

Free secondary education – A paradigm whose time has come

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The idea of the Free Senior High School was conceived by the country's current President, Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo way back in the year 2008. It was one of the major talking points of that election. Other contesting parties then, notably the National Democratic Congress questioned the genuineness and the country's ability and readiness to implement such a policy. And it was seen by many sceptics that the country could not fund the policy, or that it was not realistic and doable considering our peculiar circumstances as a developing nation. Some even claimed free SHS could only be possible after twenty years.

Nonetheless, upon assumption of office in January 2017, having secured a resounding, landslide victory in the 2016 elections, the New Patriotic Party government set sail for the implementation of the Free Senior High School policy. This would give life to a dream the president had nurtured for almost a decade - to see every Ghanaian child's access to secondary education unimpeded irrespective of their socio-economic backgrounds.

Significantly, that dream of implementing such a laudable initiative was not only entrenching a constitutional imperative but also consolidating the country's desire to give meaning to many international treaties it had ratified in the area of education. For instance, the United Nations Development Goal 4 (SDG4) outlines the socio-cultural, economic, and political rights to inclusive and equitable quality education for all. In particular, the government is enjoined to ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes by 2030.

Additionally, Chapter 5 of the 1992 Constitution on Fundamental Human Rights and Freedoms, Article 25 (1) states that all persons shall have the right to equal educational opportunities and facilities and with a view to achieving the full realisation of that right. Clause (a) states that basic education shall be free, compulsory and available to all, while clause (b) also states that secondary education in its different forms, including technical and vocational education, shall be made generally available and accessible to all by every appropriate means, and in particular, by the progressive introduction of free education.

Although the aforementioned constitutional provisions reinforce the national aspirations to free secondary education for young people, it does not provide sufficient rationale for an equitable secondary education system. The premise of Article 38 (1), however, can and should be considered in supporting such a system: "The State shall provide educational facilities at all levels and in all the regions of Ghana, and shall, to the greatest extent feasible, make those facilities available to all citizens. Such words as found in our constitution were succinctly captured by the New Patriotic Party's 2016 manifesto as redefining "Basic education to include Senior High School

(SHS), covering vocational, agricultural and technical schools, and make it available for free on a universal basis to all Ghanaians” (p.31).

Consequently, the roll-out of the Free Senior High School in the country since September 2017 has not been without controversy, as divided opinions exist on its propriety among political party leaders, academics, civil society organizations and groups, faith-based organizations and the citizenry at large. Vociferous dissenting voices have largely emerged from the political class lampooning this government’s decision to implement the policy, which though captured in our statute books has only recently been given life.

Counter-arguments which have been paraded and presented concerning its implementation within media circles are best speculations, conjectures and, at worse infantile and baseless. Wild and unsubstantiated allegations of Free SHS increasing delinquency, promoting teenage pregnancies, and lowering the quality of the country’s educational system have not been supported with verifiable evidence that can stand the test of logic and analytical thinking. And it appears to be a calculated and coordinated attempt, by some group of persons, who hitherto were doubtful of the President’s commitment to this course, seeking to discredit this great and significant feat through needless criticisms.

Furthermore, the President’s quest to implement the Free Senior High School policy now is not only timely but helps to bridge the access inequalities within the secondary education space; of which the element of cost remains a major stumbling block. Empirical studies have shown that an economy like Ghana can potentially sustain positive impacts and benefits if at least 75 percent of all 15-year-olds reach the minimum form of education (OECD, 2015; UNESCO, 2012). It is therefore fair to say that this makes secondary education significantly important, given other evidence of positive relationships existing between estimations on per unit increase in education and investment returns to education (Armah & Mereku, 2018).

Developed countries like the USA, UK Japan, Canada, Sweden and, Egypt in Africa have had it as part of public policy to ensure that education up to the secondary level is financed by the state, yet Ghana and many other African countries have lagged behind in terms of implementing a free secondary education policy. The concept of the Free Senior High School policy being implemented in Ghana now is more like adopting a philosophy of global recognition and endorsement. The impact and essence of the Free Senior High School policy cannot be overemphasized, and its benefits are manifest in several ways.

Firstly, it will help to provide poverty relief and foster economic development. Expanded education has a long-standing expectation of maximizing economic well-being and personal welfare by improving the quality of human capital; the innovative capacity of the economy; and the use of technological knowledge. These could potentially contribute to economic growth and poverty relief for the citizens.

Secondly, it will help to achieve gender equity. Male dominance on enrolment lists in schools is a common phenomenon, and in Africa, this has been a recipe for many undesirable consequences

including early marriage, low confidence, low empowerment and a disappointing lifestyle and status for girls compared to boys. With the free SHS policy, a lot more girls will stay in school longer to strengthen gender equity at the SHS level and provide an equal chance at life success for both males and females.

Again, it is a boost to improving health and living conditions. The uneducated and the poor, more often than not, have a lack of basic health precaution and consciousness. Education promotes public health and health equity. For example, a person with secondary education is more likely to take credible health care decisions (including sanitary measures) and interactions than their counterparts with no secondary education. For girls or women, the education-health outcomes are significant for them, it delays marriage leading to proper and effective family planning and low risks to diseases.

Also, there is a positive correlation between the number of years in school and improved democracy including social accountability in society. On the hierarchy of schooling, secondary school offers better learning and influence on pupils, who learn to be receptive, assertive, critical, tolerant, have respect for law and order, social responsibilities, cooperation, political involvement, political decisions, regard for peace and other shared norms and values that promote civic responsibility and patriotism.

Lastly, secondary education serves as a link for school continuity for primary school graduates and also gives secondary school graduates the hope of potential entry into tertiary education. As more students complete secondary education, the expectation is that demand for higher education (including professional training institutions such as nursing, teaching, etc.) will increase, and this has implications for the manpower needs of the country.

In all our conversations towards the Free Senior High School policy, we should eschew sheer and petty propaganda, parochialism and personal considerations. Rather, we should be focussed on advancing the national interest. Social investments in education like the Free Senior High School policy remain a heritage for the Ghanaian child, and it epitomizes how equitable the nation's resources can be distributed. Let us all as citizens be committed to making this nation great by exhibiting good demonstrable traits in its collective interest.

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