

Government's new direction on free SHS beneficiaries appears problematic, lacks coherence

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Introduction

Anyone who has carefully listened to H.E. President Akufo-Addo throughout the 2016 campaign and after assuming office will understand that the free Senior High School (SHS) programme is intended for all Ghanaian children regardless of their academic abilities and family backgrounds. Consistent with this view, government intends to seek a constitutional amendment to redefine basic education to include secondary education so that every child of school going age would have access to education from KG to SHS. As a prelude to this monumental structural change, Government has demonstrated its commitment to begin implementing the free SHS policy in September, 2017.

Whilst the policy intention appears laudable, I have consistently advised the Government, through any medium possible in Ghana and abroad to hasten slowly and give itself at least a 1-4-year period, comprising 1-year inception phase and 2-3 implementation phase. The Pro-Vice Chancellor of the University of Cape Coast together with several other notable education professionals have made similar observations. My advice was borne out of my professional knowledge and understanding of previous education reform agendas from 1957 till date, why they failed to meet reform targets and my genuine concern for addressing widespread disparities in education access across the country, especially among vulnerable groups.

Limited information flow on the free SHS Programme

Many stakeholders including the media, civil society organizations, parents, teacher associations, the academic community, amongst others, have been patient on how Government intends to roll out the free SHS policy. This is largely due to the seemingly lack of information and limited stakeholders' involvement in evolving a workable implementation plan and evaluation framework for the programme. By now a Government's White Paper detailing a roadmap to implementation should have been issued for our perusal and contributions. Of importance is how we ensure that foreign nationals in our JHS system do not flood our secondary school system as well to enjoy free SHS. With so many unanswered questions, our very vibrant media would always ask any Government official questions on 'Free SHS' at the least opportunity afforded them.

Education Minister's Interview with Starr FM

On Tuesday 16 May, an online news portal quoted the Minister for Education as saying "only brilliant students will have the opportunity to enjoy the government's Free SHS policy in September". Of course the Honourable Minister has denied ever using the adjective "brilliant" in the interview he granted compelling Starronline.com to retract and accordingly replace "brilliant"

with “students who pass the BECE”. This will be the third time the Minister has had to deny a news report, or complained of being misquoted by the media, a situation he needs to appropriately address. Nevertheless, I am still clear in my mind what exactly the Hon Minister meant with reference to the quotations attributed to him in the story. Save the use of the adjective “brilliant” the underlying contentions of the news report has not been denied. Mr Rodney Nkrumah-Boateng who is the Executive Secretary to the Minister in attempting to clarify the matter on Facebook confirmed my understanding of the Minister’s thinking. As he aptly puts it: “Sit the BECE, pass, get placed in a public SHS and you benefit from Free SHS”. For the benefit of those who have not read my previous publications on this BECE system, I will attempt to explain briefly and make a strong case that any implementation of free SHS on the basis of BECE “grades” is elitist, selective and undermines the President's vision of universal basic education from primary to SHS.

The purpose of BECE

The BECE taken at the end of the second term of the final year of Junior High School focuses on selection of few above average students who qualify to offer grammar/academic programmes at the Senior High Schools (SHS). The scores are derived using the students’ raw test scores and the overall distribution of scores, such that results are assigned a value from 1 (the highest) to 9 (the poorest performers – the ‘stanine’ system). In each year the grades are identically distributed such that 4% of students receive a 1, 7% a 2 and so on, fitting 54% of students into grades 4, 5 and 6, collectively described as “pass” for SHS. This so called “pass” in BECE, has been defined as gaining an aggregate range of 6-36 in the best six subjects with a grade 6 or better in the core subjects (i.e. Mathematics, English, Integrated Science and Social Studies). All pupils who fall below this cut-off point have technically not acquired the qualifying grades to SHS and could be described as poor performers (or below average students) as per the grade interpretation provided at the back of the certificate. If government were to grant free SHS to students based on this “pass or fail” as the Honourable Minister seems to suggest, then the award scheme is definitely for the “brilliant” students (those in above average and average grade categories), you may call it a “scholarship” scheme then. An important psychometric property of any test like the BECE is that, it must be able to discriminate between highest and lowest performers, the brilliant student (high achiever/performer) must pass and the weak student (low achiever/performer) must fail. Anything short of that attenuates the validity of the test. This is why exams (including BECE) are written under strict conditions to avoid collusion and cheating, so that such confounding factors do not obfuscate the measurement of the ‘true’ cognitive abilities of the candidates.

From Grades (pass/fail) to Raw Scores

Following years of criticism against pass/fail system of selecting JHS graduates into SHS, the Ghana Education Service has now ignored the use of grades in the SHS selection, in favour of students’ raw scores where the cut-off point appears to be dependent on the number of factors including the number of declared vacancies in the SHS/TVIs. This has resulted in expanded access

to secondary education in recent times. In the 2016/2017 academic year, for instance, GES is reported to have placed 95% (437, 962 out of 461,013) of the BECE candidates in the 512, 114 declared vacancies at SHS/TVIs across the country. This means that students were placed in secondary schools (SHS/TVIs) regardless of whether they obtained the “qualifying grades” or not, given that it is theoretically impossible to obtain 95% “pass” under the BECE’s stanine system as explained earlier.

Wide disparities in the “Pass/Fail” grade description

There is some evidence to suggest that a large proportion of pupils who do not obtain the qualifying grades (or “pass”) to proceed to SHS are from disadvantaged backgrounds, suggesting a high achievement gap between students from underserved communities and those from seemingly affluent backgrounds. In 2014 for instance, only 11%, 22% and 11% of BECE candidates obtained the qualifying grades for SHS in the Upper East, Northern and Upper West Regions of Ghana, respectively. The “pass” rate figures for Greater Accra and Ashanti region were around 80% for the same period. The Ghana Living Standard Survey 6, classifies districts under the three Northern regions among the poorest in Ghana with low annual family income compared to Greater Accra and Ashanti Regions. As per this example, if the Government offers free SHS to students who “pass/fail” BECE, then it raises equity and social justice issues which have become a global benchmark, particularly in the context of the UN’s Sustainable Development Goal 4 of improved learning outcomes for all.

Why “pass and qualify for free SHS” diktat?

Government has allocated Ghc400 million towards the implementation of free SHS to be financed by the ABFA (GHC 211,717,458) and the unknown domestic sources (GHC 188,282,542). If we assume 10% (46,100) increase in enrolment in 2017/2018 compared to last year (average enrolment increase over the last decade revolves around 15,000, with the highest being that of 2016, around 33,000), we are looking at roughly 484, 062, 000 qualified free SHS students in September 2017 (based on raw score placement, not grades). Obviously, the first year budget allocation cannot adequately finance all the fee components for both day students (around Ghc 500/ student plus free lunch) and boarding students (around Ghc 1000) government intends to absorb. Thus the only logical explanation to the Minister’s “pass and qualify for free SHS” diktat, could be the unsustainable cost implication the programme imposes on the Government’s fiscal space.

Way forward

Clearly, Government’s vision for free SHS aligns with helping vulnerable groups by removing financial barriers and improving access to SHS together with addressing inequalities in opportunities to transition from JHS to SHS. Achieving this developmental goal lies at looking critically at the data sitting at the Ministry of Education to identify which categories of people are gaining less access to secondary education. If Government proceed with the “pass BECE and qualify for free SHS” cliché in September, 2017, the programme will remain selective and will

benefit students who attended relatively good private JHS, more than the large majority of young people in the rural areas, especially girls from disadvantaged backgrounds who attended public JHS, and could not meet the high stake cut-off point.

In allocating financial support to our secondary schools in September, Government must acknowledge the inequalities in funding options for schools particularly contributions of the Old Student Associations and PTAs, and how that widens the quality inputs gaps in schools (e.g. teaching and learning resources, pupil- teacher ratio and infrastructure deficit) and achievement gaps, as we work towards equal quality education for all by 2030.

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