

Contribution of Free Senior High School Policy to Students' Academic Performance and Progression in the Northern Region of Ghana: A Review.

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ABSTRACT

This review critically assesses the contribution of Ghana's Free Senior High School (FSHS) policy to students' academic performance and educational progression, with a specific focus on the Northern Region. Since its inception in 2017, the FSHS policy has aimed to promote equitable access to secondary education by removing cost barriers, expanding infrastructure, and improving teaching and learning quality. This review adopted a qualitative research approach, specifically employing a systematic literature review (SLR) methodology. This approach helped to rigorously and transparently evaluate, and synthesize existing research evidence between 2017 and 2025 on the contribution of the Free Senior High School (FSHS) policy to students' academic performance and progression in Ghana's Northern Region. The findings reveal that while the policy has significantly increased enrolment, particularly among students from disadvantaged backgrounds, it has also generated challenges related to overcrowding, underfunding, teacher workload, and dwindling educational quality. The double-track system, introduced to manage excess demand, has received mixed evaluations regarding its impact on academic performance. The findings also highlight improvements in enrolment, transition, and completion rates in the Northern Region but also underscores persistent infrastructural and pedagogical constraints. It concludes with recommendations for a balanced policy reform, enhanced stakeholder participation, sustainable financing models, and expanded support for technical and vocational education to ensure the policy's long-term effectiveness and alignment with Ghana's development goals.

Keywords: Secondary education, Free Senior High School, Academic Performance, Quality Education, Progression

INTRODUCTION

The Free Senior High School (FSHS) policy, implemented in Ghana since September 2017, represents a significant governmental initiative designed to broaden access to secondary education and enhance the overall quality of teaching and learning towards fulfilling Sustainable Development Goal 4.1 (SDG 4.1) by mandating free, equitable, high-quality primary and secondary education (Ayeh, 2023). The policy was designed around several core "pillars": removing cost barriers, expanding infrastructure, improving quality and equity, and developing employable skills. Since the start of implementation of the policy in 2017, a total number of 5.7 million young people have benefited from the programme across the country. (MOFEP, 2024). This review paper assesses the FSHS policy's contributions to students' academic performance and progression in the northern region of Ghana, drawing on available empirical research data, reports, policy briefs, and scholarly publications.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Despite the introduction of Ghana's Free Senior High School (FSHS) policy in 2017 to expand equitable access to secondary education, persistent educational disparities remain, notably within the Northern Region (Opoku, 2025; ModernGhana, 2025). While national media reports by ModernGhana, (2025), and 3News, (2025) indicate that enrolment rates in the northern region now exceed 95% and transition rates from junior high to senior high

reached 98% in the 2023/2024 academic year, concerns persist over the quality of academic delivery due to overcrowded classes, inadequate infrastructure, and teacher shortages in rural schools (Adul-Rahim et al., 2022; Ghana Report, 2024). Literature on the subject remains fragmented on the actual contribution of the policy. According to Opoku (2025) most evaluations of the policy focus on national metrics or broader regional averages, rather than systematically synthesising evidence on the actual contribution of the policy to academic performance and progression in the Northern Region. Contextual factors, such as socioeconomic status, school infrastructure disparities, and cultural barriers, are insufficiently addressed in existing studies (Opoku, 2025; Ghana Report, 2024). This systematic literature review therefore critically assesses the extent to which the Free SHS policy has influenced academic performance and progression among students in the Northern Region of Ghana.

METHODOLOGY

This review paper employed a qualitative research methodology, specifically a systematic literature review approach, to examine the contribution of the Free Senior High School (FSHS) policy to students' academic performance and progression in the Northern Region of Ghana. This methodological approach was justified because it enabled a comprehensive synthesis and interpretation of diverse findings from existing studies, policy reports, and evaluations related to the Free SHS policy. The systematic literature review also facilitated the critical appraisal and integration of evidence from multiple sources, identifying recurring patterns, highlighting research gaps, and contextualising the impact of the policy within the socio-economic and educational landscape of the Northern Region (Tranfield, Denyer, & Smart, 2003; Booth, Sutton, & Papaioannou, 2016). Given the exploratory nature of the research questions and the emphasis on understanding policy outcomes in a complex, real-world context, the qualitative methodology was appropriate for drawing nuanced insights rather than statistical generalisations (Suri, 2020; Snyder, 2019). Relevant peer-reviewed articles, policy documents, government reports, and empirical studies published between 2017 and 2025 were systematically selected using databases such as Google Scholar, JSTOR, and ResearchGate. The inclusion criteria focused on studies that addressed educational outcomes, access, equity, and progression patterns linked to the FSHS policy, with particular attention to the Northern Region. Thematic content analysis was used to identify, interpret, and synthesize key findings from the selected literature. This methodology was appropriate as it allowed for the systematic identification and interpretation of recurring patterns and insights across diverse qualitative studies (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The Northern Region of Ghana

The Northern Region has a population of 2,310,939; which is made up of 49.4% male and 50.6% female. The region's total land area is about 26,524 sq. km, with a population density of 87.1 km². The Region is located between latitude 8 30" and 10 30" N and lies within the savannah belt of Ghana. It has Togo to the East as its international neighbour. Further South, the Region shares boundaries with the Savannah Region, and to the North, it shares borders with the North-East Region. It also shares boundaries with the Oti Region to the South-East. It is divided into sixteen (16) political/administrative districts headed by the Metropolitan, Municipal and District Chief Executives (GSS, 2021). According to SchoolsInGhana, (2023), there are forty-two (42) public senior high schools in the Northern Region of Ghana.

The Region is often cited as one of the regions in Ghana with a wide range of socioeconomic disparity, high levels of poverty, and a high youth unemployment rate of 24.7% among young adults between the ages of 15 to 24 years (UNDP, 2023; GSS, 2021). This diversity is important in assessing how the FSHS policy influences the academic experiences of students from different economic backgrounds, especially students who might otherwise not be able to afford secondary education. Understanding how the policy influences students' academic performance and progression in such a context can contribute valuable insights to existing knowledge on its effectiveness and equity. (Akyeampong et al., 2018).

Additionally, historical evidence reveals that the Northern Region has always faced challenges with access to educational infrastructure and manpower. Most senior high schools in the region are often saddled with inadequate teaching and learning materials, and shortage of qualified teachers (MOE, 2019). A review focus in

this setting would, therefore, reveal the extent to which the FSHS policy is addressing these challenges (Asare et al., 2020).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The implementation of Ghana's Free Senior High School (FSHS) policy in 2017 marked a watershed moment in the nation's pursuit of equitable and inclusive education. The policy's core aim was to remove financial barriers to secondary education, thereby improving access and progression across the country, particularly for disadvantaged groups. A growing body of literature has since evaluated the policy's impact from multiple perspectives, access, quality, social equity, and sustainability, revealing both commendable achievements and critical shortcomings.

Public perception about the FSHS policy

The FHS policy was greeted with mixed public perception, largely viewed in terms of disparities in implementation, inaccuracies in the results of the policy. A north-south comparative analysis by Dzordzormenyoh et al. (2025) revealed that opinions about the policy are shaped more by lived experience, regional context, and occupation than by political partisanship. Negative policy outcomes such as increased youth unemployment, insufficient resourcing, and operational inefficiencies have contributed to public scepticism, particularly in northern communities where educational needs are more acute. This regional disparity suggests that while the FSHS policy is national in scope, its impact is uneven. The social and economic ripple effects of the policy have also been examined by Nyadzi et al. (2024) focused on its implications for tertiary institutions, particularly in the Western Region. They found that the surge in enrolments has overwhelmed universities, leading to high student-to-lecturer ratios and increased operational costs. These findings point to a pressing need for expanded infrastructure and strategic partnerships with private institutions to absorb the growing number of students progressing from SHS. At the household level, Matery (2020) reported that parents have experienced substantial financial relief as a result of the FSHS policy. However, this economic benefit has come with unintended consequences. The operationalization of the policy through the double-track system has introduced scheduling complications, created social disruptions, and been associated with a rise in social vices and teenage pregnancies, challenges that disproportionately affect rural and less-resourced areas. Similarly, the 2023 Demi-Decade review of the policy reported that over 1.2 million students have benefited from the removal of cost barriers. Yet, the study also found substantial challenges, including financial sustainability concerns and insufficient consultation with key stakeholders. This echoes the findings of Asante & Agbee (2021), who argue that while the FSHS policy outperformed its predecessor, the Progressive Free SHS policy in expanding access, it did so at the cost of quality and efficiency. These scholars call for a redesign of the policy, including exploring cost-sharing mechanisms such as partial payment of boarding fees by parents to improve equity and relieve fiscal pressure on the state.

Models of Secondary Education Funding

Funding models for secondary education vary significantly across the globe, shaped by national priorities, economic capabilities, and governance structures. In high-income countries such as Canada, Finland, and South Korea, secondary education is primarily funded through general taxation, with governments allocating substantial portions of public budgets to education (OECD, 2023). These countries often operate under decentralized models, where local or regional authorities manage funds, allowing for context-specific allocation and oversight. Such systems are designed to ensure equity, with additional resources directed toward disadvantaged schools or regions. UNESCO, (2022) also stressed the fact that international frameworks like the Education 2030 Agenda emphasize sustainable financing as a critical factor in achieving inclusive and equitable quality education for all. In contrast, secondary school funding in many African countries is characterized by limited public investment, donor dependency, and increasing private sector involvement. Governments such as those of Nigeria and Uganda rely heavily on international aid and non-governmental organizations to supplement education budgets (Global Education Monitoring Report, 2023). Even with policies offering free secondary education, such as in Ghana and Kenya, hidden costs such as uniforms, books, and examination fees persist, creating financial barriers for low-income families (Adom, 2023).

Additionally, uneven resource distribution and weak fiscal management often hinder the effective implementation of funding models, contributing to disparities in infrastructure, teacher availability, and learning outcomes across urban and rural schools. Efforts to reform secondary education financing in Africa have increasingly focused on performance-based and needs-based funding models, aimed at improving both efficiency and equity. Countries like Rwanda and Ethiopia have begun experimenting with capitation grants and school-based management systems that give schools more autonomy in spending while being held accountable for performance metrics (World Bank, 2023). These approaches are supported by international development partners and aim to align funding with educational outcomes rather than mere enrolment figures. However, the success of such reforms depends on robust monitoring frameworks, community engagement, and political commitment. Ultimately, sustainable and equitable funding for secondary education in Africa requires a blend of domestic resource mobilization, improved governance, and innovative financing mechanisms tailored to local contexts.

The emergence of free education

Free education has emerged globally as a means of promoting equitable access to education, reducing poverty, and fostering national development. Internationally, countries such as Norway, Germany, and Finland have successfully implemented free education policies, particularly at the tertiary level, underpinned by strong welfare systems and sustained public investment (OECD, 2023). This model emphasizes inclusivity, quality, and state responsibility, often resulting in high enrolment rates and improved learning outcomes. Moreover, international bodies like UNESCO have consistently advocated for free and compulsory education at the basic level as a fundamental human right (UNESCO, 2022). Despite variations in scope and structure, international free education models often share the goal of dismantling socio-economic barriers to learning and are typically supported by policies ensuring teacher quality, infrastructure development, and curriculum reforms. Several studies underscore the transformative role of free education in widening access to secondary education.

Free education in Africa

In the African context, free education policies have gained momentum in recent decades, with countries such as Kenya, Ghana, and Tanzania adopting various models to address educational inequities. For instance, Kenya's Free Primary Education (FPE) initiative, introduced in 2003, significantly increased enrolment but also exposed challenges related to overcrowding and resource constraints (Bold et al., 2022). Ghana's Free Senior High School (FSHS) policy, launched in 2017, similarly aimed to enhance access but has raised concerns about sustainability, infrastructural deficit and quality of teaching and learning (Chanimbe and Dankwah, 2021). While African free education initiatives align with global educational goals, their implementation often reveals contextual challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, insufficient funding, and regional disparities. For instance, Agana, Baataar, and Saani (2025) conducted a qualitative assessment on Ghana's Free Senior School education in the Upper West Region and concluded that the FSHS policy significantly increased enrolment among economically disadvantaged students. However, they also observed that the expansion has strained existing educational infrastructure, with schools now facing overcrowded classrooms, inadequate teaching materials, and an overstretched teaching workforce. Despite the policy's positive intentions, its implementation has placed pressure on the very systems meant to support educational quality. These challenges highlight the need for strategic planning, stakeholder engagement, and policy coherence to ensure that free education policies deliver both access and quality across the continent.

Educational Funding in Ghana

The funding model of education in Ghana is predominantly state-led, with the government allocating a significant portion of its national budget to support basic, secondary, and tertiary education. Public education financing is largely derived from domestic revenue, supplemented by donor contributions and international aid. In recent years, Ghana has increased its education expenditure, particularly following the introduction of the Free Senior High School (FSHS) policy in 2017, which sought to eliminate cost barriers at the secondary level (MoE, 2023). This policy has led to substantial budgetary reallocations, with over 20% of the education sector budget dedicated to the FSHS initiative, reflecting a shift in funding priorities from infrastructure and teacher

development to access and equity (Adom, 2023). While the policy has improved enrolment rates, concerns remain regarding its long-term financial sustainability and the implications for other educational sub-sectors.

Table 1: Summary of relevant papers and key findings on the subject

Title	Summary of paper reviewed	Key findings
Agana, T. A., Baataar, C. K. M., & Saani, I. (2025). A qualitative assessment of the Free Senior High School (Free SHS) policy on education in the Upper West Region of Ghana. <i>Ghana Journal of Educational Policy</i> , 15(1), 12–33.	The study investigates the impact of Ghana's Free Senior High School policy on educational outcomes in the Upper West Region, findings show increased enrolment for disadvantaged students but also challenges such as inadequate infrastructure and resource strain, with recommendations for infrastructure expansion and teacher support.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The Free SHS policy has significantly increased secondary school enrolment, particularly for economically disadvantaged students. - The policy's implementation is hindered by challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, overcrowded classrooms, insufficient learning materials, and overburdened teachers. - Concerns about compromised educational quality and strained resources persist despite the policy's transformative potential.
Dzordzormenyoh, M. K., Amoah, E., Dzordzormenyoh, C., & Domeh, J. O. (2025). Public perception of Ghana's Free Senior High School policy: A north–south comparative analysis. <i>Ghana Policy Journal</i> , 7(1), 24–41.	This study examines public perception of Ghana's Free Senior High School policy, focusing on regional variations and factors influencing these perceptions, with findings indicating that negative policy outcomes and occupation influence public opinion, having implications for education access and development in Ghana.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Partisanship does not influence public opinion about the effectiveness of the policy in helping poor access to education. - Negative policy outcomes, such as increased unemployment and inadequate resource provision, influence public opinion. - Occupation and region play a role in shaping public opinion about policy.
Nyadzi, et al., (2024). Assessing the Socio-Economic Implications of Free Senior High School (SHS) Policy on Tertiary Institutions in Ghana: A Case Study of the Western Region. <i>Open Journal of Educational Research</i> , 4(3), 100–111.	The Free Senior High School policy in Ghana has increased enrolment in tertiary institutions in the Western Region, but it also poses challenges such as inadequate facilities, high student-to-lecturer ratios, and increased costs, necessitating improvements in infrastructure, staffing, and partnerships with private institutions to mitigate these impacts.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The Free SHS policy has increased enrolment at the postsecondary level, leading to a high student-to-lecturer ratio and increased utility bills. - The policy has resulted in a high cost of living on campus and a rise in businesses on campus. - To address these challenges, respondents suggest improving infrastructure, hiring more lecturers, and fostering partnerships with private institutions.
Matery, J. (2020). The Effect of Free Senior High School Policy on the Lives of Parents and Wards in Ghana. <i>International Research Journal of Multidisciplinary Scope (IRJMS)</i> .	The introduction of the Free Senior High School Policy in Ghana has been beneficial to parents by reducing their financial burden, but it faces challenges such as inadequate stakeholder consultation and operational issues with the double-track system, which has mixed effects on students' social lives.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The introduction of the Free Senior High School Policy (FSHSP) significantly reduces the financial burden on parents. - The operationalization of the FSHSP with the double-track system has increased social vices and teenage pregnancies. - The policy significantly influences both the economic conditions of parents and the social lifestyle of students.

Salifu, I. (2025). Quality issues in free secondary education policy implementation: Case study insights from a community in northern Ghana. <i>Journal of African Education Policy</i> , 10(1), 12–25.	The study examines the success of Ghana's Free Senior High School policy in meeting quality objectives in northern Ghana, finding that it falls short of its intended goals, and discusses implications for policy reviews.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The FSHS policy is perceived by participants as falling short of its intended quality goals for secondary education in northern Ghana.
Duah, et al., (2022). The impact of the Free Senior High School education policy and double-track system on quality education outcomes: A quasi-experimental policy evaluation study in Ghana. Accra: Center for Educational Evaluation.	The study evaluates the impact of Ghana's Free Senior High School policy and double-track system, finding a decline in education quality and academic performance, with challenges including financial constraints and infrastructure deficits, suggesting a need for policy review and cost-sharing.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The study found a significant decline in quality education outcomes and academic performance due to the double-track system. - Students in double-track schools performed poorly in all core subjects compared to non-double-track schools. - The implementation of the policy faced challenges such as financial constraints, infrastructure deficits, and inadequate resources.
Asante, G., & Agbee, D. (2021). Responding to access and beyond in Fee-free policies: Comparative Review of Progressive Free Senior High and Free Senior High School policies in Ghana. <i>ScienceOpen</i> , 26.	The study compares two fee-free policies in Ghana, finding that the Free Senior High School policy increased access more effectively than the Progressive Free Senior High policy, but notes that prioritizing access left gaps in infrastructure and resources, necessitating policy redesign and further investment.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The Free Senior High School policy was more effective in increasing access to upper secondary education compared to the Progressive Free Senior High policy. - The prioritization of access in the Free Senior High School policy led to gaps in infrastructure and resources, necessitating a re-evaluation of funding sources and policy redesign. - Inviting consumers to absorb a proportion of boarding fees is proposed as a solution to address funding challenges and improve equity.
Ayeh, I. G. (2023). A Demi-Decade of Ghanas FSHS policy implementation- Evaluating the Pillars of the Policy Implementation: Evaluating the 'Pillars' of the Policy. <i>Journal of Education and Practice</i> www.iiste.org .	The Free Senior High School policy in Ghana, implemented in 2017, has benefited over 1.2 million students by removing financial barriers and increasing enrolment, but faces challenges such as inadequate infrastructure and financial difficulties, necessitating a review to ensure sustainability and effectiveness.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The Free SHS policy has led to increased enrolment and removed cost barriers for parents, but it has also faced challenges such as inadequate infrastructure and financial difficulties for the economy. - The policy lacks adequate stakeholder consultations and there is a high call for its review. - The policy has positively impacted lives by reducing financial burdens on parents and increasing enrolment.

KEY FINDINGS

Budgetary allocations and actual spending on education

Despite the increased investment, challenges persist in Ghana's education financing framework, including regional disparities, delayed disbursement of funds, and over-reliance on centralized budgeting. Capitation grants introduced at the basic education level have improved operational autonomy at schools, but inconsistent and inadequate funding continues to affect school management and quality outcomes (World Bank, 2023).

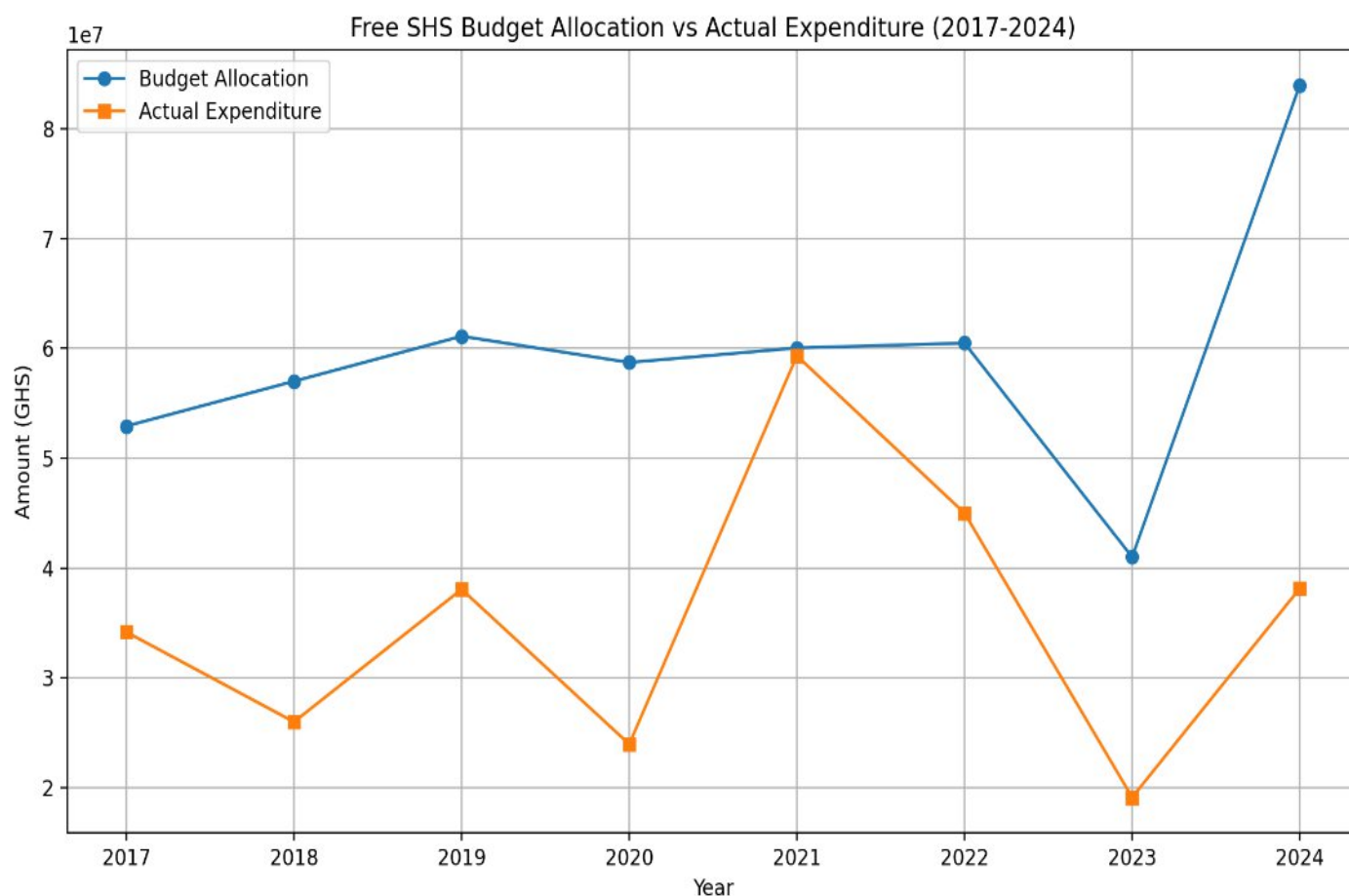


Figure 1. Free SHS budgetary allocations and spending between 2017 and 2024. **Source:** (Africa Education Watch, 2024)

The figure1 above shows that allocations grew steadily from 2017 to 2024, but real growth flattened after 2019. Actual spending lagged badly through 2020, hitting a low during the pandemic year. A sharp turnaround in 2021 brought execution rates to roughly 100 %, and they have stayed above 90 % since.

The rigid nature of budget allocations limits flexibility in addressing emergent needs such as infrastructure deficits and teacher shortages, particularly in rural and underserved areas. The recent policy dialogues have emphasized the need for diversified funding sources, including public-private partnerships, improved tax revenue mobilization, and efficiency-based allocation models to ensure equitable and sustainable education financing (UNESCO, 2022). Addressing these systemic gaps is critical to advancing Ghana's education sector and achieving the Sustainable Development Goal 4 on inclusive and quality education.

Contributions of FSHS to Student Access and enrolment

A primary objective of the FSHS policy is to eliminate financial hurdles to secondary education. According to Ayeh (2023), before the policy, high tuition fees and other expenses burdened parents and guardians, leading to low transition rates from junior to senior high school. The FSHS policy comprehensively covers tuition, admission, textbooks, library, science centre, computer fees, examination fees, utilities, boarding, and meals thereby facilitating access for students from low-income families (Abdul-Rahaman, et. al., 2018). This removal of cost barriers has led to a "tremendous increase" in student enrolment across Ghana (Ayeh, 2023). National statistics indicate a 75% rise in secondary school admissions between 2017 and 2021 (Agana, Baataar, & Saani, 2025). For instance, a study in the Ejisu Municipality observed an impressive growth in student enrolment, with a 19.1% increase in 2018 and a 36.15% increase in 2019 (Duah et. al., 2023). This mirrors national trends, with the World Bank reporting increases of 69.09% in 2017, 71.32% in 2018, and 74.68% in 2019 for senior high school enrolment. According to Dzordzormenyoh et. al., (2025) the total number of students benefiting has grown to 2.5 million students, rising from 813,448 in the 2016/17 academic year to 1.3 million in 2022/23.

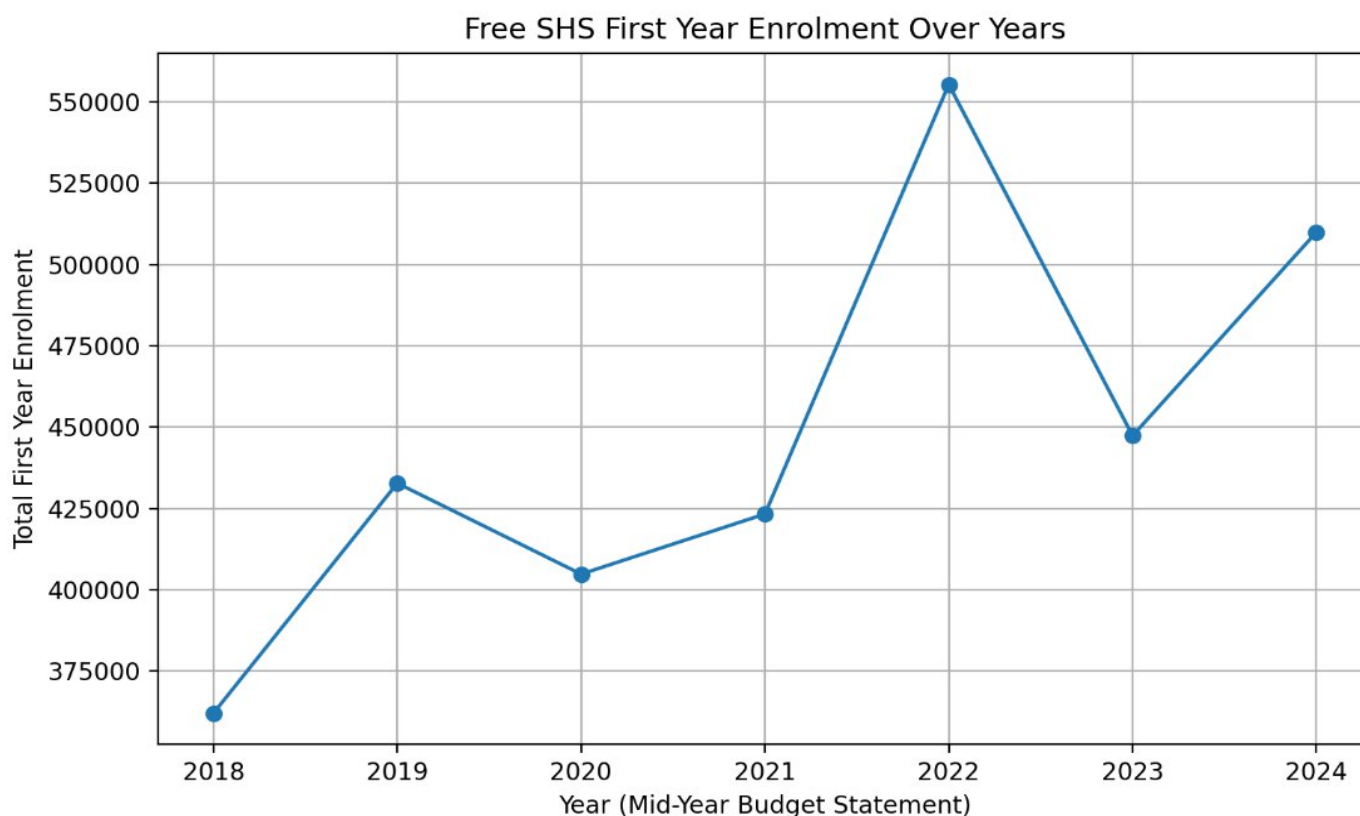


Figure 2. Free SHS first-year enrolment (2017/2018 – 2023/2024). **Source:** MOFED, 2024

The figure 2 above shows that enrolment under the FSHS programmed increased sharply in 2018/2019, dipped slightly in 2019/2020, and then resumed an upward trajectory, peaking in 2021/2022. The overall pattern reflects a sustained expansion of intake since the programme's launch (MOFED, 2024).

Specifically for the northern regions and other economically disadvantaged areas, the FSHS policy has been particularly been impactful (Agana, Baataar, & Saani, 2025). Historically, these regions suffered from low secondary school enrolment rates due to economic constraints. The policy has been perceived as a positive step for Ghanaians, particularly for parents and legal guardians who are now exempt from financial responsibility for their children's education (Tawiah & Mensah, 2023). This has allowed students from poorer backgrounds to compete on a more equal footing with their urban peers (Dzordzormenyoh et. al., (2025). According to Agana, Baataar, & Saani, (2025), parents interviewed in his study titled “A Qualitative Assessment of the Free Senior High School (Free SHS) Policy on Education in the Upper West Region of Ghana” expressed gratitude, with one stating that without FSHS, their child would likely been pushed into early working life instead of attending school. Another noted that “the policy made it possible for students from poor backgrounds to attend the same schools as their wealthier counterparts.” In the same vain, Kyei-Nuamah & Larbi, (2022) are also of the view that the policy has significantly improved the transition rate from junior high school (JHS) to senior high school (SHS) and the completion rate in secondary schooling. The transition rate rose from 68% in 2016/17 to 91.8% in 2019/20, and the completion rate increased from 48% to 64.1% in the same period. The cut-off points for admission, which was aggregate 25 before FSHS, was abolished, allowing students with scores of 26 to 48 to gain admission, thus expanding access to more students (Ayeh, 2023).

Impact of FSHS policy on Academic Performance and Quality

Quality of education remains one of the most persistent concerns across the literature. Salifu (2025), focusing on northern Ghana, found that stakeholders perceive the FSHS policy as falling short of its quality objectives. This finding is consistent with a quasi-experimental policy evaluation by Dwomoh et al. (2022), which documented a decline in student performance in core subjects under the double-track system. Their research attributes these declines to financial constraints, infrastructure deficits, and insufficient teaching and learning resources issues that further complicate efforts to achieve equity and excellence simultaneously. The impact of

FSHS on academic performance has shown mixed results, with some improvements observed over time after initial dips. The West African Senior Secondary Certificate Examination (WASSCE) is a key measure of student performance (Ayeh, 2023). In the introductory years of the policy (2017-2018), academic performance in core subjects generally dipped, except for English Language (Duah et al., 2023). This decline was attributed to challenges stemming from the unexpectedly increased student enrolment, which overstretched teachers and educational resources (Dwomoh, et al., 2022). However, according to Duah et al., (2023), improvements were observed from 2019 onwards. For instance, WASSCE results for core subjects in 2021 showed increases in pass rates: English (54.08%), Mathematics (54.11%), Integrated Science (65.70%), and Social Studies (66.03%), compared to 2017/18 figures (Kyei-Nuamah & Larbi, 22). Some schools also shown notable academic achievements; for example, Kintampo Senior High School (KINSS) performed well in quizzes and improved its WASSCE results, with a significant increase in pass rates from 15% to 96.6% in 2020 (Abdul-Rahim, Adom, & Adu-Agyem, 2022).

According to Shamo (2023), the introduction of the "Double Track System" in about 400 schools was a temporary measure to accommodate the surge in enrolment and address deficits in accommodation, classrooms, and teacher-to-student ratios. This system, which divides students and staff into two tracks (Green and Gold), allowed for more teacher-student contact hours by reducing student congestion, which perhaps translated into improved performances in core subjects in 2019 (Duah, Gyabaa, Mensah, Poku, & Damte, 2023). Despite these improvements, concerns about compromised educational quality persist. Factors such as overcrowded classrooms, inadequate teaching and learning materials, and overburdened teachers have been highlighted (Agana, Baataar, & Saani, 2025). Some parents and teachers believe that the policy's focus on quantity has overshadowed quality, leading to reduced individual attention for students and a decline in overall standards. Duah et al., (2023) is therefore of the view that the rapid expansion of secondary education amid inadequate provision of facilities poses severe challenges to effective teaching and learning. Students in double-track schools, for example, have been noted to perform poorly in WAEC examinations compared to non-double-track schools, partly due to reduced contact hours and increased holidays (Dwomoh, et al., 2022).

Progression to Higher Education and Employable Skills

The FSHS policy aims not only to improve academic performance but also to develop employable skills and improve equity by prioritizing and supporting Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) institutions (Ayeh, 2023). The policy seeks to enhance the competitiveness of Ghanaian students to match global standards (Abdul-Rahim, Adom, & Adu-Agyem, 2022). There is a recognized need to invest more in TVET education, as it produces individuals with essential technical and vocational skills that can foster business creation and industrialization (Ayeh, 2023). The author noted that partnerships with international bodies like the Japan International Co-operation Agency (JICA) and WorldSkills Germany are underway to improve TVET education. Regarding progression to tertiary education, experimental evidence from Ghana shows that secondary school scholarships increased the likelihood of enrolling in tertiary education (Kwabena & Darko, 2018). While the absolute numbers might be small compared to expectations, scholarship winners were still more likely to be enrolled in a tertiary program (Duflo, Dupas, & Kremer, 2021). The policy's goal is to empower youth to drive Ghana's development and create jobs through education and skills training (Ayeh, 2023).

Challenges and Criticisms

The Free Senior High School (FSHS) policy in Ghana, while widely acknowledged for improving access to secondary education, continues to grapple with a number of implementation challenges that threaten its long-term sustainability and effectiveness. A primary concern is the significant strain placed on existing educational infrastructure. The rapid increase in student enrolment has overwhelmed the capacity of many schools, resulting in overcrowded classrooms, dining halls, and insufficient boarding facilities, especially in underserved rural regions such as the Upper West Region (Shamo, 2023). These conditions not only affect the quality of education but also the general well-being and safety of students.

Additionally, the policy has been challenged by recurrent delays and inadequacies in government funding. Such financial constraints have disrupted the timely provision of essential resources, including teaching and learning materials and school meals, thereby impeding schools' ability to operate efficiently (Dwomoh et al., 2022).

Teacher-related challenges compound this issue. According to Duah et al., (2023), the increased student population has led to higher workloads for teachers, many of whom have reported insufficient teaching and learning resources. This assessment was corroborated by Dwomoh et al., (2022) who emphasized that problems related to teacher deployment and rationalization further complicate classroom management and instructional delivery. To cope with the issue of overcrowding, therefore, the government introduced the Double Track System; however, this initiative inadvertently resulted in unstable academic calendars, longer vacation periods, and concerns over students' engagement in social vices during extended breaks (Duah et al., 2023). This underscores the criticism by stakeholders about the limited consultation preceding the implementation of the FSHS policy. Many argue that the top-down approach excluded key actors, including directors of education, headteachers and parents, thus contributing to several operational inefficiencies (Dwomoh et al., 2022).

Furthermore, there is a growing perception that the policy, if not aligned with broader economic planning, could exacerbate youth unemployment as increasing numbers of students complete secondary education without corresponding expansion in job opportunities (Dzordzormenyoh et al., 2025). Reports of some headteachers charging unauthorized fees, despite the policy's promise of free education, according to Abdul-Rahaman et al., (2018) also point to issues of compliance and oversight. These multifaceted challenges underscore the need for a more holistic and participatory approach to education policy planning and implementation in Ghana.

DISCUSSIONS

Expansion of Access and Enrolment

Multiple studies, including Agana et al. (2025) and Asante and Agbee (2021), affirm that the FSHS policy has led to a significant increase in secondary school enrolment, particularly in rural and underserved areas such as the Northern Region. Ayeh (2023) notes that over 1.2 million students have benefited from the policy since its inception. This is consistent with the constitutional vision of universal access to secondary education, and it signals a democratization of opportunity for northern students who were previously excluded due to financial barriers. However, while the quantitative gains are evident, the literature also warns against equating access with educational quality. For instance, Salifu (2025) argues that while access has improved in the north, the pace of investment in infrastructure, teacher deployment, and instructional materials has lagged behind the increased demand. Thus, although more students now attend SHS, their learning environments remain compromised, raising questions about the quality of education and prospects for academic progression.

Quality of Learning and Academic Performance

The core aim of expanding access is ultimately to improve learning outcomes, yet evidence of improved academic performance is mixed. Dwomoh et al. (2022) find that the double-track system—implemented to accommodate increased enrolments has disrupted the academic calendar, increased teacher workloads, and limited contact hours with students. These factors collectively undermine academic performance, especially in under-resourced northern schools.

Agana et al. (2025) further note a rise in absenteeism and reduced discipline in schools, attributed partly to overpopulated classrooms and weakened supervisory structures. These challenges are exacerbated in the north, where infrastructure is weaker and school management capacity is limited. Such conditions hinder effective teaching and learning, suggesting that while FSHS may have opened the door to education, it has not sufficiently supported students to thrive academically once inside. Moreover, performance metrics in the West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE) do not show a consistent upward trend for students in the Northern Region, reinforcing the argument that access alone does not guarantee learning success. The Demi-Decade report supports this by indicating that quality assurance mechanisms have not kept pace with enrolment expansion.

Equity and Regional Variation

The northern part of Ghana has historically experienced educational disparities due to infrastructural deficits, lower teacher retention, and economic hardship. The FSHS policy, though national in scope, has exposed these

existing inequities rather than resolved them. Dzordzormenyoh et al. (2025) report that perceptions of FSHS differ by region and occupation, with many northern stakeholders expressing concern over the policy's implementation quality in their schools. This regional disparity is crucial to the discussion of progression. Students in the north not only face a resource gap but also contend with socio-economic challenges that affect their ability to sustain engagement through to tertiary education. Matey (2020) notes that while the policy provides financial relief, the hidden costs of schooling (transport, boarding supplies, food) remain barriers for poor households, especially in rural northern areas.

Institutional Strain and Systemic Limitations

The rapid scale-up of FSHS has placed considerable strain on existing educational institutions. Osei et al. (2024) document how tertiary institutions—particularly public universities—are facing large intakes from FSHS graduates without a proportional increase in faculty, infrastructure, or academic support services. For students from the Northern Region, who may require more preparatory support due to foundational deficits, this poses significant challenges to academic progression at higher levels. Furthermore, issues such as teacher stress, burnout, and logistical constraints reported in studies like Agana et al. (2025) suggest a system under pressure, with implications for student outcomes. Without well-supported and motivated teachers, efforts to enhance performance and progression in the north are likely to fall short.

Long-term Progression and Sustainability

The FSHS policy's long-term goal is not only to improve performance at the SHS level but to enhance progression to higher education and economic participation. However, several studies caution that this trajectory is uncertain without strategic adjustments. The Demi-Decade review, for instance, advocates for cost-sharing and policy redesign, especially given the unsustainable fiscal burden of the program. Progression from SHS to tertiary institutions among northern students is also limited by persistent socio-cultural factors, such as early marriage and gendered expectations, which are not fully addressed by the FSHS framework. Additionally, Salifu (2025) recommends targeted support programs mentoring, remedial teaching, and counselling to help northern students bridge academic and personal challenges and successfully transition to tertiary education.

CONCLUSIONS

The Free Senior High School (FSHS) policy in Ghana has significantly enhanced access to secondary education, particularly for disadvantaged students in the Northern Region, by eliminating financial barriers and improving enrolment and progression rates.

Persistent challenges such as infrastructure deficits, teacher shortages, funding delays, and concerns over academic quality highlight the need for a more balanced and sustainable approach.

The policy has not been reviewed since its implementation in 2017, and therefore lacks stakeholder involvement and support the financing and investments mechanism.

The FSHS policy is not properly aligned with the national development goals and hance, is not expanding technical and vocational education opportunities which is critical to translating educational access into socio-economic advancement.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To ensure the long-term success, quality, and sustainability of Ghana's Free Senior High School (FSHS) policy, a multidimensional reform approach is necessary.

Firstly, policy implementation must adopt a balanced framework that gives equal emphasis to all pillars of the education system—not merely access, but also quality, infrastructure, and equity. Ayeh (2023) underscores that without parallel investment in these other components, the gains in access may be undermined by declining educational standards and deteriorating learning environments.

Secondly, there should be a comprehensive policy review that meaningfully incorporates the perspectives of diverse stakeholders, including teachers, school administrators, parents, students, and civil society actors. Such an inclusive process will enable a realistic assessment of the policy's strengths and areas requiring reform. Abdul-Rahim et al., (2022) emphasize that stakeholder consultations can uncover practical insights into implementation challenges and facilitate more adaptive and inclusive strategies. A form of cost-sharing model for financially capable households, which could ease the fiscal burden on the state while preserving equity for economically disadvantaged students (Dwomoh et al., 2022).

Thirdly, government should pursue reliable sources of educational finance, including the integration of public-private partnerships, and ensure the timely and adequate disbursement of subventions to schools to mitigate operational disruptions (Abdul-Rahim et al., 2022).

Fourthly, the state must continue to expand school infrastructure, such as classrooms, laboratories, dormitories, and sanitation facilities, to accommodate the increasing enrolment and reduce overcrowding (Ayeh, 2023).

Additionally, effective teacher recruitment, equitable deployment, and the provision of appropriate teaching and learning resources remain essential for maintaining instructional quality (Dwomoh et al., 2022).

Furthermore, Technical and Vocational Education pathways should be strengthened for equipping students with employable skills and aligning secondary education with labour market demands (Ayeh, 2023).

Ongoing evaluation of the double-track system is necessary to assess its impacts on academic contact hours, student performance, and social development. A strategic transition plan towards a single-track system should be developed to address these concerns (Duah et al., 2023).

Finally, fostering greater transparency and communication regarding the policy's objectives, funding, and implementation processes can help build public trust and bolster citizen engagement. Kyei-Nuamah and Larbi (2022) suggest that accessible reporting frameworks and awareness campaigns can enhance stakeholder confidence and support for the FSHS initiative.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There is no potential conflict of interest in this study. This paper is the outcome of a review of empirical literature, media reports, and public records on the subject. All publications referred have been duly acknowledged. It is therefore the original work of the authors.

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