



ESID Briefing No. 17

How politics shapes the quality of education in Ghana

KEY FINDINGS:

- Ghana's blend of multi-party competition and patron-client politics generates much stronger incentives to improve access to education than to improve the quality of education. The general failure to improve accountability in the education sector, particularly regarding the proportion of highly-trained teachers who spend time on task, has led to poor educational outcomes that directly reflect how politics and governance work in Ghana.
- Ghana's competitive clientelist settlement has tended to generate a high degree of policy incoherence and politicisation within the education sector. Governance arrangements are usually poorly aligned with the prevailing balance of power at multiple levels of the educational system.
- Where good practice does emerge, this is usually through the efforts of reform-minded coalitions of state and non-state actors at district and school levels, with the capacity to devise and enforce problem-solving solutions to local problems.
- Decentralisation reforms have created the space for these kinds of coalitions to emerge, but have not systematically improved performance. This is because of failures to ensure coherence with centralised aspects of educational sector governance, as well the ways in which district-level politics play out.

Ghana is characterised as a 'competitive clientelist' type of political settlement, in which two parties – the National Democratic Congress (NDC) and the New Patriotic Party (NPP) – have consistently challenged each other in national elections. In this context, the incentives of ruling elites can become loaded towards the use of public institutions in politicised ways to secure short-term gains. This has implications for the education sector in Ghana, which has historically been seen by its ruling elites as critical, both to their means of staying in power through increased legitimacy and to their ideas of promoting national development.

“ Incentives of ruling elites can become loaded towards the use of public institutions in politicised ways. ”

Education sector reforms in Ghana over the past three decades have, on paper at least, focused on the twin imperatives of improving the quality and quantity of education. However, the focus on quality appears to have been outweighed by the political imperatives of providing more tangible goods via the access agenda. Ghana has performed less well in terms of securing outcomes: 75% of those leaving school after five to six years could not read and the youth literacy gap between rich and poor is 50% (UNESCO, 2014).

“ The focus on quality appears to have been outweighed by the political imperatives of providing more tangible goods. ”

The frequency of reforms has increased under heightened electoral competition, at the expense of both coherence and technocratic control. Decentralisation reforms, such as the 2008 Education Act, have created new mechanisms and structures to empower regional-, district- and school-level stakeholders to play an active role in managing and improving education service delivery. However, these reforms appear not to have achieved the desired effects: a 2008 CDD-Ghana survey suggests the national average for teacher absenteeism was 27% and another study found that only 70% of available instructional time is used for engaging students in learning activities.

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The nature of the political settlement in Ghana, and the way in which this influences the governance of education, results in few system-wide pressures for improved performance.

FINDINGS

The education sector in Ghana needs to be understood not only in a technical sense, but as a domain of resource allocation that plays a political as well as a developmental role. Incentives for politicians to directly influence the sector have increased, as became apparent under conditions of tight electoral competition in the 2000s, when the President ordered his own presidential review of the sector, despite an official education sector working group strategic review (2003-15) having already been commissioned. Moving resources from popular, if inefficient, subsidies (e.g., trainee teacher allowances), towards more quality-focused expenditures risks upsetting influential constituencies such as political elites, political parties and unions, and has been avoided.

“ Incentives for politicians to directly influence the education sector have increased. ”

The decentralisation reforms have created a new governance structure and have involved efforts to ensure an influential role for local political authorities and non-state actors. Though on paper the District Education Oversight Committee (DEOC) of the District Assembly (DA) is responsible for overall oversight of education performance, in practice, resources from central government, recruitment, and policy implementation are managed by the District Education Directorate (DED) which is accountable to regional and national institutions. This has created an imbalance in local-level autonomy over education performance, which is critical for learning outcomes. The consequence of these contradictory governance arrangements is well captured by one of our research informants (see Box 1).

Box 1:

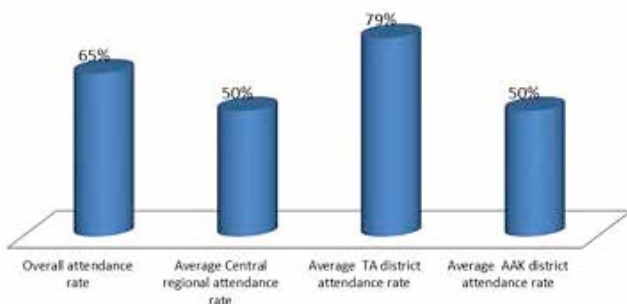
“Directives on education at the district level come from national or regional headquarters with strict compliance and they come with deadlines. All other activities pertinent to the teachers' performance and classroom work in the district are then relegated to the background in favour of the national demand. Besides, before a directive is fully implemented at the district, another policy might come to modify it. Additionally, work on teacher issues like promotions, salary upgrading and recruitments is dispatched to headquarters for action to be taken on and this takes a long time and that demoralises teachers and sometimes makes them think that the DED is not working and is oblivious to the problems at the district.”

This briefing focuses on delivery and performance management at the district level, using teacher attendance as an indicator. It focuses particularly on how some districts have managed to overcome the effects of competitive clientelism and contradictory governance arrangements.

Our research project selected two districts within the Central region, which are similar in most respects other than their educational outcomes. Abura Asebu Kwamankese (AAK) and Twifo Ati Morkwa (TA) are among the poorest districts in Ghana and generally perform badly in overall delivery of basic public services. In the 2014 Ghana's District League Table, AAK ranked 173, while TA ranked 180 out of the 216 districts in Ghana.

However, TA performs much better than AAK in tackling teacher absenteeism, where it ranks above national and regional averages, and in educational outcomes (see Figure 1). Our findings show that these differences can be explained through reference to the nature of power, politics and both formal and informal institutional arrangements at multiple levels of governance in Ghana.

Figure 1: Teacher attendance at primary level, 2014-2015



Source: CDD field data, 2015.

In particular, the constellation of power at district level helps shape the capacity of district-level technocrats and school-level bodies such as PTAs to promote teacher accountability. In TA district, a developmental coalition has emerged that has been able to circumvent the problems arising from conditions of competitive clientelism, incoherent governance arrangements and vested interests. In particular, a strong alliance has been forged, not only between the key political and bureaucratic actors involved in governing education at district level, most notably DA, DEOC and the DED, and the District Commissioner for Education, but between these actors and the teacher unions.

This coalition has been critical to overcoming opposition to DED policies and to the enforcement of accountability mechanisms at all levels. It has given DED a free hand to enforce sanctions on teachers through embargo of salaries, incentivised teachers by providing accommodation, and initiated community monitoring and reporting on absentee teachers. In other contexts, salary embargos are challenged by unions, who protect members' interests over those of students or the DAs, for whom teachers constitute a significant voting bloc.

In the lower performing AAK, however, no such coalition has emerged and members of the PTA could not command the political clout to influence decisions at the district level. Conflict over power relations, and to some extent political interests, between the DA and the DED resulted in incoherent application of sanctions for absentee teachers.

“ Developmental coalitions of multiple actors are required ... to promote higher levels of accountability. ”

These findings suggest that where the political settlement and a lack of coherence in governance arrangements fail to generate system-wide drivers of improved performance, developmental coalitions of multiple actors (political and technical, state and non-state) are required to challenge absenteeism and promote higher levels of accountability at both district and school levels. In addition, the role of circuit supervisors, who operate at the interface of district- and school-level governance structures, is critical, with better-performing schools registering a much higher number of visits from circuit supervisors.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- The centralised and decentralised dimensions of educational sector governance in Ghana need to be re-aligned, so that they are mutually supportive. This could include generating greater oversight of the Ghana Education Service at district level, whilst being careful not to undermine its high levels of technical competence.
- Different configurations of politics and power at district level create different conditions for reform, and a good understanding of political dynamics at district, and even school, levels is required for interventions to be relevant.
- Where developmental coalitions are in place, these should be nurtured and invested in, even where their operation seems at odds with 'best-practice'. This includes supporting the role of politically-salient stakeholders, such as teacher associations, parent teacher associations (PTAs) and school management committees, as well as the capacity of bureaucratic actors.
- In conditions where political dynamics are more aligned with patronage than performance, support for both top-down and bottom-up accountability mechanisms is likely to be required if outcomes are to be improved, alongside efforts to nurture coalitions for reform. An emphasis on supporting contextualised approaches to problem-solving is important.

ABOUT THIS BRIEFING

This briefing was produced from an ESID project examining why improving the quality of basic education in Ghana has remained a challenge. It draws on research framing by ESID researchers Brian Levy (University of Cape Town) and Michael Walton (Harvard University) to investigate differences in the management of teacher absenteeism at the district and school level. It was drafted by Kate Pruce, adapted from a forthcoming ESID Working Paper, with inputs from Professor Sam Hickey (ESID Research Director, The University of Manchester). The research was undertaken by Edward Ampratwum, Mohammed Awal and Franklin Oduro (Ghana Center for Democratic Development), coordinated by Professor Sam Hickey.

FURTHER READING

ESID Working Paper (2016, forthcoming). 'Decentralisation and teacher accountability in Ghana: How the political settlement shapes the education sector at the district and school levels', by Edward Ampratwum, Mohammed Awal and Franklin Oduro.

ESID Working Paper 53 (2015). 'Political settlement, the deals environment and economic growth: The case of Ghana', by Robert Darko Osei, Charles Ackah, George Domfe and Michael Danquah.

ESID Working Paper 28 (2014). 'A dynamic mapping of the political settlement in Ghana', by Franklin Oduro, Mohammed Awal and Maxwell Agyei Ashon.

ESID Working Paper 18 (2013). 'Institutions, provision and service delivery: Bringing politics back in', by Brian Levy and Michael Walton.

ESID Briefing Paper No. 8: 'Researching the politics of service provision: A new conceptual and methodological approach (November 2014).

All available at: www.effective-states.org

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