

# The Impact of Subsidy Removal Palliatives on Student Retention and Attendance in Rural Secondary Schools in Nigeria

**Adesina Ajayi Adedapo**

Ekiti State University, Ado - Ekiti, Ekiti State, Nigeria

**Bolanle Funmilayo Adedapo**

Bamidele Olumilua University of Education, Science and Technology, Ikere - Ekiti, Ekiti State, Nigeria

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**Abstract:** *The removal of fuel subsidy in Nigeria has created serious socioeconomic effects especially for low-income and rural households. This is a literature-based study of the effect of the removal palliatives on student retention and attendance in secondary schools in rural areas with a view to finding the effect of subsidy-removal. The review brings together conceptual, theoretical and empirical evidence about the interactions between economic shocks, household welfare and educational participation. Findings from empirical studies made across Nigeria show that removal of subsidies increase the cost of transport, household expenditure and opportunity costs which collectively increase low school attendance of students and risk dropping out. Government palliatives, such as cash transfers, transport support, and food assistance, are intended to reduce the effects of these impacts. However, there is evidence to show that poor targeting, logistical inefficiencies and limited coverage limit the effectiveness of such measures. This review also identifies the particular vulnerability of rural school population based on their longer travel and costs, low household income and changes of or the community's dependence on informal economic activities. Overall, it is emphasized in the literature about the importance of context specific and well-coordinated palliative strategies with a complimentary documentary complete involving community and through schools and monitoring systems to ensure continuity in education. Effective implementation of subsidy removal palliatives can improve student retention and attendance so that the poor segments of rural secondary schools are not affected adversely by economic reforms.*

**Keywords:** fuel subsidy removal, palliative measures, rural education, student retention, school attendance

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## INTRODUCTION

Fuel subsidy removal has become one of the most important economic policy reforms in Nigeria in modern times with far-reaching implications for all social sectors, including education. The removal

of fuel subsidy has resulted in an increase in the cost of transportation, inflation in the price of food and a general increase in the cost of living, affecting especially the low-income groups particularly the people in rural communities (Adeola, 2023; Aniemeké, 2024). In response to these economic shocks at the household level, the Nigerian government initiated various palliative measures to cushion the negative impacts of subsidy removals on the vulnerable classes of people in the society. These palliatives range from conditional cash transfers, food distribution, subsidising transport cost, and education support initiatives. However, the efficacy of these palliatives in maintaining educational participation, particularly in the secondary, particularly in rural educational institutions, is under explored.

Student retention and attendance are important measures for educational access, continuity and equity. In rural areas like Ekiti State, where poverty levels are comparatively high and the educational infrastructure is still fragile, impacts of economic shocks can have a major effect on schooling patterns. Increased Transportation Costs, Worse Household Income and Competing Economic Demands More often than not, students miss school or drop out due to high transportation costs and competing economic prescriptions (Oluwatayo, 2023). Existing studies about subsidy removal have been mostly centered in tertiary institutions and academic performance, welfare and engagement of students (Akpojotor et al., 2025; Ogunode & Ukozor, 2024, Ugo & Udang, 2025). There is, however, a dearth of literature based on how the subsidy removal palliatives affects student retention and attendance in the secondary school education level, especially in rural settings.

The State of Ekiti is an attractive choice for this enquiry because of its predominately agrarian economy and the high level of the economy that depends on transportation for school transactions in rural communities. The effectiveness of subsidy removal palliatives by reducing the educational disruption among the rural secondary school students is therefore an important policy and academic issue. A literature-based examination of this issue sheds light on a larger relationship among economic policy reforms, social protection mechanisms and educational outcomes.

The general purpose of this research is to focus on the effect of removal of subsidy palliatives in maintaining student retention and attendance in rural secondary schools in Ekiti State using a literature based review. Specifically, the research aims at the analysis of the concept of fuel subsidy removal and government palliatives in Nigeria, the study explores the relationship between economic shocks, household welfare, and student retention and attendance in rural secondary schools, examines empirical evidence on the impact of fuel subsidy removal and government palliative interventions on educational participation of students, identifies the gaps in existing literature by relating it to rural secondary education and subsidy removal, and also draws policy-relevant conclusions and recommendations based on the findings of studies reviewed.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study uses literature-based narrative review approach which is the systematic review and synthesis of available research on the effects of subsidy removal palliatives and student retention and attendance on rural secondary schools. A narrative review offers the possibility to integrate conceptual, theoretical, and empirical evidence from several studies in order to get a global understanding of a subject without the need for primary data collection. Sources were taken from peer-reviewed articles, government reports, and reputable institutional publications related to fuel subsidy eradication,

palliative measures and educational access and rural education in Nigeria. The review method allows to identify the patterns, gaps and policy implications especially in relation to the relationship of subsidy removal palliatives to the education participation of the students in rural areas (Akpojotor et al., 2025; Aregbesola, 2023).

### **Fuel Subsidy Removal and Palliative Measures in Nigeria**

Fuel subsidy is the government's financial support to decrease the retail price of petroleum products for consumers. In the case of Nigeria, fuel subsidy was historically justified as it ensures calm transportation cost and price stability of goods and services (Akinyemi & Okonkwo, 2023). However, worries about fiscal sustainability, corruption and inefficiency resulted in its ouster, setting off widespread socioeconomic consequences. Studies show that subsidy removal has led to higher levels of inflation, lower purchasing power and increased inequality, especially among low-income households (McCulloch, et al, 2019; Aniemeke, 2024).

To lessen the impact of these effects, the government has introduced the palliative measures that target the vulnerable groups. Palliatives for mitigating hardship resulting from economic reforms have been temporary social protection interventions. These comprise cash transfers, food relief programmes, transport support and educational assistance schemes (Aregbesola, 2023). While palliatives are theoretically designed to stabilize household welfare, their implementation has been found to have been criticized for poor targeting, poor coverage, and low sustainability (Nwachukwu & Tumba, 2023). The impact of such measures in solving education-related problems is much debated, especially for rural secondary school students who are doubly exposed to vulnerabilities.

Existent literature primarily explores macroeconomic and social consequences of subsidy removal and it geared towards peer less sector-specific results such as education at the secondary level. Studies by Ogunode and Ukozor (2024) and Offor and Ego (2024) highlight the indirect effect on educational institutions that is induced by increasing operational costs, declining student welfare and increasing absenteeism. However, the contribution of palliatives to counter value these negative outcomes is not addressed enough, which offers useful inputs for directed analysis.

### **Student Retention and Attendance in Secondary Education**

Student retention describes the capacity of an education system to keep the student under its wing until he/she completes a given level of education, while attendance reflects the regular presence of the student in school. Both these are important to achieve education outcomes and national development goals. Poor attendance rates and high rates of school dropouts hinder the continuity of learning, and valuable academic and human capital formation in the long run (Sani, 2023).

Economic hardship is one of the primary factors in retaining and attending, especially in low-income and rural communities. Increased spend in household budget on transportation, food and energy often forces families to put survival first than education (Ekundayo, 2023). Studies performed in tertiary institutions show that removal of fuel subsidies has had an adverse impact on the academic engagement, punctuality and academic performance of the student due to increased financial stress (Akpojotor et al, 2025; Hamed, 2024). Although these studies are about higher education, these dynamics are likely to have secondary school students in their students who are pressed to go daily, (especially for students of necessary transit and parental support).

Palliative interventions are thus expected to address these pressures, as they provide temporary relief. However, how much such interventions lead to increased attendance and retention is not clear. Oluwatayo (2023) asserts that transportation cost is a major impediment to the education in school after the removal of subsidies. Without specific transport or education-related palliatives, students studying in rural secondary schools are in the danger of disorganised attendance and eventual withdrawal.

### **Rural Education Vulnerability in Nigeria**

Rural education in Nigeria is marked by infrastructural deficiencies, shortage of teachers, poverty and lack of access to social services. All these structural challenges increase sensitivity of the rural schools to economic shocks such as fuel subsidy removal (Aregbesola, 2023). In rural states of Ekiti State many students travel long distance to school and so are more vulnerable to the increase in transport cost (Adeola, 2023). Literature suggests that rural households are less resilient to policy-induced economic shocks as they are substantially depended on subsistence farming and informal sources of income (McCulloch et al, 2019). As a result, in times of economic instability children's education gets interrupted. Empirical researches and studies conducted in other parts of Nigeria have shown that the elimination of subsidy has contributed to the problem of increased absenteeism and decline in academic participation among students (Oshinowo et al., 2024; Umar-Faruk, 2025).

Furthermore, weak institutional capacities at the local level often reduce the reach and effectiveness of the palliative measures in rural communities. Harring et al. (2023) make a case based on the idea that public trust and perception of fairness determine the success and acceptance of subsidy reforms. In the case of the failure of palliatives to reach intended beneficiaries, educational vulnerability is likely to be maintained. This underscores the importance of looking at the interaction of subsidy removal palliatives with rural education dynamics especially in terms of student retention and attendance.

### **Effects of Subsidy Removal on Students' Educational Outcomes**

Fuel subsidy removal has since been empirically linked to a plethora of negative educational outcomes in Nigeria from academic performance to absenteeism and disruption of continuity of learning. The removal of the subsidies increases the cost of petroleum products, resulting in the increase in the cost of transportation, inflation and increase in the household expenditure on the most fundamental of needs. These economic shocks hit the students from low-income families out of proportion, especially those in the rural and semi-urban areas. Several empirical studies point out these impacts in both the tertiary and secondary education sector.

Akpojotor et al. (2025) did a comprehensive research work in Delta State on the effects of fuel subsidy removal on welfare of staff as well as academic performance of students in tertiary institutions. The research indicated the students were experiencing great financial hardships because the families were struggling to handle the higher cost of transportation and daily living expenses. This financial burden meant that there was irregular attendance, late arriving to the lectures, and reduced participation in academic activities. While the research was focused on tertiary institutions, the identified mechanisms of the problem (increasing costs, financial stress, reduced engagement) have a high relevancy in the context of rural secondary school students, who usually rely on shared or public transportation to attend schools.

Mekuri-Ndimele and Ukata (2024) further strengthened these results showing that the removal of subsidies had effects on students learning through an indirect mechanisms of its impact on lecturers performance. Increased operational costs and issues in commuting resulted in fatigue and poorer quality of instruction as it impacted the ability of students to comprehend and retain course content. Such indirect effects indicate sensitivity of the educational ecosystem to macroeconomic shocks suggesting that the students especially at secondary school levels, mostly those in resource limited rural areas, are equally at risk of being academically disrupted.

Empirical evidence from North Central Nigeria also backs up these claims. Sani (2023) also conducted a study on the impact of fuel subsidy removal on the academic performance of students in Kogi state and reported a direct correlation between the removal of subsidy and the declining academic performance of students. Students from low-income households were found to have an increased level of absenteeism because of the lack of ability to pay for transportation to school. Similarly, Offor and Ego (2024) stated that undergraduates in South-East Nigeria experienced more challenges in attending lectures after the removal of subsidy, which affected study schedule and academic activities. These findings suggest the destabilizing effects of economic shocks resulting from subsidy removal on students learning pattern in school, which is likely to reflect in the rural secondary school in Ekiti State. Ogunode and Ukozor (2024) expanded this study by estimating the country-wide effect of the removal of these subsidies on tertiary education. They determined that students relied more heavily on personal and family resources to cover the transportation and accommodation costs to the extent that academic focus and frequent absenteeism often resulted. These findings are consistent with the findings of Ugochukwu and Nwaru (2024), who found that financial pressures caused by subsidies removal had caused the South-East Nigerian students in universities to replace school work with income-generating activities. This evidence suggest that increased opportunity costs of schooling because of economic reforms can have large effects in educating the students.

In Sokoto state Hammed (2024) noted the same effect where students absentee school classes or minimized study hours because of the increased financial stress brought about by the removal of subsidy. The study noted that students were compelled to use depleted resources for basic needs, such as food and means of transportation, instead of academic needs. Tacit confirmation of the extent of the negative impact of discontinuity of subsidies on student academic outcome emerged from the work of Umar-Faruk (2025) on data collected at Federal University Gusau, Zamfara State, showing statistically significant deterioration in academic performance of students, revealing its regional spread.

Oshinowo et al. (2024) in particular examined principal senior secondary students in Oyo state, the outcome on agricultural science students was significant and prominent effect of fuel subsidy removal. These students, mostly from rural areas, had to pay higher transportation fees that limited school attendance and practical participation in laboratories, impairing ultimately the outcomes from learning. This study is especially timely in relation to the current attention paid to the issue of rural secondary schools in that it demonstrates empirically that subsidy removal can impact directly on both attendance and the level of educational commitment.

Aregbesola (2023) pointed out the wider systemic effect of the removal of subsidies on the Nigerian education system, and how increased costs on utilities and transport practices have been resulting in an environment where learning was hampered by economic difficulties for the students. Similarly, Ekundayo (2023) stated that the low-income families of secondary school students were exposed to

the increased risk of school dropouts as the families found it hard to afford the transportation and school-related expenses, which made it difficult to maintain rural education due to economy-related policy reforms.

Oluwatayo (2023) gave empirical illustration of financial burden placed on students due to removal of subsidies as it was reported that transportation problem and increasing household expenses force students to undertake certain income-generating activities to support their education. Such dual pressures meant less study time, which adversely impacted on study performance. Udang and Akor (2025) further reported on the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic on learning engagement among students, noting a reduction in the levels of engagement by academic activities due to an increase in cost of living, and it is quite consistent among Nigerian states.

The microeconomic and macroeconomic implications of the removal of subsidies, as discussed by Aniemeke (2024), creates further evidence of the empirical results on educational outcomes. The study showed that households are affected by cascading financial shocks due to the removal of subsidies which influence decisions on children's schooling. Families under economic stress may invest less in children's education resulting in higher levels of absenteeism and dropouts. Nwachukwu and Tumba (2023) have also observed that petroleum subsidy removal changed the winning behavior of households, who reallocate scarce resources from education to basic subsistence, reinforcing the adverse effect it has on the schooling outcome of children.

Harring et al. (2023) took a cross-national approach, and demonstrated that public perceptions and attitudes towards subsidy removal may have an indirect effect on educational engagement. In the case where subsidy removal is seen as unfair or not properly implemented, the financial and psychological stress on households can be increased, further affecting the academic participation of students. Akinyemi and Okonkwo (2023) noted that socio-economic disparities make these effects even worse with rural students being more prone to face disruptions in schooling as a result of limited household resources.

Collectively all of these empirical studies paint a complex picture of the impact of subsidy removal on educational outcomes among students. Financial reasons, rising cost of transport, poverty at home and opportunity cost all combine to irregular attendance, lower engagement and lower academic performance. While a lot of literature is available on tertiary education, secondary school students, especially those in rural areas, such as Ekiti State are equally affected. The evidence highlights the need for the availability of specific interventions to manage these negative consequences and sustain ongoing engagement and retention of students, such as palliative interventions.

### **Role of Palliative Measures in Sustaining School Attendance**

Government palliative interventions meant to mitigate the negative effects of subsidy removal. Aregbesola, O. (2023) noted that Cash transfers, transport support, and food relief programs are aimed to reduce household expenditure pressure such that the student continues their regular school attendance. However, the success of these measures is not the same in all areas. Ogunode and Ukozor (2024) have highlighted the failure of the palliatives to fall on the intended beneficiaries as a result of administrative bottleneck, poor targeting and logistical challenges especially in the countryside.

Empirical research activities suggest that, if properly implemented, palliatives can positively affect the level of educational participation of students. For example, Udang and Akor (2025) discovered that transport subsidies in Cross River State helped students to attend classes more consistently leading to an improvement in retention rates of students in public secondary schools. Similarly, Oluwatayo (2023) stressed that the targeted financial assistance has helped reduce the incidences of absenteeism and enabled students from low income households to stay focused on the facets of school activities amidst more generalized economic strains. These findings suggest the potential of palliatives, if properly targeted and timely, on school attendance and retention, materializing with the removal of subsidies. Nevertheless, there are some studies that indicate that there are limitations in palliative interventions. Nwachukwu and Tumba (2023) pointed out that the inconsistency in the disbursement schedules, limited coverage, and lack of monitoring make the effect of the palliatives less effective. Ugochukwu and Nwaru (2024) further stated that the students' dependence and use of informal means to cover the cost of transportation often do not abate even with the support of the government. This suggests that the use of palliatives alone may not suffice, with complementary strategies such as transport schemes in schools as well as efforts to engage the communities needed to sustain attendance and retention at rural secondary schools.

### **Socioeconomic Factors Influencing Retention in Rural Secondary Schools**

Socioeconomic conditions are critical to the ability of students to stay in school and adhere to regular attendance. Studies consistently show that rural households due to having limited income, depending on agriculture and lacking social safety nets are highly vulnerable to economic shocks like fuel subsidy removal (McCulloch et al., 2019; Aniemeke, 2024). Increased transportation costs and household expenditure is the prevailing factor that causes family to prioritize labor over education and schools, leading to poor retention and attendance (Ekundayo, 2023).

Empirical evidence from Ekiti and other similar states suggest that there are unique challenges with students from rural communities. Oshinowo et al. (2024) reported a high rate of absenteeism of agricultural science students in Oyo State as a result of removal of subsidies because of a conflict between the demands of farm and school work schedules. Umar-Faruk (2025) further reported that the engagement in school activities in rural areas of Zamfara State was reduced by pupils and students to facilitate household income in periods of economic stress.

The interaction between removal of subsidies, palliative measures and socioeconomic vulnerability represents the need for context specific interventions. Research highlights that best retention practices in the rural communities involve a mix of financial support, transport facilitation and community sensitization (Harrington et al., 2023; Oluwatayo, 2023). Without addressing these structural constraints, the palliatives may not be enough to ensure sustained attendance as well as continuity of education for rural secondary school students.

### **CONCLUSION**

Although the review of literature shows that the removal of fuel subsidies in Nigeria have had far reaching consequences in the educational participation of students especially in rural secondary schools. Rising transport costs, the extra expenditure in the household and economic hardship have been consistently associated with lower school attendance, irregular classroom attendance and drop out risks. Despite efforts from government palliatives MNEs like cash transfers, food relief, and

transport support etc. since then to reduce the adverse impact of these on society, the effectiveness of these efforts are still not uniform and this especially in rural communities a result of logistical difficulties and administrative inefficiency that affect targeting.

There is also empirical evidence that highlights the disproportionate impact that removal of subsidies has on students from low-income rural households because of their lower ability to bear additional costs. While palliatives can overcome some financial impediments and enhance retention and attendance, when well implemented, the success of interventions such as: are dependent on the timely distribution, sufficient coverage and combination with other social support systems. Overall, the available literature suggests that economic policy reforms such as fuel subsidies removal need to be complemented by well-designed context-specific interventions aimed at ensuring access to and continuity of education in vulnerable rural populations.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the review of the literature, the following recommendations have been suggested, which are aimed at enhancing the effectiveness of the subsidy removal palliatives on student retention and attendance in rural secondary schools:

1. Government and the relevant agencies should ensure that cash transfers, food support and transportation subsidies are accurately targeted to rural households with school-going children. Digital tracking systems and mechanism for verification by the community can help in being efficient and reducing leakage.
2. Given how critical the issue of the cost of transport is for regard to attendance, the local authorities should consider the introduction of the subsidized or school-managed transport scheme. This can make a big difference to absenteeism by students seeking to travel long distances to school.
3. Communities should be involved actively in the monitoring and support for the implementation of palliatives. Parent-teacher associations and local education committees can play a role in ensuring support goes to the intended beneficiaries and continue to ensure that students are going to school regularly.
4. Palliatives should be accompanied by other forms of educational support (for example scholarships, stipends or provision of learning material). This holistic approach can help to compensate the indirect expenses of schooling aggravated by removing subsidies from the education.
5. Establish strong monitoring systems to determine the impact of palliatives to improve retention and attendance. Data-driven evaluation can aid policy adjustments to ensure interventions address emerging challenges in rural educational settings.
6. Broader economic reforms such as fuel subsidy removal should correlate with social protection and improvements to education. This guarantees that the vulnerable, especially rural students, are protected against adverse socioeconomic effects that will affect their educational outcomes.

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