

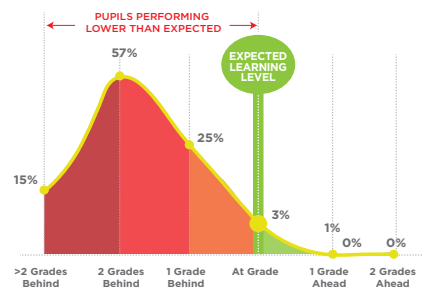
# POLICY BRIEF

# Secondary Education in Sierra Leone: Results of the Secondary Grade Learning Assessment, 2019

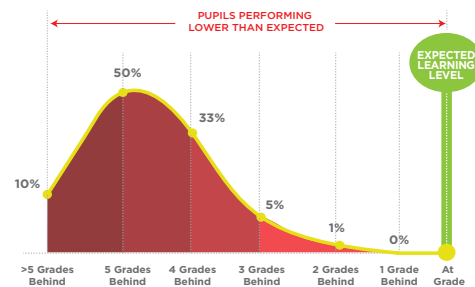
Delivering quality education and improving learning outcomes is the key priority for Sierra Leone's government and central to the success of the Sierra Leone National Development Plan (2019 – 2023). The third Leh Wi Lan learning assessment reiterates previous findings; that pupils' learning achievement at secondary grade falls way behind curriculum expectations. Rapid growth in student numbers - with 235,000 more boys and girls in secondary schools between 2018 and 2019 - has not been matched by accompanying levels of investment. The reality is that students enter secondary school without having mastered the primary curriculum. If they are unable to catch up, the gap between their knowledge and curriculum expectations widens as they progress through secondary school.

## SECONDARY SCHOOL PERFORMANCE IN MATHS AND ENGLISH

### Maths Performance JSS



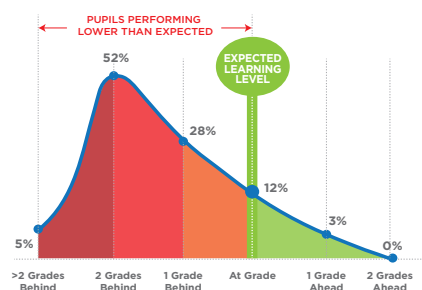
### Maths Performance SSS



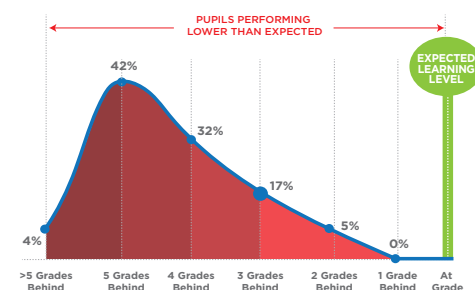
### Maths. JSS versus SSS

Performance worsens as pupils move from Junior to Senior Secondary School. 4% of pupils are at or ahead of grade in JSS, with all pupils at least two grades behind expected levels in SSS.

### English Performance JSS



### English Performance SSS



### English. JSS versus SSS

Performance in English worsens as pupils move from Junior to Senior Secondary School. 15% of pupils are at or ahead of grade in JSS, with all pupils at least two grades behind expected levels in SSS.

### JSS. Maths versus English

Pupils are falling further behind in Maths. 97% of pupils are one or more grades behind expected levels in Maths, against 85% who are one or more grades behind in English.

### SSS. Maths versus English

At Senior Secondary School, Maths performance worsens more than in English. 98% of pupils are three or more grades behind expected levels. In English, 95% of pupils are three or more grades behind.

# POLICY BRIEF

## OVERVIEW

Since launching the Free Quality School Education (FQSE) Programme in 2018, significant steps have been taken with the approval of more schools and teachers, the distribution of 2.7 million English and Maths textbooks, a review of teachers' service conditions, training for over 6,500 teachers and provision of 27,000 lesson plans in English and Maths, support to district education management and the introduction of robust external school observations.

However, the Government of Sierra Leone faces a major challenge in supporting students to both catch up and master new secondary school material at the same time. Further, this challenge needs to be delivered at a time of rapid student expansion and a shortage of trained Maths and English teachers. However, there are encouraging signs in that the learning assessment shows modest learning gains amongst 'average' and 'less able' students.

The latest DFID research suggests that "... countries at the bottom of international league tables may first move up by reducing the proportion of children with very low performance, and then improve again (from a middling to high ranking) by increasing the proportion of children with high performance<sup>[1]</sup>." While premature to draw conclusions from two data points, this may be the start of a positive trend – albeit with a more modest rate of annual learning improvement.

Considering the rapid growth in student numbers and need for investment, the original target of an annual 5 percentage points increase appears too optimistic. Such rates of learning gain have not been seen in Africa and where achieved, (Mexico, Poland and Turkey) have been delivered over a ten-year period with significantly higher levels of resourcing<sup>[2]</sup>.

## KEY FINDINGS

### **Geography, gender and household income are key factors in learning outcomes.**

Boys generally scored higher than girls across both grades and subjects and this gap widens as pupils move to higher grades from JSS2 to SSS2. Similarly, in both subjects and across both grades, weaker test scores correlate with remoteness, measured by the distance of the school from the district capital or headquarter town. Across both grades, pupils from the richest households perform significantly better than pupils from the poorest 20 per cent of households.

**Pupils are losing significant amounts of instructional time.** Teachers, on average, taught for 12 of the 25–30 prescribed school hours in a standard week, which amounts to approximately 2.5 hours of teaching per day or less than half of the standard school day. During the school observations, one in three (33 per cent) classes had pupils in them but no teachers. According to teachers, the main reason for being absent from school was own or family illness. However, principals link teachers' absence from school to low levels of teacher salary and remuneration. Student attendance, although not measured in the SGLA, is also a concern. (See instructional time policy brief for further detail).

### **Low average Pupils Teacher Ratios mask a wide variation within different schools.**

Whilst average PTR is relatively positive, with 20 pupils to one teacher in JSS and 23 pupils to one teacher in SSS, there is a wide variation within different schools with the highest being 350 to 1. Further, the lack of subject specific teachers in both JSS and SSS is likely to have a strong bearing on pupils' performance.

### **Teachers are using lesson plans but cannot cover the curriculum.**

73% of secondary school teachers used a teaching guide to help plan and prepare for their teaching, with most teachers reporting the use of MBSSE lesson plans. Most teachers are positive about MBSSE lesson plans but they struggle to incorporate all the prescribed activities in one period. Data from School Support Officers recruited and trained by Leh Wi Lan shows that approximately 20 lessons

[1] Raising the Floor on Learning Levels – Equitable Improvement Starts with Tail. RISE 2017).

[2] Hanushek, E.A. 2015 The Knowledge Capital of Nations: Education and the Economics of Growth. MIT Press.

# POLICY BRIEF

**Most schools provide no extra support for pupils with special needs though teachers adapt their teaching styles.** Around 60 per cent of teachers report no provision of ramps, railings or any other infrastructural arrangements at their schools. See further detail in policy brief on 'Tackling Barriers to Learning'.

**Difficulties in walking and hearing significantly affect pupil performance.**

For English, a significantly larger proportion of pupils reporting hearing difficulties do not reach a level of knowledge above primary grade. See further detail in policy brief on 'Tackling Barriers to Learning'.

**Staff meetings are now well-established in the secondary school system.** Almost all teachers and principals report having staff meetings in the previous term with meetings largely dealing with day-to-day school issues and administration, but also increasingly focusing on pedagogy and learning. According to principals, the most common topics of discussion during these staff meetings were teacher absenteeism, school administration and teaching practices/pedagogy.

**Most schools provide no extra support for pupils with special needs though teachers adapt their teaching styles.** Just over half of teachers said there was no special support such as counselling provided to pupils with special needs, nor was there a system for providing additional teaching outside regular classes. However, almost all teachers report adapting their pedagogies to make the lesson delivery more accessible to pupils with special needs, even though the effectiveness of these techniques is not captured in this survey.

**Schools have regular systems of internal lesson observations.** Internal observation has a role in the improvement of teaching in schools. Teachers report an average of five lessons observed during the previous term. The observers were usually the principal or head of department. 94 per cent of principals and 86 per cent of teachers confirmed that some form of feedback was also provided after the lesson observation, mostly in terms of one-on-one discussion with the concerned teacher.

**External supervision is a valuable tool for teacher development.** Most principals report at least one external supervision visit during the previous term with SSOs observing lessons and discussing advice on lesson plans and teaching methods. MBSSE inspectors and school supervisors are other common visitors. SSOs are now the most frequent visitors, reported by 80 per cent of principals. SSOs are not currently due to be replaced when the Leh Wi Lan programme closes

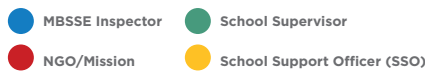
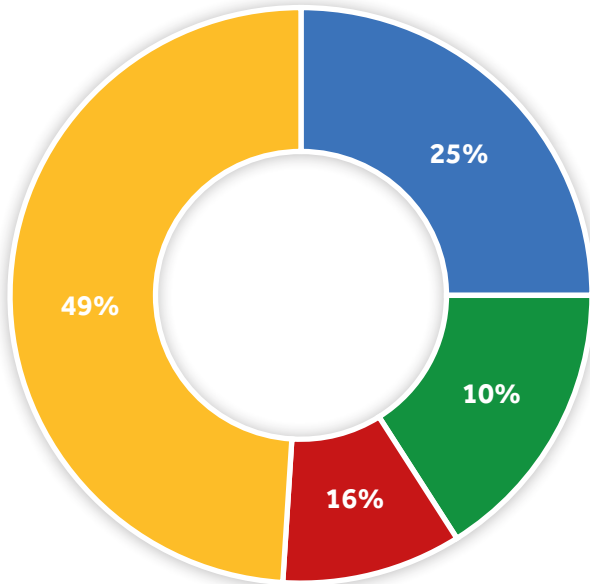
**Girls' safety is a significant and underreported problem.** Female teachers are far more likely to report that female pupils face risk to and from school. Further, a third of respondents report that female pupils were subject to harassment on the way to and from school. Girls report a much higher incidence of sexual harassment than is reported by (mostly male) teachers.

**Most pupils are using pupil handbooks in English and Maths.** For the first time, SGLA III measured uptake and response to pupil handbooks which were recently distributed to Sierra Leonean government-owned and government-assisted schools. Alongside other self-study learning materials like textbooks or teacher's notes, the pupil's handbook is being used by 68 per cent of all pupils. Pupils that report using the handbooks were performing marginally better than those not using them, although students with disabilities and female students are more likely to find the handbooks more difficult to use.

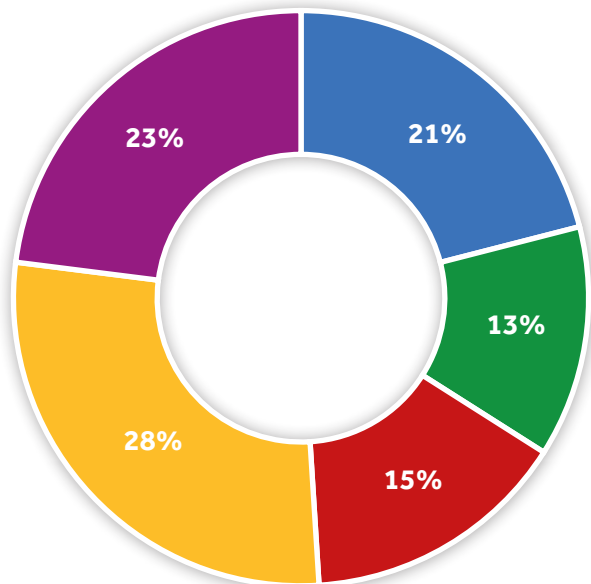
# POLICY BRIEF

## EXTERNAL SUPERVISION VISITS; FREQUENCY AND PURPOSE

EXTERNAL OBSERVERS



PURPOSE OF VISITS



## RECOMMENDATIONS

### Short Term

**Increase instructional time:** TSC, MBSSE offices should support Principals, HoDs and teachers to reflect then act on tackling the causes of lost learning time. (See instructional time brief for further details).

**Make 'Learning Improvement' the key benchmark for recognition and reward:** Recognition and incentives for principals, teachers and schools must be based on learning achievement and learning improvement of pupils. Explore ways that principals from well performing schools are enabled to support less successful schools. (Action: MBSSE, TSC)

**Deliver targeted remediation.** Provide content remediation opportunities for teachers through weekend remedial classes, termly CPD training or formal INSET training delivered by teacher training colleges (action: TSC). Incentivise teacher participation by connecting successful completion of such courses with promotion opportunities.

**Improve school monitoring:** Strengthen the official school monitoring system ensuring that there are clear protocols for inspection, uniform reporting formats and clarity on how, where and by when these reports should be shared. (Action: MBSSE)

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### Medium Term

#### **Bring teachers into formal employment:**

Formalise the employment of teachers to minimise numbers not on payroll as a measure to enforce accountability and sanction for absences (Action: TSC).

**Develop school supervision:** Develop an affordable school supervision system to both assess performance and provide in-school support to teachers. Much could be learnt from the LWL SSO model. Options could include: (i) inducting LWL SSOs as supervisors onto the government payroll before the programme closes; (ii) use existing SSO resources to train government officers; (iii) 'twin' government supervisors with SSOs on school visits; (iv) adopt / adapt the LWL real time dashboard reporting to ensure school visits reports are logged and shared in real time. (Action: MBSSE, LWL).

### Long Term

#### **Develop a modern curriculum for SSS level:**

There is no national curriculum for SSS and the WASSCE exams syllabus continues to be used as a proxy. Produce a modern curriculum for SSS to improve content and pace of learning at SSS level (Action: MBSSE).

**Revise the curriculum at primary and JSS levels:** Review and revise the accelerated school curriculum (primary and JSS) to regularise teaching pace and enable teachers to cover relevant curriculum content each school year (Action: MBSSE, TSC).

**Ensure attendance and instructional time is central to teacher progression:** Stipulate attendance and instructional time as a foundational pillar of career progression for teachers and enforce through a performance management system (Action: TSC).

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**This Policy Brief summarises the results of the third annual Secondary Grade Learning Assessment (SGLA), conducted in 2019, supported by the UKAid-funded Leh Wi Lan programme and designed in close collaboration with the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education (MBSSE).**

***Leh Wi Lan/Sierra Leone Secondary Education Improvement Programme (SSEIP) is a five-year (2016-2021) UKaid-funded programme aimed at improving English and Mathematics learning achievement in all secondary schools of Sierra Leone, especially for girls. The programme expects to impact learning conditions for 1.4 million boys and girls, leading to improved secondary exam passes, by making the learning environment safer and more productive.***

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