

To secure our future, we must secure education for our children

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On Sunday 24th January, 2021, International Day of Education was marked around the world. It was the third to be so observed since the United Nations Education Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) designated the day as such in 2018. It is a day on which we celebrate the work of our educators and policy makers, assess our progress and reflect on what we must do to improve outcomes for all.

The third International Day of Education comes at a very unique time. The Covid-19 global pandemic, which reared its head in the year 2020, has had profound effects on education. To secure the lives of children and their families, governments around the world had to take the drastic step of closing down schools. While this was a reasonable response, it quickly exposed the deep inequalities that exist between countries and social classes.

To mitigate the spread of the deadly virus, we had to reduce contact between human beings. This naturally affected teaching and learning, which had, until now, been mostly conducted in person. With classes shifting online, countries and families with the wherewithal have managed to claw back some of the losses. On the other hand, the less well-off have had no such respite. UNESCO estimates that while children in high-income countries lost six weeks of schooling, their counterparts in low and lower-middle income countries lost nearly four months on average.

Like much else, the covid-19 global pandemic presents an opportunity to rethink our approach to and handling of education. That is why, I believe, the United Nations chose “Recover and Revitalize Education for the COVID-19 Generation” as the theme for this year’s celebration. We have to emerge from this crisis better equipped to handle similar disruptions and able to give all our children equitable access to education that serves them and their communities well.

Even before Covid-19 struck, we faced the challenge of evening out educational opportunities. We know that family income levels have a very direct effect on the educational opportunities and outcomes of children. We know that children in urban areas have better access to educational infrastructure and materials. And we know that learners in the rural areas are less

likely to receive the required amount of contact hours with teachers, where they are available, than their friends in the towns and cities. What the pandemic did therefore, was to highlight the challenges we were already contending with. As we contemplate a new future in its wake, we must resolve to address these challenges more conclusively.

While we aim for better, we must not forget that there is much we have to celebrate. We have, over the last decade but especially in the last four years, we have done much to expand access to quality education for our future leaders. Last year, 74.68 percent of all eligible children were in school. This compares very favourably with the 55.7 who were in 2011. It also compares well with the global average, which is 79.88, about 5 percentage points higher than ours. We are not there yet, but we have come a long way.

This progress has not been achieved without hard work. Credit must go to, among others, Dr Matthew Opoku Prempeh, Minister of Education in the first term of the Akufo-Addo administration and his able deputies, Dr Yaw Aduwum, Gifty Twum Ampofo and Barbara Asher-Ayisi (who was later reassigned to the Ministry of Works and Housing), as well as Professor Kwesi Yankah, Minister of State in charge of tertiary education. Together, this team led the sector through some of the most significant reforms in our history. The benefits of these reforms are now being felt, such as they were in the impressive results scored by the graduating class of 2020, the first to be enrolled under the government's Free Senior High School Policy in 2017. Above all, we must commend His Excellency President Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo for his relentless focus on education, his courage and his leadership. Since 2017, we have seen a steady rise in investment into the sector. From 2013 to 2017, between 12 and 15 percent of our annual expenditure was applied to education. In 2019, however, we spent GHc 12.5 billion on educating young Ghanaians. This represented a 39 percent increase on expenditure in the 2018 fiscal year.

The expansion in access has been complemented by a drastic overhaul of our curriculum and mode of assessment. For the first time, we are deliberately moving children away from learning by rote, or as we call it, chew, pour, pass and forget. Our children are now being engaged and nurtured in ways that will enhance their creativity, encourage problem solving and nurture leadership abilities. Under these new reforms, we will be able to measure and develop specific competencies of our young people, rather than be awarded arbitrary that do not reflect or account for their individual progress up the academic ladder. I am happy and proud to have made a humble contribution to this process under the able leadership and guidance of Dr Matthew Opoku Prempeh, then Minister of Education.

Today, we can say with confidence that children in Ghanaian schools are acquiring the same critical skills that their colleagues in other parts of the world are doing. This means that they will be able to compete with anyone else in the world at the workplace, in the lab and in the boardroom. With this generation of learners, we can be assured that the future leaders will be ready to build this country when they inherit it.

These reforms and the benefits that come with them must however not be restricted to a small group. Every Ghanaian child must have the opportunity to experience and profit from it. We have to ensure that literacy and numeracy become skills that are universally possessed by anyone born in this country. If we are to “Recover and Revitalize Education for the COVID-19 Generation,” we have to adopt modern, innovative approaches that make our education system inclusive and sustainable. We have to ensure that all social classes in this country have equal access to the best education this country can offer. We must build a system that works for children with various levels of ability. And we must fortify our education system against possible disruptive events in the future.

We don't know when another pandemic will strike, or whether the next disruption will be caused by one, but we have to learn to prepare for it. And that is by building today, a system of education that can sustain any such disruption. That includes providing the funding, building the infrastructure and training the teachers who can keep the work of education going no matter what the external factors are. And as with much else, it would be best if we started work on it today.

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