

Assessing the Government's Commitment to Free Quality School Education in Sierra Leone: Achievements, Challenges, and Future Directions.

The Free Quality School Education (FQSE) policy represents a cornerstone of the Government of Sierra Leone's strategy to foster national development through education. This initiative is a response to the nation's longstanding educational challenges, including poor access, underfunding, and low-quality academic outcomes. Sierra Leone's educational system, heavily influenced by the colonial legacy, has struggled to meet the needs of its diverse population, particularly in rural and underserved areas. The 1960 UNESCO Resolution and the 1990 World Declaration on Education for All have underscored the global commitment to equal educational opportunities, influencing national policies worldwide. These frameworks are reflected in Sierra Leone's 1991 Constitution, which mandates the Government to ensure equal educational opportunities for all citizens.

The introduction of the FQSE policy by President Julius Maada Bio in August 2018 marked a significant shift in the Government's approach to addressing educational inequalities. By allocating 21% of the national budget to this initiative, the Government has demonstrated a strong commitment to improving educational outcomes and fostering human capital development. This policy brief evaluates the achievements and progress of the FQSE policy, identifies ongoing challenges and areas for improvement, and offers strategic recommendations to enhance its effectiveness.

Achievements and Progress of the Free Quality School Education (FQSE) Policy

The implementation of the FQSE policy has led to several notable achievements and progress in the education sector in Sierra Leone. One of the most significant successes is the substantial increase in enrollment rates across all educational levels.

By eliminating school fees for critical exams such as the West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE), Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE), and National Primary School Examination (NPSE), the Government has made education more accessible, particularly for children from low-income families. This initiative has helped reduce the financial burden on parents and guardians, resulting in higher enrollment and retention rates.

The Government has made significant strides in providing essential educational materials to schools. Over 12 million exercise books and more than 94 containers of core textbooks have been distributed nationwide, ensuring that students have the necessary resources for their studies. This distribution has been crucial in enhancing the quality of education and supporting effective teaching and learning processes.

Infrastructure development has been a critical component of the FQSE policy. The Government has approved the construction and rehabilitation of school buildings, particularly in underserved and rural areas. These efforts have created a more conducive learning environment, addressing issues such as overcrowded classrooms and inadequate facilities. Additionally, special facilities for disabled students have been improved, promoting inclusivity and equal access to education for all learners.

To meet the growing demand due to rising enrollment rates, the Government has recruited more teachers. This recruitment drive has helped reduce the student-to-teacher ratio, enabling more personalized attention and support for students. Furthermore, the Government has increased teachers' salaries, boosting teacher morale and retention, and contributing to the overall improvement of the education system.



Challenges and Areas for Improvement

Despite the successes of the FQSE policy, several challenges and barriers hinder its effective implementation. One of the primary issues is the delay and insufficiency of financial support to schools. While the Government provides subsidies, these payments are often delayed, creating financial instability for schools. The amounts provided are also insufficient to cover essential expenses, affecting the schools' ability to maintain infrastructure, pay staff, and procure necessary materials.

The shortage of teaching and learning materials remains a significant challenge. Although the Government has made efforts to supply textbooks and exercise books, other critical materials such as desks, chairs, blackboards, and laboratory equipment are lacking. This shortage hampers the effectiveness of teaching and learning, as students and teachers do not have access to the full range of tools needed for a comprehensive educational experience.

Teacher shortages and unequal distribution of qualified educators are persistent problems, particularly in rural areas. Many schools in these regions struggle to attract and retain qualified teachers due to inadequate compensation and lack of incentives. This issue is exacerbated by the fact that not all teachers possess the necessary training and qualifications, impacting the quality of education. The absence of specialized training programs and professional development opportunities further compounds this problem.

High levels of poverty, hunger, and the high cost of living make it difficult for many families to support their children's education. Despite the Government's efforts to provide free education, parents still need to cover transportation, lunch, and other ancillary costs, which can be prohibitive. These economic constraints lead to higher dropout rates and reduced school attendance, particularly among the most vulnerable populations.

The significant increase in enrollment rates has not been matched by corresponding expansions in infrastructure. Many schools lack adequate classroom space to accommodate the growing number of students, leading

to overcrowded conditions that impede effective teaching and learning. The lack of sufficient infrastructure, such as playing fields, laboratories, and technology labs, further limits the educational experience and opportunities for students.

Socio-Economic and Structural Barriers

The socio-economic and structural barriers facing Sierra Leone's education system are multifaceted and deeply rooted. Poverty remains a significant impediment, with many families unable to afford the indirect costs of education, such as transportation, meals, and school supplies. This financial strain often leads to higher dropout rates and absenteeism, particularly among children from low-income households.

The structural challenges within the education system exacerbate socio-economic issues. Many schools, especially in rural areas, operate in dilapidated buildings with inadequate facilities, which affects both students' learning experiences and teachers' ability to deliver quality education. The lack of proper infrastructure, such as classrooms, laboratories, and sanitation facilities, severely impacts the quality of education.

The distribution of educational resources is uneven, with rural and underserved areas facing significant disparities compared to urban centers. This inequity is reflected in the availability of qualified teachers, educational materials, and infrastructure. Rural schools often struggle to attract and retain qualified teachers due to poor living conditions, inadequate salaries, and lack of professional development opportunities. This disparity creates a cycle of underperformance and limited educational outcomes for students in these regions.

Broader systemic issues such as corruption and inefficiencies within the education sector further exacerbate socio-economic challenges. Reports of mismanagement and misallocation of resources undermine the effectiveness of educational programs and initiatives. The lack of transparency and accountability in financial management further exacerbates these challenges, leading to suboptimal outcomes and hindering the progress of educational reforms.



Recommendations

To address these challenges and build on the successes of the FGSE policy, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Construct and Rehabilitate Roads

The government should construct and rehabilitate roads leading to various schools nationwide to ease accessibility, improve educational infrastructure, and ensure adequate seating accommodations for pupils. Improving transportation infrastructure is essential for ensuring that students can attend school regularly.

2. Improve Conditions of Service for Teachers

The government should enhance the conditions of service for teachers to match the increasing cost of living. This includes raising salaries and providing special allowances for teachers in rural areas to attract and retain qualified educators. Better compensation and support for teachers are crucial for maintaining a motivated and effective teaching workforce.

3. Harmonize Salaries of Civil Servants

Harmonizing the salaries of all civil servants based on their qualifications can help maintain a stable and qualified workforce in the education sector, ensuring that teachers are adequately compensated and motivated. This approach can contribute to improved teacher retention and educational quality.

4. Provide Adequate School Facilities

The government should equip schools with improved laboratories, standard libraries, and other essential facilities to enable effective teaching and learning. Ensuring that all schools have access to basic infrastructure and teaching resources is crucial for delivering quality education.

5. Ensure Reliable Electricity and Internet Access

Providing consistent electricity and internet access to all schools is vital for integrating technology into education. This can support digital learning, enhance research capabilities, and prepare students for the modern workforce. Reliable access to electricity and the internet is essential for supporting modern educational practices.

6. Increase Recruitment of Teachers

To address the growing student population, the government should continue to recruit more teachers and ensure their distribution across both urban and

rural areas. This will help to reduce class sizes and ensure that all students receive adequate attention and support. Increasing teacher recruitment is essential for maintaining educational quality.

7. Implement Effective School Feeding Programs

An effective and adequately funded school feeding program can improve student attendance and concentration by addressing hunger and nutritional needs. Ensuring consistent implementation and coverage of this program is essential for supporting students from poor households. A comprehensive school feeding program is crucial for supporting student health and learning.

8. Timely Payment of Subsidies

The government should ensure that subsidies are paid before the start of the academic year and that the amounts are increased to meet the rising costs of living. Timely financial support is crucial for the smooth operation of schools and the maintenance of educational standards. Ensuring timely and sufficient financial support is essential for supporting schools.

9. Equip Laboratories and Libraries

Providing all schools with well-equipped laboratories and standard libraries can enhance the quality of education and support student research and learning activities. This investment is essential for fostering a comprehensive and competitive educational environment. Equipping schools with the necessary resources is crucial for supporting student learning.

10. Change the WAEC Examination Timetable

Adjusting the West Africa Examination Council (WAEC) examination timetable from May-June to August-September can prevent disruptions to learning schedules and ensure that students have ample time to prepare for their exams. This change can help to support student success and reduce stress.

11. Expand Research and Technology Integration

Future research should explore the role of technology and innovation in enhancing educational quality and access. Integrating digital tools and online learning platforms can supplement traditional teaching methods and address the lack of trained teachers and educational materials in under-resourced schools. Leveraging technology can help to address some of the key challenges in the education sector.

Conclusion

Education is essential for improving the lives of citizens and driving national development. The FQSE policy represents a significant step towards achieving these goals by making education more accessible and improving educational standards. While there have been notable achievements, significant challenges remain. Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive and coordinated effort from the government, NGOs, civil society organizations, and community leaders. By implementing the recommendations outlined in this policy brief, Sierra Leone can continue to build on the successes of the FQSE policy and ensure that all students have the opportunity to succeed.



References

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