

Free SHS is here!!!

Prince Hamid Armah, PhD | 10th September, 2017

Tomorrow, 11 September 2017, is FREE SHS DAY - a very historic day in the annals of this nation.

For the first time, a Ghanaian government is attempting to offer free secondary education to ALL its young people including feeding them, despite concerns about quality and equity issues. A bold attempt to reduce poverty and stimulate increased economic development. The goals of equitable economic growth, poverty reduction, coupled with strong social demand for democratization for Ghana depend on equitable access to high quality education and secondary education plays an important role in this regard.

Whilst we celebrate this momentous occasion, I would want to make one quick and very final comment on the benchmark for selecting free SHS beneficiaries. I start by re-echoing three important facts about the BECE assessment (which I have stated many times):

BECE assessment compares an individual child's performance to that of his or her classmates or some other larger group. It tells how one child compares to similar children on a given set of skills and knowledge, but DOES NOT provide information about what the child does and does not know.

As a norm-referenced test, BECE scores indicate the student's ranking relative to that year group and that a score (say 45%) for Grade 9 in BECE 2017 could become the score for Grade 7 in BECE 2018 due to the variations in performance between the two year groups.

Therefore, to deny any child or over 36,000 children access to SHS/TVET on the basis of a score of 9 in Math or English, as we've done, is purely a political decision. It has nothing to do with the conceptual interpretation of the BECE assessment, within the context of measurement and evaluation. Note that, in each year, 4% of the BECE candidates will obtain Grade 9 in Maths or English by default (the stanine system), even if they re-sit as they've been told to do. Effectively, some people will NEVER get access to free SHS/TVET under the current arrangement, contrary to the Government's rhetoric of No Child is Left Behind.

BECE has always been a political tool to control access to secondary education since inception in the early 1990s, and this would have been a great opportunity to break this decades-old social injustice and rewrite the narrative.

Let us ask ourselves where the affected young people should go. Many of them are likely to come from low income backgrounds and attended poor quality public JHS, the very group the policy is meant for. Will Government enrol them on some apprenticeship programme to prepare them for the world of work? What's their faith, in this era of "massification" of secondary education?

Wear your voice and ask Government to reconsider its decision. If we managed to convince Government not to limit free SHS to only 2017 BECE as it originally intended, then it's not too late. It is time to stand up and be counted.

The writer is a lecturer and education and research consultant