

JRS Helps To Stage First Joint Secondary School Exams In Yei

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In November 2008, after working closely together to ensure the success of the first county-wide joint primary school exams, involving over 90 schools, JRS Yei and the Yei County Education Office extended their collaboration to establish an examination board for the county's secondary schools, and stage the first county-wide joint secondary school exams.

Since most students and teachers had up to this point experienced only internal secondary school exams the county-wide exams was a new and exciting experience. In Yei County it is currently only final year students who sit external (O-Level) exams, traveling across the border to join Ugandan students sitting exams set by the Ugandan National Examination Board (UNEB). Eight of the county's twelve secondary schools participated, with only four declining, on the grounds that they were insufficiently prepared for the exams in terms of syllabus coverage, the collection of exam fees, or a clear mandate from their boards of governors.

When the results came out just before Christmas, parents were very happy. For the first time they were able to assess the performance of their children and compare it to others not only at the same schools but across the whole county. A total of 2,244 students sat the exams, of which 89% passed. For reasons that require further investigation, boys on average performed better than girls, with a pass rate of 91% compared to 84% among the girls.

Schools and county education officials have already agreed to continue with the joint exam system in 2009 because its benefits are obvious: It stimulates improved curriculum coverage and facilitates the introduction this year of a new Southern Sudanese curriculum, encourages a healthy academic competition among students and schools in the country, parents are able to assess their children's performance within a broader context, and teachers are challenged and motivated to improve their teaching. The county has become a role model for others contemplating introducing a joint secondary exam system, including potentially for Southern Sudan as a whole.

To help promote the new system and in order to encourage and motivate students as well as whole schools, JRS Yei has introduced a system of prizes for top performances. Each of the top three boys or girls in the secondary one, two or three exams are awarded 200 Sudanese Pounds (almost 90 USD), given in the form of payment of school fees plus a small sum for purchase of personal effects. A prize of 300 Sudanese Pound (130 USD) goes to the school with the best results in the UNEB exams. Only 4 of the 8 schools which participated in the county-wide exams ran a secondary four class in 2008, but they sent 299 students to Uganda for the exams, scoring an overall pass rate of 84%.

To further build the capacities of the local education officials and as a follow up on the 2008 exams, last month JRS organised a four-day workshop on examination principles and procedures for education officials and members of the newly created secondary and primary examination boards. It was facilitated by two experienced chief examiners from Arua, Uganda. Unfortunately the workshop was disrupted by demonstrations of war veterans who had not received their payment for the last five months. In spite of the disruptions all scheduled topics were eventually covered and everyone is already looking forward to the joint exams in second and third terms.

This month JRS is also organising two one-day workshops specifically for local secondary head teachers and education officials, to review last year's joint exams and help coordinate the introduction of the new Southern Sudan secondary curriculum.

JRS started working in Yei in 2004 supporting the government authorities and the local communities to develop the education system as a key tool of developing peace and justice in the new country. JRS supports 19 primary and six secondary schools, reaching out to almost 14,000

students and over 400 teachers. Since the signing of the peace agreement over 300,000 people have returned to their homes in Southern Sudan. As they embark on the long hard road of reconstructing their future after 22 years of civil war, the JRS Yei project seeks to offer them access to high quality capacity building services, pastoral accompaniment as well as undertaking advocacy efforts on their behalf.

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