

RE: NPP Considering 4-Years SHS Duration Again

Prince Hamid Armah, PhD | 19th September, 2017

Dear Government,

I understand that you are "seriously considering extending the length of secondary education to four years" (see <http://dailyguideafrica.com/npp-considering-4-years-shs-duration/>). Please ignore any such thoughts until at least the Ministerial Advisory Committee on Education completes and submits its report to you. Thanks for the opportunity to submit my proposal to that committee.

In the meantime, kindly note the following:

1. Schooling is always associated with age/no of years. E.g people of ages 12-15 must be in JHS, 16-18 must be in SHS/TVET. Degree is 4 years, Diploma/HND 3 years etc. If you extend SHS to 4 years it will make secondary education 7 years (JHS and SHS combined), young people will graduate at age 19 on the average with WASSCE certificate, whilst their international counterparts generally spend the same number of years to obtain higher certification, A level.

2. Today's constricted budget requires innovative, efficient application of resources. Increasing SHS by 1 year will fuel an unbridled increase in public expenditure on secondary education, at the expense of the basic schools particularly within the context of free secondary education. At present, secondary education consumes 25% of our education budget, far higher than what we spend at the basic level, especially KG and primary, and TVET. As a matter of fact, only 50% of young people of JHS going age are in school. In other words, for every 2 persons between ages 12-15 (JHS level age), one of them is not in school, although 9 out of 10 children of primary school age are in school, demonstrating weak transition from primary to JHS. If we work hard to improve primary to JHS transition and completion rate, BECE graduate should increase to over 600,000 pupils per year. Do we have resources for the requisite massive infrastructure, teachers, text books, computers, curriculum, etc, in addition to extra free SHS cost of over GhC 1 billion a year for just the one-year extension? Already we have huge infrastructure and instructional resources deficits.

Attempting to bridge the achievement gap (which what we want to do) through extended school years is a 'lazy' (easier) and more expensive approach. This conviction is undergirded by results of the extant empirical studies, especially randomised control trials on education achievement.

Solution

Now that Government has redefined basic education to include secondary school, we're heading towards a more inclusive education system, meaning young people with varied abilities will be found in our upper secondary school system (one important reason why achievement gap can't be bridged with an extended school year). E.g. Unlike the previous highly selective system where

only top 60% obtain the qualifying grade to make it to upper secondary education, this year people with up to Aggregate 52 (four grade 9, and two grade 8 in English or Maths) constituting 92% of BECE graduates got placed. In similar manner, 95% of BECE 2016 graduates were placed, although using raw scores.

Not all of these young people can make it to University/Polytechnic even if we give them 100 years at secondary school. Some will do very well in practical/vocational areas after secondary school. So they can't ALL write WASSCE; more will get fail and be stereotyped although they could be competent in other areas of life. As a reminder, WASSCE, like A level, is a matriculation or University entrance exams, designed to select the very few top academically excellent students. In this context, we need to alter our post JHS education system. After JHS, the student can write the placement exams into secondary school since we have now technically scrapped BECE.

Option 1

They can do two years there and write secondary school leaving certificate, those who can continue will stay and write another examination (WASSCE) after a year (still under Free SHS). After WASSCE, students can stay at school for another year to write another examination (not covered by free SHS). We can call it A level. Those with that A Level route can do three-year university courses while those with WASSCE will do 4 years at the University. Note that WASSCE is a bridge between "O" and "A" level exams.

Option 2

All the students can do three-year secondary, after which all of them will write a national competency and proficiency exam – call it secondary school leaving certificate examination – which will measure specific minimum national standards (basic education) and provide license to the world of work. Students would have to achieve the minimum standard before leaving school, with obligations imposed on schools to ensure that. Employers must accept such certificates by a law to be enacted. Those who can, will prepare to write WASSCE subsequently, which is the university/tertiary entrance exams. The universities acknowledging this problem instituted their own exams in the late 1990s, so they could select their students. Why we scrapped it in 2000 is another matter for discussion.

We must however remember that once we offer young people basic education to secondary school codified by law, we cannot turn round to issue a certificate to them saying they have FAILED. That "fail" actually means the education system or government has failed to give the young person basic education which is their right, the child cannot fail himself to acquire the basic education (basic learning, skills, competencies etc) .

So in conclusion, we should ignore the blanket calls for secondary school duration extension merely because people are not passing WASSCE, which is basically a university entrance exam. A

large body of knowledge confirms that achievement gap cannot be bridged by just an extension of school duration.

The writer is a lecturer and education and research consultant