

Failures in the Provision of Free Public Basic Education in Ghana

Background To Free Compulsory Universal Basic Education (FCUBE)

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In 1992, Ghana returned to constitutional democracy after more than twenty years of military rule under different regimes. During the last five years of this period, the educational system underwent a series of major reforms designed to improve access and quality, make the curriculum more relevant to the needs of a developing country, place basic schools under the control of local communities, and undo the vestiges of the colonial system of education. The number of years in pre-tertiary education was reduced while the Ordinary and Advanced Level Examinations system was scrapped. In its place, a 6-3-3 system (6 years primary, 3 years Junior Secondary School and 3 years Senior Secondary School) was introduced to cover pre-tertiary education.

The Constitution of Ghana, 1992 (Article 25.1a), guaranteed education as a basic right for all children. It also set a target of ten years, allowing for a two year grace period to enable machinery to be put in place, by which time all children should be receiving 'Free Compulsory Universal Basic Education' (FCUBE), which included six years of primary and three years of junior secondary school (Article 38 of the 1992 Constitution). Senior secondary education for a further three years would be available to those who qualified and could benefit from more academic grounding, but it would not be free.

By the end of 2003, realising that it could not meet the Constitutional targets for FCUBE in the next year, the government made a strategic shift in policy by adopting the programme of the United Nations-supported Millennium Development Goals of Education for All by 2015. Under this policy, all children would receive at least six years of schooling. The guarantee of *basic education* was reduced to six years of *primary school*. This was in reality a step backwards for Ghana, considering the fact that the Constitutional guarantee of *basic education* initially entailed nine years of free schooling, not six.

The following tables show the enrolment situation in the country between 2002 and 2003, when the government changed its policy.

Primary School (Years 1-6) Enrolment in Ghana ¹

Year	Entry into Primary Class 1 as % of 6 year olds	Primary 6 Completion Rate as % of 11 year olds	Gross Enrolment Ratio (%)	Pupils in Non-Government Schools (%)
2001-2	81.5	65.6	78.9	18.3
2002-3*	82.9	68.2	84.2	17.5

Junior Secondary School (Years 6-9) Enrolment in Ghana ²

Year	Enrolment Rate In JSS 1 (Year 7) as a % of Population Aged 12	Completion Rate Of JSS 3 (Year 9) as a % of Population Aged 14	Gross Enrolment Ratio (%)	Pupils In Non-Government Schools (%)
2001-2	62	54	61.7	14.3
2002- 3*	65	57	65	14.6

While the gross enrolment and completion rates show a rise over the period, these tables indicate two disturbing trends. These are the proportion of children who never enrol in primary school, and the high dropout rate between entry at class one and completion of JSS 3, the final year of basic education.

It is interesting to note that the report issued by the Commission for Africa expresses serious doubts as to whether the objective of universal primary education will ever be attained on the African continent before the end of this century, given the slow pace of change and the current availability of resources.³

How FCUBE Became fCUBE

The guarantee of free education was another problematic issue. In 1997, the Ministry of Education abolished the payment of fees in public schools at the Basic Education level. However with the declining fortunes of Ghana's economy, the structural adjustment policy of the IMF and the World Bank during the period between 1986 and 2000, and the increasing demand for education created by a growing population,⁴ there were shortfalls of revenue to support public basic education in all parts of the country. The Ministry of Education allowed the District Assemblies to *levy* parents and guardians for education and development. These levies, not to be called 'fees', covered such things as PTA dues, examination costs, culture, sports, library, health, furniture expenses, etc. In fact, in some districts there were as many as ten different levies charged to parents. The FCUBE policy had become fCUBE, with the small 'f' symbolising a very diminished 'free'.

The Real Cost of Basic Education for Parents

Income levels in Ghana are very low, even for those in formal employment. In February 2005, the legal daily minimum wage, excluding casual rural farm workers, was raised to ₵13,500 (\$1.45). While very few salaried workers in Accra would earn as little as the minimum wage, average take home pay for unskilled and semi-skilled workers in the public/private sector ranges from ₵500,000 to ₵700,000 per month (\$54.00 to \$76.00). This comes to ₵6 million to ₵8.4 million (\$ 652.00 to \$913.00) per year. Approximately 50% of the Accra population earn a living from the informal sector, mainly petty trading. Incomes in this sector are generally low.

The actual cost of keeping a child in primary and junior secondary school in Ghana is quite significant. In an unpublished report commissioned by ActionAid Ghana in 2003,⁵ the annual cost was estimated to be \$20.00 for a child in Basic Education in some of the most deprived communities, especially in the three Northern regions. At the time, the poorest residents in those communities declared an *annual* income of around US \$12.00 equivalent. Given the fact that the fertility rate in Ghana is still very high (averaging 4.2 children per woman), the family resources required to support several children in basic education pose a serious challenge to school enrolment and retention in such communities. Statistics show that girls are especially disadvantaged because they are the first to be kept out of school or withdrawn when financial difficulties arise.⁶

In two typical Accra public basic schools, surveyed recently by the National Partnership for Children's Trust, an Accra based charity, the average cost to parents of keeping a child in primary class 6, JSS 1 and 2, and JSS 3, ranged from \$60.00 (₵552,000) to \$110.00 (₵1,012,000) per annum.⁷ The cost was made up as follows: levies, textbooks, stationery, examination fees, uniform, shoes, socks, belt and school bag. This does not cover snacks, nor transport to and from school for those who live beyond walking distance. While the Ghana Education Service approved levies averaging \$4.00 (₵36,800) per annum, which alone might not be significant, the cost of the required textbooks for the year came to as much as \$45 (₵414,000) at the highest grade. One textbook for both primary and junior secondary school costs \$4.90 (₵45,000). A child needs a minimum of three textbooks in primary school, while one in junior secondary school requires ten per year. Although books are supposed to be supplied free, the reality is that there are not even enough for use in the classroom. A pupil without the required textbooks is therefore at a serious disadvantage.

In the Dangme East District of Greater Accra, a deprived fishing community located about 100 kilometres east of the capital, the Ghana Education Service (GES) listed the charges to parents for basic public education per year as ranging from \$6.40 (₵59,000) for upper primary, to \$12.40 (₵114,000) for junior secondary school 3. This covered levies, examination fees, exercise books, pens, pencils, rulers and maths sets but excluded books, uniforms, socks, belt, shoes and bags. Textbooks were not part of the official list even though they were not available in the schools because most parents were just too poor to buy them.⁸ Fees for the West African Examination Council's Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE), taken at the end of junior secondary school for promotion to senior secondary, school were fixed separately.

It is not surprising that ordinary working families are struggling to keep their children in school, a situation that is exacerbated by the fact that most families have three or four children to cater for. In Dangme East, GES officials report that many children below the age of 15 years are being forced to work as fisher boys, oyster miners, mat weavers and salt winners on a part time basis to find the money needed to pay for public school, while others drop out of school to fend for themselves.⁹ In Accra, many children are compelled to do jobs such as shoe shining, portering, and selling ice water for long periods each day. This poses a serious threat to the health and safety of these unfortunate children.

A Case Study: Working While in School

Linda is a 14-year-old girl who attends a public junior secondary school in Accra. The head teacher of her school describes her as bright. However, this year her grades have slipped. Investigations showed that she sells ice water near the Military Hospital after school everyday from about 1.00 – 6.00 pm to earn some extra money when she is on the morning school shift. Currently she lives with her older married sister, brother-in-law and young nephews in the police barracks. Her sister, who dropped out of school before she finished Junior Secondary School when she became pregnant, does not want the same fate for Linda. However, the family income is limited. Linda moved in with her married sister about a year ago because the treatment she was receiving from her stepmother and older half siblings was unbearable. Her biological mother is dead and her father is very old.

A Case Study: Never Enrolled in School

Johaney is an 8 year old boy who lives on Aflive Island on the Volta River, in the Dangme East District of Greater Accra. He has never been to school but wants to “learn and play football with the others.” His mother, who weaves mats and sells oysters for a living, cannot afford to send him and his siblings to school. The children’s father lives in Akosombo, a town about 60 kilometres away, where he works as a fisherman on the lake.

The Ghana Child Labour Survey done in 2001 found that 40 per cent of an estimated 6.36 million children in the age group between five and seventeen were engaged in economic activity. About 1.59 million of them were working while in school. Many of the jobs these children were doing were considered dangerous or harmful to health.¹⁰

Below are the Enrolment Pictures in Basic Education in Accra District and Dangme East for the 2003-04 period:

Accra District Enrolment: 2003 –04 School Year For Public and Private Schools¹¹

	Total	Number in Public School	Number in Private School	% Private
Primary	175,960	99,544	76,416	43.4
Junior Secondary	89,067	44,781	30,880	34.7

Dangme East Enrolment: 2003-04 for Public and Private Schools¹²

	Total	Private	% Private
Primary	16,412	1,383	8.4

Junior Secondary	4,717	259	5.5
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Many people assume that the problems related to enrolment and retention in basic education in Ghana exist only in remote, rural communities. In Dangme East District at least 30% of children age 6 + never enrol in primary school in the first place.¹³

The tables above show a disturbing attrition rate between primary and junior secondary school. For the Accra district it is almost 12%, while for Dangme East, a peri-urban area of the country's most populated district, the rate is 38%. If one assumes that most of the children who leave the private schools after primary level do not drop out but rather move to the public junior secondary schools because of the fees, then the drop out rate for public schools is even higher.

The District Superintendent of the Ghana Education Service (GES) in Ada (Dangme East) gave the main reasons for the high drop out rate after primary school as:

1. The inability of parents to pay the charges
2. The over age of some of the pupils, many of whom do not start primary 1 at 6 years old
3. The frustration students feel in their poor performance
4. Girls getting pregnant
5. The difficulty in combining work and study for those children forced to earn money.

In Dangme East, one boy who obtained an aggregate of 6 (the top score) in the 2004 BECE dropped out of school. His father decided that the boy should become a carpenter rather than continue his education in secondary school. GES officials, who were dismayed at this situation, could not convince the father to change his mind.¹⁴

The Issue of Quality in Public Basic Education

The discussion in this section of the paper will focus on schools in the Greater Accra Region where the writer has had direct access to schools. However, it can be assumed that conditions in other regions are generally as poor, if not worse.

Physical structures in many of the Accra public schools are below standard. Few, if any, have libraries, science rooms or computers. Basic sanitation is woefully lacking. In the two schools mentioned previously (Kanda and Nima Cluster Schools) there were no proper toilet facilities for the student population of 2000 pupils that attend classes in each school in two shifts daily. One school had running water, while the other did not. Many of the structures have cracks and leaking roofs, while furniture is dilapidated. Although some money is allocated to head teachers for minor repairs, it is woefully inadequate to cover any major structural renovations. This is the responsibility of the Accra Metropolitan Assembly, who often push the burden back to the parents, claiming that the schools belong to the community.

In Dangme East, the physical structures of the basic schools on the main land and on two islands, surveyed by a team from the Ghana National Campaign Coalition (GNECC), were generally in adequate condition. Only 10 out of 68 public primary schools were in poor condition. Toilet facilities were a problem because there was no water available in most mainland schools. None of the junior secondary schools had science labs, workshops or tools. The only computers available were a few that had been donated by benevolent individuals or organisations. Teaching aids in the primary schools were very scarce or non-existent. There was no library for the whole community with a population of 93,000.

The official policy of the Ghana Education Service is to supply textbooks to students in public basic education. The reality on the ground is quite different. In three schools visited in Accra, there were some books available for classroom use only, but not a complete set in any of the subjects. In Dangme East, GES admitted that most classes have between 5 and 10 tattered, old textbooks for a subject to be shared by 30 to 40+ pupils. In the junior secondary schools, books are several years out of date because of the changes in syllabuses. In the public schools, some parents buy textbooks for their children, but many do not because of the expense. By contrast, in private schools, parents are forced to buy the books for their children so that they are well equipped for school and homework.

The professional standard of the teachers in the public schools, at least in Greater Accra, is adequate for the task. Virtually all of them are qualified, having at least Teacher Training Certification, though many have higher Diplomas or degrees. Since Accra is considered a desirable area to live in as opposed to a remote, disadvantaged rural community, it is relatively easy to recruit and retain teachers in the city. The pupil teacher ratios fall within accepted norms (1:32). On the other hand, many of the teachers in the private unregistered basic schools are not qualified, having completed only Senior Secondary School. Teacher pupil ratios in many of these private schools are much higher than in the public schools, especially those that are profit making, but are not properly registered (1:40+).

The problem with teachers in the public sector is not the lack of qualifications, but the lack of supervision. Ghana Education Service personnel in both Accra and Dangme East admitted that the inspectorate section is not functioning properly, so that it is almost impossible to remove incompetent teachers. Head teachers have no authority in this regard. GES personnel confessed that they rarely inspected the island schools because they were afraid of crossing the river by boat.

If we look at two indicators of performance in basic education, the deficiencies in the public sector become apparent. This may also explain why so many parents, including many employees of the Ghana Education Service (GES) prefer to send their children to private schools. The first indice is the Criterion Referenced Tests, administered by the Ministry of Education up to 2002, to test the performance of primary school children in mathematics and English at the end of class 6. Results for the 2002 test are shown in the table below.

Criterion Referenced Tests for Primary Class 6 Pupils in Ghana, August 2002¹⁵

Subject	Public Schools		Private Schools	
	Mean	Percentage Reaching Mastery	Mean	Percentage Reaching Mastery
English	39.8	12.7	60.7	56.8
Mathematics	33.7	5.6	46.5	16.0

Grades from this test showed clearly that in English, at least, private schools out performed public ones by a very significant margin. Although the difference in results for mathematics was not as glaring, the pupils' performance in private schools was still better.

The other indicator was the results in the Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE), the national examination that students take in all subjects at the end of nine years of education. The table below shows the percentage of pupils who passed the BECE examination with aggregates 6-30, which qualified them for entry into senior secondary school. If we consider the fact that only 57.5% of pupils in

2003 got to this stage, a mere 30% of the age group successfully completed the junior secondary school level at age 15+.

Pass Rate (Aggregates 6-30) in the BECE Examination for all of Ghana¹⁶

Year	% of passes
2001	60.40
2002	60.48
2003	61.56
2004	61.18

If one looks at the BECE results for the Accra district in 2004, out of the 402 junior secondary schools that entered candidates, 105 had 100% passes with aggregates 6-30. Only four of these schools were genuine public schools with no church or other affiliation such as the university or military.¹⁷ Accra had one school with no passes, and seven schools had pass rates of less than 30%.¹⁸ Six of these were public schools.

In Dangme East, 1243 pupils took the BECE Examination in 2004. The total number that qualified with aggregates 6-30 came to 683 representing 54.9%. This is lower than the national average of 61.1%. The district ranked 52 out of 110. Only 5.4% or 62 of them were in private schools. If we assume that all those in the private schools passed, then the percent that passed in public schools would be slightly lower than 54.9%. If we consider that 50% had dropped out of school before completing junior secondary school, then only 22% of the JSS leavers in Dangme East could even be considered for secondary school.

In some deprived districts such as Yilo Krobo, Ahafo Ano South and Gushiegu/Karaga, some schools have recorded no passes in the BECE for many years. This means that none of the pupils who left those junior secondary schools entered senior secondary school.¹⁹

The Government's Response to the Problems in Basic Education

The current Government was elected into office in 2000 with a promise to reform the educational system that it believed had failed the majority of young people in the country. Two years later it commissioned two reports, the *Ministry of Education's Education Sector Review* (October 2002) and *The President's Committee on Review of Education Reforms in Ghana* (October 2002). Both reports agreed that there were serious deficiencies in the teaching and learning outcomes in public education.

At the end of 2004, the Government issued a White Paper on the Reform Review Report outlining its proposed policies to solve the numerous problems outlined. Its acknowledgement that the high level of students' attrition in the course of pre-tertiary education, but especially at age 15, "cannot be afforded by any socially responsible system of governance."²⁰ This is an honest assessment of the situation. But the lack of an urgent, binding timeframe is rather disquieting.

The following proposals in the White Paper drew universal condemnation when it was reviewed at a stakeholders meeting of the Ghana National Education Campaign Coalition (GNECC) recently:²¹

1. Changing the names of junior secondary and senior secondary schools to junior high and senior high schools.
2. Extending the duration of senior high school to four years from the current three.

The Ghana National Education Campaign Coalition (GNECC) felt that these changes were unnecessary and would be very costly to both parents and the government, both of which were already

overburdened. These recommendations did not deal with the real issues defined as access, equity and quality. The White Paper recommended that basic education should comprise eleven years of schooling, comprised as follows:

1. Two years of preschool
2. Six years of primary school
3. Three years of junior secondary school (junior high school)

This proposal was universally endorsed by GNECC at the same assembly. The concern raised was whether basic education would really be “free” as defined in the Constitution. Adding two more years to the cycle and expecting parents to foot the bill through additional levies, would not bring a favourable outcome.

The Ministry of Education issued an Education Strategic Plan (ESP) to cover the period 2003-2015 as its working guide to achieve Education For All, which was universal primary education by 2015. The authorities had confidently declared that the plan would succeed and the goals attained this time because the required funding had been worked into the current efforts. This notwithstanding, the plan still relies heavily on donor aid. Estimates from the World Bank put the amount needed from external sources at \$19 million per annum. Other sources claim much higher figures.²²

The government’s introduction of capitation grants to serve forty deprived districts (out of 110) in the country initiated at the start of the 2004-05 school year was one of the initial steps taken in fulfilment of the ESP to improve enrolment and retention. These grants averaging about ₵100,000 per child were rather modest when one considered the cost of textbooks alone. Already reports have emerged from grant-receiving districts that head teachers were not using them judiciously.²³ Budget tracking will have to be done to ensure donor funds they are properly utilised.

The President’s pronouncement at a Public Forum on 23 March 2005, that with immediate effect the government had launched its compulsory basic education programme, was rather confusing considering that the Education Strategic Plan (ESP) for Education For All (EFA) had already commenced in 2003. His proposed capitation grant, also announced, of ₵20,000 or \$2.00 to all first cycle (primary school) pupils in support of basic education can hardly bring much anticipation given the dire situation in the public education sector. Furthermore, it was not clear if this was a one off grant or something that would be repeated.

Some Modest Suggestions for the Real Way Forward for Public Basic Education

The real problems facing basic public education in Ghana today are:

1. Enrolment and retention
2. Poor infrastructure
3. Lack of teaching aids and learning materials
4. Lack of motivated teachers
5. Inadequate supervision and management

All of these problems have been repeatedly identified as the real issues by almost all reports and studies commissioned by the government and by stakeholder forums. To overcome them, a large amount of investment in both material and human resources is necessary, as well as a sincere demonstration of political will on the part of government. For a start, all charges and levies that keep children out of school or

affect their learning must be abolished. Such things as textbooks, exercise books, pens and pencils must be provided free. For the very poorest children, uniforms and shoes, bags and even lunch should be made available.

A phased-in programme for rehabilitating structures and erecting additional ones needs to be established. Although money from the Ghana Education Trust Fund (GET) is available for this purpose, disbursement needs to be more efficient and transparent. Already too many buildings have been started and left uncompleted. Since teachers are the backbone of any educational system, they must be properly remunerated and their conditions of service made more attractive. The country has a shortage of 24,000 trained teachers, especially in deprived, rural areas. Therefore special incentives are necessary to interest young men and women to train and go to work as teachers in these areas.

The monitoring and supervision of teachers needs to be improved. Those who are dedicated and hard working need to be rewarded, while those who do not fit in need to be removed. Far too many incompetent, negligent and even dangerous characters remain in the system. Almost all GES officials interviewed have stressed the fact that private schools perform better because the heads can hire and fire and insist on a high level of performance from teachers. There is no reason why this cannot apply in the public sector.

The country has made a commitment to Education For All in the next ten years. If it cannot guarantee every child at least a decent primary education, the country's future looks bleak. If on the other hand the government succeeds in its education objectives, there is light at the end of the tunnel.

Notes

1. Annual Education Sector Educational Plan 2003-2005 (AESOP), Ministry of Education, Accra, 2003. Projected figures.
2. Ibid. Projected figures.
3. Report of the Blair Commission on Africa, March 2005.
4. Listed as 2.7% per annum in IMF Staff Estimates quoted in Ghana Human Development Report 2004 (draft).
5. The Cost of Education, ActionAid Ghana, 2003 (unpublished).
6. The enrolment ratio of girls enrolled in primary schools was 47.2%, and in JSS, 45.3%, in 2002, Ministry of Education, Accra, Strategic Plan, Volume 1, 2002.
7. The Kanda Cluster of School and the Nima Cluster of Schools, Accra.
8. Ghana Education Service, Ada, Dangme East, Ghana.
9. GES, Op cit.
10. Daily Graphic, March 23, 2005.
11. SRIMPR, Ministry of Education, Accra.
12. Ibid.
13. Ghana Education Service, Dangme East.
14. Dangme East GES.
15. Report on the 2002 Administration of Primary 6 Criterion –Referenced Test, Ministry of Education, Accra, October 2004.
16. West African Exams Council, Accra, 2003.
17. SRIMPR Division, Ministry of Education, Accra.
18. SRIMPR Division, Ministry of Education, Accra.
19. Ibid.
20. The White Paper, page 5.
21. GNECC's General Assembly at Tamale, 16-18 March 2005.

22. Ibid.
23. GNECC in Central Region reported that one head teacher used the money to buy band instruments.