

When the mountain does not move, the system must



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Bwera Primary School does not sit at the end of a road. It sits at the end of effort.

Tucked deep in the hills of Kabale District, it is a place you reach on foot, along narrow paths that wind through steep terrain. The terrain is so steep and narrow that neither boda bodas nor vehicles can make the journey. For years, even contractors with the financial incentive to build it turned away.

The journey was too difficult and the logistics too complex. As a result, the school remained with weathered classrooms, too few desks, and facilities that did not adequately support learning.

Every morning, before the sun fully rises, children begin their walk. They travel for two hours uphill, over uneven ground, arriving at school already fatigued. At the end of the day, they make the same journey back home.

This is not an occasional challenge - it is sustained over seven years, the full cycle of primary education, and it shapes how learning begins each morning. For a long time, the conditions at the school did not match the effort required to access it. The imbalance was clear: significant physical effort on one side, and a learning environment that did not adequately support it on the other.

This began to change in September 2025. Through a partnership with the Mastercard Foundation Scholars Program at Makerere University, dfcu supported improvements at Bwera Primary School. The project delivered a renovated four-classroom block, new sanitation facilities and a water harvesting system. Importantly, this was not simply an infrastructure upgrade, but a deliberate effort to address a

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structural barrier to access.

For the more than 270 learners at Bwera, the shift has been immediate. The physical environment now supports learning in a way it previously did not. Teachers report improved attendance, stronger concentration in class, and more consistent participation. While the journey to school remains unchanged, what awaits learners at the end of that journey has improved significantly.

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At Bwera Primary School, this reality is shaped by context. Children do not begin their day at the classroom door. They begin it on the hillside - this journey directly affects how long children can stay in school.

As children at Bwera grow older, the pressures around them begin to change. Boys start to face expectations to contribute to household income. Along the same paths they take to school each day, there are small but real opportunities to earn, helping to carry goods up and down the hills, supporting roadside trade, or taking on casual work within the community.

Over time, this creates a difficult trade-off. The same journey that leads to school also presents other options that provide quicker, more tangible returns. When this is combined with the physical strain of the daily walk, the decision to stay in school

becomes harder to sustain, especially where the learning environment does not match the level of effort required to access it.

In this context, dropout is not simply about poverty. It reflects the combined effect of distance, fatigue, and competing demands on a child's time. This is where infrastructure becomes critical.

At Bwera, children who commit to a long and physically demanding journey need a school environment that supports that effort. When basic conditions are not in place, the cost of staying in school increases over time, affecting both attendance and retention.

The recent improvements at the school have begun to address this gap. The learning environment now better supports the children who make that journey each day. Retention, in this case, depends on whether the school environment justifies the effort required to access it.

For dfcu, delivering on its purpose of transforming lives and businesses in Uganda requires engaging with the structural barriers that limit opportunity. In education, those barriers are often physical, and addressing them requires targeted, practical investment.

The journey to school in Kabale remains demanding. At Bwera, what has changed is that the school now better meets the needs of the children who arrive.

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