

2022 Budget Analysis: Key education policy issues and why they will improve learning outcomes

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Introduction

Before the presentation of the 2022 Budget Statement and Economic Policy on Wednesday 17th November 2021, key stakeholders in the education sector and many others who have been following the evolving issues in the sector were divided about how the government was going to address the issues, particularly the impact of Covid 19 on education and to propose relieving policies to improve the mandate of the sector. To be more precise, concerns about the quality of learning in schools, teacher licensing and recruitment process, reports on financial challenges bedeviling the Free SHS policy implementation were a few of the issues that fueled peoples' expectations of the budget. Not long ago, the issue of abandoned school building projects also took center stage in public policy discussions on several media platforms. Many people appeared interested in understanding how these issues and several others will be featured in the government's plan for the year ahead. Now that the budget has been read and published, this article attempts to locate and examine the key policy commitments espoused in the budget aimed at addressing current education challenges and improving learning outcomes in this country. But before I proceed, it is important to amplify the pervasive influence of education on the human capital development and socio-economic growth of a country. Evidence of the significant correlation between human capital improvement and GDP cannot be over emphasized.

Health and safety issues

Tuning to the substantive matters, the first issue addressed in the budget is the prioritization of health and safety issues in our schools especially in a Covid-19 era. Since the emergence of Covid-19, our students have benefited from both online and in-person learning and instruction regimes, especially at the beginning of 2021. Fumigation, disinfecting, provision of nose masks, logistics and related materials led public health strategies to control the spread of the virus in schools. The assurance from the Minister for Finance to intensify the 'back to school campaign' in school districts across the country is as good as the support that all stakeholders can give to its implementation.

Improving literacy through Library service

Secondly, improving learning for the students especially in literacy is one of the biggest highlights of the budget. The appetite of the government through MoE to improve reading of the young and old is soaring and evidence of this can be observed from the plethora of education policy interventions and accomplishments of the government. Eight new libraries were completed in 2021 to bring the total number

of libraries in the country to 103, and the number of existing book stock has been revamped by a total of 88,697 new books with the new book stock standing at 1,167,388. The Minister for Finance has also indicated that two new libraries will be constructed in 2022 and five more renovated, and that the “Ghana Library Authority (GhLA) continues to work on widening the content of both the digital platforms and static libraries” [para 936]. Additionally, mobile library van outreaches will be undertaken in estimated 100 basic schools across the country, while book booth housing over 40,000 reading books will be provided by the Ghana Book Development Council (GBDC) to 70 basic schools as part of efforts to promote reading and writing. Helping our children to develop successful reading skill is one of the best gifts we can ever offer them. There is a huge rise in informational activity and people need literacy skills to be able to find, select, interpret, analyse and produce information. Empirical research evidence on the effects of reading on general academic achievement and well-being points to many benefits including enhancing brain activities, improving vocabulary, increasing ability to understand others and developing critical thinking. For example, a study conducted in 2013, Kidd and Castano asseverated that reading literary fiction enhances the theory of the mind or the capacity to understand others. In this context, if government manages to improve reading culture among children and even adults, the alarming statistics of poor literacy proficiency in Ghana could be significantly changed and result in the construction of a knowledge society.

Monitoring and tracking student performance

Monitoring and keeping portfolio of students learning is important to improving overall learning, and for the government to continue to demonstrate a sense of commitment to this ubiquitously settled education principle is highly commendable. It is heart-warming to learn that the budget will fund the conduct of the maiden

edition of the National Standards Assessment Test (NSAT) for all Primary 4 pupils in public basic schools to assess their proficiency in literacy and numeracy in December 2021, and that of Primary 2 and 6

 Ministry of Education
REPUBLIC OF GHANA

WHAT DO WE ASSESS?

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Knowledge 2 Skills 3 Values & attitudes 4 The 4Rs - Reading, wRiting, aRithmetic, and cReativity. 	<p>Core competencies:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Critical thinking and problem solving 2 Creativity and innovation 3 Communication and collaboration 4 Cultural identity and global citizenship 5 Personal development and leadership 6 Digital literacy
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in 2022. The NSAT will enable the Ministry to diagnose students’ learning to inform the provision of requisite learning interventions for pupils who do not meet the proficiency levels. As one of the pioneers to the development of such an important learner assessment policy regime, I believe the importance of the NSAT to improving formative learning cannot be overemphasized. The NSAT together with the School-Based Assessment (SBA) are parts of a comprehensive assessment architecture, the

National Pre-Tertiary Learning Assessment Framework (NPLAF), to support the linkage between curriculum and pedagogy. The NPLAF offers general guidelines on the policy, practice and conduct of learning assessment to improve their validity, reliability and fairness whilst invoking accountability and public confidence in learning and related systems at the same time.

ICT in Education

The roll-out of a two-year pilot project to develop and integrate ICT into early childhood education, as indicated by the Minister for Finance, is relevant to government's concerted efforts to ensuring improved learning. The ICT programme will provide computer-based solutions to deepen learning and also train teachers to effectively integrate ICT pedagogies.

Teacher licensing and quality

The issue of teacher licensing, in which the National Teaching Council (NTC) is heavily involved, remains an important objective to streamlining the professional and career progression of all pre-tertiary education teachers within appropriate competency framework. The licensure regime seeks to ensure that every child has a good teacher. The Minister's announcement that a total of 128,789 licenses have been issued to teachers portends a good signal to teacher professionalization, development and growth, even though the process of licensing has been met with some criticisms. Using rigorous and extensive training, together with licensure assessments to ensure professionals meet statutory requirement and expectations has been a common practice. Administering the licensure regime in this manner puts the teaching profession on the same pedestal as their counterparts in medicine, law, nursing, accounting, among others, to strengthen the quality and dignity of the profession.

BECE, Free SHS and STEM

Indicative of the budget, the government's commitment to free parents from draconian school costs and improve education quality investments is still intact. At the basic level, the Government absorbed the examination registration fees of 438,204 registered candidates from public Junior High Schools for the 2021 Basic Education Certificate Examinations (BECE). In 2022, Government will again absorb the examination registration fees of a projected number of 411,922 candidates. The free SHS is still running, benefiting a total of 1,261,495 students nationwide. The government has increased expenditure allocation to the programme for 2022 to an amount of Ghc 2,300,000,000 from Ghc 1,974,021,960 in 2021 (showing a 16.7 percentage point increase). Investment in infrastructure and interventions such as building of schools and classrooms, dormitories, libraries and administration blocks under the Free SHS Infrastructure Intervention is laudable. For instance, the Minister for Finance indicates that a total of 657 out of estimated 1,119 projects have been completed to close infrastructure gaps in schools and phase out the double track system as planned. With the government earmarking an amount of Ghc

175,000,000 into existing interventions in education, projects described as abandoned such as the E-block schools can receive timely attention in due course.

The focus on revamping STEM education is increasingly becoming sharper and more convincing. An amount of Ghc 63,000,000 is set aside to continue the construction of 20 STEM centers across the country while about 924 Mathematics and Science teachers are reported to have received training on creative pedagogies in STEM.

Budget allocation

Overall, this year's education budget allocation is the highest we have ever seen and analysis of it shows a 13.8 percentage point increase from the previous year, having increased from Ghc 15,631,637,855 in 2021 to Ghc 17,786,819,000 in 2022. When compared to 2020 allocation, the 2022 allocation has increased by a 53.4 percentage point increase (from 11,594,302,405 in 2020 to Ghc 17,786,819,000 in 2022).

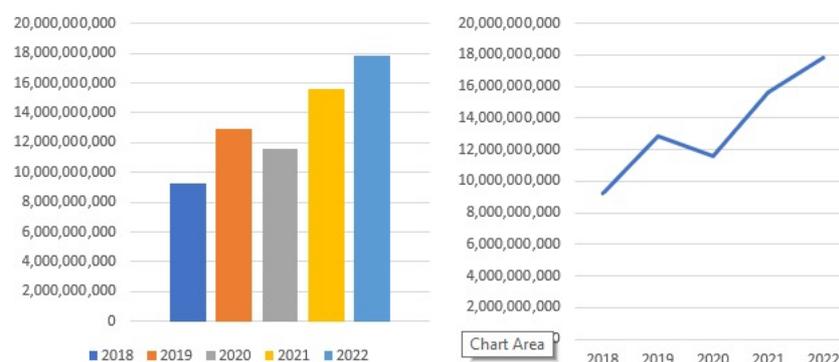


Figure 1: Trends in education sector budget allocation (2018-2022)

Conclusion

It is clear that government is committed to building a highly literate society in a not-too-distant future and has moved beyond mere political rhetoric to resource mobilization and realistic policy implementation. It has been an awesome good start for now but there remains a lot more issues in the sector that need to be resolved. The 2022 budget, undoubtedly, attempts to address the significant ones needed to improve learning outcomes in our educational institutions.

The writer is the Member of Parliament for Kwesimintsim, and Vice Chairman of the Parliamentary Select Committee on Education. He was previously the Director-General of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NaCCA), and an Education Consultant to The World Bank, UKAID, USAID and UN Education Commission projects in Ghana. www.princeharmah.com