

A Demi-Decade of Ghana's Free Senior High School Policy Implementation: Evaluating the 'Pillars' of the Policy

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Executive Summary / Abstract

To fulfill Sustainable Development Goal 4.1 (SDG 4.1), (Angeles et al., 2022) stated that all students must complete free, equitable, high-quality primary and secondary education that results in relevant and effective learning outcomes. SDG 4.1 is a requirement of Ghana's 1992 constitution article 25(1) (b), which mandated the New Patriotic Party (NPP) government to implement the Free SHS Policy in 2017. The policy has continued for half a decade, with over 1.2 million Ghanaian Senior High School students benefiting since its implementation in 2017. The policy is anchored on what the policy document refers to as 'Pillars,' which are removing cost barriers, expanding infrastructure, improving quality and equity, and developing employable skills. This evaluation exercise provided a thorough examination of the Free SHS Policy's 'pillars' using the analysis of existing documents approach and qualitative interviews to understand the eligibility criteria, the impact of the policy, and what needs to be maintained or changed, as well as making recommendations for the policy implementers. The evaluator interviewed key stakeholders, such as beneficiary students, beneficiary parents, head teachers, teachers, and teacher union executives, to answer the evaluation questions. Some of the key findings of the policy include inadequate consultations of stakeholders of Ghana's education, an increase in enrolment, removal of cost barriers on parents, inadequate infrastructure, financial difficulties placed on the economy of Ghana due to the implementation of the policy, and a high percentage call for review of the policy. The evaluation activity recommends equal priority to all policy aspects and a review of the policy to involve all stakeholders. The passing of a law to protect the policy from political interference, the government ensuring subventions are made quickly to the head teachers, introducing public-private partnerships (PPP), and securing other funding sources to run the Free SHS Policy.

Keywords: Free Senior High School Policy; Equity; Access; Quality, Cost barriers; Infrastructure.

DOI: 10.7176/JEP/14-36-01

Publication date: December 31st 2023

1. Introduction

Ghana's education system has undergone several policy changes to boost enrollment and student achievement and produce graduates who can meet the changing demands of the local and international job markets. These educational reforms cover all levels of the academic ladder in Ghana. According to Akyeampong (2009), over the years, educational policies such as Free Compulsory Universal Basic Education (FCUBE), Capitation Grants, and School Feeding Programs (SFP) have been implemented in Ghana. Alloush (2010) also believes governments worldwide have attempted to enact policies to reduce costs associated with education. In 2017, the Ghana government decided to fully implement Sustainable Development Goal 4.1 (SDG 4.1-quality education) by enacting the Free Senior High School Policy, which is cited in Ghana's Article 25(1)(b) of the 1992 constitution, stating that "Secondary Education in its different forms, including technical and vocational education, shall be made generally available and accessible to all by every appropriate means, and in particular by the progressive introduction of free education. According to the Ghana Education Service in 2017, The Free Senior High School Policy is anchored on what the policy refers to as "pillars," which are **removing cost barriers, expanding infrastructure, improving quality and equity, and developing employable skills**. Since the introduction of the Free Senior High School (Free SHS) education policy in Ghana in September 2017 by the presidential administration of Nana Akufo-Addo, the Free SHS policy has been in continuous existence for half a decade. As a historical policy in Ghana's educational system, many researchers, educationists, politicians, and policy analysts have focused on assessing the Free Senior High School (Free SHS) policy. The assessment has determined how implementing the Free SHS policy has affected Ghana's education, parents, students, and economy. To contribute to making the Free Senior High School (Free SHS) achieve its set objectives, evaluating all the "Pillars" using an in-depth evaluation exercise will help inform the policymakers and implementers of the achievements, needs, and changes required for the policy to run smoothly.

The Ghana Education Service states, "By Free Senior High School, the policy seeks to free tuition, admission, textbooks, the library, science center, computer, examination, utilities, boarding, and meals." The Free SHS policy removes cost barriers through the government of Ghana, absorbing fees approved by the Ghana Education Service Council. All Ghanaian children placed in a public senior high school through the

Computerized School Selection and Placement System (CSSPS – computer selection process aimed at removing human interference in the placement approach) during the 2017 school placement qualify to benefit the free senior high school. Fees for meals, which include three meals for boarding students (GHC 4 per day) and a hot meal for day students (GHC 1.60 per day), are also covered by the policy. Parents-Teachers Association (PTA) Dues of 20 Ghana Cedis per year form part of the government's payments to replace the portion of PTA dues dedicated towards teachers' motivation. According to the Policy Document 2018, found on the Free SHS Website, other items taken care of by the government include exercise books for students, PE kits, notebooks, technical drawing instruments, supplementary readers, textbooks, school clothes, school uniforms, and house dresses. Students who meet the requirements must print their placement form and go to the designated school for admission. The school principals then use the Student Information System (SIS) to verify student enrollment for acceptance. Policy managers use the Student Information System platform to allocate funds and other resources to the schools depending on the enrolment of students in a specific school. The Ministry of Education, supported by the Ghana Education Service, and the Free SHS Secretariat are the managers of the policy, with the District Directors and Principals or Headteachers of the high schools serving as the leading implementers of the policy. The national and regional coordinators and the Free SHS staff form the Free SHS secretariat members. The functions of the secretariat include management, collaboration, advisory, and procurement. The Headteachers or Principals of the senior high schools are the principal managers of the day-to-day affairs of the senior high schools under the policy's guidelines.

The Free SHS Policy is vital to all Ghanaians in and outside the country as a national policy. The Ministry of Education, Ghana Education Service, Ministry of Finance, Parents, Students, District Directors of Education, Headteachers, Parent Teacher Associations (PTA), Teacher Unions, and Religious Organizations are some key stakeholders in Ghana's Free Senior High Policy. Religious groups established many of Ghana's government senior high schools, which the government later took over. The Ghana Education Service implements and monitors all policies and educational issues. In Ghana, teacher unions have tremendous input in developing educational matters, as they are the body that houses all teachers and makes a collective academic contribution. Parents, students, and direct and indirect caregivers are key policy stakeholders because they stand to gain the most from implementing the Free SHS Policy by easing the financial burden on them. The primary goal of the Free SHS Policy is to remove the element of cost as a barrier to high school education and bring high school education to the doorstep of the Ghanaian child. "Education and skills training are the most important sources of empowering and providing opportunities to the youth to help drive Ghana's development and, in the process, create jobs" (freeshs.gov.gh, 2023). According to the implementers of the Free SHS policy, the objectives to accomplish the Free SHS Policy goals are:

1. "Remove Cost Barriers through the absorption of fees approved by the Ghana Education Service (GES) Council.
2. Expand physical school infrastructure and facilities to accommodate the expected increase in enrollment.
3. Improve quality by providing core textbooks, supplementary readers, teacher rationalization, and deployment.
4. Improve equity by implementing 30% of places in elite schools for public Junior High school students.
5. Prioritize and program support reform of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) institutions at the senior high level to facilitate skills acquisition." (freeshs.gov.gh, 2023).

The three core principles of the Free SHS policy—access, equity, and equality, fulfill the UN's updated SDG for education, where member nations integrate those principles into their educational systems to provide students with relevant learning experiences. Despite the issue with infrastructure expansion to accommodate students and other financial constraints on the part of the Government of Ghana, President Nana Akufo-Addo declared that the inequality in Senior High School education was unacceptable; hence, He sought to close the enrollment gap and ensure equitable access to SHS education through the Free SHS Policy.

2. Relevant Literature Review

2.1 Senior High School Funding

Without secondary school education, students have limited chances to improve their lives, and lack of education retard the World's advancements. According to Guilherme (2016), the Education for All (EFA) movement, developed by the United Nations (UN) and formally supported by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), aims to give all children access to elementary education and decrease adult illiteracy. SDG 4 encapsulates the "Education 2030" agenda and clearly articulates UNESCO's goals. The main objective of this agenda is to change lives through education by offering free and required primary education at the secondary level (Barrett, 2017; UNESCO, 2015). Atchison et al. (2017) and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (2012) (OECD) found that many free education policies give students access to schools after conducting their research on school funding policies across OECD nations. However, the

educational system's inequalities hinder underprivileged students' opportunities. According to the authors, merely leveling the playing field is not the solution, and states must strive for equity in educational opportunities by meeting the needs of diverse students and schools. The emphasis on equity must take note of the various contributing factors, such as gender, school system, physical and learning disabilities, and socioeconomic status, that stifle students' aspirations for higher education. Dalrymple's (2016) research study examining the educational funding plans of OECD members as part of a study to improve equity in education systems revealed that funding plans typically need to address important questions about equity or equal access to quality found in them. According to Finch (1984), in addressing inclusive access and lessening the household burden, England implemented the 1944 Acts for secondary education following the war for secondary education, with the primary objective of rectifying the system's lingering disparities. Between 1913 and 1937, the percentage of "free places" in grammar schools in England and Wales increased from about a third to almost half. Finch (1984) further outlined some unsettling effects of these practices. According to him, parents frequently had to decline free spots offered to less fortunate children because of the added expenses for necessary educational supplies. Therefore, poorer households still need help when education is advertised as free since it is not.

In addition to being laboriously changed throughout time, senior high school education financing in Ghana has also seen a variety of government policy initiatives (Offei, 2018). Previously, Ghana's senior high school financing program categorized northern and southern regions into two different groups with different benefits. The former benefited from the Northern Grant (which covered tuition, food, and accommodation), and the latter shared costs with the government (Koramoah, 2016). Prempeh (2018), in a study, found that many junior high schools (JHS) graduates could not transfer from junior high schools to senior high schools despite the partial reduction of expenses with the Northern Grant and the Share Costs funding policy for the Southern. The Northern Grant and the Shared Cost enjoyed by the Northern and Southern sector junior high school students were less accessible than assumed, just as in England's 1944 Acts for Secondary Education.

2.2 Equity in Senior High School Education

All school-going students should have access to educational resources needed to learn the fundamentals of education, such as reading, writing, and simple math, to serve as the basis for equity in education. Equity in education improves economic progress and individuals' educational performance in society, and worldwide national economic progress becomes slowed by educational inequality (Amadeo & Boyle, 2021).

To learn more about teachers' opinions on equality in the distribution of educational advantages to children in their classrooms across schools, Arvin (2009) conducted qualitative interviews with teachers in Chicago, USA. The majority of participants agreed that equity should take into account each student's requirements across all schools. The report reiterated that different financing schemes need varied financial resources since teaching approaches differ between schools. The respondent teachers emphasized how other schools and kids should have different input needs, including money, instructors, infrastructure, teaching materials, instructional environments, technology, and teacher support while ensuring all students can access these possibilities. Ford (2016) indicated from interview responses from some Directors and School leaders in the US National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS) that for inequity to be out of the educational system, stakeholders must consider the background of all students by focusing on the racial, ethnic, and economic diverse students. The study attests to the need to move the diversity among students and schools' policies toward more equitable approaches and practices. The overarching objective of the Ghanaian Ministry of Education is to see all Ghanaians attain high-quality education, especially the most disadvantaged, and acquire the needed skills to be productive members of society (Mensah, 2020). The ideas of Access, Equity, and Quality were the focus of the Free Senior High School logo's introduction. The free senior high school intends to provide secondary education access in Ghana, promote equity in the secondary schooling system, and, most importantly, accomplish worldwide emphasis on quality learning in senior high schools. Addae et al. (2019) findings of a study on the Free SHS Policy highlight that funding Free SHS effectively will result in more pupils attending school than under prior funding plans. Secondary schools in Ghana are still primarily divided into A, B, and C categories (where A and B are more reasonably resourced than C), depending on whether they are single-sex or mixed, and day or day/boarding schools, which are the same under previous senior high school policies. This categorization gives rise to injustices that will widen the achievement discrepancies between students in schools with fewer and more resources (Amedome & Fiagbe, 2013). In Ghana, the advantage of a policy on meal and lodging costs depends on the student's status as a day or boarding student. Due to the lack of adequate criteria for who qualifies as a day student and boarding student, high school placement may be unjust to day students and raises equality issues.

Table 1. A Logic Model of the Evaluation Process

Logic Model: Free Senior High School Policy in Ghana.					
Inputs	Activities	Outputs	Short-Term Outcomes Year 1 -2	Mid-Term Outcomes Year 2 -4	Long-Term Outcomes Year 3 beyond
Government of Ghana funding. Supervision Role: Ministry of Education. Ghana Education Service. Regional and District coordinators. Conference of Heads of Secondary Schools (CHASS). Feeding: Ghana Buffer Stock Market.	Removal of cost barriers	Cost-free High School Education.	Absorption and payment of approved GES Council fees by the government.	Removing all high school cost barriers for students and parents.	Increase in the number of students accessing Senior High School education.
	Expansion of infrastructure	Modern and standard Senior High School infrastructure development.	Provision of classrooms to accommodate the expected increase in Senior High School students.	Building and provision of Community Day Senior High Schools, dormitories, and laboratories.	Availability of physical school infrastructure and facilities in all Senior High Schools.
	Improvement in Quality and Equity	Quality and equal Senior High School education.	Provision of core textbooks and supplementary readers.	Deployment and rationalization of high School teachers.	All high school students receive quality and equal Senior High School education.
	Development of Employable Skills	Technical, Vocational Education and Training. (TVET)	Building more Technical and Vocational Senior High Schools.	Increase TVET enrolment.	Improve the competitiveness of Ghanaian Students to match the best in the World.







(Source: Evaluators creation, 2023)

2.3 Evaluation Questions

The foundation of this evaluation activity, which seeks to evaluate the Free SHS policy in Ghana senior high school education, is based on the evaluation questions below.

1. What are the processes for determining students' eligibility for the Free Senior High School policy?
2. How has the implementation of the Free Senior High School Policy impacted the "Pillars" of the policy, particularly among students from low-income families?
3. What component(s) of the Free Senior High School policy must be maintained, improved, or discarded?

Table 2. A Crosswalk of Data Collection Models and Sources

Evaluation Question	Type of question	Data collection procedure						Respondent(s) source(s)
		Questionnaires, surveys, Surveys, Checklists	Interviews	Observation	Documentation Review	Focus Groups	Case Studies	
Evaluation Question 1	exploratory							Principals, District Directors of Education, teachers, and policy documents
Evaluation Question 2	explanatory							The same respondents for Question 1
Evaluation Question 3	Descriptive							The same respondents for Question 1

(Source: Evaluators creation, 2023)

3. Data Collection and Analysis

3.1 Data Collection

The essential data collection approach used for the collection of data to answer the evaluation questions was mainly through stakeholder interviews, policy documents, and published documents on issues related to the Free SHS Policy since its implementation. The evaluator read the interview transcripts several times and organized the responses under themes. Together with the information gathered from the secondary data sources, the evaluator examined how the primary and the secondary data answered the postulated evaluation questions. The interview consisted of interviewing stakeholders of the policy who implement the policy and those who benefit from the policy, such as students and parents, using open-ended interview instruments designed for this purpose. The policy and published documents served as additional secondary data sources to answer the evaluation questions, as many published documents provide much information on the policy.

4. Findings

4.1 What are the processes for determining students' eligibility for the Free Senior High School policy?

According to the Free SHS policy documents, all Ghanaian students seeking senior high school education must benefit from the Free SHS policy. Students must get admitted to a public senior high school through the Computerized School Selection and Placement System (CSSPS) to benefit from the policy. Again, a benefited student must attain a passing mark of not more than an aggregate of 48, as agreed by the Ghana Education Service Council, to get admitted into the senior high schools where the CSSPS placed the student (freeshs.gov.gh). In Ghana, government and private institutions provide senior high school education, and students who opt to attend private senior high school institutions do not benefit from the policy. Foreigners who are not permanent residents seeking high school education in a government institution are to pay for all expenses of their education. Students who repeat their class level and those re-entering into government senior high schools and technical and vocational schools are also not eligible to enjoy the policy's benefits (freeshs.gov.gh). Before implementing the Free SHS program, aggregate 25 was the cutoff point for students who took part in the Basic Education Certificate Examination for junior high school candidates to gain entrance to senior high schools. The Free SHS policy implementation eliminated the cutoff point of aggregate 25 to allow more students

who scored 26 to 48 to gain admission to senior high school and TVET institutions. Students who do not score between aggregate 6 and 48 can sit for a private examination to retake the test or enroll in a final year in junior high school to prepare and retake the Basic Education Certificate Examination. The processes for determining the eligibility of qualifying students for the Free SHS Policy have brought sanity to the admission processes in senior high schools in Ghana. On the positive side, Principals of senior high schools currently do not have the autonomy to admit students into their institutions. Now, Principals of senior high schools can admit students based on a protocol admission for students in sports and exceptional cases by submitting such students' names to the CSSPS for consideration and placement. The placement method has reduced favoritism on the grounds of "whom you know, and the higher bidder wins," where parents pay bribes to headteachers of senior high schools for their wards to gain admission. Many principals of senior high schools and parents are satisfied with the eligibility criteria for placing students into senior high schools, as others see the process as not involving key stakeholders. Two Senior High School Principals interviewed noted that:

For now, the eligibility procedure is straightforward and well explained to parents and students to follow in admission to senior high schools. The task is on students to score the pass mark from the BECE to make them eligible to be placed in a senior high school by the CSSPS. As a headteacher, I only admit students received from the CSSPS, and I only check the Student Information System (SIS) to confirm students placed in my school. As school principals, we no longer have the right to determine students' placement on a day or boarding admission basis. Parents and students decide on the day or boarding option when filling out the school placement form in their junior high schools before writing the BECE examination. The information provided is what the CSSPS uses in making individual placement decisions. Though there are some placement errors, such placement errors are insignificant in most cases (Respondent #5, Field Interview, 2023).

Over the years, the government has not involved Teachers and Headteachers in planning and adopting educational policies. The government typically consults the leaders of the Teacher Unions, and we Headteachers are only to implement. Headteachers of senior high schools were not consulted on the eligibility criteria that must determine a place for BECE students who obtained passing marks into our senior high Schools. We did not play a specific role in deciding the eligibility criteria. We are here to manage the school and the policy decisions communicated to us. We had no engagement before adopting the policy (Respondent #6, Field Interview, 2023).

The Free SHS Policy does not discriminate between those students whose parents can or cannot pay for their children's senior high school education because there are no distinctions and clear guidelines in the policy. The policy also benefits students whose parents can afford their senior high school education. A parent interviewed stated:

The placement is done based on the BECE scores of the individual students and the information provided during the registration process. I do not understand why students who passed the BECE but decided to attend private institutions do not benefit from the policy. Are they also not Ghanaians whose parents pay taxes? How can the policy help the rich people who can pay their wards' fees? These are questions about the eligibility criteria that I do not understand. The government must review the eligibility criteria again to include private institution students (Respondent #3, Field Interview, 2023).

The insufficient stakeholder consultation during the Free SHS Policy implementation is what Mohammed and Kuyini's (2021) study revealed. The study highlighted that stakeholders of the Free SHS did not make the needed consultations to include senior high schools and TVET institutions in designing the policy.

4.2 How has the implementation of the Free Senior High School Policy impacted the "Pillars" of the policy, particularly among students from low-income families?

The five Pillars governing the Free SHS policy include the removal of cost barriers, expansion of infrastructure, improvement in quality and equity, and developing of employable Skills. Figure 1 (Free SHS Logo) summarizes the core pillars of the free SHS policy.



(Source, Ministry of Education, 2018)

Figure 1. Free SHS Policy Logo

4.2.1 Removal of Cost Barriers

The removal of cost barriers means the absorption of all fees approved by the Ghana Education Service Council to be paid by the government. The government's absorbed fees include admission fees, tuition, textbooks, library, science center, computer lab usage, all examinations, utilities, boarding fees, meals, and PTA levy for every senior high school child. The absorption of the stated fees means that the government needs to allocate a considerable budget to the Education Ministry to support the Free SHS Policy. In an interview with the Education Minister of Ghana on how much the government is spending on the Free Senior High School Policy, the conversation below ensued:

Host: Regarding the matter of Free SHS, thus far, per the budget that the Finance Minister read, we have spent a little over GHC 3 billion on the flagship program Free SHS. Three years after running it, should we begin to look at how we fund it, and the matter of 'Means Testing' that was suggested a couple of years ago for the effective run of it, considering that if you look at the budget, 35% of the revenue we are to supposed to generate will go into interest payments, another 30% into payment of salaries. Should we begin to share the burden of free SHS?

Education minister: What are you using for means testing? You brought it up, so you may have some suggestions. What I know in this country is that my brother, who is a plantain farmer, makes more money than the Chief Director of the Ministry of Education, but if we use means testing with Income taxes, the Chief director of the Ministry of Education will have to pay school fees for his children.

Host: No! That is not what I am saying. I am referencing the budget and the fiscal difficulties.

Education minister: The Budget, the budget, the fiscal difficulties- Despite all this, Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo Addo has done the impossible for this nation. Amid the Pandemic, Money is still going to schools. During the pandemic, children are in school and fed every day. Do you remember the Northern school feeding grant program before Free SHS? Did you hear how often Headmasters threatened to shut down schools because money was not coming? (Starrfm.com.gh, 2021).

The Educational Minister indicates that the government is committed to providing the needed budget to sustain the Free SHS Policy. On the floor of Ghana's parliament Budget review in 2021, the finance minister outlined the amount of money pumped into the Free SHS policy.

Mr. Speaker, the government has taken no loan to finance the Free SHS policy specifically. Since its inception, its funding has come through the Annual Budget Funding Amount (ABFA) and the Government of Ghana (GoG) funding source. During the past five years, the government allocated GH¢7.62 billion to implement the Free Senior High School (SHS) program. GH¢4.18 billion, out of the amount representing 54.76 percent, was sourced from the GoG, while the remaining GH¢3.44 billion, representing 45.24 percent, came from ABFA (ganaeducation.org, 2021)

The government allocation of funds to support the FSH School policy means that students, parents, and caretakers of senior high school students will not have cost as a barrier that will prevent the students from having senior high school education. When asked for views about removing the cost barrier on parents, a respondent parent indicated:

Yes, suppose I compare the financial expenses of my elderly children's senior high school education to that of my son, who is in his final year in senior high school under the Free SHS policy. In that case, implementing the Free SHS has removed the cost barrier, but not in totality, though, because there are other things I need to spend money to buy for my son (Respondent #2, Field Interview, 2023).

Though there is evidence of budget allocations to remove cost barriers toward high school education in Ghana, other evidence shows delays in distributing funds for senior high schools. For instance, school administrators noticed a delay in money delivery to schools in some semesters since the inception of the Free SHS policy. The delay in the disbursement of money is "creating serious financial challenges for Senior High Schools," as cited in a letter from the Coalition of Heads of Assisted Secondary Schools (CHASS), an association of principals of senior high schools in Ghana, on May 28, 2018, headlined "Delayed payment of third term (2017/2018) Free SHS grant to Senior High Schools" (Yanney, 2018, p. 9). The subventions for running Free SHS are not received early. Thus, we struggle significantly to manage the school, a school Principal also stated during the interview (Respondent #5, Field Interview, 2023).

4.2.2 Expansion of infrastructure

Expanding the infrastructure pillar of the Free SHS policy means the government provides physical infrastructure facilities to all senior high schools to accommodate all students and teachers in the expected increase in enrollment. The government of Ghana under the Progressive Free Senior High School (PFSHS) in 2015, in agreement with the World Bank, commissioned community day SHS infrastructure known as the "E-Blocks." The Community Day SHS Project is a collaboration between the Ghanaian government and the World Bank to build and upgrade school facilities as part of the Ghana Secondary Education Improvement Project (SEIP) (World Bank, 2014). Although the current government indicated its commitment to continue the E-Block project to accommodate the expected increase in enrollment, by the start of the second year of implementation, enrollment had quickly outpaced the number of available classrooms to hold students, placing considerable pressure on the government to provide classroom blocks and desks for the populated students. The shortage of infrastructure is evident in the findings of a study conducted by (Opoku Prempeh, 2019), indicating that in 2017, the Ghana Education Service was able to provide senior high schools with a total available seat of 290,737 instead of 472,730 seats needed in all senior high schools in the country creating a gap of 181,993. Shortage of infrastructure to accommodate the increasing enrollment of the students may be due to a lack of planning and haste implementation of a political campaign promise to Ghanaians. An educationist who is also a member of a District Teacher Union Executive noted:

It has resulted in several infrastructure issues. There is not much space for students to study. Before the government established the policy, if the government had contacted us educators, we could have offered a lot of thoughts and comments towards the policy and the arising issues on infrastructure. From what I can recall, the executives of teacher unions tried to provide input when the government later called the teachers' unions to discuss how the policy would operate. However, the policymakers did not consider these Teacher Unions' inputs because the government had already decided what to implement and did not want to make any changes despite our recommendations (Respondent #7, Field Interview, 2023).

In finding solutions to the infrastructure problems faced by implementing the Free SHS due to the increasing enrollment, the government 2018 introduced the Double Track System in 2018. The Double Track System was an intervention to allow the schools to accommodate more students with the same available facilities to reduce overcrowding.

Ghana joins countries like the USA, Japan, China, Australia, Brazil, France, and Costa Rica to adopt the Double Track System, known as Year-Round Education (YRE). The Ghana Education Service adopted the Double Track System because of the 'No qualified child should be left behind' policy. In 2018 projections, there is a need to create 181,993 extra spaces to accommodate the high number of students projected to enroll in senior high schools in the 2018/19 academic year. The Double-track School Calendar is an innovative intervention that will create room to accommodate the projected increase in enrolment (<http://freeshs.gov.gh/>).

The president of Ghana, Nana Addo Dankwa, at the United Nations General Assembly in 2019, outlined his government's contribution towards solving the infrastructure deficit hitting senior high school education in Ghana. He stated:

Over 900 structures are constructed in senior high schools nationwide, comprising classrooms, dining halls, assembly halls, sanitary facilities, and dormitories to confront the inherent challenges of implementing the Free SHS Policy. We are also providing a total of thousand hundred and ninety (1,190) vehicles, made up of three hundred and fifty (350) buses and eight hundred and forty (840) pickups, to senior high schools in various areas of the country (<http://freeshs.gov.gh/index.php/projects/>).

The Ghana Education Trust fund (GETFund) oversees infrastructure developments in various schools, including senior high schools. Despite the numerous projects embarked on by the GETFund, funding allocation to

GETFund to function efficiently is reduced yearly. The financial challenge of GETFund is evident in a recent petition made by African Education Watch (an Education Policy Research and Advocacy Organization) to the Parliament of Ghana to reject the allocation of GH¢1.8 billion made to GETFund in the 2023 budget as a result of budget capping. Although the Double Track system was to reduce overcrowding of students in senior high schools, reducing the funds allocated to GETFund is also an issue of concern for infrastructural development. (Source: <https://africaeducationwatch.org/> 2023).

Table 3. GETFund Accruals and Allocations for Capping from 2019 to 2023

YEAR	LEVY ACCRUAL (GHC)	BUDGETARY ALLOCATION(GHC)	% OF ACCRUAL BUDGETED
2019	1.8 Billion	1.2 Billion	66%
2020	2.0 Billion	1.2 Billion	60%
2021	2.3 Billion	1.4 Billion	60%
2022	3.2 Billion	2.6 Billion	81%
		Reviewed to 1.8 Billion	56%
2023	4.6 Billion	1.8 Billion	39%
TOTAL	13.9 Billion	8.2 Billion	Loss = 5.7 %

(Source, <https://africaeducationwatch.org/> 2023)

4.2.3 Improvement in Quality and Equity

Under the Free SHS Policy, improving the quality of senior high school education in Ghana means providing students' needs, teacher rationalization, and deployment. Schindler et al. (2015) refer to quality as a transformational process through which services such as teaching and learning benefit students' emotive, cognitive, and psychomotor domains. To satisfy the requirements of both the individual and the greater community, quality education is a way of achieving desired formal educational goals. The quality of the Free SHS Policy can be measured adequately using students' performance in the West African Senior Secondary Certificate Examination (WASSCE), which measures the performance of senior high school students and their placement into tertiary institutions. In Ghana, all senior high school students study English, Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies as their core subjects, and performance in these subjects impacts the students' tertiary placements. The tertiary Education Qualifying Grades (TEQG) for these subjects are A1 to C6 in order of scores obtained. High school students who score below C6 must retake these subjects and pass before getting admission to Ghana's tertiary institutions.

Table 4. WASSCE Candidates' Performance in Core Subjects for Free SHS Policy Beneficiaries and Non-Beneficiaries.

Year	Pre-Free SHS Policy Beneficiaries			Free SHS Policy Beneficiaries	
	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Total Candidates	289,207	316,999	347,098	375,737	446,3
% of candidates scoring TEQG (A1-A6) in English Language	54.06	46.91	48.96	57.34	54.08
% of candidates scoring TEQG (A1-A6) in Mathematics	42.73	38.33	65.31	65.71	54.11
% of candidates scoring TEQG (A1-A6) in Integrated Science	43.66	50.52	63.17	52.53	65.70
% of candidates scoring TEQG (A1-A6) in Social Studies	52.25	73.27	75.43	64.71	66.03
Average TEQG (A1-A6) For core subjects	48.18	52.26	63.22	60.07	59.98

(Source: The West African Examination Council, 2023)

The table above shows an increase in the percentage of students' performance in individual subjects from 2020 to 2021, representing the first two years of beneficiaries of the Free SHS policy. 2019, which forms part of the Progressive Free Senior High School (PFSHS) before introducing the Free SHS policy, has an average Tertiary Education Qualifying Grade of 60.07%, the highest average score measured over the years. Many educators and educational analysts attributed this average score to the four-year senior high school attendance duration under the Progressive Free Senior High School before Free SHS in 2017.

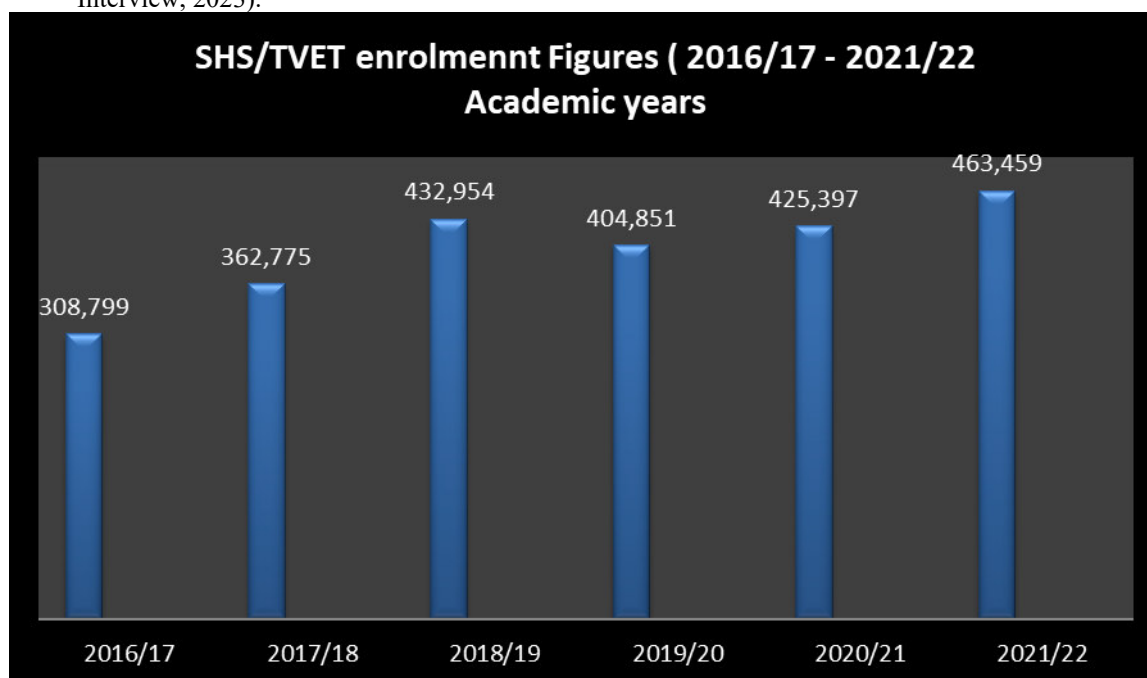
Students' performance in WASSCE will continue to be a significant yardstick to measure the quality of any educational policy implemented at the senior high school level. A parent indicated that.

We are looking for quality and not just quantity. If we put more students in senior secondary schools and do not pay more attention to the quality of education given to them, then we are not doing any good to the future of this country. Senior high schools should not only make students pass WASSCE and get admission to universities but also have skills that will make them enter the job market to do something

for themselves. Let us not forget that tertiary education in Ghana is not free, so if students pass WASSCE and cannot afford tertiary education, then what happens? Our senior high school education must focus on practical skills to prepare the students for taking up jobs or doing something for themselves (Respondent #2, Field Interview, 2023).

TVET is very important to every developing country like Ghana as it produces individuals with the needed technical and vocational skills to create businesses and employ many citizens to promote industrialization.

As a senior high school head teacher, I would say it is too early to conclude that the quality of Free SHS education is low. Quality is measured with empirical evidence and not by assertions without empirical evidence backing it. Over 1.2 million students benefit from the policy, which is remarkable in our education as a developing country. Yes, we need improvement, but the performance of students in WASSCE, teachers posted to various schools, and critics cannot overlook the infrastructural developments in senior high schools since implementing the Free SHS Policy. One of the key objectives of the Free SHS is to make the senior high school education dream for every Ghanaian a reality, and it is on course. The enrollment figures have shot up over the years. (Respondent #5, Field Interview, 2023).



(Source: The West African Examination Council, 2023)

Figure 2. High school enrolment in Ghana from 2016/2017 to 2121/2022 academic years.

The chart above shows a tremendous increase in student enrollment in senior high schools in Ghana since the introduction of the Free SHS Policy in the 2017/18 academic year. The enrollment increase is because senior high school education is currently free. As the Free SHS is cost-free and the population increases, there will be an increase in the enrolment rate of students in senior high schools. It is prudent for the government to examine the policy's equity aspect critically. On the equity issue, a beneficiary student stated:

If the government treats us equally, why should some of us be given day school options while others enjoy boarding school? I did well in the WASSCE examination but did not get into a school of my choice. The CSSPS placed me in a day school instead of a boarding school. Even the boarding students enjoy three meals daily, and the day students are given only one meal daily. Senior high school students in Ghana do not receive equal treatment. Class A and B schools have more classrooms and enjoy more beautiful classrooms, dormitories, and assembly halls than students in class C schools. I can give you examples of many Accra and Cape Coast schools. (Respondent #1, Field Interview, 2023).

These findings agree with that of Amedome and Fiagbe (2013), stating that the categorization of senior high schools gives rise to injustices that will widen the achievement discrepancies between students in schools with fewer and more resources. Ibrahim (2018) indicated that free SHS resources and quality are not the same across schools, as category A schools are more resourced than other categories. According to Atchison et al. (2017), resource inequality may further expand achievement inequalities among students, harming the marginalized poor, many of whose children attend category C schools.

Providing core textbooks and supplementary readers to all senior high school students is the heart of the quality and equity pillar of the Free SHS Policy. Since the policy's inception, there has been an increase in the

number of teachers teaching in senior high schools in the country due to the rise in enrollment due to the help of the Double Track System. There are pieces of evidence of students supplied with test books and readers in their various schools as part of the policy implementation. In an interview with the Deputy Educational minister in charge of Quality and Access on the accusations that senior high school students have not received their core subjects' textbooks, the minister responded by saying:

Students have received English, Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies textbooks.

We have also provided all libraries in all 722 of our schools with various quantities of textbooks on elective subjects. We are currently distributing science laboratory equipment to over 180 of our schools that are deficient in lab equipment and chemicals (Source, <https://www.myjoyonline.com/>).

Table 5. SHS calendar for Single and Double Track Systems.

First Semester				Second Semester		
SHS 3	81 teaching days	Vacation		81 teaching days	Vacation	
SHS 2	81 teaching days	Vacation		81 teaching days	Vacation	
SHS1 Green	41 teaching days	Vacation	41 teaching days	41 teaching days	Vacation	41 teaching days
SHS1 Brown	Vacation	81 teaching days		Vacation	81 teaching days	

(Source, Ministry of Education, 2018)

4.2.4 Development of Employable Skills

TVET education in Ghana, which is under the senior high school education system, has received criticism for not performing its duties in producing students with the needed employable skills. As part of revamping TVET education in Ghana, the Ministry of Education created a commission to regulate, promote, and take administrative responsibility for TVET for transformation and innovation for sustainable development. A TVET educator stated:

We cannot discuss the development of employable skills without stating the importance of TVET and the need to invest in TVET education in this country. Past and present governments know the importance of TVET in providing our senior high school students with the needed employable skills, but nothing shows we want to improve TVET education. It is better under the Free SHS Policy but needs more investment and attention. I have students who can do a lot with the skills they have gained from TVET education, and these students will be able to create jobs for themselves and others (Respondent #8, Field Interview, 2023).

I am in my final year as a TVET student studying Building and Construction, and I like what I am doing. However, many do not respect us, thinking we are in TVET education because we are not good students. When school goes on vacation, I work with construction companies and make money. My friends in regular senior high schools who study business and art programs do not make the money I earn on school holidays. As I speak, I can build and live in my own house without spending much money since I can use the skills acquired in TVET (Respondent #9, Field Interview, 2023).

Countries worldwide cannot develop employable skills to the fullest if senior high education in Ghana focuses on theoretical learning more than practical skills acquisition that will prepare students for the job market. Ghana's TVET education has recently partnered with other international bodies such as the Japan International Co-operation Agency (JICA) and Worldskills Germany to improve TVET education. Achievable interventions like these should be the focus of the Free SHS Policy to prepare more Ghanaian students with employable skills.

4.3 What component(s) of the Free Senior High School policy must be maintained, improved, or discarded?

To provide Free SHS Policy beneficiaries with a seamless and fruitful transition to tertiary education and the job market as well as achieve the policy's objectives and goals, it is necessary to take the views of stakeholders on what needs to be maintained, improved, or canceled to enhance the circumstances that now exist at the Senior High Schools today under the Free SHS policy. A head teacher iterated:

The government quickly implemented the Free SHS policy without many stakeholders' consultations, but I do not think the policy is a failure, as many people try to categorize it. There is always more room for improvement, and it is never too late to review and make changes to improve the program. My most significant concern about the policy is the delay in releasing funds to headteachers to manage the

schools. The delay in the release of funds has resulted in upfront debt, and therefore, any money sent to the schools later is met by suppliers visiting the schools to pay off debts we owe them. We would be delighted if the government promptly disbursed the funds to the schools (Respondent #4, Field Interview, 2023).

Free SHS is an extraordinary intervention, but the political influence and nature of the policy may not allow it to stand the test of time. Ghana has experienced significant educational interventions initiated by political parties in the past that have been canceled or abolished by subsequent governments upon winning elections. The Free SHS policy is politically motivated, and people belonging to the implementing political party see the policy as perfect without any flaws, as the opposing political parties see the policy as not beneficial to the development of Ghana's education. Political influence has been our challenge, and it is time for constitutional backing to protect good educational policies such as Free SHS (Respondent #5, Field Interview, 2023).

The government provides all the necessities, including clothing, so that all parents do not have to pay anything, including the wealthy parents who can afford their wards' senior high school education. Individuals who want to enroll their children in Grade A boarding schools should at least pay the boarding expenses, while Grade B and C school students should be provided with complete free education by the government. In my opinion, the division mentioned will lighten the government's load. The government appears to exert pressure to make the policy effective (Respondent #7, Field Interview, 2021).

Financial constraints continue to be barriers to implementing educational policies that prepare future leaders for the task ahead in developing countries such as Ghana. Due to the Free SHS, attention to other levels of Ghana's education has been minimal, with the Free SHS Policy taking about GH¢1.2billion expenditure annually.

Today, we are at a point where Free SHS risks collapsing if we do not pass the E-levy; the economy is in dire straits because over GH¢1.2billion of oil revenue goes into financing Free SHS yearly, which is not sustainable. The government introduced the Free SHS in September 2017. Before that, several corporate entities – including COCOBOD, Unilever, MTN, and Newmont, among many others – had scholarship packages for second-cycle students nationwide. However, most corporate grants ceased to exist after introducing the Free SHS (Source: thebftonline.com/).

The government must review Free SHS to focus on TVET and STEM education. TVET and STEM education will equip our students with skills to work just after completing their senior high school education (Respondent #11, Field Interview, 2021). As teachers, the tasks placed on us have been a considerable burden since implementing the Free SHS policy. We have more contact hours with our students, but we do not get the required salary and needed teaching and learning materials to make our work easy. It seems we teachers are not taking into consideration when it comes to the Free SHS Policy (Respondent #12, Field Interview, 2021). I hope that day and boarding students receive the same treatment when benefiting from the policy. I also want to be a boarding student to enjoy free boarding fees (Respondent #7, Field Interview, 2021).

All policies need evaluation after years of implementation; hence, the Free SHS policy is no exception. Senior high school stakeholders must combine expert advice to make the Free SHS policy successful.

5. Recommendations

Many suggestions are made for addressing the difficulties facing the Free SHS Policy implementation in Ghana, indicating the importance of the policy to the Ghanaian people. It is essential to put the recommendations toward the 'Pillars' of the policy, which will help measure the efficiency and what the implementors need to focus on for the sustainability of the policy. First, I recommend that all the policy aspects receive equal priority to produce senior high school students with the needed knowledge to pursue tertiary education or take job positions in the labor market.

As a politically initiated policy to fulfill a political promise, the government did not have adequate stakeholder consultations in designing and implementing the policy. A policy review is needed to involve all stakeholders in finding appropriate ways to solve the policy's challenges. The government must enact laws to protect the policy from political interference that may arise due to a change in government to sustain the policy.

It is also recommended that students with a low aggregate score from the BECE examination should not get admission into Senior High Schools but rather retake the BECE examination and obtain a suitable aggregate before enrolling in senior high schools. The reintroduction of the cutoff grades (thresholds) for admission will be necessary to raise the caliber of students entering senior high schools. The Ghana Education Service must focus more on the basic schools to prepare students for the BECE examination that will make them obtain aggregates within the cutoff point of entering senior high schools. The government must focus on TVET schools by ensuring that these schools have access to the required tools, instructional resources, and adequate funds to train

students with the skills needed for the job market.

To prevent school closures and disruptions to the academic calendar, the government must make sure that payments to the schools are made quickly to the school principals to run the schools to prevent the challenges faced in managing the schools due to the untimely provision of subventions. To increase contact hours and relieve staff of the additional demands, the government must focus on an even distribution of infrastructure facilities to solve school overcrowding problems quickly. The PTAs of senior high schools should have mandated power with more responsibilities by permitting them to operate as voluntary associations outside the school authorities' jurisdiction.

Again, a targeted approach rather than an all-encompassing approach to the Free SHS policy would have been the most suitable given the financial difficulties in implementing the policy. A recommendation is that "The Vulnerability Map" be used to determine who is poor and who is not to target who qualifies for fee exemptions. The government would have lessened the financial load if there had been a collaboration with private institutions in developing and implementing the Free SHS Policy. The government should have Public-Private Partnerships (PPP) to run the Free SHS Policy. Ghana can learn from alternative public-private partnerships (PPPs) like Mauritius and Uganda. Mohammed and Kuyini (2020) indicated that Uganda's PPP system, which permits qualifying pupils' access to private secondary school admissions, has increased test achievements at low-cost private schools. In Mauritius, the government sufficiently funds education and provides substantial financial assistance to privately run senior high schools.

6. Challenges & Limitations

The major challenge encountered in the evaluation process was getting the stakeholders together simultaneously to form a focus group for interviewing. Due to time constraints and the different schedules of the stakeholders, I interviewed each stakeholder at a time convenient to them. Getting a readily available data collection instrument that focuses on answering the needed evaluation questions was also challenging. Therefore, designing a desirable instrument for data collection was time-consuming. As a national policy, the policy's scope is broad and involves many documents to look at for a clear understanding of the program. To eliminate bias on my part as an evaluator, I excluded personal observation of current events in the schools and the current status of the policy.

7. Personal Reflections on the Program Evaluation Process

Through the evaluation process, it is evident that stakeholders engaged in the evaluation process were concerned about how they are usually rejected or sidelined in the decision-making of educational policies connected to these stakeholders in one way or another. The interview extracts indicate that the stakeholders have fantastic ideas that would have been important in designing and implementing the policy. The consultation of stakeholders in designing, implementing, and evaluating programs or policies is vital to the policy's sustainability. The evaluation questions should focus on the objectives and goals of the program to gain the desired answers. Questioning skills are also crucial in program evaluation. Using open-ended questions, creating a friendly atmosphere, and making the evaluation objectives clear to respondents gives respondents the confidence and trust to share their real concerns and ideas about the program. As a politically motivated program, many respondents are concerned with the anonymity of their responses during the interviewing process. It is essential to use different data collection approaches to collect data from the sources to give a broad understanding of the program and its findings to make valid and acceptable recommendations to all stakeholders in the program.

The Free SHS policy as a social intervention has impacted lives by removing the financial burden on parents and increasing enrolments. The policy has also increased the country's expenditure on education, leaving other aspects of the economy lacking in development.

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