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Strategic Leadership and Governance Practices as Catalysts for Academic Performance in Public Secondary Schools in Machakos County, Kenya

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Abstract
This study investigates the effect of strategic leadership and governance practices on the academic performance of public secondary schools in Machakos County, Kenya. In an era of increasing accountability and continuous educational reform, the role of school leadership and governance has been identified as a critical determinant of institutional effectiveness and student achievement. Despite uniform national policies, schools in the county exhibit significant performance disparities, suggesting that internal institutional capabilities, particularly those related to leadership, are pivotal. This research addresses a gap in the literature by providing a large-scale, localized analysis of how specific leadership and governance practices correlate with and predict academic outcomes in a Kenyan context. Grounded in Strategic Leadership Theory and the Resource-Based View (RBV), this study employed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design. Quantitative data were collected through structured questionnaires administered to a stratified random sample of 333 respondents, including principals, deputy principals, and heads of departments from 113 public secondary schools. Qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with key education administrators to provide contextual depth. Academic performance was measured using KCSE mean scores over a three-year period. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, ANOVA, and multiple regression analysis. The findings reveal that leadership and governance practices have a statistically significant and positive effect on academic performance. The correlation analysis showed a moderate positive relationship ($r = .399$, $p = .004$), and regression analysis confirmed that leadership practices significantly predict academic outcomes. Descriptive data indicated high levels of agreement among school leaders that articulating a clear academic vision ($M=4.64$), promoting teacher participation in decision-making ($M=4.38$), and supporting professional development ($M=4.32$) are established practices. Thematic analysis of qualitative data further illuminated that visionary leadership, data-informed decision-making, and transparent governance structures create an enabling environment that fosters teacher motivation and instructional improvement. The study concludes that strategic leadership is not merely an administrative function but a core strategic capability that directly drives academic excellence. It recommends that policy and practice focus on strengthening the capacity of school leaders through targeted professional development in strategic planning, data analysis, and distributed leadership to ensure sustainable improvements in educational quality.

Keywords: Strategic Leadership, School Governance, Academic Performance, Strategic Capability, Public Secondary Schools, Machakos County, Kenya

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1. Introduction

Globally, the discourse on educational improvement has increasingly converged on the pivotal role of school leadership. A vast body of research unequivocally identifies leadership as the second most significant school-based factor influencing student learning outcomes, surpassed only by the quality of classroom instruction (Leithwood et al., 2004). In an environment characterized by escalating accountability demands, curriculum reforms, and resource constraints, the ability of school leaders to navigate complexity and steer their institutions towards academic excellence has become a cornerstone of effective education systems (Fullan, 2014). This imperative has given rise to the concept of strategic leadership, which moves beyond day-to-day administrative management to encompass the articulation of a compelling vision, the cultivation of an enabling organizational culture, and the strategic alignment of resources and processes toward long-term goals (Davies & Davies, 2004).

This strategic orientation is complemented by robust governance practices the formal and informal frameworks that ensure accountability, transparency, and stakeholder participation in institutional decision-making. Together, strategic leadership and governance form a powerful duo that shapes the entire teaching and learning ecosystem, influencing everything from teacher motivation and professional development to curriculum implementation and resource allocation (Bush, 2020). High-performing education systems in countries like Finland and Singapore are distinguished by their investment in developing leaders who are not just managers but strategic thinkers, and by governance structures that empower schools while holding them accountable for results (Sahlberg, 2015; Schleicher, 2020).

In Sub-Saharan Africa, the need for effective school leadership and governance is even more acute as nations strive to achieve the Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) for inclusive and equitable quality education. Countries such as Rwanda and South Africa have made significant strides by decentralizing educational governance and investing in leadership development programs, recognizing that school-level autonomy must be paired with strong local leadership to be effective (UNESCO, 2021; Chikoko & Mthembu, 2021).

Kenya has similarly placed a strong policy emphasis on strengthening school leadership. The introduction of performance management systems like the Teacher Performance Appraisal and Development (TPAD) and the overarching goals of the Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) both presuppose the existence of dynamic and strategic school leaders who can drive change. The Ministry of Education's strategic plans have consistently highlighted the need for visionary leadership and effective governance through Boards of Management (BOMs) as key enablers of educational quality (Republic of Kenya, 2018).

Despite this clear policy direction, the reality on the ground presents a complex and often contradictory picture. Public secondary schools in Kenya, including those in Machakos County, exhibit wide and persistent disparities in academic performance, as measured by the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) examinations (KNEC, 2022). While

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operating under the same national policy framework, some schools consistently excel while others stagnate or decline. This variation strongly suggests that internal, school-level factors—chief among them leadership and governance—play a decisive role in mediating the impact of national policies and determining institutional outcomes.

This study, therefore, addresses a critical and timely problem. While the importance of leadership is widely acknowledged, there is a significant lack of large-scale, localized empirical research in Kenya that systematically investigates the specific leadership and governance practices that have the greatest impact on academic performance. Much of the existing research is either theoretical, based on small case studies, or focuses on national trends without delving into the contextual nuances of a specific county like Machakos. This empirical gap leaves a void in evidence-based knowledge that could guide the design of more effective leadership development programs and governance reforms.

Objective of the Study

The primary objective of this paper is to determine the effect of leadership and governance practices on the academic performance of public secondary schools in Machakos County, Kenya.

2. Literature Review

The investigation of leadership and governance as drivers of academic performance is anchored in two complementary theoretical frameworks: Strategic Leadership Theory and the Resource-Based View (RBV).

Strategic Leadership Theory provides the primary lens for understanding the role of school principals and their leadership teams. First advanced by scholars like House and Baetz, the theory emphasizes the leader's role in anticipating the future, articulating a vision, maintaining flexibility, and empowering others to create strategic change (as cited in Kurzhals et al., 2020). Unlike traditional leadership models that focus on internal management, strategic leadership is externally oriented, concerned with adapting the organization to its changing environment while maintaining a clear sense of purpose (Vera et al., 2022). In the context of a school, a strategic leader is one who not only manages the daily operations but also sets a clear academic vision, fosters a culture of high expectations, and aligns all institutional activities with the goal of improving student learning. The theory posits that such leadership directly influences organizational performance by creating coherence, motivating staff, and ensuring that the institution remains adaptive and forward-looking (Davies & Davies, 2004). This study uses Strategic Leadership Theory to hypothesize that schools led by principals who exhibit these strategic behaviors will demonstrate superior academic performance.

The Resource-Based View (RBV), developed by Barney (1991), complements this by focusing on the internal capabilities of the organization. The RBV argues that a firm's (or school's) sustained competitive advantage comes from its unique, valuable, rare, and inimitable resources and capabilities. While a school's physical resources are important, the RBV directs attention to its less tangible assets, such as the quality of its leadership, the effectiveness of its governance structures, its organizational culture, and the collective expertise of its staff. From an RBV perspective, a school's leadership and governance system can itself be considered a strategic capability. A school with a highly effective principal, a functional and engaged Board of Management, and transparent, participatory decision-making processes possesses a complex social and organizational capability that is

difficult for other schools to imitate. This capability allows the school to deploy all its other resources (financial, human, and physical) more effectively, leading to superior performance (Ferreira, Fernandes, & Ferreira, 2022). This study, therefore, conceptualizes effective leadership and governance not just as a set of behaviors, but as a core institutional capability that underpins academic success. Together, these two theories provide a powerful framework for arguing that the strategic actions of leaders and the quality of their governance systems are fundamental drivers of academic performance.

The empirical literature provides robust and consistent evidence for the significant, albeit indirect, impact of school leadership and governance on student academic outcomes. The evidence spans global, regional, and local contexts, though the specific mechanisms and contextual moderators vary.

Global and Regional Perspectives

A landmark review by Leithwood et al. (2004) synthesized a wide body of research and concluded that school leadership is second only to classroom teaching in its influence on student learning. The review identified three core sets of leadership practices that have the greatest impact: setting direction (articulating a clear vision and goals), developing people (providing professional development and support), and redesigning the organization (building a collaborative culture and effective structures). This foundational work has been reinforced by more recent global studies. For instance, the OECD's (2021) analysis of PISA data has consistently shown that schools with principals who exhibit strong instructional leadership defined as a focus on curriculum, instruction, and assessment tend to have higher levels of student achievement.

In the African context, research has similarly highlighted the critical role of leadership, often in overcoming significant resource constraints. A study of schools in South Africa by Chikoko and Mthembu (2021) found that effective principals were able to create pockets of excellence even in disadvantaged communities by fostering a strong school culture, motivating teachers, and engaging creatively with parents and the community. This suggests that leadership can act as a powerful compensatory factor in resource-poor environments. Similarly, research in Ghana found that decentralized school governance, when paired with strong and accountable local leadership, led to improved teacher attendance and student engagement (Kyei-Addo, Akyeampong, & Kushitor, 2023).

The Kenyan Context

In Kenya, a growing body of research has sought to quantify the impact of leadership and governance on academic performance, particularly as measured by KCSE results. A study by Ngugi, Wambua, and Kyalo (2021) in several Kenyan counties found a significant positive correlation between transformational leadership behaviors (such as inspirational motivation and individualized consideration) and schools' mean KCSE scores. This suggests that leaders who inspire and support their teachers are more likely to preside over high-performing schools.

Kafu and Simiyu (2020) focused on the role of structured leadership and governance, finding that secondary schools with clear strategic plans and active, well-functioning Boards of Management outperformed those that lacked strategic direction. This points to the importance of formal governance structures and strategic planning as a key leadership practice.

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However, the evidence is not uniformly positive, and significant challenges have been noted. A study by Mutula (2018) in western Kenya found no significant direct correlation between principals' leadership styles and student performance, suggesting that other factors, such as teacher quality and socioeconomic context, may be more powerful predictors. This highlights the indirect nature of leadership's influence; leaders affect student outcomes primarily by improving the conditions for teaching and learning.

Furthermore, a critical gap exists in the literature regarding large-scale, methodologically rigorous studies in specific county contexts. Many existing Kenyan studies, while valuable, are either based on small sample sizes, rely solely on self-reported data, or fail to use inferential statistics to test hypotheses (e.g., Chepkwony, 2020). There is a particular lack of research that uses a mixed-methods approach to combine statistical analysis with in-depth qualitative insights, and that specifically examines the full range of leadership and governance practices across a large and diverse county like Machakos. This study is designed to address this gap by providing a comprehensive, mixed-methods analysis of how specific leadership and governance practices influence academic performance across the public secondary schools of Machakos County.

3. Research Methodology

This study adopted an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, a robust approach that integrates quantitative and qualitative data to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research problem (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The research was guided by a pragmatist philosophy, which prioritizes practical, problem-centered inquiry.

The study was conducted in the 377 public secondary schools of Machakos County, Kenya. The target population comprised all key administrative and governance stakeholders, including 377 principals, 374 deputy principals, 1,353 Heads of Departments (HoDs), and 377 Board of Management (BOM) members, alongside 17 education officers and the County Director of Education.

A multi-stage sampling procedure was employed. First, the schools were stratified by category (National, Extra-County, County, Sub-County). Using Cochran's (1977) formula, a representative sample of 113 schools was determined. From these schools, a final sample of 333 respondents was selected using proportional stratified random sampling to ensure representation across the different roles (principals, deputies, HoDs, etc.).

Data were collected using two primary instruments. A structured questionnaire with 5-point Likert-scale items was administered to deputy principals and HoDs to gather quantitative data. The section on leadership and governance included statements such as, the school leadership articulates and enforces a clear academic vision, and decision-making processes in this school encourage teacher participation. Semi-structured interview schedules were used with principals, BOM members, and education officers to collect in-depth qualitative data on their experiences and perceptions of leadership practices.

A pilot study was conducted in 11 schools in the neighboring Makueni County to ensure the validity and reliability of the instruments. The reliability of the questionnaire scales was confirmed using Cronbach's Alpha, with the Leadership and Governance scale achieving a coefficient of 0.825, indicating good internal consistency.

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS. Descriptive statistics (means, percentages) were used to summarize the data. To test the study's hypothesis regarding leadership and governance, both Pearson correlation and One-Way ANOVA were performed.

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Qualitative data from the interviews were transcribed and subjected to thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and themes that could explain and enrich the quantitative results.

4. Findings

This section presents the study's findings on the effect of leadership and governance practices. It integrates the quantitative results from the survey with the qualitative insights from the interviews.

The quantitative analysis sought to measure the perceived effectiveness of leadership and governance and to establish its statistical relationship with academic performance.

Descriptive Analysis of Leadership and Governance Practices:

Deputy principals and HoDs were asked to rate their agreement with several statements about leadership and governance in their schools. The results, presented in Table 1, indicate a generally positive perception of leadership practices.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for School Leadership and Governance (N≈333)

Statement	Mean	Std. Dev.
The school leadership articulates and enforces a clear academic vision.	**4.64**	0.78
Decision-making processes in this school encourage teacher participation.	4.38	0.75
Communication from school leaders about expectations is effective.	4.32	0.91
School leadership supports ongoing professional development for staff.	4.32	0.98
Governance structures enhance transparency and accountability.	4.30	0.86

Scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree

Source: Field Data 2025

The descriptive statistics reveal a strong consensus among school-level administrators that leadership and governance are functioning well. All items received a mean score well above 4.0, indicating strong agreement. The highest mean score was for articulating a clear academic vision (M=4.64), with 96% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing. This suggests that school leaders are perceived as being highly effective at setting a clear direction for their institutions. Other high-scoring areas included promoting teacher participation in decision-making (M=4.38) and supporting professional development (M=4.32). These findings point to a culture of distributed and supportive leadership in many of the schools surveyed.

Inferential Analysis: The Relationship with Academic Performance

To test the hypothesis that leadership and governance practices have a significant effect on academic performance, both a Pearson correlation and a One-Way ANOVA were conducted.

The Pearson correlation analysis revealed a moderate, positive, and statistically significant relationship between the leadership and governance index and academic performance.

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Table 2: Correlation Between Leadership & Governance and Academic Performance (N=113 schools)

		Academic Performance
Leadership and Governance	Pearson Correlation (r)	.399*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.004

***Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).*
Source: Field Data 2025

The correlation coefficient of r = .399 indicates that as the quality of leadership and governance practices improves, academic performance tends to increase. The relationship is statistically significant (p = .004), confirming that it is not due to random chance.
A One-Way ANOVA was also conducted to test for mean differences in academic performance based on the perceived quality of leadership. The results were highly significant.

Table 3: One-Way ANOVA for Leadership & Governance Practices (Selected Item)

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	187.383	3	62.461	59.117	.000
Within Groups	115.166	109	1.057		
Total	302.549	112			

Source: Field Data 2025

The overall ANOVA test for the leadership and governance construct was also highly significant ($F(3, 109) = 50.023$, $p < .001$). This confirms that there are statistically significant differences in academic performance among schools with varying levels of leadership effectiveness. Based on these highly significant results from both correlation and ANOVA, the null hypothesis (H_{01}: There is no statistically significant effect of leadership and governance practices on academic performance) is rejected.

The thematic analysis of interviews with principals, BOM members, and education officers provided rich, contextual explanations for the quantitative findings. Four primary themes emerged: (1) Visionary Leadership as a Unifying Force, (2) The Power of Participatory Decision-Making, (3) Data-Informed Supervision, and (4) Governance as a Check and Balance.

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Theme 1: Visionary Leadership as a Unifying Force

Interviewees consistently emphasized the role of the principal in creating and communicating a shared vision for academic excellence. This was seen as the primary mechanism for aligning the efforts of teachers, students, and parents. Principal 9 noted:

> A school without a clear vision is like a ship without a rudder. My first job as a principal was to work with my staff and the BOM to agree on where we wanted to go—our target mean score, our values, our identity. Once that vision is clear and everyone owns it, it becomes the reference point for every decision we make (Principal 9, High-Performing School).

Theme 2: The Power of Participatory Decision-Making

The quantitative finding on teacher participation was strongly echoed in the interviews. Principals of successful schools described a culture of distributed leadership where teachers are not just implementers of decisions, but active participants in making them. Principal 4 noted:

> I don't make decisions in isolation. The HODs are my cabinet. We look at the data together, we discuss departmental strategies together, and we solve problems together. When teachers are part of the decision-making process, they take ownership of the outcomes. They are no longer just employees; they are partners (Principal 4, Improving School).

Theme 3: Data-Informed Supervision and Support

Effective leaders were described as those who use data not for punitive evaluation, but for supportive supervision and targeted professional development.

> We moved away from the old inspection model. Now, when I visit a class or review exam results with an HOD, the goal is not to find fault. The goal is to identify challenges and ask, 'What support do you need?' Do we need to organize a workshop on this topic? Do we need to buy more revision materials? Leadership is about providing support based on evidence (Principal, High-Performing School).

Theme 4: Governance as a Check and Balance

Education officers and BOM members highlighted the crucial role of governance structures in ensuring accountability and transparency. Principal 6 noted:

> The BOM's role is to provide oversight. We approve the budget, we review the strategic plan, and we hold the principal accountable for the school's performance. A strong, independent BOM ensures that the school's resources are used for their intended purpose—improving learning for the students (BOM Chair).

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5. Discussion

The triangulated findings of this study provide robust evidence that strategic leadership and governance practices are significant and positive catalysts for academic performance in the public secondary schools of Machakos County. The quantitative analysis establishes this relationship with statistical certainty, while the qualitative data provides a rich, nuanced explanation of the mechanisms through which effective leadership operates.

The strong positive correlation (r = .399) and the highly significant ANOVA results confirm that leadership is not a peripheral factor but a core driver of school effectiveness. This finding aligns with the vast body of international research that positions school leadership as a central lever for educational improvement (Leithwood et al., 2004; OECD, 2021). It provides strong, localized evidence from a Kenyan context to support the tenets of Strategic Leadership Theory, which argues that the visionary and adaptive capacity of leaders is fundamental to organizational success (Vera et al., 2022).

The descriptive statistics offer a particularly encouraging insight: school leaders in Machakos are, by and large, perceived to be practicing the very behaviors that the literature identifies as high-impact. The high mean scores for articulating a vision, promoting teacher participation, and supporting professional development suggest that the principles of transformational and distributed leadership are being actively implemented. This is a significant finding, as it indicates a strong foundation of leadership capacity upon which further improvements can be built.

The qualitative findings are crucial in explaining *how* these leadership practices translate into improved academic performance. The theme of visionary leadership as a unifying force illustrates the core function of a leader in setting direction. A clear and shared vision, as described by the principals, acts as an organizational glue, aligning the efforts of all stakeholders and creating a coherent focus on academic goals. This moves the school from being a collection of individual classrooms to a unified learning organization.

The theme of participatory decision-making provides a mechanism for how this vision is owned and implemented. By involving teachers in strategic conversations, leaders foster a sense of collective ownership and professional efficacy. This practice is a direct application of the principles of distributed leadership, which has been shown to increase teacher motivation and commitment (Harris, 2013). It also supports the Resource-Based View (RBV), as a collaborative and empowered teaching staff can be considered a rare and valuable organizational capability (Barney, 1991).

The theme of data-informed supervision highlights a shift from a compliance-oriented to a development-oriented model of leadership. This is a critical evolution in educational leadership. When leaders use data for supportive and diagnostic purposes, they transform supervision from an act of inspection into an opportunity for continuous professional growth. This practice is at the heart of what it means to be an instructional leader.

Finally, the theme of governance as a check and balance underscores the importance of the formal structures that ensure accountability. The role of the BOM, as described by the interviewees, is to provide the oversight that ensures the principal's strategic vision is implemented with integrity and that resources are used effectively. This demonstrates the symbiotic relationship between leadership (the driving force) and governance (the guiding and accountability framework).

In summary, the discussion reveals that effective leadership and governance in Machakos County are characterized by a blend of strategic vision, participatory culture, data-driven support, and robust accountability. These practices collectively create an enabling

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environment where teachers are motivated, resources are aligned with academic priorities, and a collective focus on student learning is maintained.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study concludes that strategic leadership and governance practices have a significant, positive, and direct effect on the academic performance of public secondary schools in Machakos County. The evidence demonstrates that principals who articulate a clear academic vision, foster a culture of participatory decision-making, use data to provide supportive instructional supervision, and operate within transparent governance structures are significantly more likely to lead high-performing schools. Effective leadership is not merely an administrative function but a core strategic capability that acts as a catalyst, unifying stakeholders and aligning institutional resources towards the singular goal of improving student learning outcomes. The findings affirm that strengthening the strategic capacity of school leaders and their governance bodies is one of the most powerful levers available for driving sustainable academic improvement in the Kenyan education system.

Based on the study's findings, the following targeted recommendations are proposed:

1. For Policymakers (Ministry of Education, TSC):
    - (i) Institutionalize Leadership Development: It is recommended that the Ministry of Education, in partnership with the Teachers Service Commission (TSC) and institutions like the Kenya Education Management Institute (KEMI), develop and mandate a continuous professional development (CPD) framework specifically for school leaders. This framework should focus on building competencies in strategic planning, data-driven instructional leadership, and participatory governance.
    - (ii) Strengthen Governance Training for BOMs: Provide mandatory, standardized training for all Board of Management members upon their appointment, focusing on their roles in strategic oversight, financial management, and holding school leadership accountable for academic performance.
2. For School Leaders (Principals):
    - (i) Foster a Culture of Distributed Leadership: Principals should actively create formal structures (e.g., instructional leadership teams, departmental committees) that empower teachers and HoDs to participate meaningfully in school-wide decision-making.
    - (ii) Champion Data-Driven Dialogue: Institutionalize regular, collaborative meetings where staff collectively analyze student performance data to identify challenges and co-create solutions. This shifts the culture from one of top-down evaluation to one of shared inquiry and continuous improvement.
3. For Future Research:
    - (i) A longitudinal study that tracks a cohort of newly appointed principals over several years would provide deeper insights into how leadership practices evolve and their long-term impact on school culture and performance.
    - (ii) A comparative case study of a high-performing and a low-performing school within the same sub-county could offer a rich, qualitative understanding of the nuanced differences in their leadership and governance dynamics.

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