

KEYNOTE ADDRESS TO LAUNCH THE AFRICA EDUCATION WATCH PROJECT – GHANA REPORT

By Professor Paul N. Buatsi, Chief Director, Ministry for Education.

Madam Chairperson, distinguished invited guests, Ghana has shown long commitment to universal primary education (UPE) since the 1960s and subsequently to Education for All (EFA) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The Free Compulsory Universal Basic Education (FCUBE) policy of 1996 is the overriding policy for this approach. The country has received significant support from Development Partners under a SWAp modality and was one of the first countries in Africa to adopt that modality of external support, within the EFA/Fast Track Initiative (EFA/FTI). The Education Strategic Plan (the central plan for the SWAp partnership, running from 2003 - 2015) stipulates an annual review of education activities, including financial and management practices.

Ladies and gentlemen, you would recall that, in the 2005/2006 academic year, Ghana introduced the school capitation grants scheme (CGS) and a school feeding programme aimed at addressing equity issues in access to basic (primary and junior secondary) schooling due to poverty. The CGS is also a vehicle for local responsiveness and accountability and, in particular, to tackle the perceived financial obstacles to attendance caused by the levying of “additional” fees (e.g. for repairs or for cultural activities). The CGS now provides 4.5 Ghana cedis for each pupil in school which can be used for teaching and learning materials, school management, including payment of travelling costs and stationery, improving school and community relationships, support for needy children, in-service training, minor repairs and sports and culture levies.

Admittedly, there are some inefficiencies and malpractices in the administration of the CGS and the School-Feeding Programme but these are laudable initiatives that are expected to improve school enrolment and quality education.

Madam Chairperson,, the Education Sector is subject to Ghana’s overarching public sector financial administration regulations which, whilst espousing transparency, do not specifically demand it. For efficient use of the Capitation Grant Scheme, the GES has developed guidelines that empower schools to effectively use financial resources to plan and carry out school activities. The regulations and guidance around the CGS and the field and institutional structure describe the basic accounting practices at school and the use of separate bank accounts (at District and at school levels) to manage the funds. The regulation also

covers the joint signatures and authorization requirements for spending – in which the chair of the SMC takes a central role.

Ladies and gentlemen, the guidelines for the CGS show the responsibilities of different levels of personnel for data collection, disbursement and reconciliation of funds. There is a clear framework of responsibilities and operational procedures in place. The GES is responsible for the allocation but the District Directors of Education take oversight once that allocation is done. The CGS is the first time that schools have operated a budget of their own and has replaced the previous system of allocations from the District. Capitation Grant funds are released in termly tranches, with the first tranche as 50 percent of the total. The first release is dependent on preparation and approval of a School Performance Improvement Plan (SPIP) that provides the rationale and details of the proposed expenditures of CGS funds.

Madam Chairperson,, we are grappling with reported long delays in the release and receipt of the capitation grant, which is distributed through the District Education Offices based on school enrolment at the end of the last academic year.

Distinguished guests, it is often tempting to use district office budget allocations to complain about the inadequacy of resources for education. It must be noted that teachers' pay is direct from GES, on the basis of teacher numbers in the sub-national administrative units. Teaching and Learning Materials (TLM) are also supplied from a central source, although they may be inadequate.

It is worth noting that, before the CGS was introduced, there was a range of purposes for which schools sought additional fees and actually charged these fees. This had a negative impact on poor parents or guardians. However, I wish to emphasize that all such fee-seeking is illegal. In special circumstances, the GES may grant approval for some fees to be levied when it is satisfied that this is really necessary.

Having read the report, I am aware that poverty, rural-urban and gender inequalities, and lack of education funding are identified as overarching challenges: The net enrolment ratio (NER) has flattened since 2000 although the 2005/6 census show a significant increase to 69 percent. There are also background concerns in the findings of shortcomings in key quality inputs, notably textbooks and teachers, which suggest resource constraints, administrative inefficiency, although both are high risk areas for leakage and rent-seeking practices. Government is taking steps to address these problems.

The report raises concern about access to (financial) data both at school and the District Offices. The report identifies severe failings in the record-keeping itself, and in the arrangements to make financial information publicly available. There are examples of good practice, including very limited use of notice boards and financial openness to the SMC but overall the findings from the household survey suggest that neither the culture nor practices of financial oversight at school level are well developed. The situation with district level financial data was the same although some effort has been made in some districts to make such information available. Although it may not be satisfactory, it should be noted that the GES has tried to improve the situation by providing financial training to all District Directors of Education and to most Head teachers.

We have also put in place elements of local accountability such as the SMCs and PTAs, which are specified by regulation. The intended participatory process for producing a School Performance Improvement Plan (SPIP) is a focus for increased understanding and local oversight of performance although these elements are not contributing enough to increasing participation for local accountability. The report notes the varied frequency of SMC meetings, indicating a lack of guidance, or knowledge of guidance, from national level.

I am happy to note that the report admits that there were responses that suggest the direct involvement of parents and the community in quality assurance, particularly in observing the attendance and behaviour of teachers as well as the fact that 78 percent of household respondents reported having visited the school in the last year. The majority responded that they were satisfied with the way the school budget was spent.

The education system has put in place channels for complaints on general education concerns, including additional fees, but parents do not seem confident in using these channels as, according to the report, many claim that they did not complain because they did not expect anything to be achieved.

Madam Chairperson, supervision of schools has been a serious problem, as indicated in the report. This is often attributed to lack of fuel for circuit supervisors to visit schools. Of course, the report identifies the varied frequency of supervision visits by District officials to the schools, which are mainly carried out by circuit supervisors with a routine mission of control and support. However, all schools submit their financial reports to the District Directorate (either to the DDE or the Finance Officer).

Madam Chairperson, during our discussion of the draft report last year, some of my colleagues expressed concern about GII's deliberate attempt to report corruption in the education system. The report also identifies that financial transparency is not well established as a culture or operational practice. Yet, overall, the respondents, while stating that corruption in Ghana in general was a serious problem, did not perceive corruption in the education sector to be a serious problem and were not aware of any cases of embezzlement in the schools.

In conclusion, I wish to state that the Ministry of Education and the Ghana Education Service welcome contributions from all stakeholders as long as they are made in good faith and are aimed at improving access to quality education. In that line, we welcome your recommendations and promise to take up those that fall within our mandate. However, we also hope that GII and similar non-governmental organizations would also play their roles in contributing towards this laudable goal of improving access to quality education for the majority of Ghanaian children.

In fact, I am informed that GII has already carried out a number of meetings with the stakeholders in the study districts aimed at sensitising parents, particularly members of the SMCs and executive members of the PTAs on their rights and roles in school management so that they can participate more actively in school governance. The GES appreciates this and wishes to encourage GII to continue providing training for SMC members in basic planning and budgeting so as ensure the efficient implementation of the SPIPs and tracking of the application of school resources and reduce resource leakages and corruption. The GES will also provide a regular training for Head Teachers and/or sanction Head Teachers who fail to keep proper records to ensure transparency and accountability in primary school financial management.

On this note, Madam Chairperson,, distinguished invited guests, ladies and gentlemen, I hereby declare the Africa Education Watch Ghana Report duly launched.

Thank you.