

CONFRONTING THE DESK DEFICITS IN GHANA'S BASIC SCHOOLS

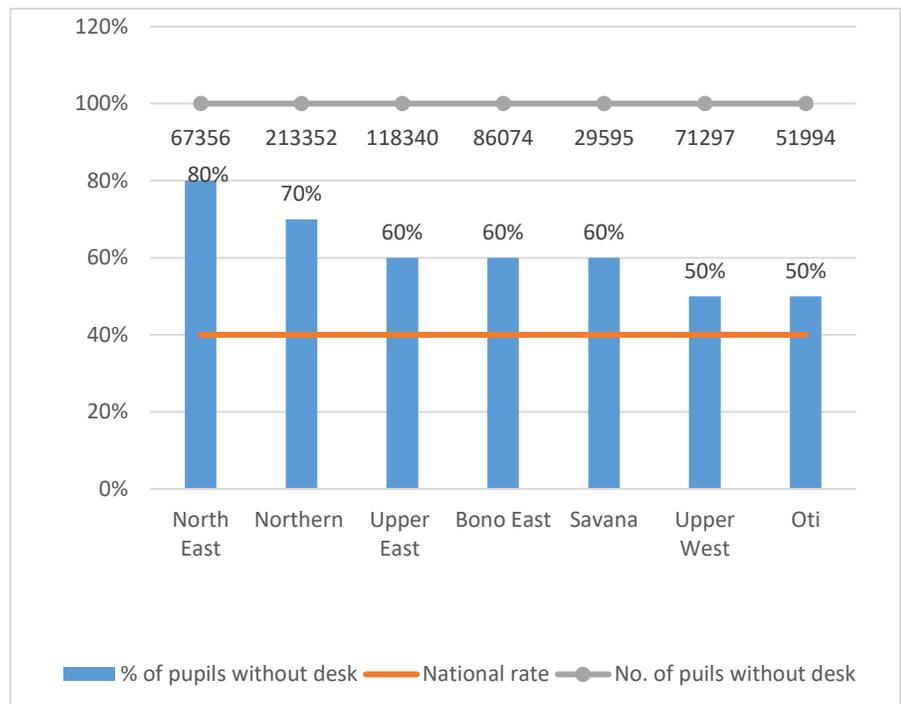
Introduction

There are about 5.8 million children in Ghana's public basic schools, comprising 1.2 million in Kindergarten (KG), 3.2 million in primary and 1.4 million in Junior High Schools (JHS). According to the Ministry of Education, by 2021, about 596,000 KG pupils, representing half of the national KG population and 1.28 million pupils in primary schools lacked desks in school. Another 425,000 pupils, representing 30 per cent of JHS students were without writing spaces. This brings the total number of public basic school pupils without desks to about 2.3 million.

The worsening desk situation in underserved regions

The desk situation is worse at the primary level in the most underserved regions in the education sector: Northern, North East, Savannah, Upper East, Upper West, Bono East and Oti, as depicted in Figure 1. Proportionally, while all the seven (7) regions have the percentage of public primary school pupils lacking desks higher than the national average (40%), the North East Region leads with a maximum of 80 per cent of primary school pupils lacking desks followed by the Northern Region (70%) with Upper East, Bono East and Savannah regions all recording 60 per cent.

Figure 1: Regions with higher than national average desk ratios in primary schools-2021



Source: Ministry of Education, EMIS, 2021.

In terms of actual numbers, however, the Northern Region leads with 213,252 public primary school pupils without desks followed by Upper East (118,340) and Bono East (86,074). Cumulatively, 638,008 (61%) public primary school pupils in the seven (7) underserved regions in Ghana's education sector do not have desks.

The lack of desks affect pupils' learning, handwriting and health, as they adopt uncomfortable postures to write when classes are in session. A recent Eduwatch study revealed that about 24% of pupils in sampled schools

within the Nkwanta South Municipality sat on stones to write on their laps, while others (25%) lay on the floor in selected schools in the Zabzugu District.¹

Declining basic education financing driving the lack of desks

The lack of chairs and desks is caused by poor funding of basic education infrastructure, manifesting in the construction of schools without adequate supply of furniture or the absence of schools and furniture in some communities, in which case, teaching takes place under community erected sheds without desks. Between 2014 and 2020, the share of the education sector discretionary expenditure to basic education declined from 19.2 per cent to 10.9 per cent.

The Ghana Education Trust Fund (GETFund) is Ghana's main funding engine for education infrastructure. In recent times, the quantum of GETFund expended on basic education has been on a steady decline, with only 16 per cent GETFund's infrastructure expenditure budget allocated to basic education in 2022, with secondary education receiving about 44 per cent.

Since the introduction of the free SHS programme in 2017, GETFund's focus has been on secondary education with the decline in funding of basic education infrastructure continuing to worsen the desk situation in basic schools. The 2022 liquidity challenges bedevilling the Ghanaian economy and its impact on education infrastructure financing, especially on GETFund, meant very little or no significant progress in improving the desk situation.

How much is required to fix the problem?

¹ Africa Education Watch (2021). Deprivation and Learning Outcomes in Zabzugu and Nkwanta South.

Eduwatch estimates that 800,000 dual desks, 150,000 KG tables and 600,000 KG chairs are urgently needed in Ghana's basic schools. This is estimated to cost between GHC 330 to 350 million, an amount equivalent to how much Ghana's government spends on the free SHS in just six weeks. However, current budgetary constraints, manifested by cuts in the basic education budget and GETFund does not provide a budgetary solution in the short to medium term.

What can citizens, civil society and the media do?

There must be increased public and policy level awareness of the full dimensions and implications of the desk situation in Ghana's basic schools by civil society organizations. The media has a key role to play in sustaining the agenda to create a compelling situation for government to act comprehensively. Occasional reporting on the lack of desks in some schools will not yield any comprehensive results.

How different should government approach the issue?

The regular public procurement approach to providing desks will prove grossly insufficient in resolving this challenge, especially in an era where fewer resources are even available for financing basic education. An alternative lies in exploring innovative, inclusive decentralized approaches that are cost-efficient.

The Ministry of Education must roll out a coordinated strategic approach, involving corporate Ghana, local governments, religious groups, traditional authorities, civil society and the Forestry Commission. This should culminate in a transparently managed Fund, with seed

money from the government and contributions from stakeholders. A matching effort to mobilize local timber resources to produce desks at a cheaper cost at the regional level for distribution to underserved districts and schools is workable and cost-efficient.

In the short, medium, to long term, the Ministry of Education and District Assemblies should commit to a policy of ensuring no basic school infrastructure contract is awarded without the full component of school furniture, including desks and chairs. This can be enforced by the funding agencies for such contracts-GETFund, Development Partners, District Assemblies, Development Authorities etc.

Ghana cannot transform her education system without desks for all pupils in basic schools.

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About Africa Education Watch

The Education Alert Policy Brief is a monthly publication by Africa Education Watch, an Education Policy Research and Advocacy Organization working to promote quality, inclusive education policy management & reform by drawing on cross-cultural, trans-national and international comparative perspectives across Africa. At Africa Education Watch, we envision a continent with globally competitive human capital that drives economic and social development.

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