

Impact of the Free Quality School Education (FQSE) Policy on Learning Achievement and Equity in Sierra Leone: A Narrative Desk-Review Analysis

Issa John Gbla * and Rashidu Smart

Department of Teacher Education, Faculty of Education, Freetown Polytechnic, Sierra Leone.

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Abstract

In 2018, the Government of Sierra Leone launched the Free Quality School Education (FQSE) policy to remove financial barriers to schooling and accelerate progress towards inclusive, quality education. This article reviews how far FQSE has advanced learning achievement and equity in the first years of implementation. The analysis is based on a qualitative dominant, narrative desk review of national statistics, government policy documents, evaluation reports and development partner studies published mainly between 2018 and 2025. The evidence shows that FQSE has contributed to substantial gains in access and participation, particularly at primary and junior secondary levels, and has helped to narrow gender gaps in enrolment. However, learning outcomes remain low and many classrooms are overcrowded, with persistent teacher shortages, uneven deployment and gaps in the availability of textbooks and other inputs. Equity challenges are especially acute for children from poorer households, rural and hard-to-reach communities, and learners with disabilities. While education spending has increased, financing remains constrained and implementation capacity is stretched. Overall, the review concludes that FQSE has largely achieved its immediate objective of expanding access but has not yet translated this into consistently improved learning achievement or fully equitable opportunities. A second phase of FQSE is therefore needed that places greater emphasis on teacher quality, targeted support to disadvantaged learners, effective use of assessment and data, and more progressive, sustainable financing to turn access gains into equitable learning for all.

Keywords: Free Quality School Education; FQSE; Learning achievement; Equity; Sierra Leone; Education policy

1. Introduction

For many families in Sierra Leone, sending a child to school has always involved a difficult trade-off. School fees, uniforms and basic learning materials compete with food, rent and other essentials. As a result, poor households have often delayed enrolment, withdrawn children early, or chosen which child to send to school based on gender or perceived future returns. Against this backdrop, the Free Quality School Education (FQSE) policy, launched in August 2018, marked a major turning point in the country's education story (Kamara, 2020).

Under FQSE, the Government of Sierra Leone committed itself to paying tuition, core textbooks and public examination fees for pupils in government and government-assisted schools. The policy sits at the centre of a broader human capital agenda and is aligned with Sustainable Development Goal 4 on inclusive and equitable quality education. Public spending on education has increased, and political leaders regularly describe education as the country's best route out of poverty and fragility (Education Commission, 2020; World Bank, 2020).

However, international experience shows that free-education policies can be a double-edged sword. When fee abolition is introduced without parallel investment in teachers, infrastructure and learning support, school systems can become

* Corresponding author: Issa John Gbla

overcrowded and stretched, and learning outcomes may stagnate or even decline. Sierra Leone's own history of conflict, Ebola and COVID-19 has left deep scars on the education system, making it even more important to ask whether the rapid expansion of access under FQSE is translating into better learning and a fairer distribution of opportunities (World Bank, 2023).

This article therefore asks two central questions: to what extent has FQSE improved learning achievement, and how far has it helped to close gaps between different groups of learners? By bringing together evidence from official evaluations, sector analyses and partner reports, the paper offers a human-centred view of the reform, paying attention not only to numbers but also to the lived realities of learners, teachers and communities. It is presented as a narrative policy and desk review, aimed at synthesising available evidence and drawing out practical implications for policy and practice.

2. Policy context and theory of change

The FQSE policy is rooted in a simple but powerful idea: if the state removes direct financial barriers to schooling and invests more in the system, more children will **enroll**, stay in school and learn better. The Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education (MBSSE) has positioned FQSE as the flagship education reform, embedded in the Education Sector Plan 2022–2026 and supported by a range of curriculum, teacher management and school-governance reforms (MBSSE, 2021, 2022).

In practical terms, FQSE covers tuition fees, core textbooks and examination fees at pre-primary, primary and secondary levels in government and government-assisted schools. The government also provides school subsidies and, with support from partners, funds school feeding in selected districts. Parents and communities continue to shoulder costs such as uniforms, transport and some locally agreed levies. Development partners including the World Bank, Global Partnership for Education (GPE) and UNICEF – provide grants, loans and technical support to strengthen implementation (World Bank, 2020; GPE, 2025).

The theory of change behind FQSE can be summarised in four linked steps. First, fee removal and expanded financing should reduce the cost of schooling for households, especially the poorest, and encourage enrolment and retention. Second, if resources are used to provide textbooks, support teachers and improve school environments, the quality of teaching and learning should improve. Third, better teaching and learning conditions should translate into higher learning achievement, measured through classroom assessments and national examinations. Finally, if all of this works in a way that prioritises the most disadvantaged learners, inequities by gender, location and wealth should narrow over time.

This theory of change is ambitious, and it depends on many assumptions: that resources arrive on time, that teachers are available and supported, that classrooms are safe and inclusive, and that data are routinely used to guide decisions. The rest of the article examines how far these assumptions have held in practice.

3. Literature review

The experience of other African countries offers important insights for understanding FQSE. Studies of free-education reforms in Kenya, Uganda and Malawi show that fee abolition often leads to a dramatic surge in enrolment. However, when teacher recruitment, training and school construction do not keep pace, class sizes increase sharply and teacher workload rises, sometimes undermining learning outcomes and teacher motivation (Education Commission, 2020).

Within Sierra Leone, the emerging literature on FQSE paints a picture of impressive access gains alongside stubborn challenges. Kamara (2020), for example, provides an overview of the early years of FQSE and highlights both the rapid increase in enrolment and the strain on existing school infrastructure. The Education Commission (2020) and World Bank (2023, 2024) analyses point to rising public expenditure on education and a strong equity narrative, but they also note persistent learning-poverty, regional disparities and limited progress in foundational skills.

Statistics Sierra Leone (2022) led a national evaluation of FQSE in government and government-assisted schools. The evaluation confirms that FQSE reduced direct school fees, increased enrolment and improved access to textbooks. At the same time, it reports ongoing shortages of trained teachers, large class sizes in some areas, and significant gaps in school infrastructure. The evaluation also highlights that many poor households still struggle with indirect costs, such as uniforms and transport, which can affect attendance and progression.

Global Partnership for Education (2025) and other partners have conducted benefit-incidence and financing analyses. These studies suggest that FQSE spending is broadly progressive – meaning that poorer households benefit in relative terms – but that the richest quintiles still capture a sizeable share of the benefits, especially at senior secondary level, where poor children are less likely to **enroll** or complete. UNICEF's work on education in Sierra Leone stresses the importance of complementary interventions, such as school feeding, safe-school policies and targeted support for girls and children with disabilities (UNICEF Sierra Leone, n.d.).

Taken together, the literature suggests that FQSE has changed the scale and equity orientation of the education system, but that learning outcomes and deep-seated inequities have been slower to respond. This article builds on that work by bringing evidence together in a single narrative focused specifically on learning achievement and equity.

4. Methodology

This article is based on a qualitative-dominant, narrative desk review of existing data and documents. It does not present new primary survey or test-score data; instead, it interprets and connects evidence from multiple sources to answer its two central questions.

Four main types of sources are used. First, core government documents, including the Education Sector Plan 2022–2026 and MBSSE policy papers, are used to understand official objectives, planned interventions and reported progress (MBSSE, 2021, 2022). Second, the national FQSE evaluation report by Statistics Sierra Leone (2022) provides detailed information on enrolment, completion, school resources and stakeholder perceptions. Third, analytical reports by the World Bank, the Education Commission and GPE offer insights into financing patterns, equity, and system-wide performance (Education Commission, 2020; World Bank, 2020, 2023; GPE, 2025). Finally, UNICEF and other partner publications provide additional perspectives on inclusion, child rights and school-level realities (UNICEF Sierra Leone, n.d.).

Documents were included in the review if they met three broad criteria: (i) they focused on Sierra Leone's basic or secondary education system; (ii) they addressed FQSE directly or examined education financing, access, learning outcomes or equity in ways clearly linked to the policy; and (iii) they were produced primarily between 2018 and 2025, corresponding to the design and implementation period of FQSE, with some pre-2018 sources used to provide historical context and comparative insights. When multiple versions of similar reports existed, the most recent or most complete version was used.

The analysis proceeds in three steps. It first traces changes in access and participation before and after the introduction of FQSE. It then examines available evidence on learning achievement and inequities across regions, gender and wealth groups. Finally, it synthesises qualitative and quantitative findings to identify key implementation challenges and draw out practical recommendations. While the approach has limitations – particularly the reliance on secondary data and sometimes incomplete or non-comparable indicators – it allows for a coherent, up-to-date picture of how FQSE is shaping learning and equity.

5. Findings and discussion

5.1. Expansion of Access and Participation

There is clear evidence that FQSE has opened school doors to many more children. According to World Bank documentation and national evaluation data, total enrolment in pre-primary, primary and secondary education increased sharply after 2018, with government and partner documents frequently citing a move from under two million learners to well over three million within a few years (World Bank, 2020, 2023; Statistics Sierra Leone, 2022). In practical terms, this means that thousands of children who would previously have stayed at home, worked or entered marriage early are now sitting in classrooms.

At the same time, education's share of the national budget has risen to around 20–21 percent, signaling a strong political choice to prioritise human capital (Education Commission, 2020; GPE, 2025). The FQSE evaluation documents show increased completion rates in some grades, reduced use of illegal school fees and levies, and wide distribution of government-funded textbooks and exercise books (Statistics Sierra Leone, 2022).

Gender parity has improved at pre-primary, primary and junior secondary levels. In many districts, girls now enroll and complete at rates similar to or higher than boys at basic-education level. However, the picture changes at senior

secondary, technical and higher education, where girls still drop out earlier and are under-represented. Regional differences also remain. Urban schools, especially in Freetown and some district headquarters towns, tend to be better resourced and more attractive to qualified teachers than remote rural schools.

In short, FQSE has made a real difference in getting children into school and keeping them there, but who benefits most varies by level, location and household background.

5.2. Learning Achievement and Quality of Education

When we turn from access to learning, the picture becomes more worrying. Multiple sources agree that many children in Sierra Leone are still not mastering basic reading and mathematics by the time they leave primary school. National and regional assessments, as well as World Bank and Education Commission analyses, place Sierra Leone among the countries with the highest levels of learning poverty in sub-Saharan Africa (Education Commission, 2020; World Bank, 2023).

Examination data from the National Primary School Examination (NPSE) and Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE) show modest improvements in pass rates in some years, but they also reveal persistent gaps between schools in urban and rural areas and between public and some non-state schools (MBSSE, 2021, 2022). Teachers and school leaders interviewed for the FQSE evaluation report pointed to large class sizes, limited opportunities for professional development, and insufficient teaching-and-learning materials as key barriers to improving learning (Statistics Sierra Leone, 2022).

What this means in human terms is that children may sit in crowded classrooms, share a textbook with several peers, and receive limited individual feedback. Many teachers work hard but have not had adequate preparation in child-centred pedagogy or continuous support in implementing the new curriculum. Without these ingredients, the promise of “quality” education in FQSE is difficult to realise.

Therefore, while FQSE has clearly increased the quantity of schooling, the quality of learning remains fragile. Unless teaching and support in the classroom improve, many learners will complete basic education without the skills they need for further study, work and citizenship.

5.3. Equity in Learning Opportunities and Outcomes

Equity is at the heart of FQSE. The policy is meant to ensure that a child’s chances in life are not determined by where they are born, their gender or how much their parents earn. The evidence suggests that FQSE has made progress in this direction, but it has not yet levelled the playing field.

Benefit-incidence analyses show that education spending under FQSE is broadly pro-poor: poorer households now receive a larger share of the subsidy than they did before, especially at primary level (GPE, 2025; World Bank, 2023). However, because children from the richest quintiles are still more likely to reach and complete senior secondary school, they capture a substantial portion of the total benefit, particularly at higher levels of education.

Children in remote rural communities face a cluster of disadvantages. Schools may be far from home, making the journey long and sometimes unsafe. Buildings may be in poor condition, and there may be too few teachers to cover all subjects. For poor households, even relatively small indirect costs – uniforms, exercise books, transport or examination preparation – can be decisive. As the FQSE evaluation notes, some parents still choose which child to send to school based on expected returns, which often disadvantages girls (Statistics Sierra Leone, 2022).

Learners with disabilities and children living in informal settlements or in fragile family situations also face exclusion and stigma. Although inclusive-education policies exist on paper, implementation is uneven and specialised support is limited (UNICEF Sierra Leone, n.d.). Exam results disaggregated by region and school type show that urban, better-resourced schools consistently outperform rural and under-resourced schools.

FQSE has therefore made the system fairer in terms of who can **enroll** and who gets public subsidies, but outcome gaps remain large. Moving from formal equality of access to genuine equality of opportunity will require more targeted support for learners who face multiple barriers.

5.4. Implementation Challenges

The limitations of FQSE's impact on learning and equity are closely tied to real implementation challenges. The first is capacity. Rapid enrolment growth has, in some areas, outpaced the expansion of infrastructure and the teacher workforce. Many schools operate with large class sizes, use double shifts or share limited classroom space.

The second challenge is teacher availability and support. While the Teaching Service Commission has made progress in regularising and posting teachers, shortages remain, especially in rural areas and at specific subjects. Opportunities for continuous professional development are growing but still do not reach all teachers with sufficient depth or frequency (MBSSE, 2021; World Bank, 2023).

Third, although the government has increased textbook provision, some schools still report shortages or delays in receiving materials. Storage and management of resources can also be a problem where school infrastructure is weak. School management committees and boards play an important role in governance, but their capacity varies widely, and they may lack training in school improvement planning and financial management (Statistics Sierra Leone, 2022).

Finally, data and accountability systems are still evolving. The Education Management Information System (EMIS) has improved, yet timely, disaggregated data on learning outcomes, teacher performance and school quality are not always available or used consistently. Without strong, regularly used data, it is difficult for central and local authorities to target support, and for communities to hold schools and policymakers to account.

These challenges do not negate the achievements of FQSE, but they help explain why the policy has not yet delivered the full gains in learning and equity that many had hoped for.

6. Policy implications and recommendations

The findings point to a clear message: FQSE has transformed access, but learning and equity require a second wave of reforms. Several practical implications emerge for government and partners.

First, there is a need to put learning at the centre of the next phase of FQSE. This means investing more deliberately in teacher quality – recruiting and deploying teachers fairly, providing regular, classroom-focused professional development, and strengthening school-based support and supervision. School leaders should be trained not only in administration but also in instructional leadership, so that they can help teachers plan lessons, use assessment and support struggling learners.

Second, equity must move from a principle to a set of targeted actions. This could include expanding school feeding in the poorest and most food-insecure communities, piloting cash or in-kind transfers to offset indirect costs for the poorest households, and making concrete investments in accessible infrastructure and specialised support for learners with disabilities. School construction and rehabilitation programmes should be guided by data on overcrowding, travel distance and out-of-school children.

Third, strengthening assessment and data systems is essential. Regular national learning assessments at key grades, linked to routine classroom assessment, would help track progress in foundational skills. When combined with EMIS data on resources and staffing, such assessments can identify which schools and districts need urgent support. Making these data publicly available in simple formats can also help communities and civil-society organisations to engage more effectively with education authorities.

Fourth, FQSE will only be sustainable if financing remains predictable and efficient. Medium-term budgeting should link resources to clearly defined learning and equity targets, and expenditure tracking should ensure that funds reach schools on time. Partnerships with non-state providers – including faith-based schools, NGOs and community-based organisations – can help innovate and extend the reach of services, especially in hard-to-serve areas.

Finally, the people who experience FQSE every day – pupils, parents, teachers and community leaders – should be at the heart of ongoing policy dialogue. Their experiences and feedback can help refine implementation, identify unintended effects and build shared responsibility for results.

7. Conclusion

Free Quality School Education is more than a slogan in Sierra Leone; it is a commitment that has reshaped the relationship between the state, schools and families. By removing tuition fees and expanding public investment, FQSE has opened the school gate to millions of children who might otherwise have been left behind. This is a major achievement and a source of hope for the country's future.

At the same time, the evidence reviewed in this article reminds us that getting children into school is only the beginning. Many pupils are not yet learning at the level they need, and deep inequalities between regions, socio-economic groups and learners with and without disabilities persist. FQSE has changed the starting line, but the race to equitable learning for all is still underway.

The next chapter of FQSE must therefore focus on turning years of schooling into meaningful learning, especially for the least advantaged. This will require patient, sustained investments in teachers, schools, assessment and targeted support, as well as continued political and social commitment. If Sierra Leone can build on the foundations laid by FQSE and keep the needs of its most vulnerable learners at the centre of reform, the policy can become a genuine engine of inclusive human development and social transformation.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

Declaration of interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have influenced the work reported in this paper.

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