Getting pupils into the classroom and learning: Lessons from high performing schools

Introduction

Removing barriers to pupils' attendance and learning at school is the most effective way to improve learning outcomes for all children and especially reach those who are marginalised through location, disability, cultural practices, household income or gender. The most recent Secondary Grade Learning Assessment (SGLA) found gender-based differences in pupil performance as well as alarmingly high levels of sexual harassment of girls. The SGLA also showed geography and income as major barriers to learning, and little provision made for children with special needs. Whilst parental and community support for education is known to be a significant factor in ensuring barriers are overcome, in-school measures are also vital in ensuring that individual and differentiated learning needs can be met.

Better performing schools tackle sexual harassment, foster parental and community support and accommodate pupils with different learning needs.

Ensuring children can attend school and learn is one of a number of factors that have an impact on performance, along with effective school leadership, the learning environment, the recruitment and deployment of qualified teachers and, effective teaching practice. This is one of a series of four briefings which recognise the importance of these factors by casting a light on the activities of better performing schools and their good practice.

This is one of a series of four briefings produced from a study, conducted by the UKAid-funded Leh Wi Lan programme, which recognise the importance of these factors by casting a light on the activities of better performing schools and their good practice.

Better performing schools

Introduce prevention mechanisms and processes for dealing with sexual harassment in schools. Everyday sexual harassment against girls is prevalent in schools, perpetrated by staff, male pupils or others encountered on the way to and from school. Community sensitisation alongside a strict code of conduct for teachers and pupils has made some difference, as do clear processes to escalate issues. However, complaint mechanisms, such as feedback boxes have not proven successful, in part because those responsible for dealing with the complaints are, at times, also the perpetrators.

At SSS2 pupils, 51 per cent of girls perform at a primary grade level compared to 39 per cent of boys.

Create safe spaces for female pupils to help keep them in school and focused on education. It is common for schools to have low numbers of female teachers and limited water and sanitation facilities that mean girls cannot manage personal hygiene and privacy during menstruation. However, some schools are working to mitigate these issues, increasing opportunities for female pupils to speak with other women through a 'mother's club' and channelling fees and donations to ensure there is a functional toilet facility with adequate water supply.

Involve parents and communities in education and school management tends to occur in better performing schools. These schools have active community-teacher and parent-teacher associations, where parents and communities are involved in closely monitoring children's day-to-day work and sent updates via WhatsApp. One school is using small monetary incentives to encourage meeting attendance and another hosts mandatory open days for parents to come to the school to discuss their child's performance and the support needed.

Sensitise parents and community leaders about the importance of education. With the launch of FQSE easing fee-related pressures, schools can encourage parents and community leaders to ensure pupils have sufficient time to travel to school and for after-school study. In one school, parents of pupils who sitting the BECE have agreed to eliminate extra chores so children can better prepare for exams, and the wider community is helping to ensure income-generating activities take place outside of school hours. Elsewhere, people from the local community who have achieved professional success are invited back as role models to talk to parents on the importance of education for all, including girls.

Provide resources for pupils to access after-school learning in a safe and quiet environment away from the distractions of home. One school is providing assisted self-study time twice a week, monitored by a teacher who can answer questions pupils may have. Others have set up after-school clubs and are encouraging pupils to make use of a reading hut at the centre of the community which is supervised by a teacher and was funded by an INGO.

Collaborate with NGOs to ensure long-established socio-cultural practices do not impact on learning. Traditional, secret society initiations can take young people away from home and school for long periods of time. Sensitisation for parents is critical but principals have also been requesting chiefs talk to elders about conducting initiations outside term time and working with NGOs that support young people from dropping out because of the psychological impact of practices like FGM. In some instances, principals have played a more direct role in ensuring students do not miss their exams, and help pupils evade initiation.

Set up a code of conduct so teachers and pupils understand that anti-social behaviour will not be tolerated and reduce the risk of young people being distracted from their education. Principals and proprietors strictly monitor written codes of conduct and behaviour that all must sign up and agree, with regular reminders of the religious and moral ethics that underpin school ethos. In some schools, elders have been engaged to monitor activities outside the school gate and report any cases of violence, truancy or substance abuse.

Balance English language with local language instruction to help pupils understand concepts and ideas. Teachers say that, with many first-generation learners from diverse language backgrounds, pupils often need a combination of English with their local language (for example Krio) to understand content and concepts. In schools where additional local languages are widely spoken, this can be a challenge. However, some schools have a no vernacular policy meaning pupils are compelled to learn English, and activities such as spelling bees, set quizzes and reading aloud ensure they practice regularly.

Methodology

This Briefing Paper explores key findings on school leadership from a qualitative deep dive study that highlights pockets of effective learning ('positive deviance') to consider what, if any, lessons can be replicated elsewhere to help other secondary schools make greater progress towards achieving their performance goals.

The study covered three districts of Western Rural, Kono and Karene targeting three schools in each area – two high performing schools and one average or low performing school, according to average pupil results in the May-June 2019 SGLAs.

The three-person research team included two Sierra Leonean researchers and spent three days in each school using key informant interviews (KIIs), focus group discussions (FGDs) and lesson/school observations to develop case studies. FGDs were carried out separately for boys and girls with the same set of eight pupils who had been randomly selected for the SGLA pupil test.