

A CRITICAL REVIEW OF THE FREE SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL POLICY IN GHANA WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF DEVELOPMENT OF CURRICULUM

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ABSTRACT:

Central governments across nations play a leading role in initiating and reforming educational policies to address the evolving needs of their workforces. Education is widely recognised as a cornerstone for societal and global development, making it a national priority. National curriculums are heavily influenced by social demands, technological advancements, national aspirations, and educational trends observed in neighbouring countries. Various assessment techniques have been established to evaluate the effectiveness of educational policies in fulfilling curriculum goals. This study employs Dunn's programme assessment framework to analyse the core elements of Ghana's Free Senior High School policy. The evaluation focuses on key dimensions including effectiveness, efficiency, adequacy (sufficiency), equity (fairness), responsiveness, and appropriateness. The analysis reveals that the policy falls short across all significant dimensions of Dunn's framework. Schools in Ghana face significant challenges such as low educational standards, disparities between urban and rural schools, high student-teacher ratios, overcrowding, resource limitations, and an overall lack of responsiveness to the issues the policy aims to tackle. Policymakers should prioritize targeted support for underserved communities, explore alternative funding models, and incentivize collaboration between public and private educational institutions. To help families navigate the challenges arising from the policy's implementation, the study presents implications and recommendations. Notably, for families to fully benefit from the programme, parental involvement is crucial, and political considerations must not overshadow their children's education.

KEYWORDS: Critical Review, Dunn Evaluation, Education Policy, Free Education, Free SHS, Public Policy Analysis.

INTRODUCTION

Since independence, the Ghanaian government has implemented numerous educational policies aimed at expanding access and ensuring quality education for all school-aged citizens. Notable initiatives include the Accelerated Education Plan (1957), Free Compulsory Basic Education (FCUBE, 1995), the Functional Literacy Project (1992), and the Free Senior High School policy (FSHS, 2017). Additional educational reforms occurred in 1974, 1987, and 2007 (Adu-Gyamfi, Donkoh & Addo, 2016). The introduction of the FSHS policy in the 2017-2018 academic year sparked widespread public debate regarding its potential benefits and long-term sustainability.

AIMS OF THE FREE SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL (FSHS)

The FSHS programme was designed to enhance the economic and educational status of individuals and families. It mandated government funding for expenses like fees, tuition, and other costs for first-year students admitted in the 2017-2018 academic year. The policy also aimed to expand facilities and promote knowledge acquisition (Mohammed & Kuyini, 2021).

This essay offers a critical assessment of Ghana's FSHS policy through the lens of curriculum development. It will consider the three central aspects of curriculum design: the nature of the subject matter, the nature of society, and the nature of the individual.

Implementation faced criticism for a lack of widespread national dialogue and input from key stakeholders like ISODEC, IMANI Ghana, Edu Watch, and others (Addo, 2019). Early challenges included insufficient classrooms, dining facilities, and accommodation, along with overcrowded classes (Public Interest and Accountability Committee's [PIAC], 2020).

Despite these issues, the FSHS policy demonstrated some positive results. Students arrived on time for each term, basic textbooks were provided (though sometimes with delays), and there was a supply of school uniforms and an increase in enrolment. The programme also improved the quality and diversity of students' diets. However, concerns were raised about substandard goods, supply chain issues, and occasional oversupply or shortage. Additionally, removing cut-off scores led to the admission of students with low marks into less prestigious institutions.

ADDITIONAL CHALLENGES:

Students were not clearly informed that the FSHS policy did not cover elective textbooks. This led to parental reluctance to purchase textbooks, negatively impacting teaching and learning in the short term. Furthermore, funding for schools arrived in installments, occasionally forcing schools to rely on funds from ineligible students.

A lack of sufficient dormitories, classrooms, mattresses, laboratories, and equipment persisted. Some schools also lacked infirmaries for sick students, and where they existed, often lacked qualified staff.

Parent-Teacher Association activities were disrupted, hindering their ability to provide supplementary resources or support existing projects. Staffing shortages occurred, particularly within the double-track system, due to a lack of breaks for personnel. The quality of kitchen staff, security, and housekeeping services was also reported as substandard (PIAC, 2020).

To address concerns about food quality, the committee recommended increased oversight by school administrators. Schools should also directly manage food orders to prevent shortages or surpluses. PIAC (2020) further suggested timely awarding of contracts for uniforms and sportswear to avoid delays. The reintroduction of cut-off scores was recommended.

To prevent academic year delays, funds should be distributed promptly. Lastly, to eliminate the double-track system, infrastructure development must be accelerated. The committee praised the simplification of Parent-Teacher Association operations and recommended their autonomy from school authorities.

Other studies highlight similar challenges to providing free secondary education. Asumadu (2019), in research conducted in the Denkyemba District, found increased student enrollment outpaced infrastructure development, leading to overcrowding and lack of adequate facilities. Asumadu also identified a lack of teaching resources, including textbooks and teachers. However, a separate study noted that rising enrolment in senior high schools increased teacher workload. Delays in funding hindered timely programme implementation and necessitated the double-track system due to insufficient infrastructure (Kyei-Nuamah & Larbi 2022).

This analysis employs Dunn's (2012) six programme evaluation dimensions to assess the FSHS policy: Effectiveness, Efficiency, Adequacy, Equity, Responsiveness, and Appropriateness. These dimensions will serve as thematic elements for in-depth discussion and policy analysis.

POLICY EFFECTIVENESS

Effectiveness measures the extent to which a programme achieves its stated goals (Hudson, Hunter & Peckham, 2019). The FSHS policy aimed to improve infrastructure quality and equity, provide universal access to secondary education, and equip citizens with skills for economic development (Duflo, Dupas & Kremer, 2021). This section evaluates the success of these objectives.

The government has addressed financial barriers by covering one-time costs for first-year students, including fees for day and boarding students. Additionally, the government provides twenty Ghana Cedis (\$1.56) annually per student to replace Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) dues, aiming to motivate and reward teachers (Asante & Agbee, 2021). This signifies a greater financial commitment to the FSHS policy compared to the previous administration's approach.

While the government has borne major expenses, the effectiveness of the FSHS policy is partial. Some schools still struggle to accommodate student influx due to insufficient classroom space. The high student-teacher ratio and increased workload compromise teaching quality, creating a stressful environment for educators. Outstanding invoices by the Government of Ghana also raise concerns (Kyei-Nuamah & Larbi, 2022).

POLICY EFFICIENCY

Efficiency, as defined by Church and Alford (2020), measures the effort required to achieve a certain level of effectiveness. Costs are typically expressed in monetary terms (Dunn, 2012). Currently, the FSHS policy demonstrates limited efficiency.

Firstly, the policy lacks a needs-based approach, providing free education to students regardless of their families' financial means. According to Mohammed and Kuyini (2021), this "lack of distinction" includes students whose families could afford senior high school fees, making the system potentially inefficient for wealthier households.

Additionally, the double-track system, implemented to address space constraints, divides students into "green" and "yellow" groups. Students on the "green track" attend school for half the year, then swap with the "yellow track." This creates additional financial burdens on parents who must arrange supplementary tuition to offset lost instructional time and keep their children academically engaged. The daily commute for some day students also proves difficult for both students and parents.

The FSHS policy also exhibits inefficiency, as some students offered admission to senior high schools could not enrol due to accommodation challenges (Babah, Frimpong, Mensah & Acquah, 2020; Chanimbe & Dankwah, 2021). The Ministry of Education (2018) supports this, reporting an unenrolment rate of over 25% among students placed in senior high schools. This primarily stems from an investment focus on classrooms. However, enrolment issues indicate that class sizes remain below optimal levels, as many students assigned to schools far from home cannot afford rental options.

Furthermore, the Ministry of Education (2018) highlights delays in disbursing FSHS capitation grants, disrupting school administrations' educational and meal planning. Headmasters report that these funding delays negatively impact academics and morale, occasionally causing a two-week postponement of courses. Teachers are still paid during this non-teaching period, and the lost instructional time is rarely recovered. This reflects poor resource management (Amponsah & Stonier, 2021).

A further obstacle to the FSHS policy's efficiency is the lack of collaboration between public and private senior high school providers. Such partnership would allow the government to address infrastructure shortages in the free school system by utilizing resources available within private schools. Ghana's 300 private schools, with enrollment at approximately 181,000 students, are distributed across its sixteen regions and operate at a third to half of their classroom capacity (Cudjoe, 2018; Amponsah & Stonier, 2021). Private school owners have proposed accepting half the government funding allocated for students in public schools, but the offer remains unaccepted (Cudjoe, 2018). A partnership between the government and private providers would enhance efficiency.

POLICY ADEQUACY

Adequacy assesses how well a level of efficiency addresses the needs, values, or opportunities that prompted a policy (Dunn, 2012). Research in Ghana suggests the FSHS policy demonstrates inadequacies. For example, Mohammed and Kuyini (2021) report that the majority (87%) of underserved students, the primary target of the policy, were unable to secure placements in senior high schools due to space constraints. The double-track system was designed to expand enrolment.

Another aspect of inadequacy involves additional costs of schooling, which limit participation. A 2017 World Bank study indicates that individuals in Ghana's poor and marginalized areas are 5-6 times less likely to access FSHS education for reasons beyond financial constraints. While factors like perceived economic returns on education play a role in enrolment decisions, FSHS remains an economic benefit for disadvantaged youth. A cost-benefit analysis becomes essential for families with lower socioeconomic status. If the perceived costs outweigh the benefits, there is a high probability of non-enrolment.

Some parents consider education a luxury good, prioritizing self-funded education for their children. Such parents might prevent children from engaging in income-generating activities. This implies that additional costs or familial financial constraints hinder full utilization of the FSHS opportunity, undermining its adequacy.

To achieve the FSHS policy's adequacy goals, greater social support (financial or in-kind) for low-income families is needed. This could involve subsidizing transportation costs, ensuring timely provision of goods and services, and adequately compensating workers. These steps would allow parents to meet their children's basic needs at home and school.

POLICY EQUITY

Equity concerns the fair distribution of resources and benefits among diverse social groups (Harrington, Erete & Piper, 2019). Dunn (2012) links equity to legal and social considerations. The FSHS policy shows clear inequities, as students in residential schools experience different treatment than those in day schools. Students in boarding schools benefit from

convenient access to teachers, collaborative environments, and support with their studies, advantages unavailable to day students despite them facing the same examinations (Amponsah & Stonier, 2021).

This bias undermines principles of fairness and casts doubt on whether true equity is in operation. Furthermore, highly qualified teachers tend to concentrate in urban schools, while those with less experience are often found in underserved areas. Predictably, this leads to an achievement gap, with urban schools generally outperforming rural counterparts on the West African Senior Secondary Certificate Examination (WASSCE) (Van Woerden, Hruschka, & Bruening, 2019; Katami, 2022; Browning, & Rigolon, 2019). These factors indicate a lack of equity within the policy.

POLICY RESPONSIVENESS

Responsiveness measures how well a policy addresses the needs, interests, or goals of specific groups (Dunn, 2012). Evidence suggests the FSHS policy demonstrates limited responsiveness, as the students who most require fee-free secondary education are not the primary beneficiaries. Disparities persist between urban and rural areas in terms of educational infrastructure, resources, and access to teachers.

While the Ministry of Education stated in a 2021 conference that 111,336 junior high school students did not enroll in senior high schools prior to FSHS due to financial constraints, that number has been significantly reduced to 62,453 (44%) under the FSHS policy. However, others argue that the gap remains significant, with approximately 40% of junior high school graduates still unable to access senior secondary education after several years of FSHS implementation (Asante & Agbee, 2021). This indicates that the policy continues to face challenges in responsiveness, as the core issue it aims to address persists, albeit to a lesser degree.

APPROPRIATENESS OF THE FREE SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL POLICY

Appropriateness examines the value and relevance of a programme's goals, including the validity of its underlying assumptions (Dunn, 2012). The FSHS policy aims to provide universal access to secondary education and develop a literate workforce to drive national development. These goals are appropriate as youth illiteracy negatively impacts children, families, and Ghanaian society as a whole. Consequences of widespread illiteracy include a less skilled workforce, lower adult wages, poor health outcomes, and a less engaged citizenry (Satz, 2018; Carrets, Ribeiro & da Silva Teixeira, 2019; Katusiime & Pinkwart, 2019). Universal enrollment in senior high school is, therefore, a worthwhile endeavour.

However, the policy's long-term sustainability heavily depends on its funding source. Currently, reliance on oil revenue raises concerns. If oil resources diminish, the policy's continuation could be jeopardised unless alternative funding is secured (Mohammed & Kuyini, 2021). This renders the policy potentially inappropriate in the future.

IMPLICATIONS FOR COUNSELLING

School counsellors have a crucial role to play:

1. Encourage young people to pursue the highest level of education possible for personal development and to equip them for leadership roles in society.
2. Educate the public about minor expenses that parents and guardians of FSHS beneficiaries may still need to cover, such as transportation, meals, and supplementary learning materials.
3. Develop and implement guidance programmes to inform community members on how to support disadvantaged students or local schools.
4. Counsel parents who prioritize private schools out of political considerations. Emphasize that government education funding draws from national resources and taxes contributed by all citizens.
5. Encourage schools and philanthropists to establish scholarships and other incentives for deserving students from low-income backgrounds.

CONCLUSION AND SUMMARY

In conclusion, this article successfully examined Ghana's FSHS policy within the context of Curriculum Development. The analysis reveals that the FSHS policy possesses several shortcomings that require attention to ensure its sustainability. For instance, during the 2023–24 academic year, over 137,000 BECE candidates who were successfully admitted to the senior high school could not report to their respective schools.

While the FSHS policy's goals – universal access to secondary education, human capital development, and fostering responsible youth – represent legitimate rights that must be upheld, the policy falls short in terms of programme implementation and policy dimensions. Evidence regarding efficiency is mixed, with some targets met and others requiring further legislative and strategic development. Inefficiencies include underutilized school resources due to student non-enrolment, lack of means-testing, delays in funding disbursement, and insufficient infrastructure despite available resources in private institutions.

The inequitable distribution of educational resources, such as skilled teachers and infrastructure, favours urban schools. This disadvantages rural students and contributes to the achievement gap between urban and rural areas. Uncertainties remain around what constitutes sufficient support until cost barriers are fully addressed. A key concern is that the FSHS policy's implementation prioritized speed over the need for sustained parental support.

Applying Dunn's (2012) dimensions ultimately shows inadequacies in the FSHS programme's effectiveness, adequacy, equity, responsiveness, and appropriateness. The following table enumerates these major strengths and weaknesses:

A Table Summarising Strengths and Weaknesses of the FSHS Policy

Dimension	Strengths	Weaknesses
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Effectiveness	Addresses financial barriers for some students	Insufficient classrooms, policy goals partially unmet
Efficiency	Attempts to utilize existing private school infrastructure	Lack of needs-based approach, delays in resource distribution
Adequacy	Recognizes the importance of universal secondary education	Limited success in reaching the most marginalized students
Equity	Attempts to improve access for disadvantaged groups	Disparities between urban and rural schools persist
Responsiveness	Policy aims to address national development needs	Some core issues of access remain un-addressed
Appropriateness	Goals of education access and development are valid	Sustainability concerns due to reliance on oil revenue

Ultimately, applying Dunn's (2012) dimensions reveals that the FSHS programme demonstrates deficiencies in effectiveness, adequacy, equity, responsiveness, and appropriateness.

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