

# Examinations' League Table: Challenges and Prospects for Enhancing Academic Performance in Luapula Province, Zambia.

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## ABSTRACT

The absence of researched data regarding the below par academic performance of Luapula province in national examinations might have contributed to the static low position on the examinations' performance league table. Given that the incidence of dwindling in performance has been year in year out, it can no longer be ignored and continue to be seen as a 'new normal' or pretend as if everything is alright in this potential province. Seeing that challenges affecting the academic performance might be multifaceted and remain misunderstood, the focus of this study was to examine and better understand the root causes of this long history of underperformance in National Examinations conducted by the Examinations Council of Zambia (ECZ). Using a qualitative case study design and supported by the theory of education production function, the research unfolded as anticipated. Paper (printed) and online questionnaire with open-ended questions, videos and oral/Sign Language interviews of 98 participants from 12 Districts of Luapula province, were used for data collection. The data was central in establishing challenges and prospects in the province's determination and willpower for enhancing academic performance in public or national summative assessments at par with other leading provinces. It was revealed that the major challenges in the province stemmed from lack of coherence and consistent in its local policies, innovations and the application of the theory of education production. It was also established that the province has prospects to clinch on top of the league table through a multi-stakeholder's concerted and unwavering efforts. This study concluded that stringent measures are more needed now than ever before to address the challenges for instance by streamlining educational policies and frameworks to closely reflect the real needs and aspirations of the local learning climate. The study recommends among other things resources mobilisation, infrastructures expansion and for a robust monitoring and evaluation to foster the implementation of all realistic and results-oriented measures.

**Keywords:** Challenges, Examinations, League table, Luapula province, Performance, Prospects, Underperformance.

## INTRODUCTION

Education is central to an upward social mobility (Kikabhai, 2022) and is a fundamental human right (Crother, 2011, p.54; ECZ, 2020) leading to individual, societal and long-term national development. One of the aims of education in general is full participation in society and equal opportunities in life, including those with special educational needs and disabilities (UNESCO, 2013; Muzata, 2021; Lwimba, 2023). Therefore, the Government of the Republic of Zambia (GRZ) through the Ministry of Education (MOE) has perceived education as viable for national development (MOE, 1996) and for this, invests in this sector. Thus, education in Luapula province has witnessed a vast expansion as evidenced through over enrolment in classrooms and many primary schools upgraded into either Junior or Secondary Schools. There are also new schools under construction in different places be it in far flung.

Further, the Ministry of Education Science, Vocational Training and Early Education (MESVTEE, 2013) and the Ministry of Education (MOE, 1996) observe the need for equity and equality in the provision of

accessible education for all citizens. One of the measures by the government to achieve equity and equality is the introduction of 'automatic promotion' policy or progression from primary grade seven (7) to junior secondary grade eight (8) level (MOE, 2020, p.xv). Implying that every learner who sat for the grade seven exams has an equal chance of progressing to junior secondary school no matter the lowry of his/her final scores. Further, the government recently introduced Free Education Policy (FEP) from primary to secondary education, which has provided access to education to many learners from different walks of life including those with disabilities. However, despite all these efforts, the academic outcomes in Luapula province have continued to significantly lag in comparison to other provinces. For example, in 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, and 2023, the province has been hovering between 8<sup>th</sup> and took 9<sup>th</sup> positions out of 10 provinces with 57.56%, 58.79%, 63.32%, 64.96% and 58.24% respectively at Grade 12 School Certificate Examinations. This was below the national average pass rate as would be seen on the table below. At the Grade Nine (9) Junior Secondary School Leaving Examinations, the province was the lowest with 48.59% in 2020 (MOE, 2020, p.36). The cause of this underperformance forms the gap this research has explored.

Quality education in Zambia and in particular Luapula province cannot be realised in the presence of dwindling academic performance. In this paper, academic, learning or educational achievement is the aggregated score from the criterion referenced national assessments. Quality education is the ability of a learner to demonstrate useful knowledge and skills in different aspects of life. The achievement of quality education is established through standard educational assessments. This assessment serves various pedagogical purposes such as 'promoting learning achievement' (MOE, 2010, p.1) and monitoring learners' progress to determine how best they have mastered 'specific curricular objectives' (MOE, 1996, p.57; Rayner, 2007; Hayward, 2014). Further, MOE (2010, p.2) and CDC (2001) assert that, educational assessment is used to 'determine the effectiveness of the system' in getting every learner ready with relevant 'knowledge and skills' for a useful living in any given society. According to a study by Thomas and Loxley (2001, p.84), educational assessments is seen by many as a viable indication of the 'transmission of knowledge' and skills from the 'teacher to the student'. Therefore, Bernard (2009) stresses the needs to put into place better tools for assessing both the quality and quantity of what is being learned, and partly by using the results of these assessments to identify problem areas and focus more clearly on the factors that influence learning and outcomes.

Here then, the Examinations Council of Zambia (ECZ) has been mandated to conduct public examinations and certification in all schools and some institutions outside university education (ECZ, 2010). As elsewhere, in Zambia, ECZ uses an assessment system where examination grades form the benchmark on which learners' progression from one level in education through performance is determined (MOE, 1996; Hayward, 2014; Lwimba, 2023; ECZ, 2023). This provision may have been further compounded by the introduction of provincial performance rankings on the league table. However, Hayward and Lwimba perceives this scenario as contributing to competition, malpractice, and rote learning or memorisation instead of achievable quality education. Further, league tables foster in parents informed choices of schools e.g. secondary schools (See Frederickson and Cline, 2015). This means that most parents outside the province shun sending their children to this province perceived to be among underachievers. Thus, the majority of schools in Luapula are made up of local children.

The academic achievements significantly vary from one region or province to another with Luapula province being among the least performing in public examinations (ECZ, 2023, p.4) despite using the same syllabus, study materials or resources, teachers and examinations. The province might be experiencing inadequate infrastructures, conducive learning environment and brain drains of highly and resourceful manpower. Crother, perceives conducive learning space as significant in promoting educational breakthrough and achievements (p.54). Further, Frederickson and Cline, have found a conducive physical learning climate as well as teaching/learning resources as quintessential in fostering academic learning and outcomes. For this, the theory of education production function (Barro & Sala-i-Martin, 1995) and the conducive learning environments, needs to be explored in Luapula province. The school environment in this paper is made up of e.g. teachers, learners and infrastructures.

**Prospects have rekindled hope:** The province believes in concerted efforts and the transformative power of education in addressing the many challenges facing the world today. Therefore, this study attempts with a burgeoning interest to investigate the cause of this persistent “low” performance subsequently, building bridges for improved educational outcomes.

### Statement of the Problem

The academic performance of Luapula Province in public examinations has persistently been recording low in comparison with other provinces on the National Assessment performance’s league table. For example, in the 2022 and 2023 school certificate examination, the province took the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> slots (ECZ, 2023) respectively. Given that several provinces with a record of being below the national ceiling line, have significantly improved with some taking the top niche, Luapula province can no longer be left behind. This province like any other province has the potential to clinch top of the league table; however, there is a gap in researched knowledge about this persistent underperformance and the way out of this plateau. In the midst of this lack of causative knowledge, grounded research through interaction with primary, secondary school teachers and administrators to delve into their lived perspectives on challenges and prospects in enhancing educational achievement in public examinations has been found significant.

### Justification/Significance of the Study

This study is significant given its inclination to provide insight on the stagnation in academic performance of Luapula province. Given that the study would become the first pragmatic material that would be pulled from the shelf in the provision of solutions to the challenges of underperformance, it is hoped that the findings would help teachers, policy makers, curriculum and educational planners and other multi-stakeholders to identify gaps within the education offered in this province. Doing so would lead to the development of appropriate mechanism to address the barriers thereby bolstering competitive performance of candidates in public examinations.

### Research Objectives

This study was steered by the following research objectives:

1. To establish the challenges contributing to low academic performance of Luapula province in the national examinations.
2. To explore prospects for improving academic performance of Luapula province in the national examinations.
3. To investigate the benefits of improved academic performance in Luapula province to the Youth and National development.

### Research Questions

This research study was guided by the following research questions

1. What are the challenges contributing to low academic performance of Luapula province in the national examinations?
2. What are the prospects for improving academic performance of Luapula province in the national examinations?
3. What are the benefits of improved academic performance in Luapula province to the Youth and national development?

### Significance of the Research Questions

The first question is important in enabling the researcher to explore the critical views, experiences and understanding of insiders on the challenges and how they intersect to affect educational achievements. In

other way, this question gives the researcher more of an idea picture of what was on the ground in Luapula province and sees the needs that might be lacking. The second question has a tone of promising and prosperous future for the province because it delved in finding specific measures that ought to be done to improve academic outcomes and therefore, ranking on the league table. The last investigative question helped the researcher to determine the benefits accrued to improved academic performance to the Youth of Luapula province and the nation as a whole.

## **METHODS AND MATERIALS**

### **Research Design**

This research study adopted a qualitative case study paradigm with a clinch on exploratory and constructivism processes through interactions with both literature and research participants (Cohen et al., 2018). This implies that, the study sought to understand and interpret grounded viewpoints and opinions that are socially constructed through experiences by teachers (Matthews & Ross, 2010; Creswell, 2014) in Luapula province. Further, this research was inductive arising from the contextual insight into causes of 'low' academic performance and how to enhance the same.

### **Target population**

The study targeted to capture data from all the 12 districts of Luapula province which has 768 government schools (679 primary and 89 secondaries, MOE, 2020). Teachers and head teachers from one public primary and secondary schools in each district were contacted. Head teachers (Schools' Administrators) were included because they are responsible for implementation of education curriculum policy and programmes at school level.

### **Sample and Sampling**

Purposive sampling was used to select the study sites and participants (Kombo and Tromp, 2006) because of proximal access to them. The sample size comprised of 12 Districts, giving an optimum sample of 91 schools (74 primary and 17 secondary), and 98 participants-sixty-seven (67) males and thirty-one (31) females.

### **Data collection Procedure**

The study involved the use of both printed and online questionnaires, WhatsApp/Zoom videos and non-verbal interviews via a schedule of questions as instrument to gather data. The participants were informed through their gatekeepers and consent obtained several days before the interviews took place and questionnaires distributed. Twenty-nine (29) printed questionnaires were distributed and completed in the presence of the researcher. This helped in providing prompt clarifications where participants felt unsure. Forty-eight (48) questionnaires were completed online, and twenty-one participants including five (5) Sign Language users were contacted through WhatsApp/Zoom video modality.

### **Data Analysis**

Data was analysed using thematic analysis on which three distinctive themes based on the questions and analysis emerged for a qualitative presentation of the findings. Data was examined through six stages. The first stage involved organising, arranging, and sorting, scanning and transcribing interviews. The second stage involved perusing through the organised data by identifying information that tallied with research questions. This was followed by a stage on coding data with labels based on the samples of data collected. In the fourth stage, themes were distinctly made as headings for the section on findings. In the fifth and sixth stages, themes were interrelated to find the associations between them and data was interpreted relative to literature reviewed (Kombo & Tromp, 2006; Matthews & Ross, 2010).

## Ethical Considerations

Participants were informed about the purpose of study and prior consent was sought from them, and the Provincial Education Office before printed and online questionnaires were distributed. Participants were protected through adherence to research ethics and were also assured of confidentiality. To ensure anonymity, all identifying information about participants and institutions were masked by means of pseudonyms.

## Limitations of the Study

This research study registered some of the following limitations. There was inadequate literature on the challenges and prospects for improving academic performance, and the sample of 98 participants could be questioned as being too small to generalize to the wider population. Some potential participants without access to the internet (and e.g. social media and email addresses) were excluded from the research. Some views were not included due to limited space. Further, more males than females took part in this research, highlighting gender imbalance. A gender balanced sample would have, arguably, provided better representation of insiders' experiences. These limitations have given this research a narrow view and therefore, further research is needed to capture the view of the wider population.

## Theoretical Perspective

Although the researcher had no predetermined theory, the findings did agree with the theory of Education Production Function which is derived from the neoclassical growth theory (Barro & Sala-i-Martin, 1995). It underlies the economics of education and/or the effects of school resources (educational inputs) on academic achievements (educational outputs). In this theory, the targeted resources are among other things, teacher-learner ratio, and quality of teachers, school resources e.g. instructional materials and physical climate (MOE, 2010; MOE, 2020). These attributions are measured through high retention of teachers/learners in school and academic outcomes via standardized assessment scores or quality of graduates. In this framework, resources and quality teachers are independent variables while academic outcomes are dependent variables.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Findings of the Study

This section discusses the findings of the study that rose from the research questions. A thematic framework was identified, leading to section headings for specific analysis and the subsequent discussion of the findings.

Table 1: Distribution of Research Participants by Gender, Age and Education

Gender	Male		Female	Total	
	67 (68.4%)		31 (31.6%)	98 (100%)	
Age Group in Years	18-20	21-29	30-39	40-49	50+
	00	12	54	24	8
Qualifications	Certificate in Education	Diploma in Education	Degree in Education	Masters in Education	
	13	18	58	9	

Source: The Author



## Characteristics of Participants

**Gender:** In a world with gender disparity, this study found gender as significant. Although all attempts were made to create a gender balance, there were more males 67 than 31 females representing 68.4% and 31.6.7% respectively.

**Age:** The age of participants was also important as it gave this study a range of different educational life experiences that enriched the data collected. The study captured more participants in the chronological age group of 30-39 with 54 participants and this was followed by 40-49 with 24 participants. The third group was made up of 12 participants in the aged of 21-29. The last group were 8 aged 50 years and above. No response from the age group between 18-20 was recorded.

**Qualifications:** The qualifications of participants formed the basis on which quality delivery of learning experiences this study measured. There were 13 participants with certificates and 18 had Diplomas, 58 had first degrees and 9 indicated master's degree in education. This study did not record any response from any PhD holder.

Table 2: ECZ's Performance League Table

The table below shows the performance of Luapula province at Grade 12 School Certificate Examinations in the last five years-2019 to 2023:

Province	2023		2022		2021		2020		2019	
	(%)	Pos.	(%)	Pos.	(%)	Pos.	(%)	Pos.	(%)	Pos.
Eastern	79.23	1	78.66	1	69.33	4	67.22	3	66.49	3
Copperbelt	74.41	2	76.13	2	67.94	5	64.46	5	66.1	4
Southern	74.20	3	75.33	3	70.44	2	70.55	1	70.73	1
Lusaka	71.34	4	72.60	5	64.10	7	62.77	6	67.39	2
Central	71.18	5	72.61	4	70.11	3	66.52	4	67.18	5
Northern	67.83	6	63.55	8	62.69	9	59.68	7	63.3	6
Muchinga	63.65	7	66.28	6	62.20	10	54.51	10	58.88	7
Luapula	58.24	8	64.96	7	63.32	8	58.79	9	57.56	8
North-Western	47.03	9	45.28	10	67.80	6	59.53	8	63.3	6
Western	45.68	10	47.84	9	73.73	1	68.96	2	56.3	9
National Average	65.28		66.32		67.17		63.30		63.72	

Source: ECZ, 2022, 2023 Key: Pos=Position

Luapula province's performance between 2019 and 2023 has been relatively consistent hovering around 7<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> position. In 2019 the province took 8<sup>th</sup> slot and 9<sup>th</sup> in 2020. In 2022 the province improved by one position, however, was unable to sustain it and reverted to 8<sup>th</sup> position in 2023, the same position registered in 2021. In 2023, for example, the national average pass rate was 65.28%, Luapula emerged with 58.24%. In these five years, Luapula including Muchinga have been performing below the national average as can be seen on the league table. These statistics confirm the findings of the current study that Luapula has been underperforming in national assessments. The following sections delves in findings and discussion of the root cause and the way out of this fixation.

## Challenges/Barriers Contributing to Low Academic Performance in Luapula Province

### i) Challenges facing Schools

The question to establish the challenges and barriers contributing to low performance of Luapula province in national examinations evoked numerous responses from participants who were readily available to offer their own lived experiences. The most recurring response centred on lack of adequate and robust Early Childhood Education Centres (ECE) also known as nursery or pre-schools. There are inadequate government ECE centres and the few are the children especially in rural areas and peri-urban places. This is supported by Matafwali's (2022) posits that 'vulnerable children in hard-to-reach areas in rural are disproportionately underrepresented in ECE'. For example, in 2020 the province recorded 17, 400 children enrolled in ECE centres while Southern, and Eastern provinces had 46, 727 and 41, 086 respectively. These provinces with higher number of enrolments including the Copperbelt (34, 420), Central (28, 445) and Lusaka (24, 655) are more often above the national average on ECZ's league table. The provinces with fewer enrolments for instance Luapula, Muchinga (12, 691) and North-Western (12, 425) (MOE, 2020) records proportions of candidates obtaining results below the national average (ECZ, 2023)

Further, government's ECE centres are not as widespread as private ones. The later usually are inaccessible by most families due to exorbitant school fees. This explains majority of learners start receiving formal education in grade one. These learners usually breakthrough in literacy after grade five (5) and most of them fails to do so even after grade seven (7) at which they first attempt national primary school assessment. Experiential evidence does explain ECE as crucial in fostering literacy abilities and in preparing an individual child for life challenges, access to higher education and labour market. In supporting ECE, ILO (2018, p.54; Matafwali, 2022) assert that, children do not only develop physically, but also cognitive skills in the first few years of life and build on them progressively throughout school years. Playparks, Games, toys and books for instance, are important in facilitating socialization and intellectual development of children, leading to academic performance. However, these are mostly inaccessible in the province. Thus, investing in ECE was found beneficial as one teacher was quoted as saying:

*Children in Luapula province lack strong educational background that comes with pre-school education. Pre-school is important in preparing children for both primary and secondary including tertiary education and employment. However, there are few pre-schools in this province and the situation is worse in rural areas where both parents and their children have never even heard about pre-school because all learners start school in grade one. Government should pump more resources in the training of ECE teachers, constructions or opening of more ECE centres. (Participant Female 16)*

In addition, another teacher reported the following remarks:

*As an ECE teacher, I receive less support from the administration and fellow teachers. My class lacks teaching and learning resources including Play Park. It is no less than a grade one class. Additionally, I am the only teacher and when I am not available, no one come to my aid by attending to the toddlers. (Participant Female 12)*

The learning points from the above teachers explores challenges being faced by the few ECE sector with the situation worsening in rural areas. It further appears that where they exist, are no difference from grade one classes due to lack of essential resources that stimulate early learning climates. Well-resourced and stocked ECE centres either independently established or attached to all primary schools are needed.

In another development, it was found that most teachers handling junior and senior secondary classes especially in rural are teaching subjects they are not licenced by the Teaching Council of Zambia (TCZ). This was attributed to shortages of specialised manpower in the province. Most teachers teaching junior classes were doing so on 'secondment' basis, a situation where a teacher is made to teach a grade or subject for which is less or not qualified, placing academic performance at stake. The qualification and/or

specialisation of teachers are significant in effective delivery of instructional strategies in class, and this fosters academic breakthrough. In the absence of this, quality education that translates into academic outcomes (MOE, 2010) would be eroded. One teacher lamented:

*I am qualified to teach Social Studies but teaching Business studies. My fellow teacher who studied English and Religious Studies do teach Computer Studies at the same school. I think this is a challenge that cannot vitally help to improve academic outcomes in Luapula Province. (Participant Male 8).*

In this verbatim, the teacher is of the view that lack of specialisation and the teaching of subjects on secondment, is not only illegal by laws of TCZ but also leading to breaks in teaching delivery and educational achievements (e.g. basic skills, knowledge, values and life skills). Primary schools are also not exemptional. There are reports of ECE teachers teaching upper or examination classes. The shortages of enough qualified teachers at ECE, primary and secondary levels were attributed to brain drain or “mass exodus” of teachers to district town centres and other provinces. The underlying factors raised from among other things, lack of incentives e.g. resources (MOE, 2001), modern accommodation and attractive remote/rural hardship allowances. This was cited as challenges contributing to below than average academic performance. One participant narrated the following excerpt:

*Incentives to keep teachers in rural schools and even urban schools and bolster hard working is minimal in the province. Most teachers in rural areas do struggle to access double class, responsibility and remote/rural hardship allowances. I struggled to receive this allowance and my spouse and colleague at another school are still fighting to get remote allowance despite submitting appropriate duly filled in claim forms.*

(Participant Male 9)

The exploration of this excerpt informs the need to provide incentives to teachers in rural areas. Luapula being a rural province should enjoy all kinds of allowances as baits retaining teachers. The flaws in the provisions of remote and rural hardship allowances to deserving teachers is a recipe encouraging transfers from these areas, leading to artificial shortages of the best teachers and educators. This scenario results in inefficiency of operation and low school attainments.

The other issues that caught the coding of the researcher were lack of teaching and learning resources universally designed to meet the learning needs of a 21<sup>st</sup> Century learner. The provision of these, is a steppingstone for school progressions and achievements. It should be noted that without them, any teaching would be doing a disservice to learners. This problem was reported by more than half of the participants as would be echoed through the following:

*There is lack of teaching resources in schools. The only resources known here are manila papers and flip charts. Such aids like a model of a human skeleton, are out of reach. At my school there is only two laptops one for the administration and the other for practical computer lessons. These are not enough for a growing large number of learners because of Free Education Policy. (Participant Female 1)*

The Participants seemed to indicate lack of adequate teaching materials and conducive learning environments affects quality education delivery and therefore, academic performance in national examinations. Lack of resources was frequently cited with over enrolment.

Given that individual learner's success in education is partly influenced by the educational environment (Frederickson and Cline, 2015), over enrolment in classrooms was noted with concern. Several participants mentioned over enrolment against few teachers and limited infrastructures as contributing to underperformance in any form of educational assessments:

*Most schools in Luapula have chronic shortage of teachers but headteachers are still overburdening them through over enrolling learners beyond capacity. In this situation the smooth teaching and*



*learning is compromised however, it is the learners who are suffering in the first place for not receiving the much-needed teacher-pupil interaction.*

(Participant Male 8)

Another participant had the following to comment:

*Lack of adequate space in classrooms is not conducive to quality learning and better results. Some classrooms have about 50 learners. In a day teachers spend much time marking 50-100 exercise books depending on the activities of a day. These make some teachers to give learners few activities and homework. (anonymous 7)*

Large classroom size in terms of number of learners have its own challenges that affect delivery of quality education and outcomes. For instance, when teacher-pupil ratio is high, teachers have problems in providing individualised attention to all. Learner-centred approach is nearly impossible. This finding is supported by the research work conducted by MOE (2010) and Lwimba (2023) that high teacher-pupil ratio and large class size denies learners opportunities to receive close attention, stifling quality education.

This grounded research also recorded a volley of responses on the shortages of infrastructures in the province. The policy of having a school within a radius of two kilometres has not been realised in Luapula. Schools have been scattered far from one another. Where they exist, lack adequate classrooms and teachers' accommodations and the few available are not conducive (MOE, 2010). For example, MOE's (2020) statistical bulletin indicated 4 748 classrooms at all school levels against the population of 349, 687 learners, contributing to makeshift classrooms in certain places. Evidence reveals that three to four grades take turns in using one classroom in a single day, significantly reducing teacher-learner contact time. For instance, a particular grade would use the classroom from 06:45-10:15, the next grade from 10:30am to 12:15, from 12:30 to 14:15 and 14:30 to 17: 00pm. Further, the same document reported 1, 776 permanent houses against 8, 838 primary and secondary teachers in Luapula. This scenario makes some teachers to rent outside and usually far from the school. This was echoed by many participants but due to limited space in this paper, only few excerpts were sampled:

*Luapula province does not have adequate infrastructures like spacious classrooms, boarding facilities and accommodation for teachers are not enough to catch up with the growing population of learners and teachers. At my school, to solve the challenges of classrooms, we turned some dormitories into classrooms. This has affected boarding spaces. Boarders' performance in most school is more exceptional than day scholars. A reduction in boarding spaces has resulted in less boarders and more day scholars, affecting academic performance. The problems of lack of schools would be solved once government builds more schools and expand existing schools through building extra classrooms. This will also curb on the over enrolment issues. (Participant Male 4)*

Constructions of schools, classrooms and teacher's houses within proximity would reduce on distance that teachers and learner's cover. This would not only lead to channelling time and energy used in covering long distances to teaching and learning experiences, but also in curbing late-coming, knocking-off early or absconding and absenteeism which have adverse effects on "teacher-pupil teaching and learning interactions" (MOE, 2010, p.78) and outcomes.

## **ii) Barriers/Challenges Learners Face in Learning in Luapula Province**

The many challenges faced by schools are like those reported affecting learners. The lack of designated reading facilities was mentioned by several participants as contributing to lower-than-average academic performance. There is dearth of adequate libraries that could stimulate reading culture (Lwimba, 2023). Among the ninety-eight (98) participants, only sixteen (16) mentioned their schools have libraries but with out-dated stocks of books. Lwimba in his book argued a library with out-dated books is not a library but a

store warehouse of old books. It was found the province has only 44 permanent libraries in primary schools in comparison to 679 for the Copperbelt and 191 for Southern province (MOE, 2020). Like Luapula, North-Western (34) and Western (24) have fewer libraries and this might be one of the factors explaining their low rankings on the league table. The library is considered the 'heart of learning' implying in its absence, learners are denied their fundamental right of access to enriching educational resources. In 2020, while provinces like Lusaka had 134, 565, Copperbelt 176, 194 and Western 66, 488 textbooks, Luapula recorded only 24, 678 in all the subjects (ibid.). Several participants echoed in similitude to the following participant:

*Library facilities are lacking in our province. Those that are available like in Mansa are stocked with outdated reading materials which are irrelevant to the modern era. This means that without adequate and well stocked libraries, a reading culture and thus academic performance cannot be realised. Something must be done to provide learners with reading spaces with modern books and supplementary materials like academic pamphlets. (Participant Female 15)*

It was also reported that truancy or absenteeism is rife in the province. Several factors were cited as leading to this vice. For example, lack of interest in school by parents and learners themselves, seasonal or traditional activities and lack of both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, and role models to stimulate interest in school were mentioned. Childhood headed homes was in specified. These can be summarised through the remarks given by one of the participants:

*Luapula is among the provinces with seasonal/traditional activities for making ends meet e.g. fishing and caterpillar gathering including harvesting and drying cassava. During this period, learners miss classes for several days if not months. In districts which are close to the Copperbelt province, learners after harvesting e.g. maize, beans, and groundnuts migrate there to either sell their produce or look for piece works. They would be there for many months only to return few months before examinations start. Some never return. Seasonal errands also make children develop negative attitudes towards education. These children do not consider education as a game changer but as a by-way business. (Participant Female 5)*

Furthermore, in support of the above, another participant remarked as follows:

*Children abscond classes because they are breadwinners, lack support from parents/guardians and some do too much manual work at home or farms and therefore, cannot concentrate in school. (Participant Male 4)*

Seasonal activities in the province appear to be affecting attendance which is an epitome to academic performance. Learners who reside along e.g. the banks of river Luapula, Lake Mweru and Bangweulu leave school for fishing and other migrants to fishing camps which are significantly far from school. They would be there for several months. The same applies to those who go for mushroom picking and caterpillars' gatherings. Poverty is at the centre of all this.

Poverty among pupils was quoted as contributing to "poor" attendance, concentration and educational achievements in the province. It was revealed that most learners lack basic requisites for learning. They face financial challenges to meet essential school necessities. One participant was quoted as saying:

*Some learners do piece work to buy school requisites for themselves because parents do not provide for them due to abject poverty. The situation is even worse for the orphans and those with disabilities. (Participant Male 2)*

Poverty which manifests itself through several factors like hunger (Lack of food and nutrition), if not alleviated has a range of repercussions like reduced accessibility to education (Muzata, 2021), low academic performance (MOE, 2010) through lack of enough energy for studying. Mani et al., (2013) found a relationship between poverty and cognitive function, implying that poverty can reduce cognitive

performance, fuelling underperformance in school. The end of this is school drop-out and early marriages/pregnancies among other vices. Parents and guardians who are affected by poverty that is typically precipitated by low level of education also resort to wedding off their daughters in order to raise income to sustain themselves (Muyuni et al., 2022). They also wed off their sons to reduce on feeding spaces. This result in teenage marriages and pregnancies, and usually these marriages are short-lived. In 2020 for example, 1, 344 pregnancies among school-going girls were reported however, only 710 re-admitted (MOE, 2020) through the Re-entry policy. Their performance in most cases is below par. Similarly, one participant remarked the following sentiment:

*Teenage marriages and pregnancies are widespread in Luapula province. The Re-entry policy although is good has contributed in part to an increase of such cases. When these children come back in schools, their education has been disturbed by married life and the impact of childbearing/rearing that some struggle to catch up with education, and others would better be repeated in lower grades. Their performance in school and exams is not good and are in numbers of those resitting for grade 9 external and grade 12 GCE exams. (Participant Female 1)*

Despite all this challenges, the province has realistic prospects and opportunities to overcome them through concerted efforts and purpose.

### **Prospects for Improving Academic Performance in Luapula Province**

To establish how to improve academic performance and thus provincial ranking, participants were asked about the prospects or opportunities. They did not hesitate to point at significant measures of assurance, believing in the potential of the province to ascend the ladder of the league table against all odds. Most of the responses in this section were just a replica of the above challenges schools (learners and teachers) face. Thus, several participants' points echoed the following remarks:

*The academic performance will only be realised if learners were made to breakthrough in writing and reading whilst in ECE, grade one or two. This would be achieved if government through the Ministry of Education invested in and intensify ECE and lower primary education. This is the section that needs more resources (teachers and materials) including close Monitoring and Evaluation. New Breakthrough To Literacy (NBTL) recorded success in promoting literacy and I do not yet understand how such a promising literacy program was abandoned. A literate learner is a good predictor of academic attainments at all levels. (Participant Female 15)*

Turning to, the library as a repository of knowledge is good supplement to every effort promoting the acquisition and retention of literacy skills. Despite the prominent position this institution has in fostering education, Luapula province, as alluded to, has chronic shortfalls of public, private and institutional/school's libraries. Therefore, government should construct at least one public library in each district and each school should have this facility or reading corner with latest hard and softcopies of reading materials. Schools should be connected to the internet to promote accessibility to online reading stuffs. In line with this debate, one participant commented that:

*Libraries are important in education and in fostering reading culture and performance in school but are very few in Luapula province and where they exist, people or learners are not sensitised enough to make maximum use of them. Government must construct more libraries and sensitise people to use them, and membership subscriptions for library users should be slashed to an accessible level. (Participant Male 20)*

The idea in this verbatim highlight the library, reading culture, literacy and educational achievement as necessarily and essentially compatible. The availability and well use of them would lead to improved reading culture and school attainment. The absence or lack of its judicious use explains some of the challenges learners are facing in education today. A learner who cannot read and write, may not progress far in education and life.

In a separate development, food and nutrition was cited as critical in promoting positive academic achievements because a healthy learner has the potential or vitality to be receptive and concentrate in school. They also enjoy the absence of illnesses hence are in schools throughout the term thereby defeating the impact of absenteeism arising from sicknesses. Two participants remarked as follows:

*Most children in Luapula province especially in deep rural are underfed while others may have plenty but one or limited variety of foods which results in lack of a balanced diet. This is also coupled by lack of clean or treated water. Some children stay far from the source of water. Lack of enough water may lead to dehydration which is not good for school children. Therefore, feeding programme and water reticulations should be introduced where they do not exist and revitalise where they are. Parents and guardians should be sensitised on how to prepare balanced diet for their families. (Participant Male 8)*

In support of the above, the following participant had a similar point in view.

*Government should introduce feeding program to make learners nourished and energetically stay in school for longer periods. (Participant Female 12)*

The above participants have provided a well-informed idea picture concerning the low level of nutrition and safe drinking water in Luapula province. Adequate nutrition and rehydration are linked to alertness and academic performance among school-going children. This is a moral clarion call for the need to introduce clean drinking water points and revitalise school feeding programme to supplement home nutrition and dehydration. This assertion agrees with MOE (2005) and a research by Kabaso (2017) that Luapula has a high rate of malnutrition among school going children, calling necessities for well-balanced diet to foster “child development” (Muzata, 2021, p.35) and general learning outcomes.

The other strategy that was repeatedly mentioned to improve educational performance was recruitment and retention of more qualified and loyal teachers. Teachers are the backbone of every success in school. They are the most important resources with significant influence on the general learning and wellness of learners including those with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) (Frederickson and Cline, 2015). Therefore, more teachers are needed in all the schools in the province. To this effect, one participant said:

*The province should be given enough teachers during teachers’ recruitment to curb the deficit of teachers especially in rural set ups. Loyal teachers who cannot get transfers to towns or other provinces are the much needed in this rural province.*

(Participant Male 9)

Given the above excerpts, it is anticipated that the academic performance in Luapula would be strengthened once enough qualified teachers are posted and retained. This may also reduce on teacher-learner ratio and those teaching on secondment, yielding no results.

As alluded to, the availability of teaching and learning resources were cited as key predictors of academic breakthrough. These resources are critical in aiding delivery and assimilations of the learning concepts especially in rural areas with little or no real-life situations. It is clear that in some far-flung areas people have never even seen a mobile cell phone. Hence, teaching/learning resources would bring such things live in learning. The needs for making resources available in all schools in order to promote educational achievements were reported by many participants but the following comment was exceptional:

*Teaching and learning resources are important when teaching but are not readily available at my school, and science laboratory has no equipment and is dilapidated to say the least. We are encouraged to improvise but conversely the materials one can use to improvise are also not available. Government should not fund schools to procure these resources but rather bring them in schools because these schools have failed to procure them. (Participant Female 15)*



Motivation talks to arouse interests in both learners and their parents were reported as quintessential in fostering educational achievements. This research revealed that learners and their parents are not motivated enough to have a well-informed perception about school. For instance, parents/carers do not help children with reading and homework despite this being significant in improving the overall academic performance (MOE, 2010; Frederickson and Cline, 2015). Learners also lack adequate role models to arouse their inner drives to work extra hard. In the absence of motivation, learners may not have the whim to appreciate all the benefits accrued to school for national, societal development and in their own lives. A participant was quoted as saying:

*The office for Guidance and Counselling should be strengthened and funded to conduct a robust motivation talks in all schools. These talks should highlight the importance of education. The government can also supplement the efforts of the Guidance and Counselling by using various platforms. For example, television, radio and social media would be used to motivate learners including their parents who needs to be sensitised on the values of education so that they do not use their children in their farming fields and fishing camps or as breadwinners, during school terms.*

(Participant Female 5)

This narrator informs the reader that individual learner's success in education is influenced by both extrinsic and intrinsic motivation including inner drives and self-efficacy of learners (Galton et al., 2009; Lwimba, 2023). Self-conscientiousness and optimism are central ingredients in educational attainments and therefore, learners must be guided to be self-driven.

It was also found that the province is participating in activities for Continuing Professional Development (CPD). This programme is tailored to enhance professionalism among teachers. It shapes one's knowledge, skillsets and pedagogical aspects in a particular subject. It flourishes on the belief that human knowledge is dynamic and thus needs to be updated continuously. Therefore, a good teacher remains a student throughout his/her life span (MOE, 2001). This CPD if well managed in Luapula province would lead to breakthrough in academic work. One participant echoed the following:

*At my school CPD is regularly conducted in the afternoon and we are learning important things. Teachers should be motivated to implement CPD seriously. This programme is very good and can lead to higher level of professionalism and school success in terms of producing well-behaved learners and good results in exams.*

(Participant Male 9)

Moving further, effective monitoring and evaluation were cited as significant in augmenting academic performance in the province. Internal and external monitors play an enabling role in supervising teaching and management (ILO, 2018) of schools. They provide checks and balances, promoting delivery of quality educational experiences. One of the participants confirmed this as saying:

*If all schools in the province would be monitored and follow-ups made, could improve teaching and learning outcomes. Schools in remote and far flung are not consistently monitored. Monitors should monitor all the schools under their charge. They should both observe teachers teaching in the classroom and check their 'preparation' or teaching files. This is essential in fostering bespoke practices in teachers' development through professionalism.* (Participant Male 4)

In another findings, the impact of assessments and/or examinations on academic performance was reported. Teaching, learning and assessments are intertwined, and they affect one another. For instance, assessments promote teaching/learning in schools and quality teaching/learning enhances good performance in assessments. It is not surprising to find that in the absence of one of these two, the other fails. The in-course assessments or intermediate such as monthly, midterms, end of term and mock examinations if used



consistently in all schools have positive effects on academic achievements (MOE, 2010; Lwimba, 2023) for the learner in particular and education sector in general. They influence learner's behaviour to focus on their study and it is the form of practice. It also influences the final course grades, increasing learners learning. However, it was found that learners in rural areas are not subjected to all these enabling assessments. Learners write tests with few questions from the chalk/black boards and the only time they see assessment papers is during final or mock examinations. In most cases, the outcomes from these tests are not revised with learners on areas of strengths and weaknesses. One participant pointed that:

*The tests in Luapula if are revised with learners would help in improving academic performance. Learners should not be writing tests on the chalkboard. Tests should be analysed. Analysis of tests is important in informing the next step in school journey.*

(Participant Female 16)

Problem-based learning is essential in fostering learner's self-directed learning skills (Lwimba, 2023). When test or assessment papers are revised with learners, they will be empowered to revise on themselves and be better prepared to effectively tackle summative examinations, leading to enhanced academic performance.

### **Benefits of Enhanced Academic Performance to the Youth and National Development**

In this section, a lead question was asked on how the enhanced academic performance would benefit the youth in this province and the nation as a whole. Participants gave valid responses that are down to earth. One of the most recurring was that it opens more doors to higher education and employment opportunities. They are able to progress to tertiary education, create employment opportunities or join existing labour market (ILO, 2018), leading to individual, community and national development. As one participant put it:

*Better academic performance increases chances of accessing tertiary education, merit-based scholarships and career opportunities. This would result in personal and national development.*  
(Participant Male 13)

Quality educational achievement is believed by many as key to escaping circles of poverty and inequality thereby reducing cases of crime and/or delinquency behaviour among the youth. It boosts confidence in the youth and make them contributes to discoveries of new knowledge for sustainability of their terrain including aspects of climate change. This can be exemplified as quoted from a participant as below:

*When youths have good results at grade 12 school certificate level, they become confident and hopeful about their future. They contribute meaningfully to the collective challenges being faced by themselves and the nation such as climate change resulting in droughts that has severely affected the generation of hydroelectricity and therefore, load shading Zambia is experiencing today.* (Participant Female 6)

Furthermore, upward socioeconomic mobility has been correlated to quality educational attainments. Socioeconomic mobility is a conduit for progression of individuals from one social class to another (usually advanced) through education, employment and so forth. Higher academic achievement makes this mobility possible for example, it fosters critical thinking, problem-solving skills and social cohesion. It provides access to better education, employment opportunities, and the breaking of long chain of generational poverty and injustices, fostering economic growth at individual and national levels. One participant asserted:

*Education comes with social mobility. Educated youth can progress from lower to higher life experiences. Through education they can combat generational poverty and underdevelopment in their localities, leading to personal, community, and national development.* (Participant Male 20)

In all the above verbatims, considerations are evident. Academic achievement of the youth are potential allies in personal, provincial and national development. Multi-stakeholders are called upon to improve the quality of education being offered in Luapula province for example, by strengthening early childhood

education, targeting support to vulnerable individuals and infrastructure development to create inclusive diverse learning environments for all (Matafwali, 2022; Lwimba, 2024).

### Contributions of any other Thoughts

At the end of the questionnaire, it was asked to contribute any information that was not asked in the questionnaire. It was reported that learners with disabilities might not be performing well in school because of lack of appropriate learning environments and specific assessments. The provisions of education in inclusive environments that maximises their learning opportunities would contribute to their exceptional performance in assessments. This is supported by Muzata's (2021) and Crowther's (2011) finding of the provision of education to learners with SEND in an inclusive setting. One participant had the following to say:

*Children with special educational needs should be given a separate examination to accommodate their learning needs. These children are facing challenges when attempting the exams that are prepared without their special educational needs (strength and weaknesses) in check. There should be special inclusive schools and units in all the districts. (Participant Male 4)*

Revitalisation of co-curricular activities in all schools was reported as substantial in promoting not only intellectual growth, and physical potency but also academic performance. For example, a robust co-curricular activity is essential for good health and illness prevention. They are also vital in socialisation and curbing absenteeism thereby encouraging attendance, an epitome for academic development. In short, co-curricular activities help in promoting the physical, mental and social wellbeing of an individual learner. Children who have challenges in academic works find solace in co-curricular activities such as sport and clubs, assisting them develop interests in school. One participant remarked:

*Co-curricular activities are important for the general growth of all school going children. However, in Luapula they are mostly taken serious during preparations for such events as inter-schools, inter-districts, inter-provincial and national games. If this important aspect was consistently done, could contribute to better school outcomes.*

(Participant Female 5)

The landscape of understanding of this excerpt informs the importance of co-curricular activities in enhancing creativity, critical thinking and problem-solving skills (MOE, 2001; Lwimba, 2023), leading to learning achievements. This, therefore, calls for all parties in the education sector to maximise use of these enabling activities for all learners.

## DISCUSSION

The purpose of this research paper was to draw attention to the persistence of underachievement of Luapula province in national assessments at almost all levels. Drawing on the conceptual framework of education production function, various issues were noted. Many schools (teachers and learners) face continual difficulties in navigating in many of these learning institutions because of lack of essential materials and infrastructures, for example. Learners in rural set ups are particularly disadvantaged in their educational journeys.

By comparing Luapula to other provinces above the 'national average', the research noted the widening gap between them. There was a significant contrast with learners in Luapula facing significantly more barriers in their school journey. For instance, many do not access ECE before enrolled in grade one. Learners who access these centres, find educational progression and/or the development of literacy skills less taxing. An interesting point is that a literate learner is capable of reading, writing and comprehending given materials, fostering academic discipline and performance in examinations. All the provinces above the national ceiling,

are those with higher ECE enrolments (MOE, 2020). The challenge in Luapula could be alleviated through constructions and/or creation of ECE centres of good quality.

Further, the attendance and successful completion of pre-schools years, ought to be the condition for enrolments into primary grade one. This would enable children to breakthrough in literacy including numeracy with understanding early before they attempt the first national exams at Grade Seven in their school journey. Children who have never passed through ECE have greater challenges in reading and understanding material read. This assertion confirms MOE (2010) reports that some learners can read but without understanding what they are reading. This affects performance in other study areas which depends on the ability to read and understanding of the contents read. Comprehending the landscape of what is being read, is an essential skill and a good predictor of academic performance in any kind of assessment (ibid.). For this, MOE should invest lots in ECE and lower primary education to further literacy in learners. Literacy screening and/or assessment should be made robust in all primary schools, ensuring only those able to read and write progress to the next grade level of the education system. The New Breakthrough to Literacy program (MOE, 2001) should be reintroduced and retrofitted to align with the contemporary education in a rapidly changing world as it proved beneficial in inculcating reading and writing skillsets at an early stage.

The teacher ought to teach the subject or level for which he/she is formally qualified. Cases of teaching on secondment should be disallowed. Quality teachers would raise the standards of education in Luapula and the nation at large. This is supported by MOE's (2010, p.41) assertions that the achievement of quality education is "dependent on...teaching staff and their professional qualifications". Here then, teaching should be done on the basis of proper qualifications and/or specialisations.

Library is central to learning. However, the province was found to be among others with the lowest number of this essential facility. By contrast, provinces e.g. the Copperbelt, Southern, Lusaka, and Eastern with more libraries took leads on ECZ's league table than those with few (MOE, 2020; ECZ, 2023), underscoring an urgent need to construct more libraries in the province. Every school or district should have one to facilitate reading for information, academic progression and enjoyment. People who read a wide range of books are more civilised and educated than those that do not. Luapula can be on the head/lead if expose to reading climate through provision of accessible reading facilities/resources including reading corners stocked with interesting books in classrooms and have people/learners sensitised to access them.

The learners in this province are influenced by several factors such as seasonal activities. It was revealed that many learners including their parents are markedly pre-occupied with these activities instead of school, advancing ambivalent negative attitude towards education. Thus, parents are reluctant to support their children with school. This can be addressed through concerted efforts and protracted sensitisation on the importance of education. School holidays can be used for these activities and not during school terms. Traditional leaders and parents/caregivers can play an enabling role in reversing and preventing the escalation of this trend of absenteeism arising from traditional seasonal activities. Absenteeism as problematic as it may, requires "urgent redress" (MOE, 2010, p.65).

This study further found malnutrition because of poverty as a contributing factor. Poverty is an enemy of education as it makes learners spend more time trying to make ends meet e.g. figuring about food, and learning materials instead of the actual learning, and this consumes their cognitive resources for academic prowess. As alluded to, research conducted by Kabaso in Mwense District of Luapula, explains how children attend school and/or sleep on an empty stomach, resulting in underperformance in both formative and summative assessments. The Ministry of Education should work with the Ministry of Agriculture, and the Ministry of Community Development and Social Services including other lining Ministries and specific NGOs to sensitise parents to grow enough of a variety of foods rather than relying solely on fish and cassava. Where feasible should be provided with supplementary foods. This is significant because in addition to contributing to the physical growth of children, food and healthy nutrition including clean water are important for their emotional and cognitive growth on which a fine intellect that can withstand academic pressure is tethered.

As indicated in the findings, the chronic shortages of teaching/learning materials and infrastructures has a bearing on academic performance. There are inadequate of them in most schools in the province. Further, it was upsetting given the report that some schools have stopped offering Computer Studies due to lack of resources such as computers and computer rooms including any kind of electrical power. Furthermore, lack of science laboratories makes learners fail to compete on the equal footings like those from well-equipped schools/provinces. There is an urgent need to procure a wide range of modern teaching resources to aid teaching, and infrastructure expansions to accommodate the ever-growing population of learners arising from self-realisation and the Free Education Policy.

Further, a school with enough infrastructures for example, classrooms, boarding facilities, and teacher's accommodation promote learning outcomes. In this terrain, there are spaces for conducting remedial work, academic learner's preparations (Prep) and one-to-one instructional strategies. Covering distance daily to and from school has some effects on quality education delivery. For instance, when teacher is tired may not have enough energy and morale to effectively deliver the learning instructions. Equally, a learner may not concentrate in school. This is further exuded by Muyuni, Moonga, Chikampa & Mulenga's (2022) findings of long distance contributing to absenteeism, and late coming (MOE, 2010) even during examinations. They noted that regular attendance is essential in fostering academic breakthrough among learners. A friend of mine once explained about one of the UNIP's government policies, stipulated the construction of at least one school every after two kilometres. Although I could not trace any related document to support this claim however, it would have benefited Luapula province if it was there and implemented. Construction of more schools, classrooms and teachers' houses including furniture is paramount in this province.

The issues of early marriages and pregnancies caught the researcher's attention. School children should be sensitised on the dangers of intimacy relationships which typically results in teenage or unwanted pregnancies including diseases such as STIs and HIV/AIDS. These vices, among others, lead to school dropouts and the experiences of School Re-entry policy (GIDD, 2010) which in most cases do not yield good academic results. The number of pregnancies recorded in 2020 led to drop-out of 634 girls, contributing to the lower completion rate of 28.5% of this province in that particular year (MOE, 2020, p.34).

The challenges and prospects highlighted call for actionable response to alleviate them and bolsters opportunities by implementing policies and framework including programs that are sensitive to the real needs of the local education sector in Luapula province.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations were made from key findings:

- There is need to make quality education more accessible through provisions of adequate enabling facilities and materials at all levels of education.
- Early Childhood Education (Pre-school) to be retrofitted and expanded in capacity in order to prepare learners for primary education and beyond.
- Improvement in infrastructures through constructions of more schools and/or classrooms with quality teachers' accommodation at reasonable distances.
- Constructions of both public and school libraries in the province.
- Government through the Ministry of Education should strengthen monitoring and evaluation mechanism to assess competence and proficiency of teachers and managers of schools for effective teaching delivery in all institutions of learning.
- Introduction of safe drinking water points and feeding programme in schools to supplement on home nutrition.
- National assessment league table to be abolished as it may lead to malpractices, rote learning and memorisation instead of achievable education of good quality.
- Quality input for quality outputs ought to be emphasised and promoted in schools.



- This research should be backed with tangible actions.
- A further research is needed.

## CONCLUSION

This maiden study revealed a teething number of aspects affecting the education delivery and academic performance in Luapula province. The research established that the low academic performance in national examinations arises from a nuanced combination of numerous factors such as lack of adequate ECE centres, infrastructures and teaching/learning resources, brain drains, and negative attitudes towards school by both learners and their parents. For this, stringent measures are quintessential in a rapidly changing landscape of this province. For instance, concerted efforts are needed to restructure the education to better meet the challenges and opportunities in the province. This may call to streamline teaching and make educational system work synergistically to increase the speed and flexibility with which it can address and adapt to promising and/or results-oriented changes for improved educational ends. Further, implementation stage is often far better than the initial one. Therefore, this research espouses individual schools to reflect on the manner are delivering education and account for the academic outcomes of their learners at all levels of national examinations. Given that the findings here are not mere rhetorical but practical possibilities, the education sector in the province and beyond have been urged to choose more locally focused means to effect academic change by acting on the given recommendations surfacing from insiders.

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