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Now, an elite school for poor pupils

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World's largest low-cost school opens in Lagos, Folashade Adebayo writes

With four colourful tents and loud music reminiscent of a party scene, it was easy to conclude that either a birthday party or a wedding reception was in the offing on Ibrahim Iyiola Street, Ijegan, Lagos, on Saturday.

To add to the fanfare, popular actor, Afeez Oyetoro of *the I don Port* o fame, breezed into the area, heightening the excitement and expectations. But the reason for the gathering was lurking behind a green fence in the neighbourhood. A low-cost private school, the Bridge International Academy, which charges N6,000 per term, has just been opened.



According to Shannon May, BIA co-founder, the school was designed to provide affordable but quality education to children from poor homes. May added that the first BIA was opened in 2009 in

Mukuru, a slum in Kenya, and 400 of such schools have since been established across Africa and Asia.

“It is true that many mushroom private schools also charge very small fees. But we are different because we leverage on technology and economies of scale to provide quality education. We are opening two low-cost schools simultaneously today. The other school is at Ikorodu and the plan is to build more academies in Nigeria and reach 200,000 children in the next seven years.

“There is nothing more heartbreaking than having children who are not educated because their parents are poor. We are here to show the government that they do not have to spend thousands of dollars to provide quality education,”she said.

Meanwhile, experts have welcomed the development, saying it is an attempt to reduce educational inequality between children from upper and lower income families.

Indeed, there are mounting evidences that family income predicts the academic performance of pupils.

A research which studied the brains of 1,100 children and young adults between ages three and 20 showed that the brains of children from families who earned less than \$ 25,000 (N4.9m) a year is six per cent smaller than those from families who earned \$ 150,000 (N29.5m) or more.

The study, which was co-authored by Elizabeth Sowell of the Children's Hospital, Los Angeles, United States, was published in an international journal, *Nature Neuroscience*, in March.

"We have known for so long that poverty and lack of access to resources to enrich the developmental environment are related to poor school performance, poor test scores and fewer educational opportunities," said Sowell.

Commending the BIA, an educationist, Dr. Segun Omisore, urged all stakeholders to support the new school.

"It is a specialised school and it deserves the support of all, including the government. I tend to incline that they (the organisers) will succeed because they will want to prove a point. It is also refreshing that an organisation who is able to pool resources together is on the mission to bridge educational inequality in Nigeria," he said.

In his address, the Academic Manager of the Ijegan branch, Mr. Raymond Anyasi, said the quality of teaching and learning was comparable with the best in the world.

"Our teachers have been trained and they will receive their lesson notes electronically from master teachers who are based at our headquarters. We still use the Nigerian curriculum but our master teachers ensure a standard is maintained all over our

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academies. We have 121 pupils registered already and we are starting with kindergarten and primary classes. Kindergarten pupils pay just N6,000 per term while the primary pupils pay N8,000 per term. Textbooks are also included in the fees although parents are expected to pay N1,500 for uniforms. With over 400 academies across the world, we are able to pull funds together and manage the academy effectively,"he said.

In her remarks, the Director-General, Office of Education Quality Assurance, Lagos State, Mrs. Ronke Soyombo, commended the BIA for investing in education. Urging the school to mentor other private schools, she added that officials of the state government would be visiting all schools within the state for evaluation and compliance to standard this month.

"We appreciate your contributions to the development of education in the state and implore you to keep up the good work. I also urge you to mentor other schools who are below the expected level. I pray that this school grows in leaps and bounds and that all the ideals and goals you have set out will be achieved,"she said.

On his part, Oyetoro encouraged the parents to patronise the institution, saying it was the opportunity of a life time.

"Education is not money but the key to the room of money and prestige. When I was in primary school

at Iseyin, Oyo State, we were told the governor was coming. I was a boy scout then and we were taken into the bush two weeks before his arrival to practise.

"I did not eat a day to his arrival because of excitement. We were standing on the streets waiting for him. He was supposed to come by 9am but did not show up till 4:30pm. He did not even come down to shake us. I was left hungry and unfulfilled. But today, I shake hands with governors and presidents,"he said.

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