

2025

# ASSESSING THE FREE QUALITY SCHOOL EDUCATION PROGRAMME IN PARTS OF SIERRA LEONE:

*Opportunities, Challenges, and Strategic  
Recommendations to Enhance Effective Service  
Delivery*



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## **Acknowledgement**

The report, “Assessing the Free Quality School Education Programme in parts of Sierra Leone: Opportunities, Challenges, and Strategic Recommendations to Enhance Effective Service Delivery”, is made possible through the generous funding from the Centre for Accountability and Rule of Law, Sierra Leone (CARL-SL), under the Transparency and Accountability component of our Strategic Plan.

CARL-SL would like to acknowledge the contributions of survey participants, interview subjects, MBSSE officials in the districts, school heads/authorities, parents/guardians and pupils who all provided valuable input.

## EXECUTIVE INTRODUCTION

The Centre for Accountability and Rule of Law - Sierra Leone (CARL-SL) is an independent, non-profit organisation dedicated to fostering transparency and accountability. Its mission is to cultivate a fair and democratic society by monitoring public institutions, evaluating their performance, and pinpointing areas for improvement. Additionally, CARL-SL advocates for institutional transparency, raises awareness about its significance, and encourages institutions to enhance openness and accountability to the public.

In 2018, during the launch of the Free Quality School Education Programme, the Government of Sierra Leone emphasized the advantages that public school pupils would gain from the FQSE initiative. These benefits include free tuition, teaching and learning materials, such as essential textbooks, and school meals for pupils in underprivileged communities. Since its inception in 2018, the government has been providing these services to public school pupils across the country. However, school heads have recently reported difficulties in accessing these services. The challenges in service delivery under the Free Quality School Education scheme have become a pressing topic among school

heads, education stakeholders, parents, and the broader community. Consequently, CARL-SL conducted this assessment to know the impact of the programme, identify challenges faced by school heads, pupils, and parents during its implementation, and offer insights to inform policymakers' decisions.

The findings from this research will promote accountability among stakeholders regarding the use of public funds and resources, ensuring the programme is executed as intended. They will also encourage dialogue among stakeholders, including educators, parents/caregivers, and community leaders, fostering collaborative effort to enhance the quality of education. By sharing the findings with the public, the report aims to raise awareness about the significance of the Free Quality School Education Programme and the necessity for ongoing community engagement in educational initiatives.

Overall, this report is poised to play a vital role in shaping the future of education within the context of the Free Quality School Education initiative in Sierra Leone.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The report outlines the findings from an analysis of essential indicators related to the implementation of the Free Quality School Education (FQSE) Programme in Sierra Leone. The objective is to assess the FQSE Programme, identifying opportunities, challenges, and strategic recommendations to improve service delivery. The analysis concentrated on access to government support for schools, resource allocation, satisfaction with services, community engagement, and difficulties faced by school heads, pupils, parents/caregivers, and other stakeholders regarding the overall implementation of the FQSE Programme. It assessed the services offered under the FQSE Programme and their effectiveness in reaching the intended beneficiaries.

The assessment was conducted by the Centre for Accountability and Rule of Law-Sierra Leone (CARL-SL), with data collected across eight districts: Bo and Moyamba in the South, Kono and Kenema in the East, Tonkolili in the Northeast, Port Loko and Kambia in the Northwest, and Western Rural. Data were collected from fifteen schools in each district, totaling 120 schools. Enumerators also facilitated Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with var-

ious stakeholders, including school heads, teachers, parents/caregivers, and community leaders. The assessment specifically examined the payment of School Fees Subsidies to cover tuition, the provision of Teaching and Learning Materials, and food supplies under the School Feeding Programme. The FGDs held at various locations considered the aspect of accountability on the part of school heads in the use of school fees subsidies. It also assessed the involvement of stakeholders, particularly parents/caregivers, in the implementation of the FQSE, their satisfaction with the programme, and the challenges they encounter in accessing the services.

Approximately one-third of schools in the selected districts reported receiving government school fees subsidies. However, some indicated that they only received subsidies for the first term of the 2024/25 academic year, with no funds allocated for the subsequent terms at the time of the assessment. The findings highlighted inconsistencies in the payment of school fees and Subsidies, making it challenging for school heads to manage daily operations, including paying teachers who lack PIN codes, auxiliary staff, and providing necessary teaching and learning materi-

als. There are issues of accountability on the part of school heads in the use of school fees subsidies, and this erodes trust among various stakeholders, including parents/caregivers, pupils and communities. It came out glaringly from discussions that community members are not comfortable with school heads in the use of School Fees subsidies. School heads should be able to give full details of how subsidies paid by the government are used in managing their schools.

The assessment also indicated that although school heads received Teaching and Learning Materials from the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education (MBSSE) at the start of the FQSE implementation, no supplies have been provided for the past three years, including the 2024/2025 academic year, exacerbating the difficulties in managing public schools by school heads.

Government, in collaboration with development partners, has constructed several primary and secondary schools across the country, renovated existing schools to improve facilities, including classrooms, and this came out clearly during the assessment. The problem of accommodation, which resulted in overcrowded classrooms, has been solved to a very large extent in

several schools.

Since 2018, the government has made significant strides in changing the trajectory of the education sector, leading to an over 50% increase in primary school enrollment. The government has committed at least 20% of the national recurrent budget to education, and this has reflected in improvement in the learning outcomes at the three levels (Primary, JSS and SSS).

There has been a significant leap in promoting inclusive education, particularly for girls, children with disabilities, and marginalized communities. Due to the elimination of school fees, basic education has become more accessible to all children, especially girls and those from marginalized backgrounds who previously faced financial barriers. The programme has contributed to reducing the gender gap that existed in education.

Regarding parental and community involvement in school activities, all respondents reported their participation, primarily through Community Teachers Associations (CTAs) and School Management Committees (SMCs). However, only 60 per cent of parents/caregivers were aware of the specifics of the FQSE programme, indicating a need for

increased awareness and engagement efforts on the part of the MBSSE.

The assessment identified common challenges across all schools in the eight districts, including issues related to the non-payment or late payment of subsidies, difficulties in accessing subsidies from banks, signature-related problems, lack of Teaching and Learning Materials, and challenges concerning food supplies under the School Feeding Programme.

It is recommended that the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education (MBSSE) work closely with the Ministry of Finance to ensure the timely payment of School Fees Subsidies to schools before the reopening of the 2025/2026 academic year to enhance the smooth operations of the scheme.

Additionally, the MBSSE should procure and distribute core textbooks that align with the current curriculum to schools nationwide to help teachers and pupils in the classroom. Interviews show that there has also been a serious boost in the area of the payment of salaries to teachers. During discussions, it became clear that there are no delays in the payment of salaries and percentages are being added to

teachers' salaries from time to time since the launch of the FQSE scheme.

The school feeding program has incentivized attendance and has helped parents, most especially those in deprived communities who find it difficult to provide adequate meals. Parents said their children are happy to go to school regularly, anytime there is a food supply in the schools.

The Ministry, in collaboration with other stakeholders such as civil society organisations (CSOs), should conduct head counts in schools to verify enrollments. This will significantly reduce government waste and ensure that schools receive funding that corresponds to their actual enrollments.

Lastly, there is a need to enhance communication between schools and families/communities, with school heads required to report on the utilization of funds. Improving communication channels and making expenditure reports accessible will build trust and foster effective collaboration.

## BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

In August 2018, His Excellency President Brigadier Rtd. Dr. Julius Maada Bio officially launched the Free Quality School Education Programme in Freetown, Sierra Leone. This initiative is designed to minimize financial obstacles to education, ensuring that every child has the chance to attend school, experience quality learning in a supportive environment, and be taught by trained, qualified educators with sufficient teaching and learning resources.

At that launch, the President highlighted the benefits that pupils in public schools would receive through the Free Quality School Education Programme, which include:

- Payment of tuition fees for pupils in public schools
- Payment of examination fees for public school pupils taking national exams (NPSE, BECE, and WASSCE)
- Provision of textbooks for core subjects to public schools
- Supply of Teaching and Learning Materials (TLMs), including exercise books, to schools
- Implementation of a school feeding program for primary school pupils in

underprivileged communities.

Since the programme's inception, Sierra Leone has made significant strides in improving its educational system, with the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education playing a crucial role in this progress, resulting in over a 50% increase in primary school enrollment. The government has committed at least 20% of the national recurrent budget to education since the programme's launch, in line with the 2000 Dakar Education for All commitments. The Government of Sierra Leone, through the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education, has covered tuition and admission fees, examination fees for students taking the NPSE, BECE, and WASSCE, procured and distributed textbooks for core subjects, provided Civic Education books to schools, supplied Teaching and Learning Materials, and implemented school feeding programmes for pupils in disadvantaged communities across the nation.

There have been significant strides in promoting inclusive education, particularly for girls, children with disabilities, and marginalized com-



munities. The programme has eliminated school fees, making education more accessible to all children, especially girls and those from marginalized backgrounds who previously faced financial barriers. This has led to higher enrollment rates among these groups since 2018.

By specifically targeting the barriers that girls face in accessing education, such as cultural norms and economic constraints, the programme has contributed to reducing the gender gap in education. Initiatives like providing sanitary facilities and promoting awareness about the importance of girls' education have further changed the trajectory.

The programme has included measures to ensure schools are more inclusive for children with disabilities. This includes training teachers on inclusive education practices and providing resources to accommodate diverse learning needs, thereby fostering an environment where all children can thrive irrespective of their circumstances.

Despite these achievements since the launch of the Free Quality School Education Programme, sev-

eral challenges and obstacles have emerged for school heads, parents/caregivers, and community members in accessing the services offered by the initiative. School heads have expressed concerns regarding delays in receiving school fees subsidies needed to manage their institutions, a prolonged lack of teaching and learning materials, and issues with the funding allocated to them. These concerns have become a significant topic of discussion among school heads, parents/caregivers, and the wider public, potentially jeopardizing the implementation of the FQSE. This assessment is therefore conducted to address these growing concerns, identify implementation gaps, and explore solutions with the involvement of stakeholders.

In conclusion, while the Free Quality School Education Programme has made remarkable progress in enhancing access to education and promoting inclusivity in Sierra Leone, it is crucial to acknowledge and address the challenges that have surfaced since its inception.

## 1.1

**PURPOSE OF THE ASSESSMENT**

The current body of research indicates that the Government of Sierra Leone has made significant progress in increasing school enrollment and improving learning outcomes since introducing the Free Quality School Education (FQSE) initiative in 2018. This study aims to assess the FQSE Programme in Sierra Leone, focusing on identifying opportunities, challenges, and strategic recommendations for better service delivery. The Centre for Accountability and Rule of Law in Sierra Leone

(CARL-SL), an organisation dedicated to promoting transparency and accountability in public sector institutions, conducted this assessment to determine whether government services are effectively reaching beneficiaries and achieving the intended impact within communities. Additionally, the study seeks to identify obstacles to accessing services under the programme and to propose solutions to these challenges.

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**THE KEY DELIVERABLES FOR THIS ASSESSMENT INCLUDE:**

- ***Collecting data using Kobo Collect from eight districts***
- ***Analysing the data***
- ***Compiling a comprehensive report on the findings***
- ***Collaborating with CARL-SL staff to review the report***
- ***Finalising the report and disseminating the findings to the public***

CARL-SL will utilise this report to engage policymakers in advocating for supportive policies and ensuring accountability among duty bearers for effective service delivery. Furthermore, it will assist in advocating for increased resources, such as textbooks, teaching materials, subsidies, and school feeding programmes for schools across the country that are in dire need of these services and resources.

## 1.2

### OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To analyse how financial and material resources are distributed and utilised by school authorities, and identify gaps and inefficiencies.
2. To explore challenges faced by schools and pupils in accessing the FQSE.
3. To assess the involvement of communities and their roles in supporting schools to foster a collaborative educational environment.
4. To establish mechanisms and hold various stakeholders to account for their roles in delivering educational services to communities
5. To collect feedback from pupils, parents/ caregivers, and school heads to understand their experiences and impressions about the FQSE programme.
6. To provide evidence-based recommendations for policymakers, local and international partners, civil society organisations, communities, and many more to enhance the FQSE programme, informing future improvements and scaling up successful practices.

## 1.3

### SUMMARY OF METHODOLOGY

#### STUDY DESIGN

The assessment adopted a Mixed-methods Research Design, combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of services delivered under the FQSE Programme. Qualitative data were used to help

explain or provide context for the quantitative findings, and triangulating them helped validate our findings and enhance the credibility of our results.



## **SAMPLING APPROACH**

The scope of work/coverage of the assessment included eight districts, including Bo and Moyamba in the south, Kono and Kenema in the East, Tonkolili in the Northeast, Port Loko and Kambia in the North-west, and Western Rural. We selected districts from all the regions to ensure we have results that reflect the views of respondents across the country. One hundred and twenty (120) schools were enumerated in these eight districts, targeting fifteen schools per district. Enumerators ensured data was collected from the three levels (Primary, JSS, and SSS) in each of the districts, and at least three chiefdoms were selected for data collection in each of the districts. The selections were made to ensure enumerators did not only target schools in the district headquarters towns but also schools in chiefdoms that are hard to reach, and these schools were randomly selected.

### **Data Collection Tools**

The Quantitative Method used included designing and administering structured questionnaires using Kobo Collect, soliciting various information, including details on subsidies, teaching and learning materials, textbooks, curriculum, and the school feeding programme. There were also Qualitative questions that required observation techniques and Focus Group Discussions.

### **Participants Group**

Enumerators engaged school leaders, community members, parents/caregivers in discussions to get further information on the state of services they receive under the FQSE scheme.

### **Data Collection Method and Ethical Protocols**

The data collection and ethical protocols were in line with a mixed-methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative research techniques to gather comprehensive insights about the FQSE programme.

### **Structured Questionnaires**

Structured questionnaires were used to gather quantitative data from school heads, pupils, and parents/caregivers. These structured formats were used to allow for standardized responses, making it easier to analyze patterns and trends. The questions focused on specific aspects of the programme, such as satisfaction levels, perceived effectiveness, con-

sistency, and overall experiences.

### **In-Depth Interviews**

This method was used to allow for deeper exploration of the experiences and perceptions of the participant groups. It encouraged participants to express their thoughts and feelings in their own words, and it uncovered nuanced insights into the strengths and challenges of the FQSE that the questionnaire could not capture.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The assessment took into consideration ethical considerations like informed consent from the participants' group, ensuring that they understood the purpose of the study and their right to withdraw at any time. The process also ensured we protected the anonymity and confidentiality of participants, especially when sensitive information was shared during the interviews.

2.0

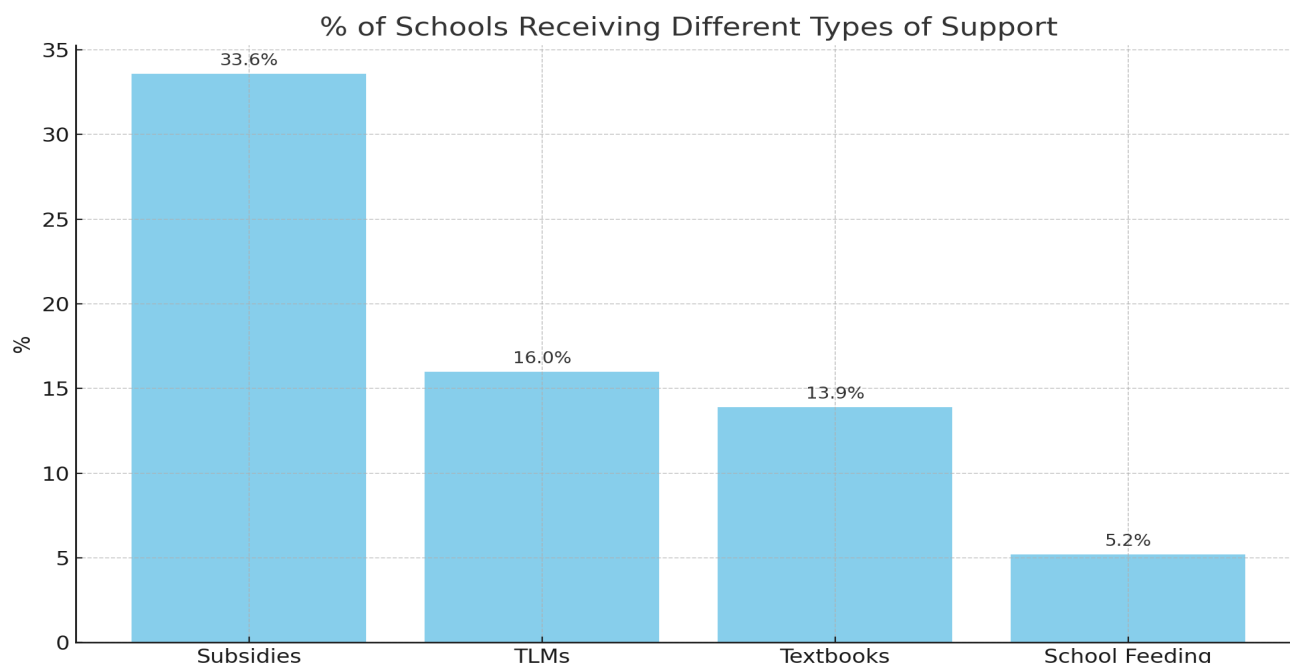
## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS**

The Findings and Discussion section of this report is organized into five sub-headings: a) access to and delivery of government support, b) resource allocation and utilization, c) service satisfaction and impact, d) community involvement and governance, and e) challenges and barriers. The findings indicate inconsistencies in the payment of School Fees Subsidies across all districts. Additionally, Teaching and Learning Materials are not being provided to schools, which poses significant challenges for school leaders in effectively managing their schools. The findings also reveal issues with the food items supplied by partners in some schools. Despite the challenges and barriers to accessing services under the FQSE scheme, stakeholders and community members are actively participating in the governance of their local schools. However, it is important to note that, despite this high level of involvement, parents/caregivers and community members have limited knowledge about the implementation of the FQSE. The following section provides detailed insights into the evaluation findings.

## 2.1

## ACCESS TO AND DELIVERY OF GOVERNMENT SUPPORT

Access to and Delivery of Government Support  
% of Schools Receiving Different Types of Support



The assessment examined the accessibility and delivery of government support through the Free Quality School Education Programme. It concentrated on the resources made available by the government under this initiative and how accessible these resources are for schools and pupils, irrespective of their backgrounds and circumstances. The findings indicate that government support, including subsidies, teaching and learning materials (TLMs), and school feeding programs, does not reach all public schools. According to Figure 1, only 33.6 per cent of the 120 schools assessed received school fee subsidies

for the first term of the 2024/2025 academic year, 16 per cent received TLMs in the past three years, and approximately 5 per cent benefited from the school feeding programme for the 2024/2025 academic year. This data highlights that more public schools are receiving school fee subsidies compared to those receiving TLMs and school feeding support from the government.

Figure 2 illustrates that not all public schools receive comprehensive government assistance; some receive subsidies but lack TLMs, while others receive TLMs but not subsidies. Figure 3

indicates that although school



heads reported receiving school fees subsidies, some noted that these subsidies were only provided for the first term of the 2024/25 academic year, and they received them late in the academic year, with no support for the following terms. This points to inconsistencies in the frequency of school fee subsidy payments, which affects effective service delivery. It is important to mention that these subsidies are intended to cover stipends of non-pin coded teachers and auxiliary staff, get teaching and learning materials, invest in development activities in the school, etc.. During discussions, it was highlighted that the non-payment of stipends leads to decreased motivation and morale, ultimately impacting the quality of education received by pupils.

In terms of the supply of TLMs, including textbooks, significant challenges have been identified. The assessment revealed that schools have not received TLMs in recent years, adversely affecting teaching quality. Respondents noted that the core textbooks provided at the start of the programme are now insufficient due to rising enrollment across all levels, attributed to the FQSE scheme. Additionally, school heads expressed concerns that the core textbooks are not aligned with the new curriculum, complicating their preparation of teaching materials.

While school heads, parents/caregivers, and teachers acknowledged that the school feeding programme has contributed to increased enrolment, attendance and retention in schools, they raised several concerns regarding this service. School heads reported that some suppliers contracted by the government (MBSSE) deliver food items far from the schools, requiring them to transport the items themselves. In some cases, this has led school heads to sell part of the food items to cover transportation costs, which reduces the number of days the food is available for pupils. They also reported instances of spoiled food items being supplied, which are unsuitable for consumption. Furthermore, school heads mentioned that various staff members of the MBSSE demand a certain quantity of food after delivery, which diminishes the actual number of feeding days for pupils. It is evident that despite the government's provision of these services, there are significant disruptions in the distribution chain, causing many pupils, schools, and parents to bear the consequences of these issues.

In conclusion, the assessment of the Free Quality School Education Programme reveals critical gaps in the accessibility and delivery of government support to public schools. The

data presented underscores the importance of addressing the inconsistencies in subsidy payments and the supply of TLMs, as these factors directly influence the quality of education and the motivation of teaching staff. Moreover, the challenges faced by school heads in managing the school feeding programme further illustrate the complexities involved in ensuring that all pupils benefit from government initiatives.

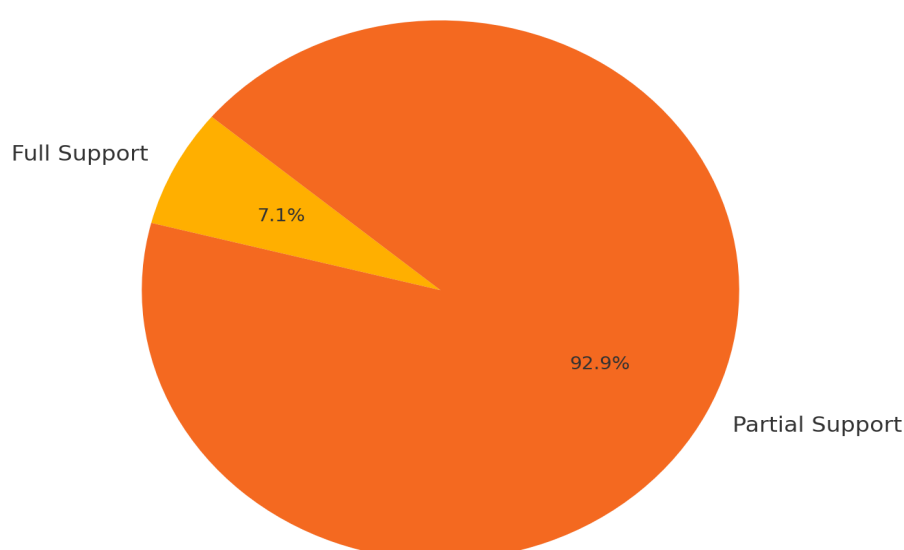
## Visuals with Interpretations

**Figure 1. Percentage of schools receiving various types of government support.**

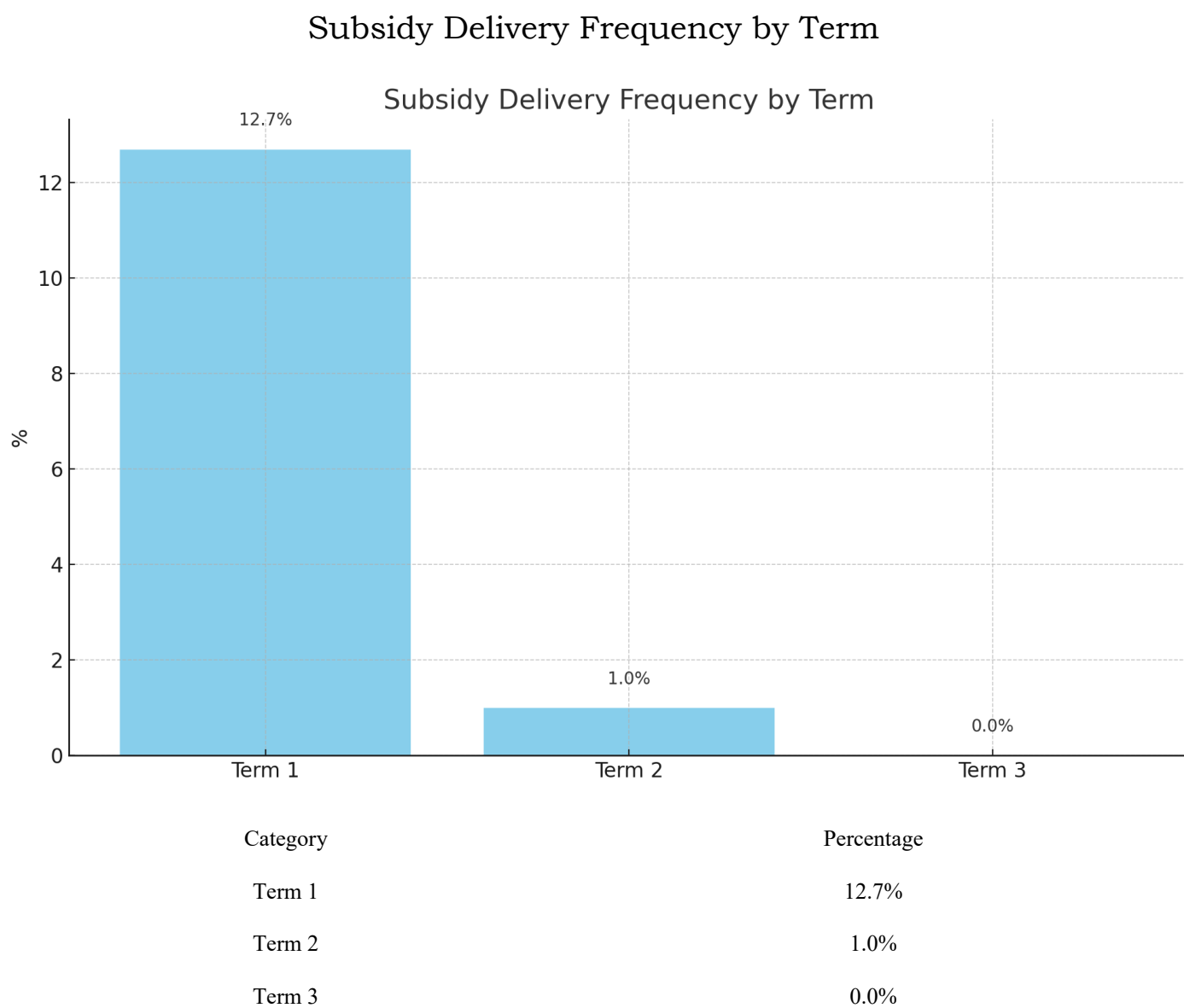
**2024/2025 academic year**

**% of Schools Receiving Full vs. Partial Support**

% of Schools Receiving Full vs. Partial Support

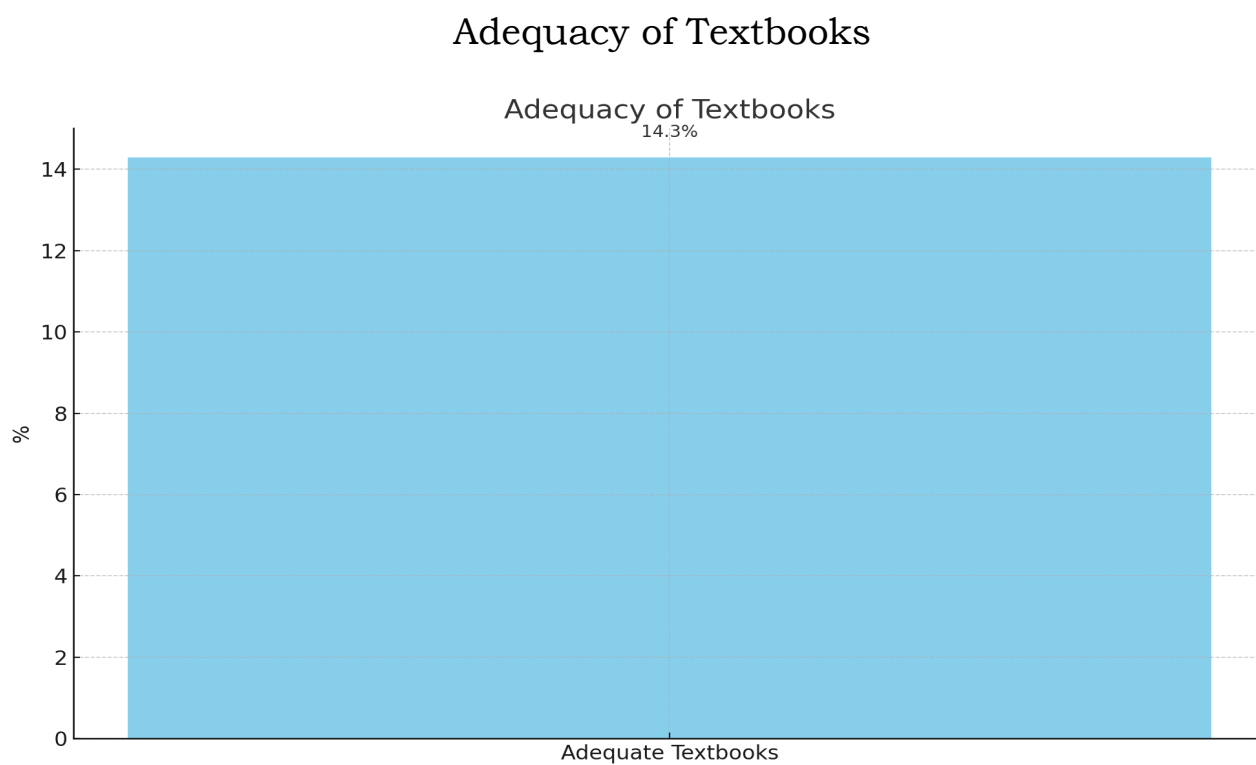


**Figure 2: Percentage of schools receiving full vs. Partial support**  
**2024/2025 academic year**





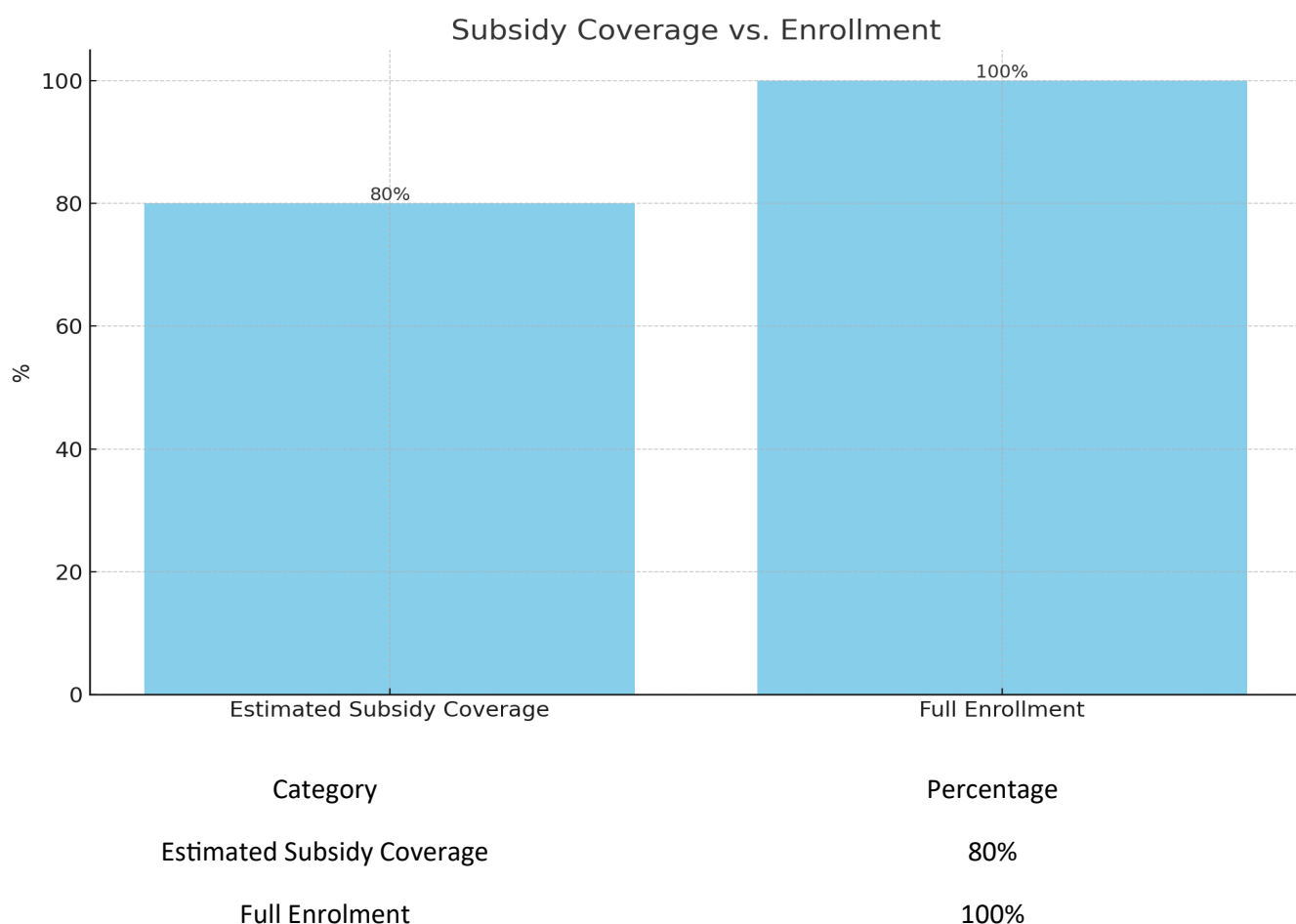
**Figure 3. Subsidy delivery frequency by term  
2024/2025 academic year**



**Figure 4. Adequacy of Textbooks  
2024/2025 academic year**

## 2.2

## RESOURCE ALLOCATION AND UTILIZATION

Resource Allocation and Utilisation  
Subsidy Coverage vs. Enrolment

**Figure 5. Resource allocation and utilization**  
**2024/2025 academic year**

Assessment on resource allocation and utilization indicates that government-provided School Fees Subsidies are primarily used by schools to pay unpin-coded teachers, auxiliary staff, to purchase teaching and learning materials and carry out development activities in the school. The amount of subsidy payments to schools is based on enrollment fig-

ures, leading school heads to often exaggerate these numbers. This inflation results in schools receiving funds that significantly exceed the actual student population. Enrollment rates in primary schools tend to rise not only due to subsidies but also because of the school feeding programme, which allocates more food to schools with higher enroll-

ment. However, as illustrated in Figure 5, there are instances where the funding received does not correspond with actual enrollment figures, creating discrepancies that impact service delivery. Some schools receive subsidies that are much lower than their reported enrollment, hence gaps that school heads will have to handle themselves. In this instance, school heads request that parents pay for their children to enable them to meet the demands of managing their schools.

Regarding transparency and accountability, school heads were unable to provide a comprehensive report detailing how the subsidies were utilized when requested. They offered general explanations about the use of funds but could not supply supporting documents for their expenditures. Additionally, some school heads reported that certain officials within the District Education Offices demand a percentage of the subsidy, which can leave schools without sufficient funds to operate throughout the term for which the subsidy is intended.

Furthermore, there have been claims that when school heads raise concerns with the District Education Offices about the non-payment of subsidies to certain schools, there is often little follow-up action taken by the District Education Offices to address the problem with the Minis-

try of Finance or the Banks.

In conclusion, the assessment highlights significant challenges in the implementation and management of government-provided School Fees Subsidies, particularly regarding transparency, accountability, and the accurate reporting of enrollment figures. The tendency for schools to inflate enrollment numbers not only skews funding allocations but also undermines the integrity of the subsidy system, leading to disparities in resource allocation. The inability of school heads to provide detailed accounts of subsidy utilization further exacerbates the issue, suggesting a need for stronger oversight mechanisms to ensure that funds are used effectively and reach the intended beneficiaries. Additionally, the reported demands for a percentage of subsidies by officials within the District Education Offices raise serious concerns about corruption and mismanagement, which can severely impact the operational capacity of schools. To address these issues, policymakers must implement stricter regulations and monitoring systems to enhance accountability and transparency in the allocation and use of school subsidies. By fostering a more equitable and efficient system, we can better support educational institutions in delivering quality education to all pupils.



## 2.3

**SERVICE SATISFACTION AND IMPACT**

Pupil's satisfaction regarding the different types of support is varied, with only 14.3% of 120 schools assessed expressing satisfaction with the learning materials provided by the government. Further assessment revealed that while pupils appreciate having some learning materials available for use in class, they feel these resources are inadequate.

Parents and caregivers exhibit moderate satisfaction, with 65% of 120 schools rating the education service delivery and communication with school heads positively. Furthermore, 78% of parents and caregivers consider the overall implementation of the FQSE to be "Good." The assessment indicates that the school feeding programme has had a positive impact on enrollment trends. Parents and caregivers noted that their children are more enthusiastic about attending school when they know food will be provided, but they become hesitant to go when supplies are delayed. Assessments across all eight targeted districts demonstrate that pupils are benefiting from the School Feeding Programme in some parts of the country.

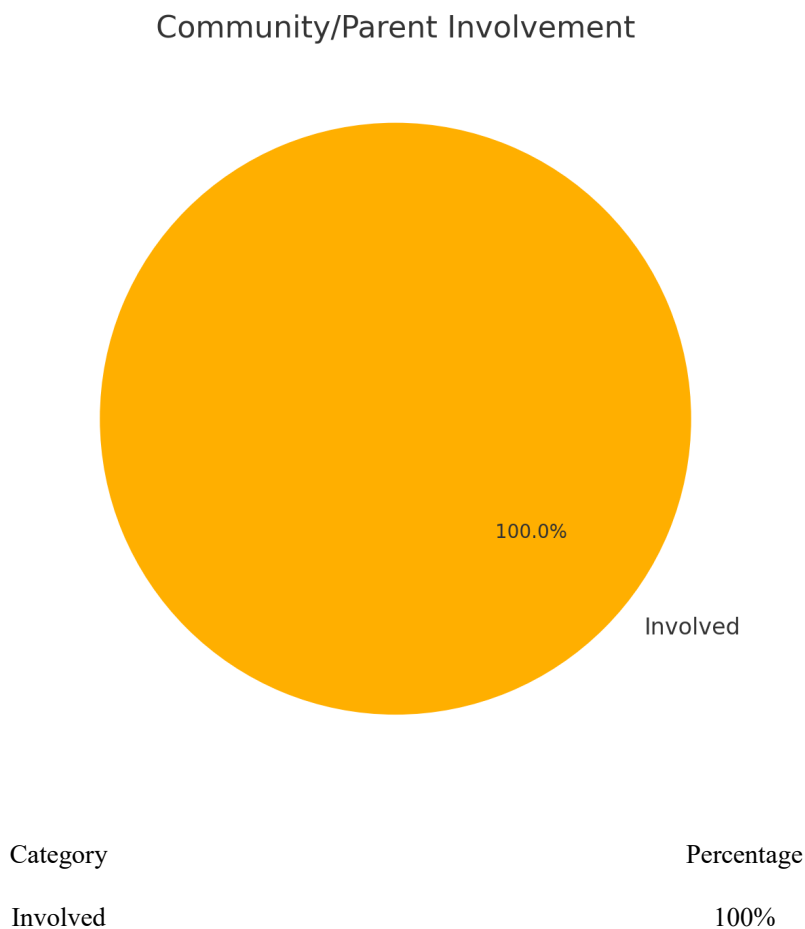
## 2.4

**COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT AND GOVERNANCE**

The study examined the role of the community in school management to access the extent of shared responsibility and ownership, which can enhance support for educational initiatives and lead to better learning outcomes. The findings indicate that there is active parental and community participation in school administration. According to Figure 6, 100 per cent of respondents from all surveyed areas reported community and parental

involvement in school governance, with decision-making predominantly involving community input to incorporate diverse perspectives and experiences. Community engagement throughout the programme's implementation is crucial for ensuring transparency and accountability. Therefore, it is essential to have effective community structures, such as the School Management Committee (SMC) and the Community Teachers Association (CTA). The assessment

found that while these structures exist in schools, their effective functionality remains a significant concern, as some do not meet regularly. Having these structures operate effectively can foster robust monitoring of the FQSE implementation, including the management of funds allocated to schools. Although parents/caregivers indicated their willingness to participate in decision-making processes at their schools, they demonstrated a limited understanding of the specifics of the FQSE.



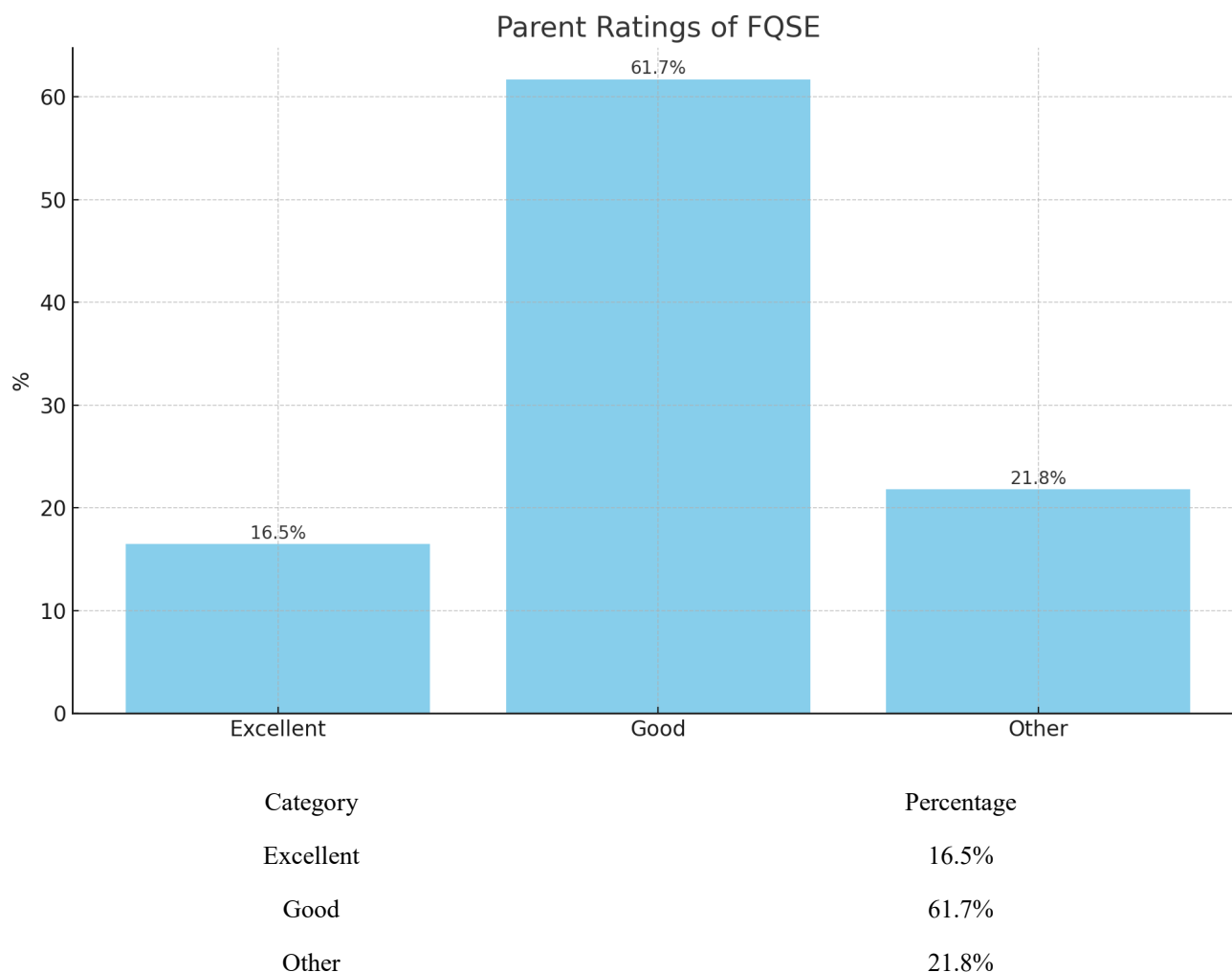
Interpretation: All surveyed communities report involvement from parents or community members in school activities.

**Figure 6. Community/parental involvement**  
**2024/2025 academic year**

In conclusion, the assessment highlights the critical role of community involvement in school management as a means to enhance educational outcomes. The involvement of community members in school governance helps in holding school heads accountable for their performance. This accountability can lead to improved teaching practices and better resource allocation, ultimately benefiting the pupils. The unanimous support for parental and community participation underscores the potential for collaborative governance to enrich decision-making processes. However, the findings also reveal a gap in understanding regarding the specifics of the Free Quality School Educa-

tion (FQSE) initiative among parents/caregivers. To fully leverage community engagement, it is imperative to strengthen the functionality of existing structures like the School Management Committee and the Community Teachers Association. Providing targeted training and resources to empower these stakeholders will not only enhance their understanding of the FQSE but also foster a more effective partnership between schools and the community. Ultimately, a well-informed and actively engaged community can drive accountability, transparency, and sustained support for educational initiatives, leading to improved learning outcomes for all students.

## Parent Ratings of FQSE



**Figure seven: Parental rating of the FQSE  
2024/2025 academic year**

### 2.5

## CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS

In all eight districts where the assessment was conducted, it became evident that there are significant inconsistencies regarding the frequency of school fees subsidy payments, delays in subsidy disbursement, and difficulties in accessing these funds from banks. These issues pose challenges for school heads. Parents also pay extra costs when enrolling their children, as school heads often require payments that accumulate to a substantial amount, undermining the "free" aspect of the FQSE initiative. Furthermore, there have been complaints about the quality of food provided, including instances of expired items and missing supplies. Reports of mismanagement, kick-backs, and unofficial fees highlight the urgent need for



enhanced oversight and effectiveness of the programme.

In conclusion, the findings from the assessment across the eight districts underscore a critical need for systemic reforms to ensure the effective implementation of the Free Quality School Education (FQSE) initiative. The inconsistencies in subsidy payments, coupled with the extra costs imposed on parents and the reported quality issues in school provisions, suggest the current framework is failing to meet its intended goals. To address these challenges, it is essential for stakeholders, including government authorities, school heads, and community members, to collaborate in establishing transparent processes, improving financial management, and ensuring accountability. By prioritizing these reforms, we can work towards creating a truly equitable and quality education system that fulfils its promise of free education for all children.

### 3.0

## CONCLUSION

### SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

In 2018, His Excellency the President introduced the Free Quality School Education initiative, aimed at removing financial obstacles to education and ensuring that every child has the chance to attend school and gain quality learning experiences in a supportive environment with sufficient teaching and learning resources. Since its inception, the Sierra Leone government has made significant strides in transforming the educational system, resulting in a notable increase in enrollment across all levels of basic and senior secondary education.

Since the initiative's launch, the government has committed at least 20% of the national recurrent budget to education. This funding has been used to cover examination fees for students taking public examinations (NPSE, BECE, WASSCE), procure and distribute textbooks for core subjects, pay tuition fees, provide teaching and learning materials, and offer school meals to pupils from marginalized communities. It is clear that the government, in collaboration with partners, is making remarkable progress in enhancing enrollment and educational out-

comes nationwide. However, an assessment conducted by CARL-SL indicates that challenges remain in ensuring that the services reach the intended beneficiaries of the Free Quality School Education programme.

To alleviate the financial burden on parents, the government has been covering tuition fees for pupils in public schools, easing the financial strain over the years. Nevertheless, the assessment reveals inconsistencies in the payment of school fees subsidies. While schools received funding for the first term of the 2024/25 academic year, payments for the second and third terms were not disbursed at the time the assessment was undertaken. Delays or non-payments of these subsidies adversely impact school management, as some staff rely on these funds for their stipends, and can diminish the morale of teaching staff not on the payroll.

The assessment also highlights issues with District Education Office authorities demanding school heads to share ten per cent of their subsidies, indicating a level of corruption that disrupts the effective operation of schools. Additionally, school heads are unable to provide detailed documentation on how the subsidies are utilized.

Some schools inflate enrollment figures to secure additional subsidies, leading the government to pay significant amounts for pupils who do not exist in those schools.

Teaching and Learning Materials (TLMs) are a crucial aspect of the Free Quality School Education initiative. Initially, the government supplied these materials, but the assessment indicates that schools are no longer receiving them, forcing school heads to use fee subsidies to purchase TLMs. When the government fails to supply exercise books, parents are left to cover these costs, further increasing their financial burden. Moreover, the textbooks provided by the government do not align with the current curriculum, complicating lesson planning for teachers.

While the school feeding programme has significantly boosted enrollment, attendance and retention, especially at the primary level, school heads, parents, and pupils have raised various concerns. Food items intended for schools are often delivered to distant locations, requiring school heads to arrange transportation and cover the associated costs. In some instances, school heads resort to selling part of the food items to fund transportation expenses.

The assessment also reveals that some food supplies arrive in poor condition, such as rice infested with weevils. Additionally, there are reports of MBSSE authorities demanding a portion of the food after delivery, which can lead to a reduction in the number of days pupils receive meals.

There is considerable parental and community involvement in school administration, yet many community members and parents lack an understanding of the benefits their children should receive under the Free Quality School Education programme. The assessment found that while community structures like School Management Committees (SMCs) and Community Teachers Associations (CTAs) exist, they are not functioning effectively to ensure robust monitoring of the scheme.

In conclusion, while the Free Quality School Education initiative in Sierra Leone has made commendable progress in increasing enrollment and providing essential resources to pupils, significant challenges remain that hinder its full implementation. The inconsistencies in subsidy payments, issues of corruption, and the misalignment of teaching materials with the current curriculum are critical areas that need urgent attention. Furthermore, the logistical difficulties surrounding the school

feeding programme and the lack of effective community engagement highlight the need for a more robust framework to ensure that the benefits of this initiative reach all intended beneficiaries.

To build on the successes achieved thus far, it is imperative for the government, in collaboration with stakeholders, to address these challenges transparently and efficiently. Strengthening oversight mechanisms, ensuring timely disbursement of funds, and enhancing community awareness and involvement will be crucial steps toward realizing the vision of equitable and quality education for every child in Sierra Leone. By fostering a more accountable and inclusive education system, the government can ensure that the Free Quality School Education initiative not only meets its goals but also paves the way for a brighter future for the nation's youth.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING ACCESS AND QUALITY

- Regular assessment of the programme is essential to ensure it achieves its goals and benefits for all stakeholders, including pupils, teachers, parents/caregivers and communities.
- The government should guarantee that subsidies are paid to all beneficiary schools at the start of each term, allowing schools to plan effectively for the upcoming period.
- The Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education should collaborate with school heads and banks to address the challenges they encounter when accessing their funds.
- The Ministry, in partnership with stakeholders such as civil society organisations, should conduct headcounts in schools to verify enrollment figures, significantly reducing government waste. School heads found wanting for inflating their enrollment should be punished by either the MBSSE, ACC or Teaching Service Commission.
- Disciplinary actions should be taken against Ministry staff who are found to be harassing school heads regarding subsidies.
- The Ministry must urgently procure Teaching and Learning Materials for distribution to schools nationwide.
- Core textbooks that align with the current curriculum should be immediately acquired and distributed to schools to facilitate effective teaching and learning.

- The MBSSE, along with civil society organisations, should investigate allegations regarding the collection of food supplies from schools by certain authorities.
- The MBSSE should establish robust monitoring systems for all activities and services provided to schools.
- There should be ongoing engagement with communities regarding the implementation of the program to foster a supportive learning environment.
- Continuous professional development for teachers is crucial to enhance their teaching skills and keep them updated with modern educational practices.
- An accountability mechanism should be instituted for school heads to be accountable and transparent in the use of the school fees subsidies. Stakeholders should ensure subsidies are used for their intended purpose, such as improving facilities in the school.
- There is a need to make the school environment more comfortable for the pupils by investing more in the infrastructure.
- Civil society organisations should be empowered to work with the Ministry of Basic Education to ensure transparency and accountability by school heads.



