



AFRICA
EDUCATION WATCH



A REVIEW OF THE GHANA EDUCATION SERVICE (GES) BACK TO SCHOOL CAMPAIGN AND RE-ENTRY POLICY FOR PREGNANT GIRLS AND SCHOOL MOTHERS

The Securing Educational Rights of Vulnerable Students in COVID-19 Era [SERVE II] Project is a partnership between Eduwatch and STAR Ghana Foundation with funding from the Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office



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About Africa Education Watch

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

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

BTS	Back-to School
CCG	Center for Constitutional Governance
CHRAJ	Commission of Human Rights and Administrative Justice
DATC	District Advocacy Task Force
DOVVSU	Domestic Violence and Victim Support Unit
DSW	Department of Social Welfare
EMIS	Education Management Information System
FCDO	Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office
GES	Ghana Education Service
GEU	Girls' Education Unit
GNAT	Ghana National Association of Teachers
GNACOPS	Ghana National Council of Private Schools
JHS	Junior High School
LEAP	Livelihood Empowerment Against Poverty
LCPS	Low-Cost Private Schools
MG ³	Making Ghanaian Girls Great
MoE	Ministry of Education
MoGCSP	Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection of Ghana
NAGRAT	National Association of Graduate Teachers
NCCE	National Commission for Civic Education
NNED	Northern Network for Educational Development
NHIS	National Health Insurance Scheme
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
PPE	Personal Protective Equipment
PPAG	Planned Parenthood Association of Ghana
RATC	Regional Advocacy Task Force
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
SERVE II	Second Phase of the Securing Educational Rights of Vulnerable Students in COVID-19 Era
SHS	Senior High Schools
TEWU	Teachers and Educational Workers Union
UKAID	United Kingdom Agency for International Development
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund

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The Girls' Education Unit of Ghana Education Service

Greater Accra, Upper East and Northern Regional House of Chiefs

Parliamentary Select Committee on Education

Northern Regional Coordinating Council

National Catholic Education Unit

Presbyterian Education Unit

Care Love Foundation

Islamic Education Unit

Plan International Ghana

YEFL-Ghana

Action Aid

GNACOPS

NAGRAT

OXFAM

UNICEF

GNAT

NNED

PPAG

NCCE

ICDP

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The second phase of the Securing Educational Rights of Vulnerable Students in COVID-19 Era [SERVE II] Project, which is a partnership between Africa Education Watch (Eduwatch) and STAR Ghana Foundation with funding from the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), aims at mobilizing policy level and budgetary support for a social protection policy that targets providing economic support to vulnerable teenage mothers who seek to re-enter and complete basic and secondary education while strengthening the re-entry policy. To effectively engage relevant stakeholders to realize this objective, a review of the Ghana Education Service (GES) Back to School Campaign (BTS) and Re-entry Policy was conducted, which culminated into this report.

The report assesses the effectiveness of the Re-entry Policy and BTS Campaign, focusing on the impact on teenage pregnancy prevention, re-enrollment of pregnant girls and teenage mothers, and the challenges in implementation. It also explores alternative strategies from other girls' re-entry projects implemented by Plan International Ghana and Action Aid, while proffering recommendations to strengthen the policy and campaign.

A qualitative research approach was adopted, involving the collection of data from both primary and secondary sources. A desk review of GES Re-entry Policy and BTS Campaign, the COVID-19 Coordinated Education Response Plan of Ghana; Eduwatch's 2020 Ghana COVID-19 Back to School Monitoring Report; and STAR Ghana's 2021 Discussion Paper on Examining Implementation Experiences in a COVID-19 Pandemic Era among others, was conducted. This was followed by a focus group discussion with the Girls Education unit of GES and other re-entry stakeholders to review implementation progress and challenges in the implementation of the Re-entry Policy and BTS Campaign. In addition, three separate stakeholder convenings were held in Accra, Tamale and Koforidua with Civil Society and government stakeholders and the Parliamentary Select Committee on Education to enrich and validate the report.

The GES Re-entry Policy and BTS Campaign have yielded the result of sending 10,869 pregnant girls and teenage mothers back to the classroom between the 2017/2018 and 2019/2020 academic years out of the 22,147 in-school pregnancies¹. While within the context of the school environment, about half of pregnant girls were supported to re-enter and continue their basic and secondary education which a modest achievement, situating the outcomes within the broader context of 331,538 teenage pregnancies occurring in Ghana among both in and out of school girls² raises serious concerns about the scope of the Campaign, as only 3% of basic and secondary school aged children are impacted, with private school girls also excluded.

The report identifies inadequate funding, staffing deficit; infrastructure deficits; negative perception towards pregnant girls and teenage mothers; limited coverage of Campaign; poverty; child marriage; distance commuted to school; weak institutional collaboration; and the lack of synergy in approaches by various stakeholders, leading to poor assimilation of messages as challenges hampering the effectiveness of the Policy and Campaign.

¹ EMIS 2017-2020

² District Health Information Management System (DHIMS), 2020.

To financially support vulnerable teenage mothers to re-enter and stay in school to complete while strengthening the Re-entry Policy and BTS Campaign, the report recommends material support within the Livelihood Empowerment Against Poverty (LEAP) programme for economically vulnerable teenage mothers who seek to re-enter school; increased budgetary funding for mainstreaming girls' re-entry campaigns; increased collaboration and coordination to draw synergy among stakeholders; improved investment in early childhood care and education in the public sector; investment in data to understand the nuances in barriers to education and; sustained education and awareness creation on the negative effects and prevention of teenage pregnancy.

It further emphasizes the importance of multi-stakeholder collaboration and buy in, at the community, district and national level to ensure a harmonized anti-teenage pregnancy campaign and community support for the re-entry of teenage mothers. Critical to this buy-in are the roles of traditional authorities, religious bodies, the Ghana Health Service (Public Health Directorates), National Commission on Civic Education and the GES. Among the key issues recommended for further consideration and adoption is a review of the Sexual Reproductive Health Education communication strategies of the GES and the Ghana Health Service to achieve synergy.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Ghana is one of the 193 countries that have adopted the SDGs, a set of 17 interlinked global goals designed to be a 'blueprint to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all'³ by 2030. Prominent among these 17 goals is Goal 4 which aims at ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. The wording of this goal implies equal access and learning opportunities for all without any barriers. SDG 4 coupled with Goal 5 (i.e., achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls) makes a strong case for all barriers to education, including economic, to be removed to ensure all citizens, especially girls and women, have access and opportunity.

Several government policies and programmes have been implemented in the education sector, all in a bid to achieve the SDG 4. As we march towards 2030 while instituting measures to create more and more access, we must not leave behind vulnerable children who fall through the tracks in their educational attainments like pregnant girls and young mothers, otherwise, the SDGs, especially Goal 4 will not be said to have been attained by 2030.

Being aware that about 30% of school dropout among girls is caused by teenage pregnancy⁴, GES introduced the Re-entry Policy, which it has been implementing since 2018 to ensure pregnant girls and school mothers continue or return to school. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent long school closures came with its own challenges which were widely reported. World Vision reported that an estimated one million girls will be blocked from returning to school due to the school closures associated with the pandemic in Sub-Saharan Africa⁵.

The Ministry of Health reported that there had been 109,865 teenage pregnancies in 2020 alone⁶. An October 2020 report from Eduwatch's monitoring of the partial school re-opening indicated that 20% of the schools monitored reported 1 to 3 girls not returning, with 80% being teenage pregnancy related while 20% were due to migration⁷.

Besides, the Ministry of Education (MoE), the body in charge of education in Ghana reports that 70% of pre-tertiary pregnancies occur at the Junior High School (JHS) level. In response to these challenges, the GES launched a BTS Campaign as part of government's COVID-19 resilience strategy for the education sector to facilitate re-entry, especially for pregnant girls and teenage mothers, and has since made some impact on re-enrolment.

This report assesses the effectiveness of the Re-entry Policy and the BTS Campaign of the GES, dwelling on the impact on the [re]enrollment of pregnant girls and teenage mothers, challenges in implementation and alternative strategies from other re-entry efforts, including interventions by Action Aid and Plan International Ghana. It makes strategy and policy level recommendations for preventing teenage pregnancies and strengthening the Re-entry Policy for pregnant girls and teenage mothers in basic and secondary schools.

³ <http://www.un.org.cn>info>

⁴ Ghana Education Fact Sheets 2020, MICS-EAGLE: UNICEF

⁵ World Vision International, (2020). COVID-19 Aftershocks: Access Denied report. Available @ www.wvi.org

⁶ District Health Information Management System (DHIMS), 2020

⁷ Ghana COVID-19 Back to School Monitoring Report 2020: Africa Education Watch

CHAPTER 2

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This review was necessitated by the worrying trend in the number of teenage pregnancies and the potential to cause many girls to lose out on education in Ghana. A challenge of this magnitude required state-led interventions to mitigate, thus government, together with Development Partners and Civil Society Organizations rolled out various policies and programmes to reverse the trend. A qualitative research approach was adopted to gain an in-depth insight into these interventions which were aimed at preventing pregnancy among school-going-age girls, assisting pregnant girls and school mothers to return to school, while reducing pregnancy induced dropouts.

Data Collection Method/Source of Data

Data was collected from both primary and secondary sources. A desk research was conducted to review relevant literature on the subject matter including a review of GES' Guidelines for Prevention of Pregnancy among School Girls and Facilitation of Re-entry into School after Childbirth, the COVID-19 Coordinated Education Response Plan for Ghana, the Ghana COVID-19 Accelerated Funding Application Forms, and Eduwatch's 2020 Ghana COVID-19 Back to School Monitoring Report among others. This review also explored strategies to remove financial barriers to the re-entry of pregnant girls and school mothers by drawing on literature proposing a targeted material (financial) support policy for these girls to eliminate the potential of poverty hindering their re-entry and stay in school to complete.

Primary data was collected through a Focus Group Discussion made up of participants from GES' Girls' Education Unit, Department of Social Welfare, Accra Metropolitan Assembly Girl Child Unit, Plan International Ghana, FCDO, Action Aid, Mfantseman District Girl Child Unit, Care Love Foundation and STAR Ghana Foundation. These stakeholders were selected for their experience and work done in the area of girls' education and child protection in Ghana.

To fine-tune this review report, two broad stakeholder convenings; (in the Southern Sector and Northern Sector) were held to discuss the Girls' Re-entry Policy and Back to School Campaign draft review report. The Southern Sector Convening, which was held at the AH Hotel in Accra on 8th December 2021, brought together stakeholders including; UNICEF, STAR Ghana Foundation, National Commission for Civic Education (NCCE), National Catholic Education Unit, National House of Chiefs, Department of Social Welfare (DSW), GES Girls' Education Unit, Parliamentary Select Committee on Education, Planned Parenthood Association of Ghana (PPAG), Ghana Health Service (GHS), Islamic Education Unit, MoE, Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection (MoGCSP), OXFAM, International Child Development Programme (ICDP), Center for Constitutional Governance (CCG), National Association of Graduate Teachers (NAGRAT), Local Government Service, Action Aid, Ghana National Council of Private Schools (GNACOPS), TV3, Ghana News Agency, Daily Graphic, GHOne/Starr FM, Radio Universe, Peace FM, Plan B FM and OMY TV.

The Northern Sector Convening was also held in Tamale at the Modern City Hotel on the 27th of January, 2022. It hosted participants from the GHS, GES, NCCE, Action Aid, Presbyterian Education Unit, Upper East Regional House of Chiefs, OXFAM, School For Life, NOYED-Gh, Northern Network for Educational Development (NNED), YEFL-Ghana, DSW, NAGRAT, PPAG, Catholic Education Unit, Northern Regional Coordinating Council, CALID Ghana, UNICEF, Ghana National Association of Teachers (GNAT), Islamic Education Unit, Northern Regional House of Chiefs, Zaa TV/Radio, Citi FM/TV, GBC Savannah, Radio Justice, and Ghana News Agency.

The convening in Tamale, also featured a former teenage mother from Bimbilla who dropped out of school at JHS 1 due to pregnancy and faced difficulties in re-entering to complete because of poverty and the additional burden of caring for her child, though she had the desire for education. She shared her story of how with support from Action Aid, her parents agreed to allow her continue her education and to give care to her baby while she continued schooling. She added that the most important boost was the financial support she received from Action Aid Ghana to enable her fend for herself and her baby, and to buy school supplies and personal care items. With this support, she was able to complete JHS, continued to Senior High School and is now in Bimbilla College of Education, pursuing a degree in education. Her participation at the convening and experience shared highlighted the need for GES' psycho-social support, skills training on weekends/vacation and awareness creation approach to re-entry to be complemented with financial support to achieve optimum impact.

Participants in both convenings were stakeholders drawn from various communities, districts, and regional/national offices across the country. A draft review report was presented to participants for discussion; to share their knowledge and experiences, and to make recommendations to enrich this report.

Advocating policy level action to financially assist pregnant girls and school mothers to re-enter, stay and complete the full course of basic and secondary education requires legislative support. As a result, Eduwatch again held a strategic engagement with the Parliamentary Select Committee on Education on 23rd December, 2021 to brief the committee on the impact of poverty in restricting the educational attainment of girls who fall victim to teenage pregnancy and motherhood, while highlighting the implications of the high number of pregnancies among school-going-age girls and the consequent 30% dropout rate among girls on achievement of the SDGs, especially Goals 4 and 5.

CHAPTER 3

REVIEWING THE GES RE-ENTRY POLICY AND BACK TO SCHOOL CAMPAIGN

GES' Re-entry Policy

The GES, recognizing the high incidence of pregnancies among girls in school, leading to high dropout rates, and the lack of a standardized procedure for handling pregnant school girls or managing the return of young mothers to school after childbirth, developed the Re-entry Policy with the support of partners including UNICEF. It aims at adopting measures to prevent pregnancy among school girls and facilitate the re-entry of adolescent mothers to school after childbirth.

Though the overriding principle of MoE/GES in the Guidelines is to promote abstinence as a way of pregnancy prevention, it also aims to;

1. Standardize the approaches for handling cases of pregnancy among school girls and re-entry of girls into school after childbirth.
2. Increase support for in-school pregnant girls and young mothers.
3. Promote the re-entry of adolescent mothers to school after childbirth.
4. Strengthen the capacity of teachers in the management, accountability and support for pregnant school girls and those who re-enter after childbirth.
5. Promote supportive environments for pregnant school girls and young mothers by reducing stigma and discrimination towards them.

The Re-entry Guidelines have been codified into a booklet and used as the main tool to train stakeholders, including Girls' Education Officers, Girl Child Facilitators, Guidance and Counseling Facilitators, and Headteachers at the district and school levels. The main strategy in implementing the Re-entry Guideline is awareness creation and psycho-social support where the various stakeholders at the school and community/household levels are sensitized/trained on the roles to play/steps to take to prevent teenage pregnancies, deal with cases of sexual activities among school children and pregnancy among school-going girls.

The Girls' Education Unit (GEU) is the operational arm for implementing government's girls' enrolment and re-entry agenda under the GES. It is mandated to develop strategies to enhance enrolment, participation, retention, transition, completion, and improved learning outcomes of girls in basic and secondary schools. A key milestone of the introduction of the Policy is the introduction of the re-entry matrix/indicator in the Education Management Information System (EMIS) considering its relevance to planning.

GES' Back to School Campaign

The COVID-19 Back to School Campaign was launched as part of government's COVID-19 resilience strategy to ensure that all children return to school after the protracted school closures. Planning/designing the campaign brought together many stakeholders including MoGCSP, DSW, NCCE, Commission for Human Rights and Administrative Justice (CHRAJ), Domestic Violence and Victim Support Unit (DOVVSU) of the Ghana Police Service, NAGRAT, GNAT, Teachers and Educational Workers Union (TEWU), the Christian Council, the Office of the National Chief Imam, Civil Society Organizations, Traditional Leaders, the media among others.

The implementation began with training of regional stakeholders in all sixteen (16) regions, after which it was cascaded to one hundred and ninety-six (196) districts across the country. Fifty (50) communities were selected from each of the 196 districts based on the level of prevalence of teenage pregnancies. The three main thematic areas of focus for the campaign were to:

- a. Ensure schools are safe for children.
- b. Ensure all children, especially pregnant school girls and young mothers re-enter school.
- c. Provide psycho-social support to school children including pregnant girls and their caregivers.

In all, 524 and 5,831 people were trained at the regional and district levels respectively to sensitize community members.

Safe Schools

To ensure schools were safe for children in a pandemic era, government, through district education offices deployed Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) including nose masks, hand sanitizers, hand washing soaps and tissues to schools although it took over two weeks for most schools to receive the full complement of these PPEs due to delay occasioned by centralized procurement processes. In addition to preventing or minimizing COVID-19 spread, school assembly was banned and contact hours reduced. Despite its limited coverage, the Ghana School Feeding Programme beneficiary schools continued to receive meals (lunch). Notwithstanding these interventions, issues of large class sizes, inadequate desks coupled with the outmoded and pandemic non-complaint dual desk system, some teachers and head teachers' refusal to run a shift system, and inadequate school infrastructure marred these efforts.

With regards to making schools safe for pregnant school girls and school mothers, the awareness creation focus strategy of the Re-entry Policy and BTS campaign ensured school level stakeholders were sensitized to encourage and support pregnant school girls and young mothers to return and stay in school, while educating teachers and students against stigmatizing these girls. However, the challenge is that the current dual desk system does not support the changes in the body of a pregnant girl. Also, the lack of nurseries in public basic schools where school mothers can enroll their young children while they attend school is a major setback for their re-entry (especially where the teen mother has no relatives willing to offer care to her baby).

Pregnancy Prevention

As part of promoting the pregnancy prevention component of the Re-entry Policy, the GES has been undertaking community-level advocacy on abstinence. Apart from the advocacy, the GES is implementing a pilot intervention in five (5) districts (Damango, Tolon, Walewale, Bimbila and Saboba) in the Northern Region where it has targeted 1,000 highly vulnerable girls to provide them school uniforms, school bags, sandals and educational materials with the objective of pregnancy prevention through providing critical needs of vulnerable girls which usually pushes them to engage in transactional sexual relationships.

The UNICEF-funded project also incorporates role modeling as an important component to create awareness among these vulnerable girls on the need for abstinence while encouraging them to take their education seriously. The support for the girls is intended to continue until they complete JHS 3. In all 7,050 girls from the new regions will benefit from the project after the pilot phase. Children are selected from very poor households, including children whose parents are on the Livelihood Empowerment Against Poverty (LEAP) intervention, children of single parents, children of HIV-AIDS patients, children with disability or children of persons with disability, and teen mothers.

Girls' Re-entry Support

The processes for handling and supporting school pregnancies have been streamlined. Support for girls' re-entry starts with confirmation through a medical examination that a girl is indeed pregnant, immediately the Girls' Education Facilitator receives the report of a pregnancy. The male partner is then identified and if he is also a student, he undergoes counseling. However, in the case where the person is an adult and the girl is fifteen years or below, the Girls' Education Facilitator collaborates with the Social Welfare Department where a complaint is lodged with DOVVSU to begin investigations and prosecute the perpetrator. The pregnancy case is then documented and where the girl decides to continue after childbirth or for medical reasons, she cannot attend school while pregnant, the girl and her parents/guardian on one hand, and the school authorities on another, agree on the terms for a leave of absence for the girl to return after delivery. Where a pregnant school girl or teen mother wishes to continue or re-enter school, the school is mandated to ensure a conducive school environment for the girl. Depending on the circumstance, the school head can facilitate the re-enrollment of the girl in a different school. This is usually done to avoid stigma. This has eliminated the former practice where school heads handled pregnancy issues among school girls at their discretion, which is informed by their personal beliefs and principles – a situation that in the past led to the exclusion from school of many pregnant girls and young mothers.

Institutional Provisions

One of the institutional bottlenecks in the school transition of pregnant girls after JHS was their inability to defer their admissions at the Senior High School (SHS) level, having been placed by the Computerized School Selection and Placement System while pregnant. This was because, it was impossible to defer one's admission under the free SHS programme. The Girls' Education Unit has worked to create a pathway for deferring admissions to SHS based on pregnancies and the re-entry of same. Consequently, a portal has been opened for such girls to reapply online to be placed in schools. However, it is unclear if same opportunities exist for girls who drop out due to pregnancy while in SHS.

Psychosocial Support

Consistent with GES' Policy and campaign strategy, most of the activities carried out to achieve this objective centered on awareness creation and sensitization. Through the Regional Advocacy Task Force (RATC) and District Advocacy Task Force (DATC) across the country, BTS Campaign messages were disseminated through mass media (radio), community engagements, traditional

theatre and games to highlight the need for all children, including pregnant girls and young mothers to return to school and to assure parents of the safety of their wards in school. Psychosocial support in cases of pregnancies took the form of counseling where the Guidance and Counseling Unit of GES came in to counsel the pregnant school girl and her parent(s) or guardian(s) by encouraging support for the girl to return to school. At the school level, teachers and head teachers were sensitized to support these girls. Teachers are given the mandate to ensure regular attendance of pregnant school girls and teen mothers who return to school.

Outcome

Cumulatively, the implementation of the Re-entry Policy for the past three academic years (2017/18 to 2019/2020) and the BTS Campaign have yielded the return of 10,869 pregnant school girls and young mothers to the classroom, with pre-tertiary enrollment increasing from 9.2 million before COVID-19 to 9.6 million when schools reopened.

CHAPTER 4

CHALLENGES IN IMPLEMENTING THE RE-ENTRY POLICY AND BACK TO SCHOOL CAMPAIGN

The implementation of the GES BTS Campaign and Re-Entry Policy has not been without constraints. These are institutional, budgetary, cultural, and socio-economic in nature.

Funding

The major challenge is sustained funding. The Policy and BTS Campaign are currently being funded by international organizations such as FCDO, UNICEF, UKaid and UNESCO, with very little or no direct funding from government, apart from institutional support. The status quo raises serious issues of sustainability, especially at a time UKaid is reducing their funding to the social sectors, not only at the GES but also at the MoGCSP. These cuts affect the ability of agencies to deliver social interventions to support girls to re-enter school. Related to the donor reliant and unpredictable funding of girls' re-entry interventions in Ghana is the issue of sustainability.

Staffing Deficit

Using the existing GES structures places extra burden on the already over-burdened teachers and facilitators. As with all the re-entry interventions where teachers are tasked with following up on absentee pregnant school girls and young mothers, these teachers become overworked, which affects their output in class if the targeted girls miss school often. There is a need to address the staffing deficit at the GEU to ensure the effectiveness of the campaign and policy.

Misconceptions about Support for Pregnant Teenagers and Teenage Mothers

Misconceptions of support for pregnant girls and young mothers borne out of lack of understanding of the intention of advocacy at the community level especially will cause the advocacy to fail. There is a general perception that supporting girls who get pregnant encourages pregnancy; thus, if local-level education and awareness creation is not effective, stakeholders at that level will shoot down the advocacy. Also, local buy-in is necessary for the success of the advocacy at the policy level.

Infrastructure Deficits

There is also the issue of inadequate infrastructure to make the school environment conducive for pregnant girls and school mothers. A pregnant school girl needs a special kind of desk to accommodate the changes in her body, but our current dual desk system does not support the re-entry policy as it is not fit for pregnant girls. Also, 98% of public basic schools lack nurseries where young mothers can keep their babies while they learn in cases where the girl does not find a caregiver. Linked to the infrastructure challenge is inadequate kindergartens attached to basic schools where young mothers can enroll their young children while attending school.

Distance to School

Distance to school is a major cause of school drop-out in rural Ghana, thereby hampering re-entry efforts. Nationally, about 25% of primary schools do not have a JHS. In underserved regions like the Northern region, the number increases to 40%, exposing girls to the dangers of sexual violence on that long road to school, and making it very difficult for teenage mothers to travel daily to access education.

Poverty

Another challenge to re-entry is the lack of desire on the part of girls to return to school due to economic benefits they derive from engaging in child labour. When school girls drop out due to pregnancy and engage in economic activities where they earn substantial amounts of money, it becomes difficult to convince them to return to the classroom as they do not want to let go of the economic benefit they are enjoying. In the Northern Sector Convening, it emerged that families were not encouraged to support girls to re-enter school after child birth since the scarce family income was not even adequate to support children in school.

Limited Coverage

The BTS Campaign lacks national coverage as it was not implemented in some 64 districts across the country. This means pregnant girls and young mothers who dropped out in these districts may not have the opportunity to re-enter as they may not be aware of a Re-entry Policy. Also, the campaign focused mainly on public schools, even as over 222 Low-Cost Private Schools (LCPS) collapsed during the COVID-19 pandemic induced school closure. Findings in a yet to be launched Eduwatch report on the pandemic resilience of LCPS and re-entry of students indicates that, there are no systems to facilitate the re-entry of LCPS students, some of whom are still struggling to re-enter due to the lack of admission spaces in public schools, absence of public schools or high cost of available private schools.

Abstinence Vs Safe Sex

The GHS, DSW, NCCE and Department of Gender are key institutions conducting outreach on among others, the prevention of teenage pregnancy at the community level. There are however gaps in inter-agency collaboration at the local level due to the differences in messages and strategy.

It is estimated that 69.4% of unintended pregnancies occur among adolescents⁸; children who are supposed to be in school. This means, the sustainable way to end pregnancy-induced school dropouts is the prevention of pregnancy. While the GHS and other agencies propagate pregnancy prevention through abstinence and safe sex to teenagers, the GES does not permit advocacy on contraception use in schools. The incongruity in the messaging either confuses or limits the assimilation of the communication.

Recording over 100,000 annual teenage pregnancies over a five-year period suggests that the abstinence-ONLY message to teenagers is not yielding enough dividends. There is the need for synergy in the messages of all agencies involved in adolescent and reproductive-health-rights advocacy for consistency, effectiveness, strengthened institutional collaboration and greater impact. Stakeholders must have a national dialogue on the implications for continuing to pursue an abstinence-only policy or adopting a flexible one which also accommodates teaching the use of contraception use in basic and secondary schools.

⁸ Bain, L.E., Muftugil-Yalcin, S., Amoakoh-Coleman, M. et al. Decision-making preferences and risk factors regarding early adolescent pregnancy in Ghana: stakeholders' and adolescents' perspectives from a vignette-based qualitative study. *Reprod Health* 17, 141 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12978-020-00992-x>

Child Marriage

Ghana is home to over 2 million child brides, with one out of every five young women married in union before their 18th birthday⁹. Child marriage is still endemic in many communities, especially in the northern parts of the country. The practice continues to restrict the ability of teenage mothers to re-enter and continue their education, as 9 in every 10 married girls are not attending school.

Re-entry Best Practices

The Plan International Back to School/Re-entry Experience

Under the Making Ghanaian Girls Great (MG³) project, Plan International Ghana with funding from the FCDO used the existing structures and the BTS Campaign messages of the GES to identify young mothers who had dropped out of school due to financial barriers and wanted to re-enter, and offered them financial support. The MG³ project originally targeted girls who were transitioning from primary six to JHS, but when the COVID-19 pandemic hit and the government rolled out the COVID-19 BTS Campaign, the project expanded its coverage to include young school mothers.

Aside adopting the strategy of the GES, the project which targeted 5,000 girls from five districts in the Greater Accra region and two districts in the Oti region also made cash transfers upon request to the girls to help take care of their needs such as school supplies, transportation fares if they had to travel long distances to school, and for the upkeep of their babies. There was also an allocation of cash to start a small business for the caregivers who care for the babies when these girls go to school. To facilitate the cash transfers, SIM cards registered on Mobile Money were procured, the wallets are loaded and distributed to the caregivers of these girls and monies were transferred to the cards upon request. Cash transfers are on need basis where the least amount transferred is GHC 375 while the highest is GHC 600, and spending is monitored.

The effectiveness and sustainability of the MG³ project is hinged on the importance placed on data collection at the preliminary stages to understand the challenges each girl faced and to tailor interventions. This was necessary because the implementers recognized that barriers to girls' education are not generic; different sets of girls face different sets of challenges; thus, the need for data to understand these differences, so interventions introduced will remedy specific challenges. Preliminary data on the project also identified a host of intersectionalities in barriers to education. For instance, in the Upper West region where there are cultural barriers to girls' education, teenage pregnancy and poverty become additional layers of barriers to pregnant school girls and young mothers. The situation of a pregnant school girl or young mother from these parts is made even worse if she has a disability in addition. To support such a girl to re-enter school, all other barriers need to be broken first.

⁹ UNICEF, 2020: Ending Child Marriage-A profile of progress in Ghana.
<https://data.unicef.org/resources/ending-child-marriage-a-profile-of-progress-in-ghana/>

Another important perspective from the MG³ project is the fact that barriers to girls' education are multifaceted; thus, all challenges, including those at the school level need to be addressed to get the needed outcome. For instance, data from the project indicated that, girls who had witnessed/suffered corporal punishment have lower attendance rates and learning outcomes hence have a higher likelihood to drop out than girls who had not. Seeing that the issue of girls' re-entry is a continuous process after its eight years of implementation, the MG³ project set thresholds of attendance using existing GES structures by introducing what it calls the Absentee Tracking System, where when a girl is absent from school for up to three days, the teacher is given the responsibility to follow up to find out why and encourage the girl and her caregiver to ensure she attends school.

To augment these efforts, there is the Role Modeling component of the project, where women who have been in that situation but have completed school and are doing well in their various fields of endeavor are invited to speak with the girls. Preliminary findings from the project evaluation showed improved self-esteem, high attendance rates and improved learning outcomes among others as some of the successes chalked with the MG³ project.

The Action Aid Girls' Re-entry Experience

What organizations like Action Aid have done is to incorporate models into their projects to make them self-sustaining. For example, as part of their sustainability measures, girls who are beneficiaries of the project are given skills and encouraged to use them out of school to earn income. The caregivers of such girls are also assisted to join farmer groups to benefit from the support the group receives to boost their businesses. In the case of Plan International Ghana's MG³, an allocation is made in the cash transfer for the caregivers to start a business. Additionally, the initial cost of material support is very capital intensive, but as more children re-enter and stay in school, the average cost drops.

Key among the highlights of Action Aid's projects on girls' re-entry has been to identify all relevant stakeholders, especially those at the district, school and community/household levels on which the success of re-enrolling pregnant school girls and young mothers depends. Their strategy, just as that of GES', has mainly focused on sensitization, they work with community-based organizations and Non-Governmental Organizations, Girl Child Officers at the district level and the Girls' Facilitators at the school level. Action Aid also engages with CHRAJ and NCCE in their re-entry sensitization drive where the team approaches girls who have dropped out in the communities. The team then collaborates with the local stakeholders to offer counseling to the girls and their families, especially the caregivers who should be mothers or female guardians. At the school level, the team collaborates with the Girls' Facilitator and the school head before the girls go back to the school.

Unlike Plan's MG³ project, where there's cash transfer, Action Aid provides all the school supplies the girls need, including bags, sandals and sanitary pads; and these items are replenished when the team goes back for monitoring. The girls are then introduced to the Girls' Club, a network of girls with the same situations acting as a support system. They follow up on each other and

report to the Girls' Facilitator to ensure every girl in the club achieves regular attendance. As in the case of the MG³ project, Action Aid's girls' re-entry intervention highlights the need for continuous sensitization of pregnant school girls and young mothers, as they face stigma and pressure from their peers and community members which puts them at risk of dropping out again.

Similar to Plan's MG³ project, Action Aid's programme has a Role Modeling component. In addition, the girls are taught skills like soap making, popcorn making and some basic business skills; and they are encouraged to make these items and sell on weekends. The guardians and caregivers are also supported in whatever trade they want to engage in. Guardians who are farmers, but do not belong to a small holder farmer group are aided to join one to benefit from the support given to these groups. This enables the mothers and caregivers of these girls to network and ensure their wards fully participate in education.

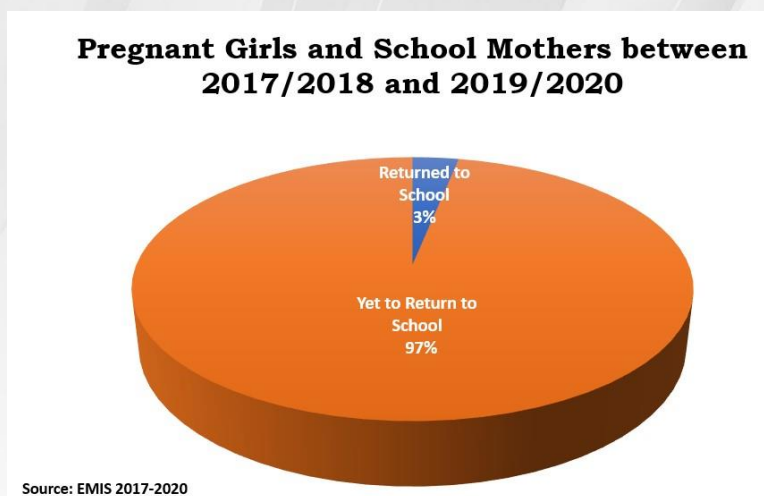
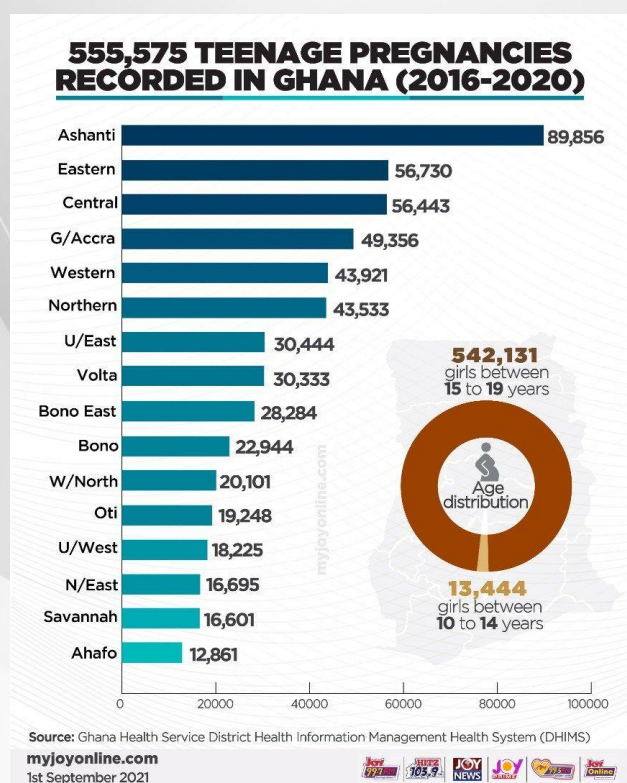
One other unique feature that sets apart Action Aid's strategy from the rest is making NHIS registration a compulsory component of their intervention to address healthcare challenges that most of their beneficiaries especially their babies encounter. Again, collaboration with their partners at the National Health Insurance Authority comes in handy to register these girls. Action Aid is currently engaging the District Assemblies for a possible renewal of the National Health Insurance cards once they expire – a challenge coming up strongly. In the Kejebi District, under Action Aid's programme, the Social Welfare Department has enrolled children of fifty young school mothers in Early Childhood Development centers and has taken up the full cost. Also, in cases where the person responsible for a girl's pregnancy is a minor, Action Aid liaises with Social Welfare to ensure the person and his family take responsibility for the girl's maintenance and/or the baby.

CHAPTER 5

RE-ENTRY AND BACK TO SCHOOL POLICY STRENGTHENING

The GES BTS Campaign and Re-Entry Policy focuses largely on awareness creation and psycho-social support to facilitate the re-entry of pregnant girls and teenage mothers, which have yielded some results. About 10,869 pregnant girls and school mothers have returned to the classroom between 2017/2018 and 2019/2020¹⁰ academic years through these interventions. However, this number is only 3.3% of the 331,538 teen pregnancies recorded within the same period¹¹. The deployed strategies may succeed in re-enrolling pregnant school girls and school mothers, but cannot keep, especially poor teenage mothers with the extra responsibility of fending for themselves and their babies in the classroom.

With poverty being an underlying cause of teen pregnancy and subsequent dropout among girls, suffice to say that it is the major factor hindering the re-entry of many of the 96.7% of pregnant girls and school mothers who are yet to return to school. This is because teenage pregnancies and motherhood have strong potentials to cause girls to drop out of school, and the implications on their re-enrolment vary depending on the level at which the drop out occurs and their socio-economic backgrounds; girls from poor households face economic barriers that hinder their re-entry as they take on the extra burden of childcare despite Ghana's free basic education.



¹⁰ EMIS 2017-2020

¹¹ District Health Information Management System (DHIMS), 2020.

Material Support for School Mothers

STAR Ghana's (2021) discussion paper on Re-entry Policy: Examining Implementation Experiences in a COVID-19 Pandemic Era, under the continental best practice in re-enrolling teenage mothers in school section on page 17, highlights a Human Rights Watch (2018) report which makes a case for material [economic] support for targeted vulnerable girls to re-enter school; a critical point worth considering for the effectiveness/sustenance of GES' efforts on girls' re-entry and BTS Campaign¹². The lack of policy-level support and funding for a comprehensive material support strategy for vulnerable girls is a missing link, compared to best practices in other countries like South Africa where the state provides cash grants to support teenage mothers to re-enroll while using cash grants to cushion childcare costs; an approach similar to the LEAP in Ghana. While there have been pockets of successful cases of material support for teenage mothers to re-enroll, the scale has been extremely limited, largely led by NGOs. The GES BTS Campaign and Re-entry Policy's immense focus on awareness creation and psycho-social support to facilitate re-entry will mitigate dropout rate among pregnant girls and school mothers, but at a restrictive rate if it is not coupled with the commitment of resources to support a material support policy for economically vulnerable teenage mothers, to continue their education without necessarily incentivizing teenage pregnancy.

It is against this backdrop that the SERVE II project, funded by STAR Ghana Foundation with support from the FCDO under its Partnership Beyond Aid programme and implemented by Eduwatch, is advocating policy level and budgetary support for a social protection policy that targets providing economic support to vulnerable teenage mothers who seek to re-enter and complete basic education.

¹² Human Rights Watch (2018: summary) as cited by STAR Ghana Foundation. (March, 2021). Discussion Paper; Re-entry Policy: Examining Implementation Experiences in a COVID-19 Pandemic Era

CONCLUSION

Even though Ghana has been implementing the Re-entry Policy focusing on pregnancy prevention for the past three years, the incidence of pregnancy among school-going children remains high with an annual average of 100,000 teenage pregnancies. While it is commendable to formulate and implement a policy that seeks to ensure that teenage pregnancy and teenage motherhood are not hindrances to education, the effectiveness of such a policy relies on the nitty-gritty that goes into the implementation process to ensure success. Evidently, the success rate of the Girls' Re-entry Policy is a manifestation of its implementation lapses, considering the teenage pregnancy rates and the number of these girls that have returned to the classroom. As indicated above, inadequate funding and sustainability mechanisms, staffing deficit, infrastructure deficits, negative perception about support for pregnant girls and young mothers, and the lack of synergy in approaches by various stakeholders, leading to poor assimilation of messages and weak institutional collaboration, continue to hamper the effectiveness of the campaign and policy.

To maximize the outcome of the Girls' Re-entry Policy and the BTS Campaign, there is a need to review and harmonize advocacy strategies to strengthen effectiveness while improving budgetary and equipment support, institutional collaboration and capacity strengthening for increased scope, sustainability, and impact. Adopting a policy that provides economic or livelihood support to vulnerable teenage mothers, who risk missing out on education due to economic factors, is necessary to increase the enrollment of teenage mothers in school. Also, a national conversation among stakeholders on reviewing the abstinence-ONLY advocacy policy based on its minimal effectiveness in preventing teenage pregnancies in schools is critical at this point.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To enhance the effectiveness of the GES' Back to School Campaign and Re-entry Policy, the following recommendations should be considered:

1. The MoE and MoGCSP must provide budgetary funding for a mainstream re-entry campaign.
2. GES must identify and engage all relevant stakeholders from the household/community level to the national level to ensure collaboration, coordination and to draw synergies.
3. MoGCSP must improve investments in early childhood care and education in the public sector by building more nurseries.
4. The GES must invest in data to understand the nuances in the barriers that hinder re-entry, to tailor interventions to address the needs of pregnant girls and young mothers. A wholesale approach to tackling re-entry of pregnant school girls and teenage mothers feeds the notion of encouraging and incentivizing teenage pregnancy.
5. The GES must intensify and sustain education and awareness creation on the challenges of school dropout resulting from teenage pregnancy to clear all misconceptions, gain stakeholder understanding and buy-in on the need for material support for pregnant school girls and young mothers.
6. The staffing gap at the GEU should be filled, with emphasis on personnel with relevant backgrounds and experiences.
7. GES must institute a mentorship programme using successful re-entrants who have completed school and impacted society. This will motivate out-of-school girls to enroll or re-enroll.
8. The Sexual Reproductive Health Education communication strategy should be reviewed to attain synergy between GES and GHS. Though the overarching message is abstinence, advocacy on safe sex should be complementary. In addition, state agencies involved in re-entry and related activities, including GHS, NCCE and MoGCSP must collaborate on strategy and partnerships at the district level to avoid duplication.
9. Traditional leaders should be empowered to pass by-laws to fine boys who impregnate girls to deter others. In addition, traditional authorities must collaborate with the security agencies to report and act against child marriages.
10. The MoE must provide JHS in every community with a primary school to reduce the distance commuted to school.

NOTES

NOTES

A REVIEW OF THE GHANA EDUCATION SERVICE (GES) BACK TO SCHOOL CAMPAIGN AND RE-ENTRY POLICY FOR PREGNANT GIRLS AND SCHOOL MOTHERS

The Securing Educational Rights of Vulnerable Students in COVID-19 Era [SERVE II] Project is a partnership between Eduwatch and STAR Ghana Foundation with funding from the Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office



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