysfunction and Academic Performance

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.148[a]	.022	.019	.32141

a. Predictors: (Constant), family dysfunctionality

The ANOVA results in Table 3 reported the significance of the relationship between family dysfunctionality and academic performance. In particular, the F-value of 7.123 and the p-value of 0.008 (less than the recommended 0.05) indicated that the relationship between family dysfunctionality and academic performance was statistically significant. The regression sums of squares show how much of the total variation in the dependent variables is explained by the predictor variable. Therefore, the regression sum of squares of 0.736 indicated that family dysfunctionality accounted for 0.736 of the changes in students' performance, which is a very small effect. The residual sums of squares represent the variation in the dependent variables attributable to factors other than the measured predictor. Therefore, the residual sum of squares (32.748) indicated that a larger portion of the variation in academic performance was likely attributable to other factors not measured in the study. These factors may include personal motivation, peer influence, socioeconomic background, or teacher support. Besides, the total variation in students' academic performance was 33.484, which implied that family dysfunction explained a small but significant portion of the total variation. In sum, while family dysfunctionality significantly influenced the academic performance of students in Tharaka-Nithi County secondary schools, it was not the sole or primary factor. These findings are consistent with previous research, including Lamborn et al. (2020) and Smith & Johnson

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Vol. 6||Issue 4||pp 47-59||June||2026
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(2023), which also reported that family dysfunction significantly affects students' academic performance. However, unlike these studies, which suggested a strong and profound effect, the present study found that family dysfunction accounted for a small proportion of the variance in academic performance. This difference could be explained by measurement variability, contextual factors, and/or community support systems in Tharaka-Nithi County.

Table 2: Analysis of Variance of the Relationship between Family Dysfunction and Academic Performance

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	.736	1	.736	7.123	.008[a]
	Residual	32.748	317	.103		
	Total	33.484	318			

a. Predictors: (Constant), Family Dysfunctionality

b. Dependent Variable: Academperform

The coefficient results in Table 4 explained how family dysfunctionality affected the academic performance of students in Tharaka Nithi County. In particular, the constant of 1.850 represented the predicted average level of academic performance when the predictor (family dysfunctionality) was zero. In other words, the predicted average level of academic performance was higher when the family environment was functional and stable. The unstandardized coefficient (B = -0.044) for family dysfunctionality indicated that for every 1-unit increase in family dysfunction, students' academic performance decreased by 0.044 units. This negative trend confirmed that increased family conflict invariably translated into a decline in academic performance. Additionally, the standardized coefficient (Beta) of -0.148 confirmed that the effect of family dysfunction on academic performance was weak but negative. The t-value of -2.669 and the p-value of 0.008 indicated that the relationship between the two variables was significant because the p-value was less than the recommended 0.05. In sum, the findings suggested that students from dysfunctional family backgrounds tend to perform slightly worse. The effect of family dysfunctionality was, however, not very strong, though it was statistically significant enough to suggest that it played a critical role in supporting the academic success of students in secondary schools in Tharaka Nithi County.

The findings are consistent with Lamborn et al. (2020), who found that dysfunctional family environments characterized by conflict and emotional instability negatively affect students' educational outcomes. Notably, the current study reported a negative coefficient (B = -0.044), which supports this argument, since it demonstrates that increased translates into decreased academic performance. In the same vein, Smith and Johnson (2023) also found that family conflict contributes to emotional stress and anxiety, which eventually interferes with the concentration and engagement of students in school activities.

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Table 3: Regression Coefficients for Family Dysfunction and Academic Performance

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		
		B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
1	(Constant)	1.850	.051		36.487	.000
	FAMILYDYSFUNTIONALITY	-.044	.016	-.148	-2.669	.008

a. Dependent Variable: ACADEMPERFORM

4.3.2 Linear Regression Analysis between Strategies for Supporting Students from Family Dysfunction and Academic Performance

The model summary results for the relationship between strategies for supporting students from families affected by dysfunction and academic performance are presented in Table 5. In particular, the correlation coefficient (R) of 0.083 indicated a positive but weak relationship between students' strategies and academic performance. This implied that the students' application of the strategies yielded only a minimal improvement in their academic performance. The R-squared value of 0.007 indicated that, when the strategies were applied, they explained only 0.7% of the variation in students' academic performance. This very low effect suggested that the strategies (such as mentorship and emotional or psychological support) could not, by themselves, provide meaningful effects on students' academic performance. The Adjusted R Square (0.004) also confirmed that, even after accounting for potential influences, the model could not explain the variation in academic performance. Therefore, the model suggested that the adopted strategies have very limited effects on students' academic performance. This further hinted at the possibility that other factors, such as the school environment, family background, teacher support, and personal commitment, may contribute to the academic performance of secondary students in Tharaka Nithi County.

Table 4: Model Summary of the Relationship between Strategies for Supporting Students from Family Dysfunction and Academic Performance

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.083[a]	.007	.004	.32390

a. Predictors: (Constant), STRATEGEM

The ANOVA results in Table 6 show the significance of the effect that the adopted strategies have on the academic performance of the students in Tharaka Nithi County. The F-value of 2.173 and the p-value of 0.141 indicated that the relationship between the two variables was

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Email: info@edinburgjournals.org||ISSN: 2790-0118

not statistically significant, as the p-value exceeded the recommended benchmark of 0.05. This implied that the strategies used did not have a reliable or meaningful impact on students' performance. The regression sum of squares of 0.228 also indicated that only a very small portion of the variation in academic performance was explained by the adopted strategies. The residual sum of squares (33.256) indicated that a much larger portion of the variation in academic performance was explained by factors other than the adopted strategies. Therefore, even though the adopted strategies contribute to changes in academic performance, the effect is too small to be statistically significant. This suggests that the adopted strategies are not strong predictors of academic performance, hinting that other factors, such as teacher support, personal motivation, and school conditions, are highly likely to play a significant role in influencing the academic performance of secondary school students in Tharaka Nithi County.

These findings seemingly contradict previous research, such as Mason and Sweeney (2022), which found that on-site counseling services and timely psychological support significantly enhanced students' emotional well-being and academic engagement. Similarly, Kariuki et al. (2021) found that strengthening community support systems, including after-school programs and parental education, positively contributed to students' educational outcomes. This contradiction suggests that the intervention strategies in Tharaka Nithi County secondary schools, which are increasingly necessary, have minimal impact considering their statistical insignificance. This may reflect challenges, including implementation quality, coverage, duration, or contextual differences, which need to be addressed to make the interventions more effective.

Table 5: Analysis of Variance of the Relationship Strategies for Supporting Students from Family Dysfunction and Academic Performance

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	.228	1	.228	2.173	.141[a]
	Residual	33.256	317	.105		
	Total	33.484	318			

a. Predictors: (Constant), STRATEGEM

b. Dependent Variable: ACADEMPERFORM

The coefficient results reported in Table 7 explain how the strategies adopted, such as mentorship and emotional or psychological support, relate to the academic performance of secondary students in Tharaka Nithi County. The constant (1.600) represents the predicted average academic performance when the strategies are zero, or rather, before the students applied them. The unstandardized coefficient (B = 0.027) indicated that each additional unit increase in the adopted strategies increased students' academic performance by 0.027 units. This suggested a positive relationship between the variables, indicating that students who adopted the strategies performed slightly better than those who did not. However, the standardized coefficient (Beta = 0.083) and the t-value (1.474) showed a weak relationship between the variables, whereas the p-value of 0.141 implied that the relationship was not statistically significant.

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Therefore, although there was a small positive relationship between strategy and academic performance, it was not reliable or strong enough to conclude that strategies alone could improve academic performance. Other factors, such as teacher support, personal motivation, and school conditions, were highly likely to play a significant role in determining the academic performance of secondary students in Tharaka Nithi County. These findings align with Mason & Sweeney (2022), who found that while counseling enhances emotional well-being, improvements in academic performance require integrating other factors that support academic achievement. Mugisha & Otieno (2022) also found that without economic relief in the form of school fees and learning materials, psychological gains alone cannot translate into performance.

Table 6: **Regression Coefficients for Strategies for Supporting Students from Family Dysfunction and Academic Performance**

		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		
Model		B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
1	(Constant)	1.600	.085		18.777	.000
	STRATEGEM	.027	.018	.083	1.474	.141

a. Dependent Variable: ACADEMPERFORM

5. Conclusion

The study confirms that dysfunctional family backgrounds have a statistically significant, albeit modest, negative effect on the academic performance of secondary school students in Tharaka-Nithi County. Emotional distress, low motivation and self-esteem, increased behavioural issues, and poor academic outcomes emerge as the key pathways through which family dysfunction undermines learning. Although the overall impact accounts for only a small portion of the variance in academic performance, the consistent presence of these indicators in both quantitative and qualitative data underscores the urgent need for targeted support. When viewed through the lenses of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and Bowlby's Attachment Theory, the findings highlight that family dysfunction operates within a broader ecosystem of poverty, limited resources, and cultural stigma, making school-based and community-level interventions indispensable for breaking the cycle.

6. Recommendations

Addressing Emotional Distress: Schools in Tharaka Nithi County should establish routine emotional check-ins and well-resourced guidance and counseling departments staffed by professionally trained counselors. Early identification of signs of emotional distress (anxiety, sadness, irritability) through brief screening tools and teacher training will enable timely psychological first aid and referral, thereby reducing the negative spill-over of family-related stress onto concentration and academic engagement (aligning with 52.9% prevalence of distress).

Enhancing Motivation and Self-Esteem: Targeted mentorship programmes that pair students from dysfunctional backgrounds (52.7% reporting neglect) with positive adult role models and successful peers should be institutionalised in every secondary school. These programmes must deliberately focus on building self-worth, goal-setting skills, and a sense of future possibility. Recognition schemes that celebrate effort and improvement will help counteract feelings of worthlessness.

Managing Increased Behavioural Issues: A clear, restorative rather than punitive, disciplinary policy should be adopted, accompanied by training of all teachers on trauma-informed classroom management. Schools should create "calming corners" or safe spaces and train selected senior students as peer mediators so that behavioural outbursts (22.6% linked to home stress) are met with understanding and support rather than suspension.

Improving Poor Academic Outcomes: Comprehensive academic recovery plans that combine after-school remedial teaching, provision of learning materials, and subsidised feeding programmes are recommended for students identified as academically at risk (74.6% average or below). Partnerships between schools, the county government, and NGOs should be strengthened to provide bursaries and remove practical barriers that convert emotional and behavioural challenges into sustained poor grades.

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