

The Editor
All Media Houses
Ghana

14th January, 2025

FOR IMMEDIATE PUBLICATION

FREE SHS: A RETROSPECTIVE ANALYSIS OF THE MINISTRY OF EDUCATION'S MISSTEPS AND THE PATH TO RECOVERY

Abstract:

What went wrong? We set out with noble intentions, to make education accessible to all. But in our zeal, did we overlook the cracks in the foundation? The Ministry of Education's Free SHS policy, once hailed as a revolutionary step, now lies tarnished by missteps and mismanagement.

We ignored the warning signs, the whispers of concern from teachers, parents, and students. We prioritized politics over people, and now the consequences are clear. The system is strained, resources are scarce, and the future of our children hangs in the balance.

But it's not too late. We can learn from our mistakes, and forge a new path. One that prioritizes inclusivity, equity, and quality. One that listens to the voices of all stakeholders, and seeks solutions that benefit the many, not just the few.

This retrospective analysis seeks to uncover the lessons of the past, and illuminate the path to recovery. It's a call to action, a reminder that we owe it to ourselves, our children, and our nation to do better. To create an education system that truly serves the needs of all, and sets us on the path to a brighter future.

Introduction

As the dust settles on the 2024 elections, it is apparent that the New Patriotic Party's (NPP) inability to retain power can be attributed, in part, to the over-reliance on the Free Senior High School (SHS) policy. This article provides a retrospective analysis of the Ministry of Education's missteps and the consequences of prioritizing Free SHS above all other needs of the education sector.

The Warning Signs

The Ministry of Education's missteps in implementing the Free SHS policy were multifaceted. One major issue was the Ministry's refusal to consider alternative ideas, such as partnering with private schools, which led to a narrow focus that ignored pressing issues like feeding, resource management, and inadequacy.

Discriminatory Placement Policy against Private Schools

One of the significant missteps of the Ministry of Education was the implementation of the 30% SHS Category A placement policy, which discriminatorily affected learners from private schools. This policy limited the placement of private school students into top-tier public schools, creating an unfair disadvantage for these learners.

This policy was widely criticized for being discriminatory, as it denied private school students equal opportunities to access top-tier education. The policy also created a perception that private school education was inferior to public school education, which further exacerbated the problem.

Perceived Corruption and Lack of Integrity

The student placement process was marred by allegations of corruption and lack of integrity. The Ministry's handling of student placements raised concerns about fairness and transparency. Furthermore, the appointment of only party activists into key positions, such as Heads of schools, district, regional, and headquarters, created an atmosphere of mistrust and favoritism.

Autocratic Leadership and Lack of Accountability

The autocratic, arrogant, and know-it-all attitude of some key staff of the Ministry further exacerbated the problems. This leadership style stifled constructive feedback and criticism, creating a culture of silence and fear. The lack of accountability and transparency in the Ministry's decision-making processes undermined the policy's credibility and effectiveness.

Restricting Stakeholder Feedback

The Ministry's decision to restrict teachers, heads of schools and parents from commenting on the policy's negative impacts was a clear attempt to stifle dissenting voices. By forcing stakeholders to highlight only positive aspects, the Ministry created a culture of silence and fear, which ultimately undermined the policy's effectiveness.

The illegal formation of Parent Associations (**the so called PA**) without proper incorporation and forcing it down the throat of Ghanaians, was intended to counter the established and incorporated Parents-Teachers Associations, which had a tradition of transparent and collaborative relationships. This move had a clear agenda: to destroy all vocal institutions that could point out mistakes and demand progress.

Misallocated Resources

The Ministry's prioritization of lavish infrastructure projects in select constituencies for political agendas, at the expense of distributing essential textbooks and learning materials to all schools, was a clear misallocation of resources. This decision not only undermined the policy's success but also perpetuated inequality and unfairness in the education sector.

Neglecting Basic Education

The Ministry's total neglect of Basic schools, leaving them in deplorable states in terms of resources, policies, collaboration, and accountability, was a clear indication of a lack of commitment to education as a whole. By focusing solely on learners who could easily be registered as voters, the Ministry turned the entire secondary education system into a political activity, undermining the fundamental principles of education.

Inexperienced Leadership

The Ministry's facilitation of the appointment of director-generals, whose appointments clearly violated the principles of teacher professionalism and other individuals lacking the expertise to navigate policy changes, was a clear recipe for disaster. The lack of effective leadership and management led to a lack of accountability, transparency, and responsiveness, ultimately undermining the Ministry's credibility and effectiveness.

Digital Communication Failures

Furthermore, the Ministry's website and social media outlets were frequently down and not updated, creating trust issues and undermining the Ministry's ability to communicate effectively with stakeholders. Ironically, while the Ministry's official platforms were dormant, officials were busy projecting their personal platforms in the name of portfolio building, using state resources and taxpayers' money.

The Ministry of Education's missteps in implementing the Free SHS policy have had far-reaching and devastating consequences. The policy's narrow focus, discriminatory placement policy, and lack of accountability have created a perfect storm that has undermined the credibility and effectiveness of the Ministry. Ultimately, the policy's implementation has been a disappointing and destructive experience, perpetuating inequality and unfairness, and creating a culture of silence and fear.

Caution

To avoid similar missteps in the future, the Ministry of Education should adopt a more inclusive and divergent approach to policy-making. This involves considering alternative ideas and perspectives, fostering a culture of transparency, accountability, and responsiveness, and encouraging stakeholder feedback and participation. By doing so, the Ministry can ensure that all voices are heard and valued, leading to more effective and sustainable policies. Effective resource allocation is also crucial, with a focus on distributing essential textbooks and learning materials to all schools.

A comprehensive approach to education is also necessary, prioritizing Basic education and addressing the needs of all learners. This requires effective leadership and management, surrounding the Ministry with experienced and competent individuals who can drive change and improvement. Furthermore, developing and maintaining effective digital communication platforms is vital to ensure transparency, accountability, and responsiveness. By implementing these recommendations, the Ministry of Education can create a more inclusive, effective, and sustainable education system that benefits all learners

Way forward

In order to recover the benefits of the Free SHS policy, I propose the following policy actions

1. Investment in Day Schools with TVET: Increase investment in day schools, particularly those offering Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) programs. This will provide students with practical skills and prepare them for the workforce. The success of Suame Magazine, the renowned TVET hub, demonstrates the potential for skills training in Ghana.

2. Burden-Sharing for Boarding Schools: Implement a burden-sharing mechanism for boarding schools to reduce the financial strain on government and parents. This could include cost-sharing arrangements or public-private partnerships.

3. Targeted Support for Private Rural Schools: Provide comprehensive support to private schools in rural areas that meet specific criteria, such as enrolling vulnerable students. This will help increase access to quality education in underserved communities.

4. Rethinking School Uniform Policy: Reverse the current thinking on school uniforms by encouraging parents and students to take ownership of their attire, just as they do for church or other social events. This will reduce the financial burden on government and promote a sense of responsibility among students.

5. Diversifying Pathways to University Education: Introduce alternative pathways to university education that focus on skills training and competency-based progression. This could include programs that allow students to enroll in university without passing traditional entrance exams, or that recognize prior learning and experience. For example, a farmer could receive skills training and certification in agriculture, leading to a degree or graduation certificate.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Ministry of Education's over-reliance on the Free SHS policy, combined with its refusal to consider alternative ideas, restriction of stakeholder feedback, misallocation of resources, neglect of Basic education, inexperienced leadership, and digital communication failures, ultimately led to the NPP's inability to retain power. As the country moves forward, it is essential that the Ministry of Education learns from these missteps and prioritizes a more inclusive, effective, and sustainable approach to education.

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