




Financial Burden Analysis of the free SHS Policy and Implications on Equitable Access

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About Africa Education Watch

Africa Education Watch is an Education Policy Research and Advocacy organization working with Civil Society Organizations, Government, and Private Sector to promote an equitable, accountable and responsive education system that assures quality and equal opportunities for all. Working with partners in Ghana, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Kenya and Nigeria, we envision a continent with globally competitive human capital that drives economic and social development.

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ABBREVIATIONS

Acronyms	Meaning
AfDB	Africa Development Bank
GES	Ghana Education Service
GIZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit
ICT	Information Communication Technology
KfW	Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau
KOICA	Korea International Cooperation Agency
LEAP	Livelihood Empowerment Against Poverty
MoE	Ministry of Education
MoF	Ministry of Finance
SHS	Senior High School
SHTS	Senior High Technical School
TVET	Technical Vocation Education and Training
TVI	Technical Vocational Institution

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction and background

Over the years, successive Ghanaian governments have made significant efforts to improve the quality and accessibility of secondary education in Ghana. Some of the interventions include the Northern Scholarship Scheme for secondary schools in the northern regions of Ghana, Ghana Cocoa Board scholarship/bursaries, the construction of Community Day Senior High Schools (SHS), Model SHS Programme, and progressively free SHS policy for day students. The most recent policy intervention is the free SHS policy introduced in September 2017.

While secondary education has been 'free' since 2017, between the 2019/20 and 2022/23 academic years, 194,862 BECE graduates who were placed into secondary schools could not honour their admission at first instance for varied reasons, with the main factor being financial. This study, therefore, sought to investigate the financial burden sharing between government and parents and its impact on access by students from low-income households. It makes recommendations for improving equity in cost burden sharing, especially among students from low-income households.

Methodology

The study adopted qualitative and quantitative approaches for data collection and analysis. The cost borne by the government was analyzed using free SHS budgetary allocations and expenditures obtained from the Ministry of Education (MoE), Ministry of Finance (MoF) and the Parliament of Ghana for the period 2017/18 to 2022/23 academic years. The cost to parents was analysed using historical prices of prospectus items obtained from the Ghana Statistical Service to cost prospectuses obtained from 20 second cycle schools.

Sampling

Twenty second cycle schools, comprising 16 SHS/Senior High Technical Schools (SHTS) and four (4) Technical Vocational Institutes (TVIs), were conveniently sampled from the various categories of second cycle schools to obtain prospectuses. A total of 20 parents whose wards could not honour their admissions in the 2022/23 academic year were conveniently sampled for interviews together with 40 parents whose children were in second cycle schools. Out of 40 parents engaged, 14 each were selected from the northern and middle zones of Ghana, with 12 from the southern zone. One (1) Community Day SHS was sampled purposively for a Case Study.

Limitation:

Because of the relatively small sample of school prospectuses and parents, our study must be viewed as suggestive rather than definitive. Nevertheless, the outcomes give important insights into secondary education financing in Ghana.

KEY FINDINGS**Enrolment**

1. Since the inception of the free SHS policy in 2017, enrolment in secondary schools has increased from 813,448 in 2016/17 academic year to 1.3 million in 2022/23 academic year.
2. In the first six years of the free SHS policy, an average of 422,940 students were enrolled annually compared to an average of 260,490 annual enrolments for the last six years before the Policy.
3. About 2.5 million students have so far benefited from the free SHS policy from the 2017/18 to 2022/23 academic year.
4. Between the 2019/20 and 2022/23 academic years, 194,862 candidates did not honour their admissions at first instance into second cycle schools.

Government's allocation and expenditure

5. Between the 2017/23 and 2023/24 academic years, a total of GH¢12.88 billion was allocated to the free SHS policy, averaging GH¢ 1.84 billion annually.
6. Between the 2017/21 and 2021/22 academic years, GH¢5.3 billion was expended on the Policy, averaging GH¢1.06 billion a year.
7. In nominal terms, the annual budgetary allocation to the free SHS policy increased by 639 per cent – from GH¢400 million in 2017 academic year to GH¢2.95 billion in 2023 academic year. However, adjusting for inflation within the period reduces the increment to 443 per cent (GH¢352.8 million in 2017 to GH¢1.91 billion in 2023).
8. Between the 2017/18 and 2021/22 academic years, the average government spending per student under the free SHS policy was GH¢1,241 with parents spending GH¢4,185 per annum.
9. Budget credibility has been on a continuous decline since the 2018/19

academic year – from 120 per cent in the 2017/18 academic year to 99 per cent in the 2018/19 academic year, 76 per cent in 2019/20 and 58 per cent in 2020/21. In 2021/22, the lowest rate of 51 per cent of approved funds was spent.

Parents' Expenditure

New Students

1. The total cost borne by parents under free SHS policy on their wards in SHS/SHTS boarding houses in the first year (2017/18 academic year) was GH¢3,074. This increased to GH¢3,649 in the 2019/20 academic year and further to GH¢6,477 in the 2022/2023 academic year. The cost of prospectus constitutes about 45 per cent of the total cost. Also, there is no significant difference (3%) between the prospectuses for an SHS/SHTS boarding student and a Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) student attending a TVI.

Continuing Students

2. Parents of continuing boarding house students spent GH¢1,701 in the 2017/18 academic year, GH¢2,087 in the 2019/20 academic year, and GH¢4,000 in the 2022/23 academic year. Of the total extra cost incurred in the 2022/23 academic year, about 60 per cent was expended on non-perishable food items (provisions), 10 per cent on transportation, 10 per cent on books, 10 per cent on upkeep (cash) and 10 per cent on personal effects.

Continuing Day Students

3. Day students who lived within the locality of their schools did not spend any money to school. They had breakfast at home, walked to school, had free lunch at school, and returned home for supper. However, day students from distant communities spent an average of GH¢4,400 annually – 40 per cent on transportation, 50 per cent on breakfast in school, and 10 per cent on books. They also benefited from the government's free lunch in school, and returned home for supper.

Continuing Day Students in Hostels

4. At the Nkwanta Community Day SHS, day students who lived in distant communities rented rooms within the vicinity of the school to enhance proximity. Such students spent average of GH¢5,380 on hostel accommodation, feeding and utilities annually.

The GES' Harmonised School Prospectus

5. In November 2023, the Ghana Education Service (GES) harmonised

secondary school prospectuses following parents' complaints about excessive items in some schools' prospectus at the start of the 2022/23 academic year. Eduwatch had called for a harmonised prospectus to reduce the then cost estimated at GH¢4,000. A market survey conducted in November 2023 put the cost of the harmonized prospectus at a minimum of GH¢2,100. Compliance of school heads with the harmonized prospectus is critical to achieve increased access by the poor.

6. Despite the reduction in the cost of prospectus arising from the harmonised GES prospectus, parents in the first and second wealth quintiles with average annual household expenditure of GH¢5,168 and GH¢8,250 respectively, may find it difficult to procure the GH¢2,100 prospectus, as the prospective student is not the only member of the household.

Recommendations

1. In the short-term, the MoE must target the free SHS policy to focus more on the needs of children from the poorest households using data from the Livelihood Empowerment Against Poverty (LEAP) programme as a point of entry. Under the LEAP programme, the government currently has a database of over 346,019 poor households where cash grants are dispensed bi-monthly as stipend to over one (1) million people. This will enable the government to spend more to cover the full cost of secondary education for students from the lower income quintiles/households, compared to those from the upper income quintiles.

2. In the medium- to long-term, the MoE must develop and implement a strategy to gradually transition Ghana's secondary education system from the current boarding-as-a-norm to day-as-norm. Free boarding secondary education should be reserved strategically for students in underserved communities where there is no reasonable commutable access to a secondary school. However, parents, who in spite of an opportunity for their wards to be day students for free, still decide to opt for boarding status must pay for its full cost.

3. The MoF must improve the disbursement of funds under the free SHS policy. The timely availability of funds (especially at the school level) to procure items that were previously 'smuggled' into prospectus, is critical to sustain compliance with the current moderate, harmonised prospectus. This will also improve the availability of adequate foodstuffs and other Teaching and Learning Resources in schools to reduce the financial burden on some parents to supply provisions to their wards in school.

INTRODUCTION

Ghana operates a 2-6-3-3-year pre-tertiary education system – two (2) years of kindergarten education, six (6) years of primary education, three (3) years of lower secondary education (Junior High School) and 3 years of upper secondary education (“secondary education”). The secondary education system comprises three (3) years of SHS/SHTS and TVIs. The SHS/SHTS are managed by the GES while the TVIs are managed by the Ghana Technical and Vocational Education and Training Service (GTVETS).

Studies have shown that, investing in secondary education yields considerable social and private returns by offering young people the chance to acquire attitudes and job-oriented skills that can make them participate in the labour market, and foster positive social and civic values for participation in governance.¹ In line with this, like many countries, Ghana has over the years been investing in the delivery of secondary education through policy and programme initiatives to ensure secondary education is not only accessible to all youth, but also guarantees quality learning outcome for every learner.

Notable investments in expanding access and improving quality of secondary education in the past three (3) decades include the Northern Scholarship Scheme for secondary education in the northern regions of Ghana where poverty levels are highest, the Ghana Cocoa Board scholarship/bursaries, the Secondary Education Improvement Project, the construction of Community Day SHS, rolling out of Professional Learning Community for teachers in secondary schools as a means of continuously improving their skills, Model SHS Programme, and progressively free SHS policy for day students.

Successive governments have also invested in expanding access and improving the mode of facilitation in TVIs through the provision of modern technology, training of instructors, provision of scholarships for learners and instructors, and upgrading infrastructure. The Development of Skills for Industry Project, the Ghana Skills and Technology Development Project, and other TVET improvement projects funded by the AfDB, JICA, KOICA, World Bank, KfW, and GIZ are among others.

The investments in secondary education prior to the 2017/18 academic year led to enrolment in public SHS/SHTS increasing from 393,995 in the 2007/08 academic year to 813,448 in the 2016/17 academic year with JHS-SHS transition reaching 67 per cent by 2016. Within the same period, enrolment in the then GES-managed public TVIs increased from 38,714 to 45,215. In terms of learning attainment, the aggregate performance in the four (4) core subjects – English Language, Mathematics, Social Studies, and Integrated Science – increased from 36 per cent (2006

¹ Dana, M. 2011. Pennsylvania’s Best Investment: The Social and Economic Benefits of Public Education

THE FREE SHS POLICY

to 47 per cent (2016), representing 11 percentage points increase.

On September 12, 2017, the free SHS was launched. H.E. Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo in his speech during the launch noted that, the Policy is to “lift the financial burden off parents, and the heart-rending anxiety that accompanies the beginning of every school term.”

According to the free SHS policy document, the specific objectives of the Policy are to:

- a. expand secondary education places, and ensure that all children of secondary-school-going age have unhindered access.
- b. ensure that gender, ethnicity, physical ability and social status do not constitute a barrier to Secondary Education.
- c. ensure that all students who exit secondary education have the academic preparation to pursue further education or the skills to enter the world of work.
- d. provide adequate resources to promote effective teaching and learning in secondary institutions.
- e. equip students in the technical and vocational stream with appropriate functional skills for industry.

To achieve the above objectives, the free SHS policy intervenes by "removing" admission aggregate cut-offs, expanding infrastructure and absorbing the cost of key items in the student bill. The absorbed items in the bill include admission fees, maintenance fees, cumulative records, school uniforms, house dress, school cloth, P.E kits, medical examinations, supplementary reader/core literature books, exercise books/notebooks, general stationery, vehicle maintenance, first aid, building maintenance, sports fees, culture fees, sanitation fees, postage, practical fees, furniture maintenance, utilities, examination fees, entertainment fees, library fees, SRC dues, co-curricular activities, ICT fees, National Science and Maths Quiz, Science Development, Development Levy and feeding for all students.

Free SHS Enrolment

Since its inception in 2017, the free SHS policy has increased enrolment in SHS/SHTS from 813,448 in the 2016/17² academic year to 1.3 million in the 2022/23 academic year. As shown in Table 1, in the first year of the Policy enrolment in SHS 1 increased from 308,799 in the 2016/17 academic year to 362,775 representing a 17 per cent increase.

In the 2018/19 academic year, enrolment increased by 19 per cent, but declined by 6 per cent in the 2019/20 academic year, and thereafter increased by 5 per cent in the 2020/21 academic year. Enrollment further

² MoE. 2017 EMIS

increased by 10 per cent in the 2021/22 academic year, but recorded a negative 3 per cent growth in the 2022/23 academic year. In the first six (6) years of the Policy, an average of 422,940 students were enrolled annually, compared to an average of 260,490 annual enrolment for the last six (6) years before the free SHS policy inception. In total, 2.5 million students benefited from the Policy between the 2017/18 academic year

Table 1: Free SHS yearly enrolment trend

Academic Years	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
Yearly enrolment	308,799	362,775	432,954	404,851	425,397	463,453	448,214
Percentage growth		17%	19%	-6%	5%	10%	-3%

Source: Ministry of Education, Free SHS Secretariat

Free TVET (Enrolment)

Prior to the 2021/22 academic year, only 47 TVIs were benefiting from the free SHS policy. The government in the 2021/22 academic year extended the free SHS policy to cover 139 TVIs which hitherto were not under the MoE, bringing the total number of free TVIs as of the 2022/23 academic year to 186⁴. Enrolment has since increased from 25,091 in the 2021/22 academic year to 51,560 in the 2022/23 academic year.⁵

Table 2: Free TVET yearly enrolment

Academic Year	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
Yearly Enrolment	25,091	46,876	51,560

Source: Ghana TVET Service

Free SHS budgetary allocation

Since the free SHS policy's inception in 2017, a total of GH¢12.88 billion has been allocated for its implementation. This averages GH¢ 1.84 billion annually for the seven-year period.

The budgetary allocation recorded year-on-year increased between 2017 and 2020, after which a steady decline was recorded in 2021 before increasing in 2022 and 2023. In 2017, a total of GH¢400 million was allocated, which increased to GH¢1.1 billion in 2018, further to GH¢1.6 billion in 2019, and GH¢2.4 billion in 2020, as shown in Figure 1.

³ Ministry of Finance, 2024 Budget and Economic Statement

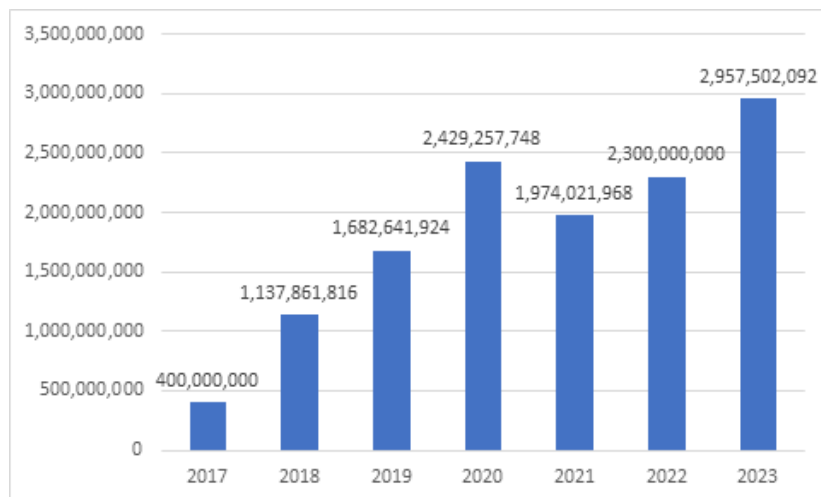
⁴ MoE, Free SHS Secretariat

⁵ Ghana TVET Service

In 2021, GH¢1.9 billion was allocated, which represented a 19 per cent decline from 2020 allocation. The decline in budgetary allocation in 2021 could be explained by the uncertainty in school reopening following the COVID-19-induced school closure in 2020.

In the following year (2022), an amount of GH¢2.3 billion was allocated, amounting to a 17 per cent increase from the 2021 allocation. In 2023, an amount of GH¢2.9 billion was allocated, representing 26 per cent increase from the previous year's allocation of GH¢2.3 billion, as depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Budgetary allocation to Free SHS Policy (2017-2023)



Source: Ministry of Finance, 2017 – 2023 Budget Statement and Economic Policy

Analysis of Real vs Nominal budget - free SHS policy

In nominal terms, budgetary allocation to the free SHS policy increased by 639 per cent – from GH¢400 million in 2017 to GH¢2.95 billion in 2023, as shown in Table 3. However, adjusting for inflation within the period reduces the increment to 443 per cent (GH¢352.8 million in 2017 to GH¢1.91 billion in 2023). This means the apparent increase in the allocation between 2017 and 2023 was eroded by a 196 per cent inflation.

Ghana has been experiencing high levels of inflation above the West African average of 8 per cent⁶ in the past two years. The 2022 end-of-year inflation rate of 54.1 per cent and October 2023 inflation rate of 35.2 per cent had the most negative impact on real fund allocation in the six (6) years of the free SHS policy's introduction. While the free SHS allocation in 2022 (GH¢2.3 billion) represented a 20 per cent increase over 2021 (GH¢1.97 billion), adjusting for inflation reduced the budget by 47 per cent. Similarly, while the 2023 GH¢2.95 billion allocation represented a 26 per cent nominal increase over 2022 (GH¢2.3 billion) in real terms, it declined by 54 per cent.

⁶ Statista. 2023. Inflation rate in Africa from 2019 to 2023, by region Retrieved: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1203735/inflation-rate-in-africa-by-region/>

Table 3: Analysis of Real vs Nominal budget - free SHS policy

Unit Cost (GH¢)			
Year	Nominal Value	Inflation Rate	Real Value
2017	400,000,000	11.8%	352,800,000
2018	1,137,861,816	9.4%	1,030,902,805
2019	1,682,641,924	7.9%	1,549,713,212
2020	2,429,257,748	10.4%	2,176,614,942
2021	1,974,021,968	12.6%	1,725,295,200
2022	2,300,000,000	54.1%	1,055,700,000
2023	2,957,502,092	35.2% ⁷	1,916,461,356

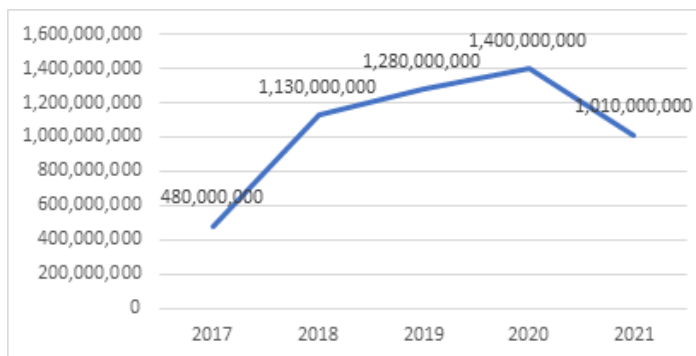
Source: Author's computation from the Ministry of Finance's budgetary allocation to free SHS and Ghana's inflationary rate from the Ghana Statistical Service.

Free SHS Expenditure

The analysis of expenditure data on the free SHS policy focuses on the period from 2017/18 to the 2021/22 academic years where expenditure data is currently available. The government's expenditure on the Policy has increased progressively from the 2017/18 to the 2020/21 academic years, as shown in Figure 2. In the 2017/18 academic year, when the Policy affected only newly admitted first year students, a total of GH¢480 million was expended.

The expenditure significantly increased to GH¢1.1 billion in the 2018/19 academic year, representing a 129 per cent increase. The key reason for the increase in expenditure was an increase in the number of students occasioned by the enrolment of the second cohort of beneficiaries onto the programme.

Figure 2: Free SHS expenditure



Source: Minister for Education's presentation to Parliament of Ghana – 2022.

⁷ Inflationary rate as of October 2023

In the 2019/20 academic year, although the third cohort of free SHS students was admitted, the expenditure for that year (GH¢1.2 billion) recorded a marginal increase (9%) compared to the 2018/19 academic year growth rate (129%). The 2020/21 academic year expenditure of GH¢1.4 billion represented a 16 per cent increase over the 2019/20 academic year amount.

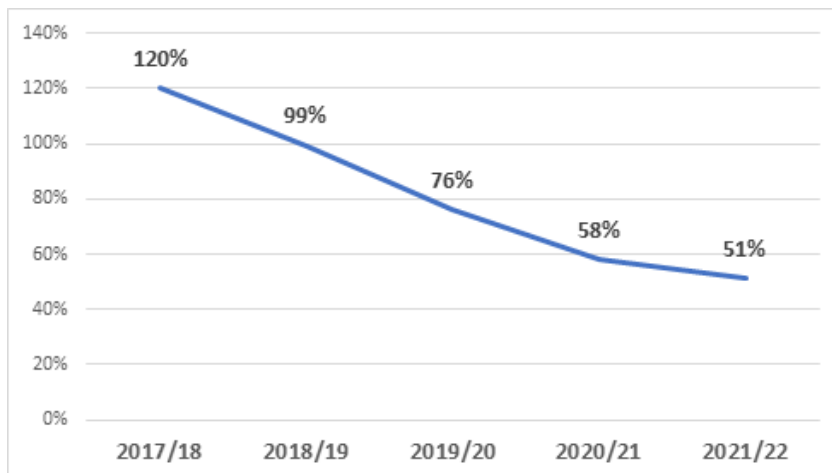
In the 2021/22 academic year, however, expenditure under the free SHS policy recorded its first decline, with GH¢1.01 billion expended by end of year, compared to GH¢1.4 billion in the previous academic year. Between the 2017/18 and the 2021/22 academic years, the total amount expended on the Policy by the government was GH¢5.3 billion, averaging GH¢1.06 billion annually.

Budget Credibility of the Free SHS policy

Budget credibility measures government's actual expenditure as a proportion of approved budget. It is an important indicator to understand the dependability and efficiency of the government's budget execution.

An analysis of the free SHS budget credibility shows that, except for the 2017/18 academic year where expenditure exceeded allocation by 20 per cent, and the 2018/19 academic year where the expenditure was almost equal to the allocation (99%), the free SHS budget credibility rate saw a continuous decline in the 2019/20 and 2021/22 academic years.

Figure 3: Free SHS budget credibility rate



Source: Author's computation of budgetary allocations and expenditure data from MoF, MoE and Parliament of Ghana

In the 2019/20 academic year, the budget credibility rate was 76 per cent (23% lower than the 2018/19 rate), declining to 58 per cent in 2020/21 (18% lower than the 2019/20 rate), and to 51 per cent in 2021/22 (7 percentage points decline from the 2020/21 academic year rate).

The continuous decline in budget credibility suggests government's difficulty in mobilizing the required resources to finance the Policy. This lends significant credence to some stakeholder views that the funding mechanism of the free SHS is not sustainable. Invariably, a decline in government spending, given increasing enrolment, suggests an increase in parents' spending, albeit informal.

How much did government spend each academic year on each student under free SHS from 2017 to 2021?

A per capita analysis of the free SHS policy indicates that, between the 2017/18 and 2021/22 academic years, the per capita public expenditure under the Policy declined from GH¢1,323 per student in the 2017/18 academic year to GH¢781 in the 2021/22 academic year, representing a 41 per cent decline, as shown in Table 4. Over the five-year period, the average per capita public expenditure under the Policy was GH¢1,147 with feeding accounting for about 70 per cent of the expenditure.

Table 4: Per unit cost of the free SHS policy

Year	No. of Beneficiaries	Total Cost (GH¢)	Unit Cost (Nominal) (GH¢)
2017/18	362,775	480,000,000	1,323
2018/19	795,729	1,130,000,000	1,420
2019/20	1,158,504	1,280,000,000	1,105
2020/21	1,263,202	1,400,000,000	1,108
2021/22	1,293,701	1,010,000,000	781
Average			1,147

Data Sources: Ministry of Education and Parliament of Ghana

HOW MUCH ARE PARENTS CONTRIBUTING TO THE FREE SHS POLICY?

On September 12, 2017, when H.E. Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo was launching the free SHS Policy at the West African SHS, he indicated that the Policy among others aims to “lift the financial burden off parents, and the heart-rending anxiety that accompanies the beginning of every school term”. Notwithstanding, parents’ contribution towards their wards’ secondary education remains significant.

The following section looks at the cost incurred by parents at the point of enrolling their wards by analysing the cost of prospectus and extra cost they incur aside the prospectus.

Cost incurred by parents on prospectus for their wards enrolling in SHS/SHTS as boarding students

Three (3) academic years were selected for analysing the historical cost trends to parents - 2017/18, 2019/20 and 2022/23. The years represent the baseline, midline and endline years of this analysis of parent’s expenditure. The analysis was done using the average costs and Standard Deviations across the three (3) years, as presented in Table 5.

Table 5: Cost of prospectus – Boarding students (SHS/SHTS)

	2017/18 (GH¢)	2019/20 (GH¢)	2022/23 (GH¢)
Average	1,373	1,562	2,477
S.D.	327	321	594

Source: Author’s computation from school prospectuses using GSS data

In the 2017/18 academic year, parents spent an average of GH¢1,373 (S.D. = 327) on prospectus for their wards enrolling as boarding students in SHS/SHTS. This increased by 14 per cent to GH¢1,562 (S.D. = 321) in the 2019/20 academic year, and further to a high of GH¢2,477 in the 2022/23, representing a 59 per cent increase over the 2019/20 spending. The increase in the cost of prospectus in the 2022/23 academic year is explained by the high end of year inflation rate (54%).

Cost incurred by parents on prospectus for their wards enrolling in SHS/SHTS as day students

As shown in Table 6, in the 2017/18 academic year, SHS/SHTS day students' prospectus cost GH¢638 (S.D. = 180), increasing to GH¢768 (S.D. = 201) in 2019/20 (20% increase), and further to GH¢1,146 (S.D. = 366) in the 2022/23 academic year (49% increase). Parents' spending on prospectus for day SHS/SHTS students constituted half of their spending on the prospectus for those in boarding schools.

Table 6: Cost of prospectus – Day students (SHS/SHTS)

	2017/18 (GH¢)	2019/20 (GH¢)	2022/23 (GH¢)
Average	638	768	1,107
S.D.	180	200	322

Source: Author's computation from school prospectuses

Cost incurred by parents on prospectus for their wards enrolling in TVIs as boarding students

As shown in Table 7, prospectus for boarding students in TVIs cost an average of GH¢1,398 (S.D. = 322) in the 2017/18 academic year, GH¢1,619 (S.D. = 372) in 2019/20, and GH¢2,545 (561) in the 2022/23 academic year.

Table 7: Cost of prospectus – Boarding students

	2017/18 (GH¢)		2019/20 (GH¢)		2022/23 (GH¢)	
	TVI	SHS	TVI	SHS	TVI	SHS
Average	1,398	1,373	1,619	1,562	2,545	2,477
S.D.	322	327	372	321	561	594

Source: Author's computation from school prospectuses

The differences in the costs of the prospectuses for SHS/SHTS and TVI boarding students in the academic years 2017/18, 2019/20, and 2022/23 were GH¢25, GH¢57, and GH¢68 respectively. This indicates that, the average cost of a TVI prospectus for boarding students is 3 per cent higher than the average cost of SHS/SHTS prospectus for boarding students.

The insignificant difference in the cost is attributed to the large similarity between prospectuses for SHS/SHTS and TVIs. Except for one (1) TVI that included items like a safety boot, overcoat, drawing sheet, drawing board, and large sets square, the other three (3) TVIs sampled for the study had prospectuses that mirrored that of SHS/SHTS.

Cost incurred by parents on prospectus for their wards enrolling in TVIs as day students

As shown in Table 8, averagely, TVI prospectuses for day students cost parents GH¢664 (S.D. = 307) in the 2017/18 academic year, GH¢799 (258) in 2019/20 and GH¢1,143 (S.D. = 477) in the 2022/23 academic year.

Table 8: Cost of prospectus – Day students

	2017/18 (GH¢)		2019/20 (GH¢)		2022/23 (GH¢)	
	TVI	SHS	TVI	SHS	TVI	SHS
Average	664	638	799	768	1,143	1,107
S.D.	307	180	258	200	477	322

Source: Author's computation from school prospectuses

The differences between the cost of TVIs and SHS/SHTS prospectuses for day students were GH¢28 in the 2017/18 academic year, GH¢31 in 2019/20 and GH¢36 in 2022/23. This indicates that, the average cost of a day TVI prospectus is 4 per cent higher than the average cost of SHS/SHTS prospectus.

Extra cost incurred by parents– boarding students

Generally, most items in a prospectus are one-time purchases. However, in addition to the cost of prospectus, there were other costs incurred by parents under the free SHS policy. Interviews with parents of boarding students in selected secondary schools indicated that, they spent an average of GH¢4,000 aside the school prospectus in the 2022/23 academic year. Items of expenditure were transport, food (provisions), personal effects books and cash for upkeep in school.⁸

Historical price data suggests that, the average extra cost incurred by parents in the 2017/18 academic year was GH¢1,701, and GH¢1,902 in the 2019/20 academic year, as shown in Table 9.

Table 9: Extra cost borne by parents

Annual Cost (GH¢)		
2017	2019	2022
1,701	1,902	4,000

Source: Field data, 2023

⁸ Other cost including PTA dues, cost of extra classes were omitted from the study, as the focus was on only direct cost of secondary education.

Of the GH¢4,000 extra cost incurred in 2022, parents indicated that about 60 per cent was spent on non-perishable food items, 10 per cent on transportation, 10 per cent on books, 10 per cent on upkeep (cash) and 10 per cent on personal effects. The reason parents gave for spending as much as 60 per cent annually on “provisions” was inadequacy of food served in schools based on the feedback from their wards. Parents spending 10 per cent on transportation was due to the frequency of breaks in the academic years. For example, in a typical academic year in double track schools, students travelled up to six (6) trips in an academic year – three (3) to school, and three (3) back home.

Total cost incurred by parents on first year boarding house students

The total prospectus and extra cost sum up the total cost to parents under the free SHS policy in a typical first academic year. As shown in Table 10, in the 2017/18 academic year, parents spent an average of GH¢3,074 on their first-year students in boarding houses. This increased to GH¢4,158 in 2018/19, GH¢3,649 in 2019/20, and further to GH¢4,028 in 2020/21. In the 2021/22 academic year, the total average spending by parents increased to GH¢4,535, and as much as GH¢6,477 in 2022/23. Averagely, the cost of prospectus constituted 45 per cent of the total cost incurred by parents on their first-year students in boarding house.

Table 10: Total cost incurred by parents – First year boarding student

	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
Prospectus	1,373	1,447	1,562	1,724	1,941	2,477
Extra cost	1,701	1,902	2,087	2,304	2,594	4,000
Total	3,074	3,349	3,649	4,028	4,535	6,477
% by prospectus	45%	43%	43%	43%	43%	38%

Source: Field data, 2023

Extra cost incurred by parents – day students

Parents of day students reported spending an average of GH¢4,400 annually on their children’s education – 40 per cent on transportation, 50 per cent on breakfast in school,⁹ and 10 per cent on books. Government provides free lunch to day students.

The experience, was however, different for students who attended community day SHS located in their local communities. For example, in the Nkwanta Community Day SHS located in Nkwanta South District of the Oti Region, about two-thirds of the students were from distant communities

⁹ An average of 170 days in an academic year at GHC13 per unit for breakfast in school

and spent about GH¢5,380 per year on hostel accommodation, feeding and utilities (water, electricity) to enable them commute on foot to school, as shown in Table 9. Parents of the remaining students who hailed from the community did not incur this cost since their wards lived with them.

Table 11: Annual cost estimate for free SHS – Day with hostel students (2022/23 academic year)

Items	Cost	Days	Total
Breakfast	13	170	2210
Supper	13	170	2210
Utilities	30	12	360
Rent	50	12	600
			5,380

Source: Field data, 2023

It is noteworthy that, while students resident in communities with Community Day Schools were fed at home, their counterpart day students who had to travel from their local communities to attend Community Day Schools in other communities, spent as much as GH¢5,380 a year to access free secondary education. The case for cost efficiency in the Community Day School approach to expanding access to free secondary education is pronounced as cost-effective both to parents and the government provided the schools are located in the communities.

Cost burden sharing analysis – Government versus parents

This section compares the government's annual per unit spending under the Policy with parents' average annual per unit spending using first-year students as the point of reference. This is because first-year expenditure is critical to secondary enrolment.

It is worthy of note that, the analysis of government spending excludes salaries of teachers, infrastructure etc, since the cost of those items were already absorbed by government decades before the free SHS policy. The analysis is therefore restricted to the free SHS budget as approved by Parliament and expended by the MoE.

It was observed that, in the 2017/18 academic year, parents' spending (GH¢3,074) was 80 per cent higher than the government's (GH¢1,323). In 2018/19, parents' spending (GH¢3,349) increased by 9 per cent while the government's spending (GH¢1,420) increased by 7 per cent, with parents' spending being 81 per cent higher than the government's spending. In the 2019/20 academic year, while parents' spending (GH¢3,649) increased by 9 per cent, the government's spending (GH¢1,105) declined by 22 per cent, resulting in parents' spending being 114 per cent higher than that of the government.

Table 12: Government vs parents' per unit spending on first year students

Year	Govt's per unit spending (GH¢)	Parents' per unit spending (GH¢)	Diff	% (parents over gov't)
2017/18	1,323	3,074	1,751	80%
2018/19	1,420	3,349	1,929	81%
2019/20	1,105	3,649	2,544	107%
2020/21	1,108	4,028	2,920	114%
2021/22	781	4,535	3,754	141%
2022/23	1,706 ¹⁰	6,477	4,771	117%
Average	1,241¹¹	4,185		109%

Source: Field data, 2023

The 2020/21 academic year saw just a 0.3 per cent increase in government's spending compared to 10 per cent increase in parents' spending, with parents' spending being 114 per cent higher than that of the government. The ensuing academic year (2021/22) recorded the lowest government per unit spending of GH¢781, representing a 30 per cent decline over the previous year's spending. Parents' spending, however, increased by 13 per cent, outperforming the government's spending by 141 per cent.

While data on the government's per unit spending for the 2022/23 academic year is not yet available, based on the historical averages in budget execution trends and current school enrolment, this is estimated to be about GH¢1,706, representing a 118 per cent increase over government's spending in the 2021/22 academic year (GH¢781), about 80 per cent lower than parents' spending of GH¢6,477 in that same year.

In sum, averagely, the government's annual per student expenditure under the free SHS policy between the 2017/18 and 2022/23 academic years was GH¢1,241 compared to parents' average per unit spending of GH¢4,185 within the same period. This also suggests that, under the free SHS policy, government absorbs about 23 per cent of the cost previously borne by parents prior to the Policy's introduction in 2017.

The impact of prospectus cost on parents on students' enrollment in SHS/SHTS/TVIs

The free SHS policy has improved access to secondary education by removing aggregate admission cut-offs, expanding infrastructure and absorbing an annual average school fees of about GH¢1,241. Notwithstanding, since Policy inception, every academic year has recorded a significant number of candidates unable to honour their placement due to varied reasons.

¹⁰ Estimated using average budget credibility rate.

¹¹ This average includes the estimated government per unit spending for 2022/23 academic year.

In the 2019/20 academic year, about 62,100 Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE) graduates who were placed in SHS/SHTS and TVIs were unable to enrol, representing 15 per cent of the total number of students placed. In the 2020/21 academic year, the number declined slightly to about 56,300 (11%), but increased to about 68,800 (15%) in 2021/22 as shown in Table 9. The 2022/23 academic year recorded the lowest number (7,487) and percentage (2%) of students placed and not enrolled.

Table 13: Number of BECE graduates placed but not enrolled (2019/20 - 2022/23)

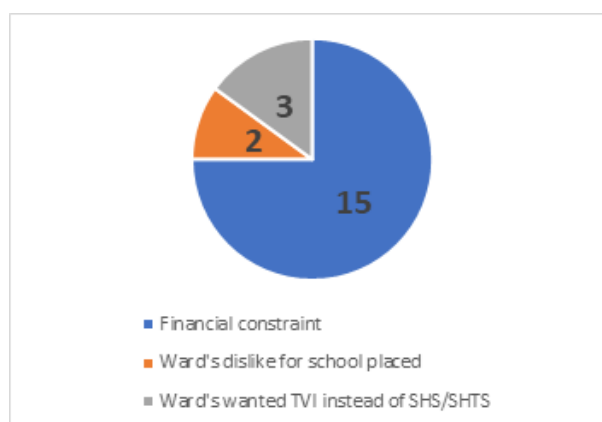
	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
Total Placed	424,224	497,610	473,728	455,701
Total Enrolled	362,075	441,256	404,856	448,214
Total Placed But Not Enrolled	62,149	56,354	68,872	7,487
% Placed But Not Enrolled	15%	11%	15%	2%

Source: Field data, 2023

Even though there is a decline in the number of students who were unable to honour their placement, which is remarkable, the prime reason for thousands not honouring their school placements was a matter of concern to this study.

Pursuant, 20 parents from the Volta, Greater Accra, Ashanti, Northern, Western North, Bono East, Eastern, Upper West, and Central regions whose children could not honour their SHS/SHTS and TVI placements were interviewed to ascertain the reason(s). Of the 20 parents, 15 mentioned financial constraints, two (2) cited their wards' dislike for the schools they were placed in, while the remaining three (3) indicated that their wards were placed in SHS instead of their preferred choice (TVI), as shown in Figure 4

Figure 4: Reasons for candidates not honoring their placements



Source: Field survey, 2023

The following are some relevant case studies:

Case 1: “My child was placed in OLA Girls SHS last year [2022], but I couldn’t afford the cost of the prospectus after enquiring about it. I am a petty trader.”

- Mother of a 2022 BECE graduate – Ho West Municipal

Case 2: “I have twin grandchildren living with me. I managed to look after them through JHS with my meagre pension salary. They were placed in secondary schools last year – one in Awudome SHS, and the other in Kpando Technical Institute. We went for the prospectuses from the schools, but I couldn’t afford them. They are brilliant, but are home because of money. They wash for people to get some money.”

- Grandfather of two 2022 BECE graduates – Ho West Municipal

Case 3: “My son, Emmanuel, completed JHS with an aggregate of 18 and was placed in Nkawie Technical School. That is what I wanted for him – to do a technical programme, specifically electricals. But, unfortunately, we didn’t have the money to buy the items required for his admission as a boarder. The items cost about GH¢3,000. Her mother and I are managing a farm which we use to feed the family. It is not a large-scale farm where we can make enough savings for his secondary education. He is currently home doing nothing. If no help comes through, I am thinking of getting him to learn a trade. It is better than being in the house doing nothing.”

- Father of a 2022 JHS graduate – Bodi District

Case 4: “I wish there is help coming through for my daughter. She had a good grade in the BECE - aggregate 11. She was placed in Agona Swedru SHS. Everything in the prospectus costs so much – from the mattress, torchlight, chop box; and the items were many. The school authorities were to inspect the items on arrival. This meant we had to purchase every item before she could go to school. I don’t think that is the ideal thing the school should be doing. She is home now. We will welcome any help that will come her way to go to school.”

- Father of a 2022 JHS graduate – Assin South District

Case 5: “I am a peasant farmer, and Gabriel’s mother is a petty trader. We managed to see him through JHS until he was placed in Akwatia Technical Institute to do woodwork. He went for the prospectus, and I was shocked by the number of items in it. The 40 or so items are likely to cost us about GH¢3,000. I had been saving to support his secondary education, but the mother and I were able to raise only GH¢900 when it was time for admission. There was a family

emergency, compelling us to use the GH¢900. That is why he is still at home, doing nothing. I have been saving some money hoping we can get him enrolled next [academic] year, yet still we have been unable to raise enough.”

- Father of a 2022 JHS graduate – Sene West District

THE GHANA EDUCATION SERVICE HARMONISED SCHOOL PROSPECTUS

In February 2023, before the beginning of the 2022/23 academic year for secondary school students, some parents of prospective first-year students raised concerns about the tall list of items in the prospectus, and the cost. Eduwatch in response called for a harmonised and moderate prospectus to enable effective coordination of compliance by school heads and ease the cost burden on parents.

The GES in November 2023 released a harmonised school prospectus for all public secondary for the 2023/24 academic year. This was developed in consultation with the Conference of Heads of Assisted Secondary Schools.

A market research conducted by Eduwatch at the Madina market on 16th and 17th November 2023 revealed that at least GH¢2,100 was required to purchase all items in the prospectus compared to GH¢2,477 in the previous (2022/23) academic year.

While this is commendable as it brings some relief to parents, it is without doubt that the GH¢2,100 will still be a burden for some parents, especially those from households in the first and second wealth quintiles whose annual expenditures are GH¢5,168 and GH¢8,250 respectively.

Even within the annual average expenditures of the lowest quantiles (first and second), about 40 per cent of the household expenditure is spent on food, with 15 per cent going into housing. This leaves only 45 per cent of the household expenditure for sharing among education, health, water and sanitation, clothing and other socio-economic essentials.¹² Since the prospective student is not the only member of the household, parents will still find it burdensome to afford a harmonised prospectus that costs about GH¢2,100 bearing in mind that there are higher non-prospectus costs of secondary education borne by parents.

An analysis of the cost of secondary education in the poorest households gives credence to the need to increase government expenditure on students from poor households under the free SHS policy. In the face of limited resources, this could only be done by targeting.

¹² Ghana Statistical Service. 2019. Ghana Living Standard Survey 7.

CONCLUSION

In September 2017, Ghana introduced a fee-free senior secondary school policy, following other pacesetters like Kenya, Rwanda, Uganda and South Africa. By the end of the 2022/23 academic year, the Policy had benefited 5.7 million children, increasing enrolment by about 50 per cent.

Between the 2017 and 2023 academic years, a total of GH¢12.88 billion was allocated to the Policy with GH¢5.3 billion expended between 2017 and 2021. The government's annual per student spending under the Policy averaged GH¢1,241 representing 23 per cent of the total per unit SHS expenditure per annum, while parents contributed the remaining GH¢4,185, representing 77 per cent of the cost, suggesting that, the Policy has taken off about a quarter of the financial burden previously borne by parents prior to its introduction. This still remains very significant, with the potential of denying poor children access to secondary education.

Between the 2019/20 and 2022/23 academic years, about 194,862 candidates who were placed in secondary schools were unable to honour their admission at first instance, with cost barriers being the major factor. The high cost associated with boarding education for both the government and parents is a major contributing factor to poor parents' inability to enrol their wards even after being placed in secondary schools.

To achieve the objective of equitable access under the free SHS policy, it is evident from the case studies compiled that, parents from low-income households require more support to enable them to see their wards throughout secondary school.


RECOMMENDATIONS

1. In the short-term, the MoE must target the Policy at children from poorest households using data from the LEAP programme as a point of entry. Under the LEAP programme, the government currently has a database of over 346,019 poor households across the country based on which cash grants are dispensed bi-monthly as stipends. This will enable the government to spend more to cover the full cost of secondary education for students from the lower income quintiles/households, compared to those from the upper income quintiles.
2. In the medium- to long-term, the MoE must develop and implement a strategy to gradually transition Ghana's secondary education system from the current boarding-as-a-norm to a day-as-a-norm. Free boarding secondary education should be reserved strategically for students in underserved communities where there is no reasonable access to a secondary school. However, those willing to access boarding secondary education as a matter of choice must pay for its full cost.
3. The MoF must improve the disbursement of funds under the Policy. The timely availability of funds to procure items that were previously 'smuggled' into or charged behind prospectuses, is critical to sustain compliance with the current moderate, harmonised prospectus. This will also improve the availability of adequate foodstuff in schools to reduce the financial burden on parents who supply food 'provisions' at an extra cost to their wards in school.

Appendix I – List of schools prospectuses were obtained from

Name	Region	Category
Achimota SHS	Greater Accra	A
St. Francis Girls	Upper West	A
Ghana SHS Tamale	Norther	A
St. Augustine SHS	Central	A
Bishop Herman College	Volta	A
Kajaji SHS	Bono East	B
Wa SHS	Upper West	B
Anlo SHS	Volta	B
Savior SHS	Eastern	B
Awudome SHS	Volta	B
New Juaben SHS	Eastern	B
Manaya Krobo SHS	Eastern	B
Savelugu SHS	Northern	C
Northern Sch of Business	Northern	C
Ejisuman SHS	Ashanti	C
Worawora Senior High	Oti	C
Kpando Tech. Inst.	Volta	A
Kikam Tech. Inst.	Western	A
Tamale Tech. Inst.	Northern	C
St. Mary's Voc./Tech. Inst.	Eastern	C

Financial Burden Analysis of the free SHS Policy and Implications on Equitable Access

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