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# Policy Discussion Paper

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# IMPROVED ACCESS, QUALITY QUESTIONED: A REPORT ON 9 YEARS OF GHANA'S FREE SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL (SHS) POLICY

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Ghana's Free Senior High School (Free SHS) policy, launched in 2017 as a constitutional commitment to universal secondary education, ranks among the most consequential social policies of the Fourth Republic. By removing tuition fees and covering boarding, feeding, and core learning materials, it expanded enrolment by more than 27 per cent in its first year alone, narrowed the gender gap in secondary enrolment, created substantial new teaching vacancies, and delivered what many households describe as unprecedented financial relief. However, this review, drawing on evidence from students, teachers, principals, and support staff across Ghana's four school resource categories (A–D), finds that this headline success conceals a policy experienced very differently depending on where a student happens to be enrolled. Free SHS's long-term sustainability now depends less on whether access can be expanded further, and more on whether the equity, quality, and governance gaps this review identifies are addressed.

### A Genuine Social Transformation

The policy's achievements are substantial and consistently corroborated across respondent groups. Families report renewed financial stability and psychological relief, no longer forced to choose between educating one child and feeding the household. Students across school categories describe newfound dignity and pride in continuing

their education, and many credit the policy with motivating them to work harder while broadening their social networks and personal development. Teachers and non-teaching staff alike affirm the policy's transformative effect on access and equity, even as they raise serious concerns about its implementation.

### A Stratified Reality

The review's central and most policy-relevant finding is that Free SHS is not a uniform experience. In practice, Ghana's A–D school categorisation system has entrenched rather than dissolved pre-existing inequities. Category A schools, typically already well-resourced, report that Free SHS support is layered on top of a strong existing base, freeing them to concentrate on academic standards, leadership, and governance. Category C/D schools are absorbing the same enrolment surge with a fraction of the resources: overcrowded classrooms and dining halls, shortages of food and furniture, deteriorating dormitories, and slower delivery of textbooks and learning materials. Resource distribution consistently favours already-advantaged schools, widening rather than narrowing the disparities Free SHS was designed to close.

This stratification radiates through every dimension of implementation. Overcrowding in classrooms, dormitories and dining halls and infrastructure deficits are undermining both teaching effectiveness and student welfare, posing a health risk rather than a matter of comfort. Large class sizes, the admission of academically underprepared students, and weak

incentive structures are eroding teacher morale and causing teacher apathy, even as many educators remain visibly committed to their students. Teacher and support-staff morale is now a direct constraint on service quality. Non-teaching staff, particularly kitchen staff managing batch feeding for enlarged student populations, describe poor working conditions and a persistent sense that their contribution goes unrecognised and undercompensated. Meanwhile, automatic placement and the removal of grade repetition, introduced to preserve universal access, have weakened student accountability and academic seriousness, and contributed to students' indiscipline and unrest.

## **A Policy Built Faster Than it was Planned**

These implementation gaps are not incidental. This review's assessment of the policy process finds that Free SHS's architects prioritised the programme and political dimensions of policymaking well ahead of the process dimension: the problem the policy was meant to solve was never precisely defined at the agenda-setting stage, and no substantive alternative options were tested before adoption. The result is a policy whose popular legitimacy is beyond question, but whose institutional foundations, including financing mechanisms, resource-allocation rules, and accountability structures, were never given the same rigour as its political rollout. This gap between political ambition and administrative design is, this review argues, the single largest threat to the policy's long-term sustainability.

## **Global Lessons from Similar Policies**

Ghana is not alone in navigating this trade-off. International experience from Kenya's model of sustained stakeholder engagement, Uganda's phased expansion of Universal Secondary Education, Rwanda's investment in teacher welfare, and Finland's equity-first resource allocation shows consistently that fee-free secondary education succeeds only when access expansion is deliberately paired with equity-sensitive resourcing, quality assurance, and participatory governance. Countries that expanded access without these accompanying reforms saw early gains erode; those that paired access with reform sustained them.

## **Pathways Forward**

A reformed Free SHS should:

1. Clarify and formally legislate the definition of "Free" in Free SHS, explicitly specifying that it covers tuition, textbooks, uniforms, boarding, and other routinely hidden costs.
2. Formally entrench Free SHS in bipartisan legislation requiring a parliamentary supermajority to amend, overseen by an independent, cross-party statutory board.
3. Rebalance resource distribution to prioritise disadvantaged (Category C/D) schools, closing the gap that currently favours already well-resourced schools.
4. Establish academic readiness criteria or

bridging programmes, so that inclusive access does not come at the cost of educational quality or student preparedness.

5. Implement accountability mechanisms including regular performance reviews, transparent reporting, and restored consequences for underperformance to rebuild academic seriousness.
6. Revise the SHS curriculum to embed digital learning strategies, including recorded lessons, YouTube/social media, and virtual learning, to reduce lost contact hours during double-track periods.
7. Develop a mega/meta policy framework clarifying how Free SHS relates to adjacent policies such as school feeding, transport, boarding, and health.
8. Elevate investment in the Free Compulsory Universal Basic Education (FCUBE) policy to strengthen the foundational pipeline feeding into Free SHS.
9. Redesign teacher and non-teaching staff salary and incentive structures and recruit additional staff to manage large class sizes.
10. Develop and expand national data dashboard into a fully real-time, publicly accessible system to track enrolment, attendance, learning outcomes, teacher-pupil ratios, resource allocation, and WASSCE results by school, district, and region, enabling civil-society and media accountability.

11. Institutionalise governance dialogue between the Ministry of Education, school leadership, parents, and frontline staff, to improve transparency and responsiveness.

12. Diversify Free SHS's financing base beyond annual budget allocation to protect the policy from short-term fiscal and political pressure.

## Strategic Imperative

Free SHS has delivered historic gains in access and equity, positioning Ghana as a continental leader in the drive toward universal secondary education. But early success does not prove long-term viability. The evidence in this review makes clear that Free SHS now stands at an inflexion point. Without deliberate, equity-focused reform, the gap between its promise and its lived reality will continue to widen along the lines of very disadvantage it was designed to erase. Policymakers have a narrow but real window to act, to move Free SHS from a bold act of access to a sustainable model of inclusive excellence, in which every Ghanaian child, regardless of background or school category, receives an education that genuinely prepares them for life and work.

# 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Secondary education has become a decisive platform for African youth to transition into the world of work. However, access remains uneven across the continent. Nearly 80% of the 264 million children excluded from secondary education live in developing countries (Asante, 2025). This highlights the urgency of the 2015 UN commitment to achieve free secondary education by 2030. Against this backdrop, Ghana stands out as one of the few nations to have shifted from a cost-sharing model to a fully free system. This shift is anchored and enshrined in Article 25(1)(b) of the 1992 Constitution and was operationalised through the Free Senior High School (FSHS) policy in 2017.

The Free Senior High School (FSHS) policy, launched in 2017, guarantees universal access to secondary education by removing core financial barriers. The FSHS policy provides tuition and support services for all public SHS students, aiming to expand access, reduce inequality, and strengthen national human capital. Coverage as seen in Table 1 includes:

**Table 1: Policy Definition of Ghana's FSHS and its coverage**

| #   | Coverage Component                | Description                            |
|-----|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------------|
| i   | Tuition                           | No academic fees charged               |
| ii  | Admission fees                    | Entry costs waived                     |
| iii | Textbooks                         | Supplied by government                 |
| iv  | Library and science centre access | Free use of facilities                 |
| v   | Examination fees                  | WAEC and internal exam charges covered |

| #   | Coverage Component    | Description                                 |
|-----|-----------------------|---------------------------------------------|
| vi  | Boarding and meals    | Free food and lodging for boarding students |
| vii | Day student subsidies | Meals or stipends provided                  |

*Source: (Ghana Ministry of Education, 2018; Gruijters et al., 2025; Addae et al., 2019; Adu-Ababio & Osei, 2018; Chanimbe & Prah, 2020; Nurudeen et al., 2018).*

With the introduction of the Free SHS, enrolment has surged, but questions of sustainability, quality, and equity remain. Central to these debates and a novel focus of this study is Ghana's categorisation of Senior High Schools (SHS), a structural feature that shapes how Free SHS is experienced across different institutions. Schools are ranked into Categories A, B, C, and D. Category A schools are typically urban, resource-rich, and highly competitive, while lower categories often reflect rural, under-resourced contexts.

Emerging evidence shows that categorisation reinforces inequality. Students from wealthier backgrounds disproportionately access Category A schools, while rural and disadvantaged students are concentrated in lower categories, perpetuating disparities in teacher quality, infrastructure, and learning outcomes (Chanimbe & Prah, 2020; Ameko et al., 2025). The Ghana National Association of Teachers (GNAT, 2023) has further argued that categorisation stigmatises lower-ranked schools, complicates placement processes, and entrenches perceptions of inferiority.

By foregrounding categorisation as the central lens of analysis, this study offers a novel evaluation of the Free SHS policy. It assesses not only the policy's

impact on enrolment but also its role in reproducing or mitigating systemic inequalities. In doing so, it provides policymakers in Ghana and globally with critical insights into how structural features of education systems shape the lived realities of free secondary education, and what options exist for a more equitable next phase.

## **1.1 Background on Free SHS**

Since its independence in 1957, Ghana's education system has undergone successive reforms to expand access, equity, and quality. Landmark initiatives such as the Education Act of 1961, the Dzobo Report of 1973, which introduced the Junior Secondary School concept, and the Education Reform Program of 1987/88 laid the foundation for a modernised structure. The 1992 Constitution further mandated the progressive introduction of free, compulsory, universal basic education, culminating in programs such as FCUBE (1996), the Capitation Grant, and the School Feeding Program (Akyeampong, 2009; Ampratwum & Armah-Attoh, 2010; Pajibo & Tamanja, 2017). These interventions boosted enrolment at the primary and lower secondary levels, with incentives like grants and meals encouraging regular attendance.

However, despite these gains, transition to Senior High School (SHS) remained limited, constrained by fees, infrastructure gaps, and regional inequalities (Donkoh et al., 2021; Mohammed & Kuyini, 2021). Historically, SHS education operated under a cost-sharing model in which tuition, boarding, and learning materials posed significant barriers for students from disadvantaged households. This created sharp

disparities between urban and rural schools, and between wealthier families and those in deprived regions.

In response, policymakers began to prioritise secondary education as a national development imperative. The Progressive Free SHS (PFSHS) program, introduced in 2015, marked the first step toward reducing cost barriers and offered partial fee waivers to targeted day students. Building on this foundation, the Free SHS (FSHS) policy, launched in 2017 under the New Patriotic Party government, marked a decisive shift: it removed nearly all financial barriers by covering tuition, boarding, meals, and learning materials (MOE, 2017). This bold expansion sought not only to democratise access but also to strengthen equity and national human capital development.

## **1.2. The Nature of the Free Senior High School Policy in Ghana**

Launched in 2017, Ghana's FSHS policy marked a transformative shift in the nation's education system by eliminating financial barriers to secondary education (Asante, 2025). Unlike the limited Progressive Free SHS (PFSHS) introduced in 2015, which absorbed only partial costs for day students, the FSHS policy replaced it with a comprehensive framework covering tuition, boarding, meals, admission, and registration fees for all students nationwide (Abdul-Rahaman et al., 2018). This holistic approach aimed to democratise upper secondary education, signalling a strong commitment to access, equity, and fulfilment of national and constitutional mandates.

FSHS was framed within the broader “Ghana Beyond Aid” discourse, positioning education as a keystone of human capital and national transformation. By absorbing all direct schooling costs, the policy dramatically expanded access for Junior High School graduates who passed the BECE, placing access at the centre of Ghana’s development strategy (GoG, 2018a).

The policy’s political dimension has also been significant. In sub-Saharan Africa, education reforms often serve electoral purposes (Verspoor & SEIA Team, 2008; Adu Gyamfi et al., 2016; Aziabah, 2018). Ghana’s Free SHS policy exemplifies this dynamic: terms such as “universal” and “free” carried symbolic weight, mobilising public support and reinforcing confidence in the ruling regime (Chapman, Burton & Werner, 2010). However, while effectiveness was emphasised, other critical dimensions, such as equity, efficiency, and responsiveness, were underexplored. The implementation was hindered by systemic vulnerabilities such as inadequate funding, limited infrastructure, and poor agenda-setting (Aziabah, 2018). Despite these obstacles, the policy’s focus on expanded access has led to concrete gains: a 27% increase in enrolment within the first year (Duflo et al., 2021), improved gender parity (Nyadzi et al., 2024), and greater opportunities for disadvantaged students. Total system-wide enrolment is presented in the table 2.

**Table 2. Total System-Wide SHS Enrolment**

| Academic Year     | Total SHS Enrolment | Key Notes                                                                                       | Source                                                                                              |
|-------------------|---------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 2016/17           | 813,000             | Pre-Free SHS baseline.                                                                          | Green Views, citing MoE data                                                                        |
| 2017/18           | 958,819             | First year of Free SHS. Gross Enrolment Rate (GER) 55.9%.                                       | Ministry of Education, Annual Progress Report / Education Sector Performance Report 2019 (official) |
| 2018/19           | 1,096,258           | 94% of enrolment in public schools. GER rose to 62.6%. Public SHS grew from 630 to 690 schools. | Ministry of Education, Annual Progress Report / Education Sector Performance Report 2019 (official) |
| 2019/20 – 2022/23 | n.d.                | Not separately disclosed in any consolidated public report located.                             |                                                                                                     |
| 2023/24           | 1.42 million        | Cumulative Free SHS beneficiaries since 2017 reported at ~3.5 million by this point.            | Secondary aggregator (Grokkipedia)                                                                  |
| 2024/25           | n.d.                | No consolidated total located at the time of writing.                                           |                                                                                                     |

*Source: Ministry of Education report on SHS enrolment trends, 2014–March 2024, as reported by the Daily Statesman (9 Apr 2024); Compilation of Ministry of Education data (2015–2016 rows); Green Views summary of MoE data (2017 row).*

Furthermore, data from West Africa Examination Council (WAEC) shows improved core-subject performance in the early years (see Table 1). However, 2026 saw a sharp decline in WASSCE performance in core subjects.

**Table 3: FSHS vs. Quality**

| Yr   | English | Maths  | Science | Social Studies | Key Notes                         |
|------|---------|--------|---------|----------------|-----------------------------------|
| 2017 | 53%     | 33%    | 48%     | 54%            | Pre-Free SHS base-line            |
| 2020 | 57%     | 61%    | 62%     | 71%            | Early gains                       |
| 2023 | 73.11%  | 62.23% | 66.82%  | 76.76%         | Peak performance                  |
| 2025 | 69.00%  | 48.73% | 57.74%  | 55.82%         | Decline in Maths & Social Studies |

Source: WAEC, 2026

These results confirm the policy's potential for promoting educational equity and performance. Nevertheless, rapid enrolment puts pressure on infrastructure, precipitating overcrowding, staff shortages, and burdens on rural schools (Kamil, 2024). The resulting reforms, such as the Double Track System, have protected access but reduced instructional time and threatened educational quality (Osei-Owusu & Akenten-Appiah, 2021), leading to a decline in WASSCE performance (see Table 1). Financial sustainability challenges also persist (Essuman, 2019).

To consolidate these gains, scholars and practitioners recommend specific actions: investing in infrastructure to ease overcrowding, recruiting and retaining qualified teachers, and developing diversified funding mechanisms such as public-private partnerships (Adjei, 2021). These actions will be critical for balancing access, quality, and sustainability, ensuring the Free SHS policy remains

a strong foundation for Ghana's educational reforms (Asante, 2025).

### 1.3 Financing Ghana's Free SHS Policy, 2017–2025: Expenditure, Funding Sources, and the Case for Sustainable Domestic Financing

Ghana's Free Senior High School (FSHS) policy has now operated for nine full budget cycles (2017–2025). Reconstructing its financing history from Parliamentary disclosures, national budget statements, and independent policy research, as seen in Table 3, reveals a programme whose enrolment and political popularity have consistently outpaced the transparency and stability of its funding architecture. This brief analyses the empirical expenditure and funding source record for 2017–2025, assesses the policy's fiscal sustainability against Ghana's wider macroeconomic trajectory, and sets out domestic financing options that could put Free SHS on a more durable footing..

**Table 4: Free SHS Expenditure and Budgetary Allocation, 2017–2025**

| Year               | Approved Budget (GH¢)                                                         | Funds Released by MoF (GH¢) | Actual Expenditure (GH¢)                                                                                    | Primary Source(s) Cited                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|--------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 2017               | 400 million                                                                   | 480 million                 | 171.8 million                                                                                               | ABFA (petroleum revenue) + GoG Consolidated Fund– 2017 Budget Statement; Parliamentary answer, Mar 2023 (Graphic Online / GNA)                                                                          |
| 2018               | 1,130 million                                                                 | 1,130 million               | 904 million                                                                                                 | ABFA (GH¢455.9m of petroleum revenue specifically earmarked) + GETFund + GoG– Parliamentary answer, Mar 2023; YAME/2018 Budget                                                                          |
| 2019               | 1,680 million                                                                 | 1,280 million               | 1,080 million                                                                                               | ABFA + GETFund + GoG– Parliamentary answer, Mar 2023 (Graphic Online)                                                                                                                                   |
| 2020               | n.d.                                                                          | n.d.                        | 2,400 million (Ministerial statement, Jun 2021) vs. 1,700 million (figure disputed in Parliament, Mar 2023) | ABFA + GETFund + GoG (COVID-19 disruption) – Ghana Business News, Jun 2021; Graphic Online, Mar 2023                                                                                                    |
| 2021               | n.d.                                                                          | n.d.                        | 1,900 million (Ministerial estimate)                                                                        | ABFA + GETFund + GoG– Ghana Business News, Jun 2021                                                                                                                                                     |
| 2017–21 cumulative | 7,623.8 million                                                               | 5,182.2 million             | 5,119.8 million                                                                                             | Official cumulative figures given to Parliament– Dr Yaw Osei Adutwum, Mar 2023 (Graphic Online / GNA / Pulse Ghana)                                                                                     |
| 2022               | 2,300 million (allocation)                                                    | n.d.                        | n.d.                                                                                                        | ABFA + GETFund + GoG– Africa Education Watch, "Financial Burden Analysis of the Free SHS Policy", 2024                                                                                                  |
| 2023               | 2,950 million (allocation)                                                    | n.d.                        | Cumulative 2017–23 reached 8,400 million                                                                    | ABFA + GETFund + GoG– Eduwatch 2024; Ken Ofori-Atta, 2024 Budget Statement, Nov 2023 (GhanaWeb)                                                                                                         |
| 2024               | 3,500 million                                                                 | n.d.                        | Cumulative to Jul 2024 reached ~9,900 million                                                               | ABFA + GETFund + GoG– 2025 Budget Statement, Mar 2025 (GhanaWeb / Graphic Online); Mid-Year Budget Review, Jul 2024 (GhanaWeb)                                                                          |
| 2025               | 3,500 million (direct budget) + up to 4,100 million (uncapped GETFund top-up) | n.d.                        | n.d.                                                                                                        | Structural shift: GETFund becomes primary financing vehicle, replacing ABFA/petroleum revenue– 2025 Budget Statement, Mar 2025 (GhanaWeb / Graphic Online); Education Minister, Nov 2025 (MyJoy-Online) |

*A Note on Data Reliability: "n.d." denotes figures not separately disclosed in public reporting for that year. Ghana's own official disclosures on Free SHS financing are not fully reconcilable across sources: Parliamentary answers, annual budget statements, mid-year budget reviews, and ministerial media statements report different figures for overlapping periods, sometimes reflecting different accounting bases (approved vs released vs expended funds; fiscal year vs academic year). This inconsistency should be treated as a governance finding in its own right and direct evidence of weak fiscal transparency, not merely a data limitation*

### 1.3.1 Funding-Source Architecture

Free SHS has never been financed from a single, dedicated revenue stream (see Table 4). Instead, it has drawn on a blend of four instruments whose relative weight has shifted substantially over the policy's lifetime, most significantly in the 2025 pivot away from petroleum revenue and toward the Ghana Education Trust Fund.

**Table 5: Funding sources of the Free SHS**

| Funding Instrument                                    | Role, 2017–2025                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | Source                                                                                                                                               |
|-------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Annual Budget Funding Amount (ABFA) petroleum revenue | Primary funding source, 2018–2024. Roughly 9% of oil proceeds were earmarked for Free SHS and the wider education sector at launch; GH¢455.9 million of petroleum revenue was specifically allocated in 2018. GHEITI co-chair Dr Steve Mantaw has estimated over GH¢1.8 billion of crude oil revenue was channelled to Free SHS annually in recent years. | 2017 Budget Statement (Business-Ghana); YAME, 2019; Harvard Ministerial Leadership Program case study; GHEITI co-chair, cited in media (Green Views) |
| Ghana Education Trust Fund (GETFund)                  | Supplementary source, 2017–2024; became the designated primary source from 2025 after the government removed the statutory cap on GETFund under the Earmarked Funds Capping and Realignment Act, 2017 (Act 947), releasing an additional GH¢4.1 billion for Free SHS financing.                                                                           | 2025 Budget Statement (GhanaWeb / Graphic Online); Education Minister, Nov 2025 (MyJoyOnline)                                                        |

| Funding Instrument                                       | Role, 2017–2025                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | Source                                                                                    |
|----------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| GETFund securitisation ("Daakye Bond")                   | One-off capital-raising instrument: GETFund receivables were securitised to raise the cedi equivalent of approximately US\$1.5 billion for infrastructure funding over 800 SHS infrastructure projects (dormitories, classrooms, science and computer laboratories) between 2017 and 2021. Government now absorbs the bond's debt service directly. | Harvard Ministerial Leadership Program case study; 2025 Budget Statement (Graphic Online) |
| Government of Ghana Consolidated Fund (general taxation) | Residual/gap-filling source across the period, topping up ABFA and GETFund shortfalls from general domestic revenue.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | 2017 Budget Statement (BusinessGhana)                                                     |

### 1.3.2. Sustainability Assessment

#### 1.3.2.1 Declining Budget Credibility

The clearest warning sign in the data is the steady erosion of budget credibility i.e. the share of approved allocation actually disbursed and spent. Independent analysis by Africa Education Watch (Eduwatch) found this ratio fell from 120 per cent in the 2017/18 academic year (when release exceeded the original approval) to 99 per cent in 2018/19, 76 per cent in 2019/20, 58 per cent in 2020/21, and just 51 per cent in 2021/22. A programme that once over-delivered against its own budget is now consistently under-delivering by roughly half, a trend that leaves schools unable to plan reliably around promised resources, and that helps explain the

delayed uniforms, textbooks, and feeding provisions documented elsewhere in this review.

### **1.3.2.2 Dependence on a Single, Volatile Revenue Base**

For seven of the policy's nine years, its primary financing instrument was the Annual Budget Funding Amount, revenue drawn from petroleum production. Oil revenue is inherently volatile, tied to global prices and production schedules outside government control, and Ghana's own 2017 Budget Statement implicitly acknowledged this by naming ABFA and "other domestic revenue sources" jointly as the funding base from the outset. A flagship social policy financed predominantly from a single depletable, price-volatile commodity revenue stream carries structural sustainability risk almost by definition.

### **1.3.2.3 A Recent, Still-Untested Structural Reform**

The 2025 decision to uncap GETFund and designate it, rather than petroleum revenue, as Free SHS's primary financing vehicle, is the first genuine attempt in the policy's history to give it a dedicated funding source rather than relying on annual budget negotiation. This is a positive structural shift, but it is recent and untested: GETFund's own revenue base (a levy on VAT-able goods and services) must now grow fast enough to sustain both Free SHS's recurrent costs and GETFund's traditional responsibilities for basic and tertiary education infrastructure, without one crowding out the other.

## **1.4 Global Comparisons of Fee-Free Secondary Education**

Ghana's fee-free approach reflects a global pattern: while access expands, issues of quality, sustainability, and equity persist. For instance, Kenya demonstrates that the Free Secondary Education (FSE) policy significantly boosted enrolment and improved gender parity, yet overcrowded classrooms and inadequate teacher resources undermined learning outcomes (Mwangi, 2021). Free Secondary Education (FSE) in Kenya is a government policy introduced in 2008 under President Mwai Kibaki's administration to ensure universal access to secondary schooling by removing tuition fees, funded largely through state subsidies. The Kenyan Government provides capitation grants to public secondary schools per student. Funds cover tuition, textbooks, and basic learning materials. Schools are prohibited from charging tuition fees, but parents remain responsible for non-tuition costs (uniforms, boarding, transport, infrastructure levies). While it has significantly boosted enrolment and transition rates from primary to secondary school, hidden costs such as uniforms, transport, and development levies still burden families and limit true equity. Although Kenya's Free Secondary Education and Ghana's Free Senior High School policies both aim to expand access to secondary education, they differ in scope, funding, and sustainability. Kenya's programme covers tuition only, leaving families to pay hidden costs, while Ghana's model is more comprehensive, absorbing tuition, boarding, meals, and textbooks.

Uganda's Universal Secondary Education (USE), launched in 2007 as the Universal Post-Primary

Education and Training (UPPET) programme, is a government initiative to eliminate tuition barriers for post-primary education. The policy aimed to bridge the gap between free primary and limited secondary education by advancing inclusion, especially for girls, rural communities, and vulnerable households. The Government covers tuition for students in participating public and selected private schools, providing capitation grants per student. Parents remain responsible for non-tuition expenses such as uniforms, meals, transport, and exam fees. USE has increased participation, especially among girls, leading to delayed marriages and better economic opportunities. However, infrastructure and teacher shortages persist (Kazibwe, 2022).

Tanzania introduced its Fee-Free Basic Education (FFBE) policy in 2016 as the government's flagship education reform. The policy covers pre-primary, primary, and lower secondary education (Form IV). The policy abolished tuition, registration, and mandatory contributions in public schools. The government provides schools with per-student capitation grants. Parents are relieved of tuition but still pay for uniforms, meals, transport, exam fees, and construction levies. This creates a gap between "fee-free" and "cost-free" education. The FFBE policy expanded access but was hindered by delayed fund disbursements and weak supervision, which compromised educational quality (Wahuna et al., 2026; Sanchawa, 2025).

Rwanda launched free secondary education in December 2025 through the Ministry of Education (MINEDUC). Rwanda's RISE (Resilience in Secondary Education) program, launched in December 2025, is

a government-led accelerated education scheme designed to give out-of-school youth and adults aged 18–35 a second chance to complete secondary school. It is tuition-free, competency-based, and allows learners to earn an A2-equivalent certificate within 6–12 months. The policy targets out-of-school youth and adults (18–35 years) who dropped out of Senior 4, 5, or 6 as part of Rwanda's broader strategy to reduce dropout rates and expand inclusive access to education. The government fully subsidises the policy, supported by organisations such as the Mastercard Foundation, UNICEF Rwanda, Carnegie Mellon University Africa, the Imbutu Foundation, and YWCA Rwanda. It aims to remove financial barriers that previously excluded disadvantaged learners. In Rwanda, abolishing secondary school fees improved enrolment rates, though rural–urban disparities persist and require targeted interventions (Ndayishimiye, 2024).

**Table 6: Regional comparative framework of free secondary education policies**

| Country                | Policy & Year                                               | Coverage                                                                           | Funding Structure                                                                                                                 | Impact                                               | Challenges                                            | Sustainability Outlook                               |
|------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|
| Kenya – FSE (2008)     | Tuition-free in public schools                              | Tuition only; parents pay hidden costs (uniforms, transport, levies)               | Government provides capitation grants per student to schools; parents cover non-tuition costs                                     | Transition rate 95%; expanded enrolment              | Overcrowding, teacher shortages, hidden costs         | Needs PPPs, stronger governance                      |
| Uganda – USE (2007)    | Tuition-free in public & selected private schools           | Tuition covered; parents pay non-tuition costs                                     | Government pays tuition subsidies to participating schools; parents responsible for meals, uniforms, exams                        | Boosted enrolment, especially girls                  | Hidden costs, rural disparities, overcrowding         | Requires consistent funding & infrastructure         |
| Tanzania – FFBE (2016) | Fee-free from pre-primary to Form IV                        | Tuition, registration, contributions abolished; parents pay uniforms, meals, exams | Government provides capitation grants; abolished school fees and contributions; parents still pay indirect costs                  | Enrolment up 31% (2014–2017); improved gender equity | Overcrowding, teacher shortages, gender learning gaps | Needs digital learning, PPPs, gender-focused reforms |
| Rwanda – RISE (2025)   | Accelerated tuition-free secondary for dropouts (18–35 yrs) | Condensed 6–12 month curriculum; formal & skills-based tracks                      | Funded by government + donor partnerships (Mastercard Foundation, UNICEF, Carnegie Mellon Africa, Imbuto Foundation, YWCA Rwanda) | Second chance for youth; gender equity gains         | Pilot stage, quality assurance, limited districts     | Needs scaling, digital expansion, donor support      |

*A Note on Data Reliability: "n.d." denotes figures not separately disclosed in public reporting for that year. Ghana's own official disclosures on Free SHS financing are not fully reconcilable across sources; Parliamentary answers, annual budget statements, mid-year budget reviews, and ministerial media statements report different figures for overlapping periods, sometimes reflecting different accounting bases (approved vs released vs expended funds; fiscal year vs academic year). This inconsistency should be treated as a governance finding in its own right and direct evidence of weak fiscal transparency, not merely a data limitation*

Ghana's FSHS is unique because it is comprehensive, fully government-funded, and universal, covering nearly all student costs. Ghana's model produced the largest enrolment surge and equity impact, though at a high fiscal cost. Ghana (FSHS): Universal for all SHS students in public schools. In contrast, Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania provide tuition-free education but leave families with hidden costs.

Meanwhile, Rwanda's RISE is donor-supported and targets dropouts. In Rwanda, the policy specifically targets out-of-school youth (18–35) for accelerated completion. Ghana's FSHS policy is distinctive in its holistic coverage of costs; however, challenges such

as overcrowding, sustainability, and disparities across school categories, echo regional experiences. Global evidence underscores that balancing access, quality, and sustainability is the critical frontier for fee-free secondary education policies (Purvis, 2020). These cases highlight a common pattern: fee-free policies expand access and promote equity, particularly for disadvantaged groups, but without parallel investments in infrastructure, teacher recruitment, and resource equity, quality suffers.

## 2.0 METHODOLOGY

### 2.1 Research Design

This study used a phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of diverse stakeholders involved with Ghana's Free SHS policy. Phenomenology was chosen for its strength in engaging deeply with participants' subjective realities. It captures how participants interpret and make sense of the policy in their daily lives (Creswell, 2013). Unlike earlier studies that mainly used quantitative surveys or secondary data, this study highlights the voices of teachers, principals, kitchen staff, and recent graduates. It therefore offers a holistic, multi-layered understanding of the policy's successes, shortcomings, and implications.

### 2.2 Research Setting

The study was conducted across four zones of Ghana, the North, East, Central West, Central East, and South to ensure geographical diversity and capture regional variations in policy implementation. Schools were selected to reflect the Ghana Education Service (GES) categorisation system (A, B, C, and D), which stratifies institutions by prestige, resources, and performance. This categorisation provided a framework for comparing experiences across elite, mid-tier, and resource-constrained schools, ensuring findings are nationally representative and contextually grounded. This stratification captures the hierarchical differences in prestige, resources, and performance among Ghanaian senior high schools and allows for comparative insights rarely

explored in existing Free SHS research.

### 2.3 Participants and Sampling Strategy

A purposive sampling strategy was used to include diverse and unique participant groups whose perspectives are often overlooked in existing studies of Ghana's Free SHS policy. The sample comprised 47 participants across four stakeholder categories:

- a. First-Year University Students (n = 16): Sixteen first-year students, four from each SHS category (A–D), were included. Their perspectives are distinctive as they are the immediate beneficiaries of Free SHS. They offer fresh reflections on how the policy shaped their move from secondary to tertiary education. Unlike alumni interviewed years after graduation, these participants share real-time Free SHS outcomes, reducing recall bias and ensuring contemporaneous insights. This approach advances methodological rigour by capturing the direct pipeline effect of Free SHS, a dimension rarely explored in prior studies (Akyeampong, 2018).
- b. Teachers (n = 16): Sixteen teachers from the Ghana National Association of Graduate Teachers (NAGRAT), representing each school category (A–D), participated. Teachers are key to implementing the policy and offer important perspectives on classroom issues such as overcrowding, discipline, and resources. By including all four GES categories, the study reveals differences in teacher

experiences in elite, mid-tier, and resource-constrained schools. This provides a nationally representative view. This contrasts with earlier studies that mostly sampled teachers from urban or Category A schools (see Agbenyega et al, 2023; Mensah et al, 2025).

- c. Kitchen Staff (n = 12): Twelve kitchen staff were included, three from each category A, B, C and D. Their participation is innovative, as non-teaching staff are rarely featured in Free SHS research. However, they play a key role in managing food provision for large student populations. Their insights reveal operational challenges, including feeding logistics, hygiene, and resource adequacy. These issues affect student welfare and retention but are often overlooked in policy discussions. This unique focus strengthens the study's contribution by addressing more than academic outcomes and supporting calls for whole-school approaches (UNESCO, 2021).
- d. Principals (n = 3): Three principals from Category B, C and D schools were interviewed to provide leadership perspectives on policy implementation. Principals from Category A schools could not honour our invitations to participate in the study due to their busy schedules. Principals occupy a strategic position, balancing government directives with school-level realities. Their insights contextualise the experiences of teachers, students, and kitchen staff, offering a macro-level view of institutional management under Free SHS.

## 2.4 Justification of Sample Size and Composition

The sample size of 47 participants was deliberately structured to balance depth and diversity. By engaging multiple stakeholder groups across Ghana's GES school categorisation system (A–D) and regional zones, the study triangulates perspectives, enhancing credibility and trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1988). Including both academic (students, teachers, and principals) and non-academic (kitchen staff) voices ensures a holistic analysis of Free SHS, capturing dimensions of access, quality, discipline, and operational sustainability.

This multi-stakeholder approach distinguishes the study from existing literature, which often focuses narrowly on teachers or policymakers. By integrating fresh graduates and kitchen staff, the study provides novel insights into immediate student outcomes and operational challenges, positioning it to inform both national and international policy debates.

## 2.5 Data Collection

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews that balanced consistency and flexibility (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Interviews lasted 45–60 minutes, were conducted in English and Twi, and were audio-recorded and translated with consent. Semi-structured interviews allowed participants to elaborate on personal experiences while enabling the research team to probe emerging issues such as discipline, resource allocation, and student motivation.

Additionally, the study conducted a preliminary desk review of 157 publications indexed in Google Scholar, Scopus, and Web of Science (2017–2025). This ensured that the study built on existing knowledge while identifying gaps and new policy issues.

## **2.6 Data Analysis**

Data were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Transcripts were reviewed iteratively, coded inductively, and organised into themes reflecting successes, shortfalls, and suggested improvements. Reflexive journaling minimised researcher bias, and the team discussed coding decisions collaboratively to enhance reliability. Themes were triangulated with findings from the preliminary literature review and cross-national comparisons (Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, Rwanda) ensuring both local depth and international relevance.

## **2.7 Trustworthiness and Rigour**

The study followed Lincoln and Guba's (1988) criteria for credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Member checking involved inviting participants to review interview summaries. Thick descriptions of school categories and regional contexts enable applicability to other settings. An audit trail documented methodological decisions. Triangulation across multiple participant groups and literature sources minimised bias. This rigorous approach ensures findings are both trustworthy and impactful for policy decision-making.

## **2.8 Ethical Considerations**

Participants were fully informed about the study's objectives, procedures, and rights. The researchers secured informed consent before interviews. The study maintained confidentiality through pseudonyms and secure data storage. Participants were assured of their right to withdraw at any time without repercussions. Special care was taken with kitchen staff, students, and teachers, who may be considered vulnerable groups, by conducting interviews in familiar settings and emphasising voluntary participation.

## **2.9 Distinctiveness of the Study**

Unlike prior studies that focus narrowly on teachers or policymakers, this research uniquely integrates students, teachers, principals, and kitchen staff across all GES school categories and regions. The inclusion of kitchen staff, a group often invisible in education policy research, provides novel insights into operational challenges. Similarly, engaging new university entrants ensures immediate reflections, capturing the direct outcomes of Free SHS. Participant structure makes the study distinctive, rigorous, and nationally representative, offering policy lessons that are both grounded and innovative.

## 3.0 FINDINGS

The Free SHS policy has delivered historic gains in access, equity, and social mobility, but its implementation reveals systemic challenges and stratified experiences. Successes are unevenly distributed across school categories: elite schools focus on standards and governance, while disadvantaged schools struggle with survival needs. The themes below discuss the findings, with specifics in the appendix (see tables 1-5).

### 3.1 Policy rationale

1. The rationale for implementing the “Free SHS” policy was to bridge the education inequity gap in Ghana and reduce poverty.
2. The policy's implementation was more politically motivated, as it aimed to advance the agenda of the political actors involved.

### 3.2 Extent of Consultation

The reviewed literature indicates that the programme's implementation unfolded in three phases: programme, process and political (Mohammed and Kuyini, 2020). However, the actors focused more on the programme and political dimension than the process dimension. During the agenda-setting stage, the problem was not clearly defined (Adarkwah, 2022), and in the adoption stage, no viable alternatives were considered. Because these stages were skipped before implementing the policy, doubts remain about its sustainability and funding (Mohammed, 2020).

## 3.3 Key Implementation Successes

The implementation of the Free SHS programme has seen significant successes, making it one of the key policy/programme highlights of Ghana's Fourth Republic. The policy successes emerged include:

1. **Expanded Access and Equity Gains:** Free SHS has democratised access, enabling poor and rural students to transition smoothly from JHS to SHS. Families report relief from financial burdens, with some able to send multiple children to school at the same time. Students describe the policy as a symbol of dignity, pride, and social mobility.
2. **Material Support:** Provision of textbooks, uniforms, calculators, and past questions reduced household costs and standardised learning opportunities. Despite delays, eventual distribution was valued, showing resilience and adaptability.
3. **Financial Relief and Peace of Mind:** Removal of tuition fees eased household stress, allowing students to focus on learning and progress to tertiary education. Parents redirected resources to other educational needs, strengthening family stability.
4. **Academic Motivation and Holistic Development:** Students in well-resourced schools viewed Free SHS as an opportunity to excel academically, while others valued basic access. Across contexts, the policy motivated learners to work harder and fostered social exposure, social

capital, peer networks, and personal growth, particularly for first-generation students.

### 3.4 Key Implementation Issues

1. **Category Differences in Experience causing Intra-System Inequities:** Free SHS is not experienced uniformly. Category A schools emphasise academic standards, governance, and motivation, while Category C/D schools struggle with overcrowding, poor facilities, and survival needs such as food and furniture.
2. **Resource Distribution Bias:** Higher-category schools benefit from timely supplies and external support (PTAs, alumni), while lower-category schools face delays, shortages, and poor infrastructure. This systemic bias risks widening inequality despite equity goals.
3. **Policy Dilemmas – Access vs Standards:** Students are divided between celebrating universal access and advocating cut-off points to maintain academic rigour. Elite schools call for readiness criteria, while community schools demand basic infrastructure.
4. **The double-track:** The double-track system has reduced student contact hours, strained teacher availability, and forced many parents to pay for extra classes, raising household costs despite the “free” label.
5. **Hidden Costs and Resource Delays:** Prospectus requirements imposed financial burdens, while delays and shortages in uniforms and books undermined the “free” narrative. Poor resource management even led to theft and inefficiencies.
6. **Discipline and Accountability Gaps:** The “no repetition” rule and automatic placement fostered indiscipline and reduced student accountability. Both teachers and kitchen staff observed misuse of resources (e.g., tablets) and student complacency, undermining academic seriousness.
7. **Overcrowding and Infrastructure Deficits as Health Risks:** Enrolment surges have strained classrooms, dormitories, and dining halls, undermining teaching effectiveness and student welfare. Overcrowding is framed as a health risk, not just a comfort issue.
8. **Teacher Workload, Morale, and Variability:** Large class sizes, admission of academically weak students, and lack of incentives have increased teacher burden. While some teachers remain dedicated, others are absent or overloaded, reflecting uneven implementation.
9. **Support Staff Pressures and Poor Incentives:** Kitchen staff face heavy workloads due to batch feeding and inadequate facilities yet remain underpaid and undervalued. Poor working conditions erode morale and raise sustainability concerns.

## 3.5 Key Stakeholders' Perspectives on the Way Forward

### 1. Introduce Academic Cut-Offs

- i. Stakeholders (teachers, kitchen staff, and students in elite schools) call for grade cut-off points or readiness criteria to restore academic seriousness.
- ii. Automatic placement is seen as reducing motivation and discipline.

### 2. Strengthen Student Accountability and Discipline

- i. Principals and teachers highlight misuse of government-provided tablets and the “no repetition” rule as undermining accountability.
- ii. Calls for stricter monitoring, remedial programs, and performance-based progression.

### 3. Invest in Infrastructure and Resource Equity

- i. Students in lower-category schools demand urgent investment in dormitories, dining halls, classrooms, and equipment.
- ii. Resource distribution must be rebalanced to prioritise disadvantaged schools.

### 4. Improve Working Conditions and Incentives for Staff

- i. Teachers and kitchen staff report fatigue, frustration, and poor morale due to heavy workloads and low pay.

- ii. Calls for fair compensation, incentives, and recognition of the non-teaching staff's critical role.

### 5. Ensure Governance Transparency and Stakeholder Dialogue

- i. Students and teachers emphasise the need for transparent placement systems and regular dialogue with the Ministry of Education.
- ii. Stakeholders want systemic reforms to improve trust, responsiveness, and accountability.

## 4.0 LESSONS LEARNED

The findings from stakeholder perspectives, the comparative review of international best practice, and the subsequent stakeholder discussion sessions point to thirteen clear lessons that should inform the next phase of Free Senior High School (Free SHS) reform:

**Lesson 1:** The meaning of “Free” in Free SHS remains ambiguous and has been defined inconsistently across different government administrations, resulting in differential treatment that disproportionately disadvantages students from poorer socioeconomic backgrounds.

**Lesson 2:** Financing for Free SHS relies on politically contingent annual allocations rather than structurally secured mechanisms such as indexed funding or an endowment, leaving its long-term sustainability exposed to short-term fiscal and political pressure.

**Lesson 3:** Free SHS has not delivered uniform benefits across the system: schools in lower resource

categories (Category C/D) continue to face acute shortages of dormitories, dining halls, classrooms, and equipment, showing that access expansion has outpaced equitable resource distribution.

**Lesson 4:** International experience from Finland, Norway, Singapore, South Korea, Kenya, Rwanda, and Botswana shows that free secondary education is sustainable only when access expansion is paired with equity-sensitive resourcing, quality-assurance mechanisms, participatory governance, and investment in staff welfare. This confirms that Ghana's Free SHS reforms must move decisively beyond enrolment expansion alone.

**Lesson 5:** Weak governance structures and limited platforms for dialogue between the Ministry of Education and school-level stakeholders have eroded trust and left placement and resource-allocation decisions widely perceived as opaque.

**Lesson 6:** Free SHS remains vulnerable to redefinition with every change of government because it has not been anchored in bipartisan, binding legislation – leaving its scope, funding, and rules subject to political cycles rather than durable, cross-party commitment.

**Lesson 7:** Frontline staff such as teachers and non-teaching staff such as kitchen workers report fatigue and low morale linked to heavy workloads, inadequate pay, and insufficient recognition, which threatens the sustainability of service delivery.

**Lesson 8:** Unconditional automatic placement, without academic readiness benchmarks, has weakened student motivation, discipline, and the perceived seriousness of secondary schooling

**Lesson 9:** Removing grade repetition, combined with limited enforcement of the use of government-provided tablets and learning materials, has created gaps in student accountability that undermine learning outcomes.

**Lesson 10:** Vulnerable and remote learners face unaddressed mobility barriers: without formal transport or guaranteed boarding for deprived day students, “free” schooling remains geographically inaccessible for many, and these mobility gaps have functioned as a policy blind spot rather than a recognised failure.

**Lesson 11:** Ghana's technological readiness for future and crisis-resilient learning of AI teacher literacy, national connectivity infrastructure, offline e-learning reserves, and localised Open Educational Resources remains underdeveloped relative to the pace of technological change and the lessons of the COVID-19 school closures.

**Lesson 12:** Teacher deployment through the Computerised School Selection and Placement System (CSSPS) lacks explicit equity safeguards, and rural postings remain under-incentivised, contributing to uneven teacher distribution and quality across school categories.

**Lesson 13:** The SHS curriculum has not kept pace with 21st-century multiliteracies of digital literacy, critical thinking, and financial literacy, risking a mismatch between what Free SHS produces and what a digitalised, globalised economy demands.

## 5.0 POLICY OPTIONS FOR A REFORMED FREE SHS (NEXT PHASE)

Moving forward, policymakers face a critical choice: whether to consolidate gains or risk widening disparities. The reformed Free SHS must move beyond enrolment expansion to equity-sensitive and quality-driven reforms. By addressing resource inequities, strengthening accountability, and investing in staff welfare, Ghana can transform Free SHS from a bold access policy into a sustainable model of inclusive excellence. This will ensure that the policy not only democratises education but also delivers meaningful learning outcomes across all school categories. To sustain the gains of the Free SHS while addressing inequities, the following actions are recommended. The recommendations below are sequenced into short-, medium-, and long-term actions so that implementation can begin immediately while building toward deeper structural reform.

### 5.1 Short-Term Actions (0–1 Year)

These are low-cost, low-complexity actions that can be initiated immediately using existing structures and authority.

**Table 7: Short-Term Actions**

| Recommendation                                                                                                                                                                      | Responsible Actor(s)                       | Implementation Approach ("How")                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Clarify and formally legislate the definition of "Free" in Free SHS, explicitly specifying that it covers tuition, textbooks, uniforms, boarding, and other routinely hidden costs. | Ministry of Education; Parliament of Ghana | Issue a policy clarification/circular defining the scope of "free" provisions, commission equity audits to verify vulnerable groups are actually reached, and disseminate the definition to all school categories and the public. |
| Providing phased or targeted support with greater attention to disadvantaged students and Category C and D schools.                                                                 | Ministry of Education; Parliament of Ghana | Design targeted policies for First Generation students and prioritise infrastructure to C/D schools                                                                                                                               |
| Reform the student-placement system's transparency, starting with an appeals channel and district-level complaint oversight.                                                        | GES; District Education Offices            | Introduce a formal appeals mechanism for placement decisions and route complaints through district-level oversight bodies.                                                                                                        |
| Institutionalise regular consultation forums between the Ministry of Education and school-level stakeholders (headmasters, teachers, support staff, parents).                       | Ministry of Education                      | Schedule recurring dialogue sessions (e.g., termly) with standing agendas covering placement, resourcing, and welfare concerns; use these forums to begin co-designing policy changes with those who will live with them.         |
| Mobilise existing Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) and alumni networks to support the most disadvantaged (Category C/D) schools.                                                    | PTAs; Alumni; Civil Society                | Launch targeted fundraising drives, mentorship programmes, and small-scale infrastructure support using existing community structures.                                                                                            |

| Recommendation                                                                                                                 | Responsible Actor(s)                                     | Implementation Approach ("How")                                                                                                                                             |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Commission a national, district-level audit of access and mobility gaps affecting remote and vulnerable day students.          | Ministry of Education; GES                               | Map which districts and student populations face the greatest commuting or accessibility barriers, to build the evidence base for the transport and boarding reforms below. |
| Initiate cross-party political dialogue on depoliticising Free SHS, laying the groundwork for future legislative entrenchment. | Ministry of Education; Parliament of Ghana (all parties) | Convene early, informal cross-party talks on a shared long-term framework for Free SHS, ahead of the formal legislative process pursued in the long term.                   |

## 5.2 Medium-Term Actions (1–3 Years)

These actions require policy design, piloting, and budget-cycle planning, and depend on the foundations laid by the short-term actions above.

**Table 8: Medium-Term Actions**

| Recommendation                                                                                                                             | Responsible Actor(s)       | Implementation Approach ("How")                                                                                                                 |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Design and pilot academic readiness criteria (grade cut-off points or bridging programmes) to balance inclusivity with academic standards. | Ministry of Education; GES | Pilot readiness benchmarks and bridging programmes in a subset of districts, drawing on Singapore/South Korea models, before national roll-out. |

| Recommendation                                                                                                                                                                                            | Responsible Actor(s)                       | Implementation Approach ("How")                                                                                                                                                                    |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Replace blanket automatic promotion with a structured, performance-based progression system.                                                                                                              | Ministry of Education; School heads        | Introduce conditional repetition or remedial pathways for underperforming students, supported by counselling and remedial programmes.                                                              |
| Establish a transparent resource-tracking system and reform the school categorisation system so budgets guarantee baseline-equal per-student funding across all bands, prioritising Category C/D schools. | Ministry of Education & GES                | Build a public resource-tracking system, weight allocation formulas toward under-resourced schools, and reduce the stigma attached to the categorisation system.                                   |
| Redesign teacher and non-teaching staff salary and incentive structures and recruit additional staff to manage large class sizes.                                                                         | Government of Ghana; Ministry of Education | Introduce transparent, performance-based allowances, broaden welfare packages, and recruit staff to relieve overstretched schools.                                                                 |
| Develop a phased learning-analytics and transparency dashboard to begin tracking core system indicators.                                                                                                  | Ministry of Education; GES                 | Build a dashboard (modelled on Ghana's COVID-19 dashboard) tracking enrolment, attendance, and resource allocation as a first phase.                                                               |
| Strengthen routine supervision of food provision, resource distribution, and teacher recruitment/deployment.                                                                                              | GES; District Education Offices            | Expand monitoring visits and reporting requirements, with findings feeding into the resource-tracking system above.                                                                                |
| Build equity criteria and an appeals mechanism into the CSSPS for teacher postings, paired with rural posting incentives.                                                                                 | GES; Ministry of Education                 | Add transparent, criteria-based rules and an appeals channel to teacher placement decisions, and offer housing and allowance incentives for rural postings to correct uneven teacher distribution. |

| Recommendation                                                                                                                                                                     | Responsible Actor(s)                                                         | Implementation Approach ("How")                                                                                                                                                                         |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Institutionalise annual, independent monitoring and evaluation reviews that assess equity outcomes, not just enrolment numbers.                                                    | Ministry of Education; independent evaluators (academia, civil society); GES | Commission yearly reviews drawing on academia, civil society, and GES, and build a formal mechanism to feed findings directly back into policy iteration.                                               |
| Pilot hybrid/blended learning models and develop localised, curriculum-aligned Open Educational Resources (OER) in Ghanaian languages that work offline.                           | Ministry of Education; GES; international partners                           | Run small-scale hybrid-learning pilots and co-develop OER with UNESCO, the Commonwealth of Learning, and African universities, testing offline functionality before wider release.                      |
| Invest in AI teacher-literacy training and expand equitable device and internet access as the foundation for a future national e-learning backbone.                                | Ministry of Education; GES                                                   | Deliver structured AI/digital-pedagogy training for teachers and prioritise device and connectivity roll-out in underserved schools ahead of urban ones.                                                |
| Revise the SHS curriculum to embed digital literacy including recorded lessons, YouTube/social media and virtual learning to reduce lost contact hours during double-track periods | Ministry of Education; National Council for Curriculum and Assessment        | Update curriculum content and assessment to reflect 21st-century multiliteracies, and schedule recurring, independently-led curriculum reviews.                                                         |
| Formally benchmark Free SHS against comparable international models and begin establishing sustainable financing instruments.                                                      | Ministry of Education; Ministry of Finance; Parliament                       | Conduct a structured benchmarking exercise against Kenya, South Africa, Finland, and Singapore, and begin capitalising a Free SHS Endowment Fund alongside multi-year Parliamentary budget commitments. |

## 5.3 Long-Term Actions (3+ Years)

These are capital-intensive, structural, or future-oriented reforms that require sustained, multi-year investment and cross-government coordination.

**Table 9: Long-Term Actions**

| Recommendation                                                                                                                                                                                                  | Responsible Actor(s)                                              | Implementation Approach ("How")                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Undertake targeted, budgeted infrastructure expansion – dormitories, classrooms, dining halls – in lower-category schools, and formally extend free transport and guaranteed boarding to deprived day students. | Government of Ghana (Cabinet & Parliament); Ministry of Education | Ring-fence a specific share of the education budget for capital expenditure, deliver projects through pre-approved local builders on fixed timelines, and treat mobility barriers identified in the short-term audit as a policy failure to be closed, not a side issue. |
| Elevate investment in the Free Compulsory Universal Basic Education (FCUBE) policy to strengthen the foundational pipeline feeding into Free SHS.                                                               | Government of Ghana; Ministry of Education                        | Give FCUBE equal budgetary and policy weighting to Free SHS and ring-fence its funding as Free SHS expands, on the reasoning that a weak basic-education "foundation" undermines the entire secondary system.                                                            |
| Develop a mega/meta policy framework clarifying how Free SHS relates to adjacent policies such as school feeding, transport, boarding, and health.                                                              | Ministry of Education; National Development Planning Commission   | Conduct a policy-mapping exercise to legally clarify whether related policies are sub-components of Free SHS or independent, parallel instruments, and eliminate duplication through a unified policy architecture.                                                      |
| Develop and expand national data dashboard for the Free SHS into a fully real-time, publicly accessible system.                                                                                                 | Ministry of Education; GES; Ghana Statistical Service             | Track enrolment, attendance, learning outcomes, teacher-pupil ratios, resource allocation, and WASSCE results by school, district, and region, enabling civil-society and media accountability.                                                                          |

| Recommendation                                                                                                                                                  | Responsible Actor(s)                                                                     | Implementation Approach ("How")                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Scale blended and virtual SHS delivery nationally, underpinned by a national fibre backbone, solar-powered computer labs, and last-mile connectivity.           | Government of Ghana; Ministry of Communications; Ministry of Education; telecom partners | Build out national fibre infrastructure and solar-powered computer labs, deploy community Wi-Fi hubs and satellite internet in remote areas, and treat digital access as essential infrastructure – turning the AI-assisted teaching and OER piloted in the medium term into a fully viable, equitable online/virtual SHS pathway. |
| Formally entrench Free SHS in bipartisan legislation requiring a parliamentary supermajority to amend, overseen by an independent, cross-party statutory board. | Government of Ghana (Cabinet & Parliament)                                               | Pass binding legislation setting a supermajority threshold for amendment and establish an independent oversight board so the policy survives beyond any single administration and evidence, not manifestos, drives its iteration.                                                                                                  |
| Institutionalise permanent, system-wide crisis-resilience architecture as a standing feature of the education system rather than an ad hoc response.            | Ministry of Education; GES; National Disaster Management Organisation                    | Maintain standing offline e-learning reserves and preloaded devices, institutionalise radio and TV lesson broadcasting, embed mental-health support protocols, and maintain resilient supply chains, so learning continuity and staff wellbeing survive the next crisis and pre-empt teacher attrition.                            |
| <b>Toward More Sustainable Domestic Financing</b>                                                                                                               |                                                                                          |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| Secure Free SHS's long-term financing through a stable, ring-fenced GETFund allocation with annual per-student cost indexing.                                   | Government of Ghana; Ministry of Finance; GETFund Secretariat                            | Lock in indexed GETFund allocations and multi-year Parliamentary budget commitments, and grow the Free SHS Endowment Fund (established in the medium term) through partner co-financing.                                                                                                                                           |

| Recommendation                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | Responsible Actor(s)                                              | Implementation Approach ("How")                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Legislate the GETFund transition. Convert the 2025 uncapping from an executive budget decision into a statutory entitlement: a specific, published percentage of the GETFund Levy ring-fenced for Free SHS recurrent costs, reviewed and reported to Parliament annually, so the reform survives beyond the current administration.                                        | Parliament of Ghana; Ministry of Finance; Ministry of Education   | Draft and pass an amendment to the GETFund Act (or a standalone Free SHS Financing Act) fixing a specific, published percentage of the GETFund Levy as a statutory, ring-fenced allocation for Free SHS recurrent costs. Require the Minister of Finance to report actual disbursements against this entitlement to Parliament annually as part of the budget cycle, so the reform is binding on future administrations rather than reversible by executive decision. |
| Diversify away from single-commodity dependence. Having relied on petroleum revenue for seven of nine years, Ghana should treat a stable, broad-based instrument (for example, an extension of the Communication Service Tax model, or a dedicated share of VAT) as a genuine alternative or complement to ABFA, reducing exposure to oil-price and production volatility. | Ministry of Finance; GETFund Secretariat, Ghana Revenue Authority | Commission a feasibility study comparing a dedicated VAT share against an extended Communication Service Tax model as a stable co-financing instrument. Legislate the preferred option as a formal, permanent complement to ABFA, with a phased implementation timetable that gradually reduces Free SHS's reliance on petroleum revenue.                                                                                                                             |

| Recommendation                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | Responsible Actor(s)                                              | Implementation Approach ("How")                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Diversify away from single-commodity dependence. Having relied on petroleum revenue for seven of nine years, Ghana should treat a stable, broad-based instrument (for example, an extension of the Communication Service Tax model, or a dedicated share of VAT) as a genuine alternative or complement to ABFA, reducing exposure to oil-price and production volatility. | Ministry of Finance; GETFund Secretariat, Ghana Revenue Authority | Commission a feasibility study comparing a dedicated VAT share against an extended Communication Service Tax model as a stable co-financing instrument. Legislate the preferred option as a formal, permanent complement to ABFA, with a phased implementation timetable that gradually reduces Free SHS's reliance on petroleum revenue. |
| Publish one consolidated, annual Free SHS financing statement. Reconciling Ministry of Education, Ministry of Finance, and GETFund figures into a single public document would directly address the transparency gap this review identifies, and would make future sustainability assessments – by government, researchers, or civil society – more reliable.              | Ministry of Education; Ministry of Finance; GETFund Secretariat   | Establish a standing inter-agency data-reconciliation unit tasked with compiling MoE, MoF, and GETFund figures on a common accounting basis. Publish the resulting statement annually, using a fixed reporting template, alongside the national Budget Statement and the Mid-Year Budget Review.                                          |

| Recommendation                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              | Responsible Actor(s)                                                                                                       | Implementation Approach ("How")                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Capitalise a Free SHS Endowment Fund. Building on the Daakye Bond precedent, combine GETFund contributions, diaspora bonds, and alumni or private-sector co-financing into an invested endowment that can smooth funding across years when oil revenue or GETFund collections underperform. | Ministry of Finance; GETFund Secretariat; Ministry of Education; diaspora and alumni associations; private-sector partners | Establish a legally independent endowment board with a professional investment mandate. Seed the fund with an initial GETFund contribution and a diaspora bond issuance modelled on the Daakye Bond, then open co-financing channels for alumni associations and private-sector donors. Invest the principal and draw only the investment income to top up Free SHS financing in years of shortfall. |

## 6.0 OTHER PATHWAYS FORWARD – COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF GLOBAL BEST PRACTICES

Global evidence shows free secondary education works when access is paired with equity, quality, and governance reforms. Ghana must apply these lessons in the next phase of Free SHS:

### 6.1 Equity-Sensitive Resource Allocation

- **Best Practice:** Countries like Finland and Norway ensure equitable resource distribution across schools, regardless of location or socioeconomic background.
- **Lesson for Ghana:** Prioritise Category C/D schools with targeted infrastructure investment, transparent resource tracking, and community support mechanisms. If Ghana does not adopt this approach, persistent inequities will widen the gap between elite and disadvantaged schools, undermining Free SHS's equity goals.

### 6.2 Quality Assurance and Academic Standards

- **Best Practice:** Singapore and South Korea combine universal access with rigorous academic standards, using bridging programs and differentiated support for weaker students.
- Ghana should set readiness criteria or cut-

off points and offer remedial programs. This balances inclusivity with quality. Without performance checks, automatic placement may erode discipline and reduce learning outcomes.

### 6.3 Governance and Stakeholder Engagement

- **Best Practice:** Kenya's free secondary education programme emphasises stakeholder dialogue, involving parents, teachers, and local boards in monitoring implementation.
- **Lesson for Ghana:** Institutionalise regular consultations between the Ministry of Education, principals, PTAs, and alums to improve transparency and responsiveness. Failure to do so will weaken governance, perpetuating mistrust and inefficiencies in placement and resource distribution.

### 6.4 Teacher and Staff Incentives

- **Best Practice:** Rwanda and Botswana link free education reforms to teacher welfare, offering incentives, professional development, and recognition for non-teaching staff.
- Based on these models, Ghana must improve salaries, manage workloads, and enhance welfare for teachers and kitchen staff to maintain morale and service quality.
- **Risk if Ignored:** Staff fatigue and low morale will compromise the sustainability of Free SHS delivery.

## 7.0 CONCLUSION

Ghana's Free Senior High School policy stands as one of the most consequential social interventions of the Fourth Republic, expanding enrolment by more than 27 per cent in its first year, narrowing the gender gap in secondary education, and delivering families across the country a long-denied experience of dignity and relief from cost. However, nine years of evidence now converge on a single, urgent conclusion: the policy's early success has been substantially undermined by its own unreformed design. A programme intended to democratise access has instead entrenched a stratified system in which Category A and B schools consolidate historic advantage. In contrast, Category C and D schools absorb the same enrolment surge with a fraction of the resources, sorted there in the first instance by a placement mechanism that channels prior disadvantage directly into future deprivation; a financing architecture which depended on a single volatile revenue stream, and under which households still shoulder the true cost of a policy branded "free"; and implementation choices that produce congestion and indiscipline not as inevitable costs of access, but as avoidable consequences of sequencing failure.

These findings are not evidence that Free SHS should be abandoned; they are evidence that it cannot survive, in its current form, unreformed. Ghana's policymakers face a closing window in which incremental adjustment is no longer sufficient: the evidence demands legislated, ring-fenced financing insulated from annual political negotiation; resource allocation deliberately weighted toward Category C and D schools rather than left to a formula that

has consistently favoured the already-advantaged; capacity-linked phasing for every future expansion; and a single, transparent, publicly reconciled account of where the money actually goes. The current Free SHS policy cannot be sustained by goodwill and universal branding alone, it must be re-engineered, deliberately and without further delay, into the equitable and durable system it has so far only promised to be.

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**Table 10: Findings on how Free SHS affects students**

|                                              |                                             |                                                                                                        |                                                                       |                                                                                                                    |
|----------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Implementa-<br/>tion Success</b>          | <b>Psychosocial Dimen-<br/>sion</b>         | Students expressed joy, pride, and relief; Free SHS symbolized dignity and family pride.               | Education became a marker of achievement and reshaped identities.     | "I felt as if I've reached the highest level of my education... my parents were proud of me." (P10-CAT C)          |
|                                              | <b>Equity Gains &amp; Access</b>            | Reduced financial barriers; smooth transitions from JHS to SHS; poor and rural students gained access. | Intergenerational comparisons show measurable equity gains.           | "Before the free SHS came... Free SHS created opportunities for everyone." (P1-CAT A)                              |
|                                              | <b>Material Support</b>                     | Provision of uniforms, books, calculators, past questions, and COVID-19 supplies.                      | Resource provision extended beyond tuition; responsiveness to crises. | "Even during COVID-19 they provided us with sanitizers, nose masks, and all that for free." (P4-CAT B)             |
|                                              | <b>Financial Relief &amp; Peace of Mind</b> | Removal of fees reduced household stress; students focused on learning.                                | Peace of mind linked directly to academic achievement.                | "There was no pressure on me... I was able to concentrate on my studies." (P2-CAT B)                               |
|                                              | <b>Academic Motivation</b>                  | Students worked harder, motivated by opportunity.                                                      | Psychological effect of opportunity drove achievement.                | "Because it was free, I did not want to waste time at all. I must leave this school with a good grade." (P1-CAT A) |
|                                              | <b>Social Exposure &amp; Development</b>    | Access to new environments, peer networks, and responsibilities.                                       | Non-academic benefits fostered holistic development.                  | "The free education gave you access to meet new people, interact with them." (P9-CAT A)                            |
| <b>Implementa-<br/>tion Chal-<br/>lenges</b> | <b>Registration Chal-<br/>lenges</b>        | Lengthy, bureaucratic enrollment processes.                                                            | Administrative inefficiencies undermined accessibility gains.         | "The enrolment process alone took you, like 3 days..." (P2-CAT B)                                                  |
|                                              | <b>Placement Mis-<br/>matches</b>           | Students often placed in schools they did not choose.                                                  | Placement quality affects satisfaction and retention.                 | "I was not expecting the school... what I selected is not what I had." (P12-CAT C)                                 |
|                                              | <b>Hidden Costs</b>                         | Prospectus requirements imposed financial burdens.                                                     | Undermines credibility of "free" narrative.                           | "They said it was free... but when we got there, they gave us the prospectus, it was about 56 items." (P13-CAT C)  |
|                                              | <b>Disciplinary &amp; Social Issues</b>     | Stigma from teachers/seniors; bullying and strict rules.                                               | Policy unintentionally created social stratification.                 | "Teachers will be saying... if not because of free SHS, you won't be here." (P4-CAT B)                             |
|                                              | <b>Teacher Commit-<br/>ment Variability</b> | Some teachers dedicated, others absent or overloaded.                                                  | Dual narrative highlights need for accountability.                    | "Sometimes we go to class... only English and Maths teachers, but no science." (P13-CAT C)                         |
|                                              | <b>Infrastructure Strain</b>                | Overcrowded classrooms/dormitories; health risks.                                                      | Enrollment success created unintended infrastructure challenges.      | "Two people have to share one bed... some sleeping on the floor." (P14-CAT D)                                      |
|                                              | <b>Food Quality &amp; Quantity</b>          | Poor quality, insufficient portions, occasional shortages.                                             | Elevated to public health concern; linked to illness.                 | "Sometimes... for about a week the government does not provide any food." (P1-CAT A)                               |
|                                              | <b>Delayed/Inade-<br/>quate Resources</b>   | Late or insufficient uniforms/books; mismanagement.                                                    | Resource delays undermined effectiveness; theft issues emerged.       | "Uniforms were oversized... it led to a lot of people stealing other people's uniforms." (P7-CAT B)                |

|  |                                      |                                                         |                                                           |                                                                                                        |
|--|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|  | <b>Double Track Challenges</b>       | Reduced time in school; weakened socialization.         | Balanced affordability with disrupted continuity.         | "Double track... we didn't spend time in school... socialization was a challenge." (P12-CAT C)         |
|  | <b>Security &amp; Welfare Issues</b> | Theft, bedbugs, unsafe facilities, contractor lockouts. | Governance gaps directly disrupted learning environments. | "One man came to lock one of the story buildings because the contractor hasn't been paid." (P15-CAT D) |

**Table 11: Key findings from Teachers and Principals**

| Category                  | Theme                                      | Key Findings                                                                                                              | Novelty/Implications                                                                                 | Illustrative Quotes                                                                                                                     |
|---------------------------|--------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Implementation Success    | Access, Equity, and Social Mobility        | Free SHS is seen as a lifeline for poor and needy students, expanding enrollment and leveling socio-economic disparities. | Teachers describe the policy as transformative, offering hope and opportunity to excluded students.  | "All thanks to the free SHS policy... all the bright students who had no hope of continuing their education are benefiting." (T11)      |
| Implementation Challenges | Overcrowding & Infrastructure Deficits     | Enrollment surge has led to overcrowded classrooms, dormitories, and dining halls; facilities overstretched.              | Access gains created quality challenges; dining delays and strained logistics undermine delivery.    | "Classroom options have about 60 to 80 plus students in one class, making effective teaching and individual attention difficult." (HT1) |
|                           | Teacher Workload & Student Preparedness    | Large class sizes and admission of academically weak students increased teacher burden.                                   | Inclusivity created tension between equity and quality; "no repetition" rule reduced accountability. | "It puts a lot of burden on the teachers because academically some of them are weak... it is making our work very difficult." (T1)      |
|                           | Teacher Attitudes Toward Policy            | Teachers support universal access but express fatigue and frustration with workload.                                      | Commitment remains strong, but morale is affected by operational demands.                            | "We the teachers are happy... but the class has increased in large sizes and it makes marking difficult." (T2)                          |
|                           | Discipline Challenges                      | Indiscipline linked to inclusivity, overcrowding, and "no repetition" policy.                                             | Structural features weakened accountability and supervision, undermining academic seriousness.       | "They tend not to study hard... they kind of have a lazy attitude towards learning." (T1)                                               |
|                           | Student Preparedness & Misuse of Resources | Some students lack readiness; misuse of tablets for non-academic purposes.                                                | Highlights need for better targeting and monitoring of resources.                                    | "Students tend to use [tablets] for calling their boyfriends, taking unnecessary pictures, videoing teachers whilst in class." (T1)     |
|                           | Teacher & Staff Morale                     | Teachers and kitchen staff overworked, underpaid, and lacking incentives.                                                 | Human resource challenges extend beyond teachers; morale undermined by poor conditions.              | "Free SHS teachers with no incentivization become boring and disturbing... kitchen staff... have no rest at all." (T12)                 |

**Table 12: Key findings from Non-Teaching Staff**

| Category                  | Theme                                 | Key Findings                                                                                                                 | Novelty/Implications                                                                                        | Illustrative Quotes                                                                                                                                                                                |
|---------------------------|---------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Implementation Success    | Financial Relief & Expanded Access    | Free SHS reduced financial burdens, enabling parents to send multiple children to school and strengthening family stability. | Kitchen staff highlight the broader social impact—family cohesion and democratized access beyond education. | "Some parents are even saying that because of free SHS, they are able to send three wards... to school at the same time without worrying about school fees." (Kitchen Staff 1)                     |
| Implementation Challenges | Student Attitudes & Indiscipline      | Students perceive Free SHS as entitlement, leading to complacency, misuse of tablets, and lack of motivation.                | Inclusivity unintentionally fosters indiscipline; echoes teacher concerns about accountability.             | "It's free SHS and so they can do whatever they want... JHS students won't learn... they know that even if they don't learn and get grade 100, they will be placed in free SHS." (Kitchen Staff 2) |
|                           | Overwork & Pressure from High Numbers | Kitchen staff face heavy workloads due to large student populations, dining in batches, and repetitive routines.             | Resource constraints affect support staff as well as teachers; delays consume academic time.                | "Form 1, we have two batches that will eat... it delays time and put pressure on kitchen staff that are woefully inadequate." (Kitchen Staff 2)                                                    |
|                           | Inadequate Resources & Facilities     | Limited utensils and kitchen facilities force inefficient routines, increasing stress and reducing efficiency.               | Reflects broader infrastructural deficits across Free SHS system.                                           | "The same utensils are being used... one group must eat, they will take it, go and clear them, clean them, come and re-fix them for the next batch." (Kitchen Staff 7)                             |
| Recommendations           | Academic Cut-Offs                     | Kitchen staff propose grade cut-off points to restore accountability and motivate students.                                  | Suggests balancing inclusivity with academic rigor; aligns with teacher calls for cut-offs.                 | "There has to be a cut-off point... if you get a good grade, let's say 6 to 20, you enjoy free SHS. Anything above 20, there is no free SHS." (Kitchen Staff 3)                                    |

**Table 13: Key findings on Recommendations from participants**

| Theme                                       | Recommendation                                                                                          | Rationale/Implications                                                                                                       | Illustrative Quotes                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|---------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Academic Cut-Offs</b>                    | Introduce grade cut-off points for Free SHS eligibility.                                                | Balances inclusivity with academic rigor; motivates students to study harder and restores accountability.                    | "There has to be a cut-off point... if you get a good grade, let's say 6 to 20, you enjoy free SHS. Anything above 20, there is no free SHS." (Kitchen Staff 3)                                        |
| <b>Student Accountability</b>               | Strengthen monitoring of student behavior and regulate use of learning resources (e.g., tablets).       | Prevents misuse of government-provided resources and reinforces seriousness in learning.                                     | "Students use the tablet to do their own thing... they don't copy notes, they don't buy textbooks... they are just passing through the school doing their own thing and having fun." (Kitchen Staff 4) |
| <b>Infrastructure &amp; Support Systems</b> | Expand dining halls, increase utensils, and hire more kitchen staff.                                    | Reduces pressure from overcrowding, improves efficiency, and ensures smooth meal provision without disrupting academic time. | "Form 1, we have two batches that will eat... it delays time and put pressure on kitchen staff that are woefully inadequate." (Kitchen Staff 2)                                                        |
| <b>Working Conditions &amp; Incentives</b>  | Improve salaries, provide incentives, and enhance recognition for non-teaching staff eg, kitchen staff. | Boosts morale, acknowledges critical contributions of non-teaching staff, and ensures sustainability of Free SHS delivery.   | "Kitchen staff... have no rest at all... their salary... is humiliating and disrespectful." (Kitchen Staff 12)                                                                                         |

**Table 14: Findings on how Free SHS is not experienced uniformly: Equity and Category Differences causing Intra-system inequities**

| Theme                                               | Recommendation                                                                                                                                     | Rationale/Implications                                                                                         | Illustrative Quotes                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|-----------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Equity &amp; Category Differences</b>            | Students in lower-category schools felt disadvantaged compared to peers in higher-category schools due to inequities in resource distribution.     | Systemic bias in allocation risks widening inequality despite Free SHS's equity goals.                         | "The constituency... everything was channeled to that school because it was a category school B and ours was C." (P11-CAT C)                                                                               |
| <b>Academic Motivation vs. Basic Access</b>         | Category A students emphasized academic motivation and excellence, while Category C/D students highlighted basic access and relief from exclusion. | School category shapes priorities—elite schools focus on achievement, community schools on survival.           | "Because it was free, I did not want to waste time at all... I must leave this school with a good grade." (P1-CAT A) vs. "My parents are not financially stable... I wouldn't have been here." (P13-CAT C) |
| <b>Resource Distribution – Abundance vs. Delays</b> | Some schools received abundant and timely resources, while others faced delays but valued eventual provision.                                      | Uneven implementation shows resilience depends on school category and location.                                | "Even during COVID-19... they provided us with sanitizers, nose masks." (P4-CAT B)                                                                                                                         |
| <b>Cut-off Points vs. Infrastructure Needs</b>      | Category A students emphasized cut-off points and readiness, while Category C/D students stressed basic infrastructure needs.                      | Highlights equity-quality tension: elite schools worry about standards, community schools demand facilities.   | "Even though it's free, there should still follow the cut-off points..." (P1-CAT A) vs. "Our home economics department... not having enough tools." (P13-CAT C)                                            |
| <b>Governance vs. Welfare Focus</b>                 | Better-resourced schools emphasized governance and systemic improvements, while struggling schools focused on immediate welfare needs.             | Different lenses of critique—structural vs. survival—reflect stratified experiences.                           | "They should have a dialogue with the Ministry of Education..." (P4-CAT B) vs. "Government would give us new infrastructures, boreholes, pipes... good food also." (P5-CAT B)                              |
| <b>Universal Access vs. Cut-off Standards</b>       | Divide between students celebrating universal access and those advocating cut-off points to maintain standards.                                    | Reveals policy dilemma: inclusivity vs. academic rigor.                                                        | "The achievement is the access to education... both of us were able to go." (P12-CAT C) vs. "There should still follow the cut-off points..." (P1-CAT A)                                                   |
| <b>Resource Inequities Across Categories</b>        | Category A schools managed overcrowding better due to external support, while Category C/D schools faced severe shortages and poor conditions.     | External support networks reinforce inequities; weaker schools struggle with overcrowding and poor facilities. | "Category A schools... they are having the facilities already... Category C and D schools are just developing schools." (P1-CAT A)                                                                         |

## PREVIOUS PUBLICATIONS



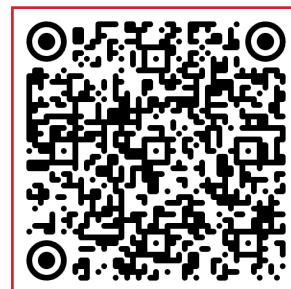
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