

News > World > Africa

# Bridge International Academies: Scripted schooling for \$6 a month is an audacious answer to educating the poorest children across Africa and Asia

News Voices Culture Lifestyle Tech Sport Appeal



A system in which every step of the learning process is remotely dictated could help make schooling [affordable](#) for some of the world's poorest children

Catrina Stewart | Monday 27 July 2015 | 2 comments



Advertisement

Pupils at a Bridge school in Nairobi *Catrina Stewart*

Beyond alleys strewn with rubbish and lines of laundry suspended between rusted metal shacks, a rutted footpath leads to a brightly painted private school, an oasis of learning in one of Nairobi's most benighted spots.

With corrugated iron for walls, chicken wire across the windows, and wooden desks, it may seem nothing out of the ordinary. But there are few places in the slums where a teacher holds a piece of chalk in his right hand and a Nook e-reader in his left, and follows verbatim an electronic [lesson plan](#) crafted entirely by academics in Boston.

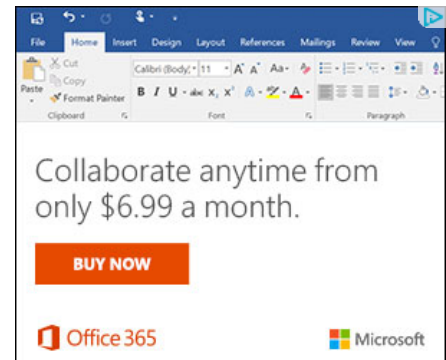
Charging \$6 a month on average, Bridge International Academies, a multinational for-profit chain, is offering [schooling](#) about as cheaply as it can be done. Its founders hope to roll that out to 10 million children across Africa and Asia, the key to its own longevity and, it hopes, the global educational conundrum that has bedevilled policy-makers.

But Bridge, which has expanded at such a rapid rate in six years that it is present in more than 400 locations across Kenya and Uganda, faces a potent threat to its survival in the shape of radical new teacher training proposals that would drive up the cost and put it beyond the reach of those that need it most.

"This could literally put every school in the [low-cost] sector out of business tomorrow," said Whitney Tilson, who sits on Bridge's board as part of a \$6m investment by the Pershing Square Foundation. "It would send a signal to the world that Kenya is a country you should never invest in as a private investor."

The proposals are likely to stoke further the debate over delivery of education to the poor across the developing world, where some 250 million children are still unable to read or write, despite many of them having been to school.

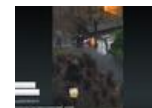
Bridge is arguably the most audacious answer yet to the question of how to bring education to the masses in countries where schools are plagued by overcrowding and teacher absenteeism.



**i100** TRENDING



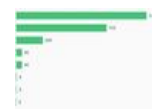
Ukrainian Google Translate has been accidentally trolling Russia



Britain came to a standstill on Wednesday to watch a livestream of a puddle. Yes, a puddle



Oregon 'terrorists' don't plan siege very well, put out plea for snacks and supplies



These are the countries which have tested the most nuclear weapons since 1945



An American Football fan tried to mock ballerinas and it completely backfired

**MOST POPULAR**

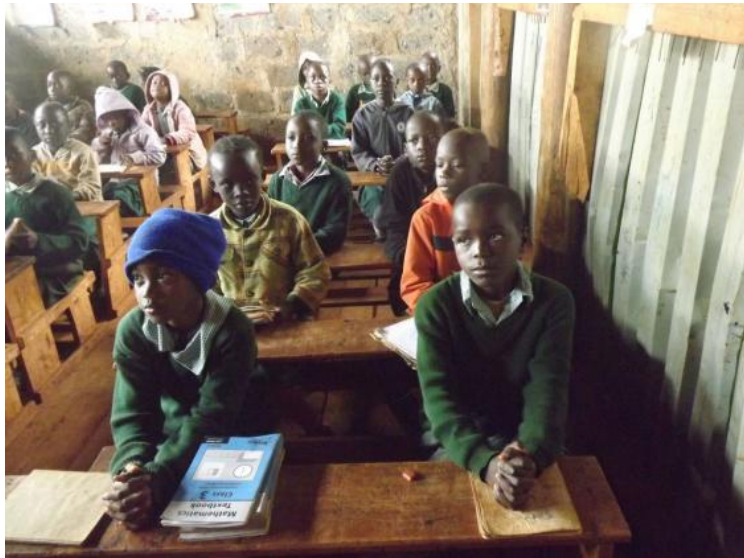


Mayor of Cologne: Women need 'code of conduct' to avoid assaults



German police search for 1,000 men after mass sexual assault

What are your greatest



Pupils at a Bridge school in Nairobi

With a team in the US responsible for lesson planning, and its teachers, mostly school-leavers trained up by Bridge, evaluated on a daily, even hourly, basis, its aim is to get children not just into school, but to get them learning as well, while making a profit in the process. It believes it will start making a profit when student enrolment, currently at 126,000, reaches half a million.

“Being physically in a room doesn’t mean that you are learning,” said Shannon May, who set up Bridge with her husband, Jay Kimmelman, after a brief stint teaching in a school in China where she became part of a system “that ensured the children were going to fail academically”.

Step into any classroom at Bridge and the chances are that the teacher will be uttering exactly the same words that are being uttered in every single Bridge school. A handbook instructs the teacher to look up from the e-book every five seconds, to wait eight seconds for children to answer, and instead of asking the teacher to explain a mathematical concept, the lesson plan takes them through it step by step. “All I have to do is deliver,” said Mary Juma, a Bridge teacher.

While the scripted approach has earned Bridge acclaim, it has also attracted criticism. “It looks hi-tech, but it is really just someone following a lesson plan in a top-down way and not stimulating discussion,” says David Archer, head of programme development at UK charity ActionAid. “It is almost Victorian.”

While global studies of low-cost private schools have produced mixed results, Ms May is convinced that Bridge’s model works. It



regrets? Survey unearths heartbreaking answers



Why Jaden Smith is threatening transgender territory



Woman's home 'trashed' on New Year's Eve after renting it on Airbnb

### The Truth About the Digital Color Evolution

WorkIntelligent.ly by Ricoh

### Lead Businesses Through Today's Greatest Challenges at Georgetown

Georgetown University

### 38 Celebs With The Highest IQ's in Hollywood

Your Daily Dish

### Here's What Happened To 10 LotR Characters After The Movies Ended

Answers

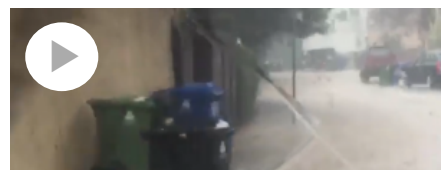
### Genealogy: Find the Story that Led to You.

Ancestry

Sponsored Links by Taboola



### VIDEO



Wheelie bin appears to attempt escape from Los Angeles floods

has commissioned independent evaluations that show children enrolled in its schools significantly outperform their state-educated peers in mathematics and English. The real test, though, will come in November, when a cohort of Bridge's children will be ready to take the final primary school exams for the first time.

Even as Bridge gets its chance to prove whether its model works, regulatory hurdles threaten to be its undoing. The Kenyan government is setting out new proposals that would radically recalibrate the financial calculations on which these schools operate. Most sweeping of all is a stipulation that half of all teachers in any one school should have a recognised teaching qualification and be paid accordingly.



Teaching with the aid of an e-book

The ministry of education says such criteria are long overdue, given the rapid expansion of private schools in the slums, some of which fail to meet even the most basic requirements on staffing, curriculum and facilities.

For a chain as extensive as Bridge's, such an order could be devastating. Mr Tilson is hopeful that a compromise will be struck, but the shape that compromise takes could determine whether international funders embrace the for-profit model.

Burned by corruption scandals implicating Kenya's ministry of education, international investors – particularly aid-funded institutions such as the World Bank and the UK's Department for International Development – are eager to fund sustainable education that can complement the public sector.

Private education, however cheap, is not the answer, argue



Stephen Fry teams up with Heathrow to welcome you to the UK



Grujic to Liverpool: Who is Klopp's first signing at Anfield?

### SPONSORED FEATURES



Spain by boat



UWE developers hail the robot that feeds itself



How to help your children apply for university



Settin' off from the dock of the Bay: Kayaking in Georgian Bay

Bridge's detractors. They contend that it takes money from the pockets of the poorest, and by allowing parents to opt out, makes it harder for government schools to get any better.

"Aid is being used as a tool to convince, cajole and compel the majority of the world to undertake policies which help big business, but which undermine public services emerging or thriving," Nick Dearden, director of Global Justice Now, said in criticism of the World Bank's \$10m investment in Bridge.

Africa has seen the biggest surges in pupil enrolment among the poor with the introduction of free primary education in countries such as Kenya, Ghana and Tanzania, but state schools still cost money. Parents have to buy uniforms, even a desk, and are often required to pay a means-tested enrolment fee that equates to a bribe.



The Bridges Academy school entrance

"It's a total myth when they say government schools are free and private schools are costly," said James Tooley, a champion of low-cost private education who set up Omega, a chain of nearly 40 schools in Ghana. "If a child can't afford Omega schools, typically they can't afford government schools either."

Earning just a few dollars a day from selling second-hand clothes, Evelyn Kagai puts most of her money towards rent and food, but she still has some left over to pay for her seven-year-old son's school fees at the nearby Bridge school. She balked at the idea of sending her son to a state school because of overcrowded classes where teachers often do not bother to turn up.

At the state primary school on the edge of Kawangware, a

sprawling settlement backing onto Nairobi's upmarket Lavington suburb, children race along the corridors and play raucously in the classroom. There is no teacher to be seen, even though the school day has a couple of hours still to run.

When a senior teacher finally emerges from the staffroom, he says he is "overwhelmed". With 84 children in his class, he cannot give them individual attention, and is forced to rely on wall displays to make up for a lack of textbooks.

The statistics are damning: a World Bank report from 2013 found that, despite spending more money than any of its neighbours on education, Kenya has seen no [improvement](#) in results.

Researching the low-cost sector during their honeymoon in Africa, Ms May and her husband found that the private schools operated on such tight margins that they had little left over to invest in facilities and teacher training. "The only way to do it is at scale," she said. "We always thought that around 500 pre- and primary schools [in Kenya] is where we could and should reach."



#### PROMOTED STORIES FROM THE WEB

Sponsored Links by Taboola

#### Here's What Happened When I Tried Dollar Shave Club

Dollar Shave Club

#### The Orange Razor That's Changing An Industry

Harry's

#### 25 Childhood Stars We're Still Crushing On

Your Daily Dish

#### 10 Stars from Commercials - Who Are They Really?

Answers

#### 15 Ridiculously Huge Mansions of NFL Players (You Won't Believe #1)

Grizly

#### Georgetown Expands Offerings with Launch of Two Master's Programs

Georgetown University

#### OracleVoice: Oracle Vs. Amazon: How Larry Ellison Sees It

Forbes for Oracle

### The Largest Employer in Each State

24/7 Wall St.

### Are You Really a Blue Blood? Your Last Name May Tell You.

Ancestry

### 8 Phenomenal Olympic Athletes who Lost It All

ThePostGame

### The Richest Women In The World May Shock You

Forbes

### 6 Things to Consider in a Data Retention Policy

Code42

#### MORE FROM THE INDEPENDENT

**Husband 'allows smugglers to rape his wife daily for three months as payment for trafficking him to Europe'**

**Airline forces women to compete for jobs in bikinis**

**Star Wars 8 is going to be 'weird', promises screenwriter**

by Taboola

INDEPENDENT MONEY



**Sending money to families and friends abroad?**  
Get bank-beating exchange rates

INDEPENDENT MONEY



**Making international business payments?**  
Get bank-beating exchange rates



Start your day with The Independent's news email



## COMMENTS

Login

Write a comment

**0 Comments**

Subscribe [RSS](#)

---

**Follow us:**



[User Policies](#)

[Privacy Policy](#)

[Cookie Policy](#)

[Code of Conduct](#)

[Complaint Form](#)

[Contact Us](#)

[Contributors](#)

[All Topics](#)

[Archive](#)

[Newsletters](#)

[iJobs](#)

[Subscriptions](#)

[Advertising Guide](#)

[Syndication](#)

[Evening Standard](#)

[Novaya Gazeta](#)

[Install our Apps](#)

