



Leh Wi Lan Sierra Leone Back to School Study 2020



Briefing note 2 – January 2021

Back to School Study: Child safety and well-being in Sierra Leone during COVID-19 school closure



About the Back to School Study

Schools in Sierra Leone closed on 31st March 2020 after the country's first COVID-19 case was confirmed. Schools reopened six months later on 5th October. During this time, nearly two million pre-primary and primary, 450,000 junior secondary and 300,000 senior secondary pupils were not attending school.¹ This is not new to Sierra Leone – in 2014-15, schools shut for nearly nine months due to Ebola. Evidence suggests the cost of school closure for children's education and well-being was high, and more profound for girls and the poorest pupils. In response to COVID-19, Sierra Leone's Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education (MBSSE) and Teacher Service Commission (TSC) immediately launched a radio teaching programme, distributed rations to pupils in the poorest communities, and conducted community sensitisation to keep girls safe. The objective was to safeguard children and promote learning recovery when schools reopen.

In this context, the Back to School (BTS) study offers a unique opportunity to use quantitative and qualitative evidence to guide MBSSE's COVID recovery priorities. BTS provides robust estimates of the learning and child well-being impacts of the COVID shock to Sierra Leone's education system. Details of the study design are shown below.

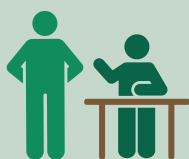
Within the BTS study, this briefing note reports on different aspects of child safety and well-being for junior- (JSS) and senior secondary school (SSS) pupils while schools were closed due to COVID-19. It answers the following four questions:

- What were the main challenges affecting pupil's safety and well-being during the school closure?
- Are there any differences in experiences and well-being impacts for certain groups of children based on their gender, disability, location and other background characteristics?
- What information and support facilities are available in communities to help children facing safety and well-being concerns?
- How safe, ready and prepared were schools to reopen following COVID-19?



2,000

JSS3 and SSS3* pupils tested on English and maths immediately after schools reopened in October



One-on-one

test administration: each pupil is tested individually by a data collector using a combination of paper test and handheld computer device for approximately 50 minutes



40

questions per test covering both English and maths



Key Informant Interviews (KIs)

with members from MBSSE, Leh wi Lan, District Education Offices (DEOs) and Teaching Service Commission (TSC)



Background

questions on pupils' age, language spoken at home, assets at home, special needs, use of pupil handbooks and radio teaching, and well-being questions associated with COVID-19 school closures



Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)

with JSS3 and SSS3 pupils, and school and community representatives (via the Community Teacher Association – CTA)



All government mandated COVID-19

health and safety protocols were followed during the conduct of the BTS Study

*JSS3 and SSS3 are examination grades for BECE and WASSCE, respectively.

¹ Current enrolment figures from Sierra Leone Annual School Census 2019.

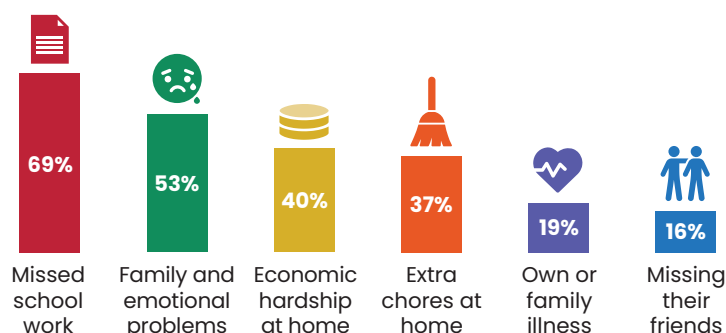


What were the key challenges to pupils' well-being during school closure?

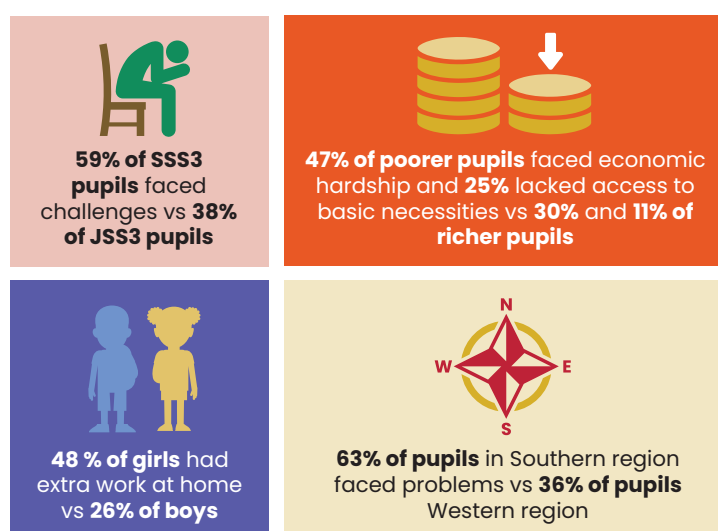
Nearly half (45 per cent) of the sampled pupils self-reported that they had faced some type of challenge during the school closure including financial hardship, additional domestic chores, violence and exploitation, emotional stress, and physical and sexual abuse. Older pupils (SSS) were significantly more likely to report challenges compared to younger pupils (JSS). There are also clear regional variations: pupils from the Southern region were more likely to report these challenges, while pupils from the Western region were least likely to do so. Girls and pupils from poorer households suffered more with nearly twice the proportion of girls as boys reporting extra work at home; and significantly more pupils from poor households facing financial challenges and lacking access to basic necessities. These challenges not only directly affected pupils' health and well-being, but also influenced their ability to learn during school closures.² In some cases, these challenges had long-lasting impact on school attendance and dropouts after schools resumed in October 2020.

The following sub-sections explain four important concerns around pupils' well-being during school closure. There are obvious crossovers between these categories. The intersectional impact is likely to be particularly profound for certain groups of pupils facing multiple deprivations such as girls, children with disabilities and pupils from the poorest backgrounds in remote locations.

Figure 1: Key challenges



Challenges faced by children while schools were closed



1 Violence and exploitation

The lockdown and associated restrictions on movement, school closure, and economic shocks for families disrupted pupils' routine and social interactions and exposed them to risk of abuse. This was the case for both girls and boys, and common in all regions, although the nature of risk and abuse varied.

Girls faced risk of violence and exploitation from various perpetrators within their homes and in the wider community. Discussions with pupils and school and community representatives revealed that girls were drawn (both involuntarily and voluntarily) into exploitative sexual relationships. Incidence of sexual violence and harassment of girls such as rape, early marriage, prostitution and teenage pregnancy rose when schools closed as a result of COVID-19.³ This was usually more common in rural remote areas, although economic hardships and domestic frustrations in more urban settings were also said to trigger this. When it came to sexual abuse, the perpetrators were often relatives or other members of the girl child's immediate household. Girls who spent time petty-trading were also said to be more exposed to various forms of harassment and exploitation in the community. There were some instances where girls were reported to have engaged in transactional sex, with the hope of earning some money to support personal or family needs in times of difficulty.

“Some girls were abused in the very house they lived in. If it was not the uncle, it will be the aunty, cousin or neighbour... It doesn't matter if they are rich or poor or in the most remote part of the country. It is the same for all of them.” (CTA member, JSS School, Western Province)

² See BTS Study: Briefing Note 1 (2020) for a summary of the status of pupil learning outcomes in junior and senior secondary schools of Sierra Leone post-school closures.

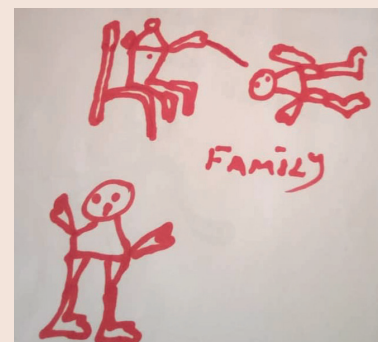
³ These were not quantified as part of the BTS quantitative survey, but rather came up in qualitative discussions with pupils and the school CTA.



“Some children live with parents or guardian who are wicked... will ask them to bring money [by selling] or then leave the house... This will cause children to go to the street, especially girls, and when they do, you will see foolish big men who will see the girls in the street and ask them what is the problem? After explaining the problem, the men will ask the girls for sex before they can help them.” (Girl JSS3 pupil, North-Western Province)

Financial struggles and domestic frustrations increased risk of physical violence and abuse against children. This was particularly so because the COVID-19 lockdown meant that families spent longer stretches of time together at home, often under mental strain and economic hardship.

Some parents of female pupils were also encouraged to find a suitor or forcefully give their hand in marriage as a result of uncertainty around school resumption, economic hardships and parents' fears for their children's safety in terms of being impregnated out of wedlock. These girls did not come back to school. In a small number of communities, boys who impregnated girls were made to marry them or otherwise take on full responsibility for their well-being. This meant these boys also had to drop out of school prematurely and take up odd jobs such as okada riding (motorcyclist) and mining.



Source: Drawing by girl pupil, JSS3, Northern Province depicting domestic violence and abuse experienced at home during school closure.

“Well during the Corona period most of the boys were involved in bad habits, like smoking and joining cliques because of the long period of sitting at home without having anything to do. As we all know an idle brain is the workshop of the devil.” (Boy JSS3 pupil, Northern Province)

Boys, especially in more central or urban locations, faced increased risk of negative peer influence and exploitation. School and community respondents, especially in the Western and Northern regions, suggested that during the school closure, boys followed bad company and got drawn to smoking, drugs, gangs ('cliques'), violence and petty crime. Often this was a result of not having other productive engagements during this time. These children were said to have taken up 'bad lives' in wanting to be like their friends, often against the wishes of their parents.

“I drew my mother flogging me... [during the lockdown] she asked me to accompany her to the farm, but I refused, so that was why she flogged me.” (Girl JSS3 pupil, Northern Province)

There are many parallels here with Sierra's Leone's experience of Ebola. Physical and sexual violence against children increased with a substantial rise in teenage pregnancy rates, often linked to rape or transactional sex to secure basic goods and services.



2 Emotional and social well-being

Children were happy in the early days of lockdown, but later grew tired and discontent with being at home. They initially saw school closure as a holiday and time for rest and relaxation at home

through playing, sleeping and watching television. However, the extended closure and restrictions meant that children eventually got bored and missed their friends, work and social interactions at school. This was mentioned as a key challenge by nearly 20 per cent of the pupils facing issues. Pupils shared that they experienced feelings of stress, anxiety, isolation, and depression which they linked to lack of contact with their school community.



“Well I was happy initially because it was an opportunity for me to take some rest, but later I got tired with the long holiday and also I missed the lunch money that I used to get. So I was a bit happy and a bit sad at the same time when schools were closed.” (Girl JSS3 pupil, Western Province)



Parents also struggled to keep children productively engaged at home and in some cases this stress was transferred onto the children. School and community representatives reported that some parents grew tired of constantly having their children at home because it was difficult to control them, make them study, and keep them from negative or harmful activities. Parents were eager for schools to reopen. Some pupils reported domestic tensions with their parents, quarrelling and violence at home. This was upsetting for children to see; and in more extreme cases was released on children through emotional and physical aggression. For many pupils, schools serve as a safe space which became unavailable during the closure. The quantitative findings show that one in two pupils (49 per cent) were exposed to emotional and safety challenges at home due to family problems and feuds.

Pupils in examination grades were also particularly concerned about missing part of their academic year and curriculum due to school closure, and the impact this would have in the future. JSS3 and SSS3 are examination grades for the BECE and WASSCE respectively. School closure in Sierra Leone meant that pupils missed the tail end (usually an assessment period) of their second term and the entire third term. The more academically motivated pupils were particularly worried about missing school and not being able to catch up in time before the exams.

Pupils who had the resources and support were able to cope with academic stress through dedicated self-study, taking private lessons or hiring tutors, using distance learning resources or seeking assistance from family members. However, this was not possible for the marginalised, poor and disadvantaged groups. Pupils also mentioned that academic concerns continue to date with some teachers rushing through topics, or focusing only on prospective examination content, in an attempt to catch-up with the curriculum in a compressed period now that schools have resumed. Pupils reported finding this stressful.

“I was not happy because it was not the time to close schools and we were unable to complete the syllabus for the term. We only completed two terms and this was the reason many of our colleagues failed the academic year... they would have passed had we completed the three terms.” (Girl JSS3 pupil, Southern Province)

“By failing to complete the syllabus and the removal of SSS4 now... it has a negative effect... right now not everyone is well prepared to face the exams because so many topics need to be covered but we are still behind.” (Boy SSS3 pupil, Western Province)

A small number of children linked their emotional well-being more directly to fear of the virus and the mental stress of lockdown. Pupils, as well as their parents, were afraid of contracting the disease, especially given the country's recent experience with Ebola and the health and social consequences associated with it. This was said to create ‘panic and trauma’. It was also one of the reasons people took lockdown seriously and some children mentioned their parents did not allow them to return to school immediately after resumption because they were afraid of the exposure. To deal with these psychological issues the MBSSE has rolled out training to some school administrators on a psycho-social support manual for children.

“Another thing that upset children is when their parents quarrel at home, the children will never be happy. In some homes the father and mother would be quarrelling almost every day.” (Boy SSS3 Pupils, North Western Province)

“Because of the extended time spent at home, parents were now also able to understand the good and bad habits of their children which made them angry and shout at their children and also flog them.” (Principal, JSS School, Eastern Province)



“When they said COVID-19 is an airborne disease, people started fearing each other at home and they started distancing from each other. Because of this, children were mentally stressed. Also social media and television created more fear in their mind by showing the dangers of the disease so children were not happy at that time.” (Vice Principal, SSS School, Northern Province)



3 Economic and financial difficulties

COVID-19 impacted the economic standing of many families, and children bore a direct consequence of this. The national lockdown and restrictions on movement meant that many parents struggled with their jobs and daily income. 40 per cent of boys and girls reported economic hardship in their homes as one of the key challenges they faced during school closure. This issue was particularly common in the Southern province, while significantly less pupils in the Western reported financial difficulties. Children from poorer backgrounds and those living in more remote locations suffered more.

As a result, a large number of children (both boys and girls) engaged in income-generating activities during the lockdown to support their families. Children reported engaging in farm work with their families, petty trading in markets, and taking up apprenticeships and odd-jobs like gardening, motorcycle riding and manual labour. The latter was more common for boys, while girls were particularly engaged in market trading. As previously discussed, in some extreme cases girls also engaged in activities like prostitution while others resorted to begging to help with family earnings.



40%
of pupils
reported economic
hardship as a key
challenge



Source: Drawing by boy pupil, SSS3, Western Province, showing him dividing his time between selling in the market and studying at home.

“You would see girls standing in groups and you would see boys come to pick them up. But all this was happening simply because the government announced a lockdown. If the family has been in lockdown for three days, and after the three days there is no food, the girls in the house will do something bad to feed the house. There was also a huge increase in the number of street beggars during COVID-19. People were begging just for them to cope with the situation.” (Principal, JSS School, Western Province)

Financial constraints also meant that some pupils did not have access to necessary learning materials and resources during the school closure. For instance, nearly 85 per cent of the poorest pupils and 60 per cent of the richest cohort of pupils did not have access to a radio to enable them to tune into the government's Radio Teaching Programme.⁴ There is also some evidence to suggest that the fear of having to pay a fine around pupil handbooks may have been more prohibitive for poorer families meaning that such children were more likely to not have access to them. When faced with the choice, households spent on basic necessities and food rather than what was considered more dispensable expenditure such as batteries for radios. Pupils from the poorest households were also significantly less able to access private tutors or lessons during school closure. Lack of finances was also one of the key factor affecting children's return to school.

“My mother was worried about my school items since we didn't have any money at the time of the reopening of schools. But we were selling in the market and raised money that way to pay for my school.” (Girl JSS3 Pupil, North Western Province)

“The level of poverty is so high You cannot buy batteries when you have to feed the family or when you don't have money at all. So if a pupil is from such a family, they will have to suffer.” (Principal, JSS School, Eastern Province)



Poorest

84%
with no
access to
radio

Richest

60%
with no
access to
radio



Poorest

66%
with no
access to pupil
handbooks

Richest

55%
with no
access to pupil
handbooks

⁴ The poorest and richest households refer to the bottom 20 per cent and top 20 per cent of households in terms of assets.



4 Physical health and hunger

While many children expressed a desire to help out their families during lockdown, in some cases their domestic chores and economic engagements became too time-consuming and physically taxing. One in two girls (48 per cent) and one in four boys (26 per cent) reported having extra chores at home as a problem during the school closure period. Children at times spent up to six hours selling in markets or working on farms, following which they complained they were too tired to study and do other things. Some parents were also reported to discipline their children strongly in case they refused or were lazy with going to business. Children were physically and verbally abused or deprived of food if they disobeyed.

In addition, many children suffered from hunger and shortage of food during school closure. Dry rations were distributed by MBSSE to families in some communities. However, for most pupils, financial challenges coupled with the loss of free school meals meant that children, especially those in the provincial regions, were unable to secure sufficient nourishment. This affected their physical well-being as well as their concentration and motivation to study.

“This (COVID-19) really affected the financial situation of some people... their expenses were above their income at that time. So many people cut down their food, if they use to cook four cups of rice they cut it down to three cups.” (Principal, JSS School, Northern Province)

“During the holiday I did not have enough food to eat and every time I did not have enough food, I would feel weak and I would not be able to study... It was not just me, some of my friends were also suffering from hunger.” (Girl SSS3 Pupils, North Western Province)

“My farming activity [during school closure] was affecting my studies because we would be on the farm for the whole day and return home only very late in the evening. I would be very tired by then and if forced to study, I would not be able to do so well.” (Girl JSS3 pupil, Southern Province)



Source: Drawing by boy pupil, SSS3, Northern Province, showing intense physical manual labour.

This ‘hunger virus’ was reportedly more terrible than COVID-19 itself with lingering impacts despite the resumption of schools. Some pupils still suffered from a lack of food at home and were said to come to school on an empty stomach. As a result, they did not have energy to participate in class and learn. School representatives understood and sympathised with these pupils, but there was often little they could do to tangibly change their situation.

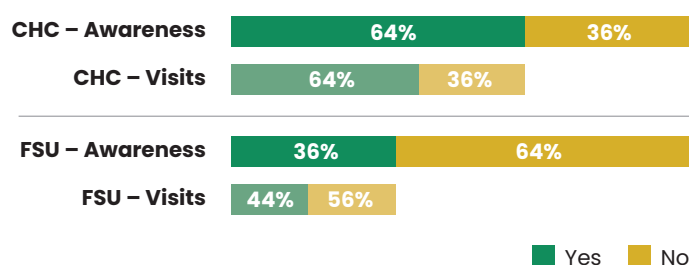
“Some pupils are coming to school from families that eat three meals a day, while others just get one meal in the evening... If you are a student coming from [the latter] family, your performance will be different... These pupils, if they come to school, they will not pay attention and they will sleep in class for the rest of the day. It is not that they do not want to learn, but they are hungry.” (Principal, JSS School, Northern Province)

Where did pupils seek help in dealing with these challenges during school closure?

Pupils’ ability to cope with physical, emotional and financial challenges during the school closure period varied according to their background and knowledge of support facilities. Pupils, and school and community representatives mentioned many different support mechanisms in coping with children’s safety and welfare issues. The level of awareness and usage of each varied. More formal support mechanisms included Family Support Units (FSU) and Community Health Centres (CHC), while informal support was taken from peers, family members and others in the community. Figure 2 summarises pupils’ knowledge and usage of CHCs and FSUs in particular.



Figure 2: Pupil knowledge and usage of CHCs and FSUs



Children are more likely to be aware of CHCs compared to FSUs in terms of reporting violence or seeking medical assistance.

Two-thirds of pupils (64 per cent) knew the location of the nearest CHC in their community.⁵ Compared to this, the awareness of FSUs was much lower, with only one in three pupils knowing where their nearest unit was. In addition, of the pupils who are aware of these centres, a higher percentage had visited a CHC compared to FSU. This is somewhat in contrast to the qualitative discussions

with pupils and school representatives where the majority of participants were aware of the role and presence of FSUs especially when it came to reporting sexual violence or exploitation.

There are also regional variations with significantly more pupils from the Southern region knowing or having visited their local CHC or FSU. Pupils in the Western region were least likely to know of these formal support mechanisms compared to other children. Across grades, although SSS3 pupils had a marginally higher awareness of both CHC and FSU, a significantly higher proportion of these JSS3 pupils (49 per cent) had visited an FSU compared to the SSS3 pupils (36 per cent).

In general though, pupils suggested that physical and emotional abuse is either not formally reported by children or is more likely to be reported to friends, siblings or colleagues. There are several reasons for this, including the long cultural undertone of stigmatisation, the fear of getting blamed, and the fact that some perpetrators of abuse are family members or trusted adults themselves which makes reporting more complicated. Silence carries long-term risks for cumulative psychological problems and without intervention might promote a cycle of abuse. Although several respondents mentioned accessing support services through school-based and on-site counselling, these services were suspended when schools closed due to COVID-19.

Nonetheless, several other welfare support mechanisms were reported at the community level. These included assistance from community chiefs and notables in settling cases of abuse, as well as learning support to pupils in terms of organising space and study groups. Some schools and alumni associations, particularly in large private schools in the Western region, also created special learning channels (e.g. via WhatsApp groups or learning videos) that were circulated to pupils as an additional resource. In addition, the government and other agencies made effort to support and sensitise pupils on aspects of safety and dealing with abuse during the lockdown period through the Radio Teaching Programme and direct contributions such as the provision of radios and rations to certain groups.

“We have NGOs that are complementing the government’s effort to improve education in our community, for instance [mentions international organisation] have a project for girl child education. This project supports vulnerable children to go to school by providing learning and school material and they also pay some teachers... So when COVID came, they decided to give radio sets to vulnerable children so that they could follow the radio teaching program organised by the government and TSC. They also gave other learning materials to students.” (CTA Secretary, JSS School, Eastern Province)

What is being done to make schools safer for pupils after the reopening?

A somewhat direct effect of children’s well-being during the school closure can be seen in terms of pupil attendance and associated dropouts once schools reopened.⁶ In some cases, pupil attendance was reported to be better than usual. This was attributed, amongst other things, to a higher pupil motivation to learn after being away from school for more than six months, and the MBSSE policy of mass promotions allowing pupils to move to the next grade more easily. On the other hand, some schools reported lower attendance and more dropouts, especially among pupils from poorer households where parents continue to face economic hardships and cannot afford school expenses. Girl pupils are also more likely to be affected by challenges such as sexual harassment, early marriage and teen pregnancies, which made it difficult for some of them to return to school. In addition, some pupils and parents expressed reservations over the health and safety implications of returning to school while COVID-19 was still a concern.

⁵ Pupils were asked whether they knew where the nearest CHC/FSU was regardless of whether they had visited it.

⁶ Although the BTS study did not collect quantitative data on this, enrolment issues came up in the qualitative discussions with CTA members and education officials.



A large number of education stakeholders in Sierra Leone have been involved in devising and implementing measures to manage safe reopening of schools. This ranges from central and district officials, to school administrators and teachers, as well as parents and pupils themselves. Education officials mentioned developing an operations manual to guide schools on what is required of them to operate safely once all pupils are back to school. These include, among many others, details on how to proceed if a child in the school tests positive for COVID-19, providing 'veronica' buckets and soaps for handwashing, having thermometers in the school to monitor temperature at regular intervals, restricting assembly, and implementing a phased lunch break across grades. At the time of the survey, the focus was now on trying to ensure that all schools comply with these guidelines.

Most commonly mentioned measures taken to make schools safer



Although the intention of schools to comply and protect pupils was apparent, pupils and CTA members suggested that implementation and monitoring of these protocols was not always effective. Some pupils and school representatives complained about either not having, or not wanting to wear, face masks, while others faced challenges with ensuring adequate quantities of soap and water for pupils to regularly wash their hands. Space and resource limitations in many schools also meant that social distancing in classrooms was very difficult because they did not have enough teachers or classrooms to accommodate smaller groups. As such, many schools felt more support was needed from the government to enable them to effectively implement all the required protocols that had been instructed.

Concluding remarks

Children's welfare and ability to learn effectively during the school closure period was affected by the various well-being issues they faced – including physical abuse and exploitation, extra chores and work, poverty, hunger, fatigue, and emotional challenges. Girls, older pupils and those belonging to poorer households were particularly affected by these challenges, with some children facing multiple forms of deprivation. This has important implications for their learning performance, self-esteem, confidence and personal development.

Children usually prefer to discuss well-being challenges or seek help from family or friends, however this becomes more complicated when the perpetrators of abuse are from a child's immediate circle of trusted adults. Although a significant number of pupils are aware of formal support systems, in particular their local CHC, these are often not used as much as other community support services. Further sensitisation and assurance on the effectiveness and confidentiality of FSUs and CHCs may increase children's trust and reliance on these systems.

Ensuring the safe reopening and return of pupils to schools is a clear priority across the chain of actors in the secondary school system of Sierra Leone, but there is a gap between intention and action. Detailed guidance material and protocols have been developed and shared with schools. However, there are challenges with implementation and compliance, especially in an education system where most schools are already struggling and under-resourced, irrespective of COVID. These additional demands create further challenge for school administrators, although the commitment to keep children safe is strong. Schools should be supported at a local level to comply effectively, and regular monitoring and feedback loops should be put in place.

About the project and contact details

Leh Wi Lan/Sierra Leone Secondary Education Improvement Programme (SSEIP) is a five-year (2016-2021) UKaid-funded programme aimed at improving English and maths learning achievement in all secondary schools, especially for girls. This briefing note was produced under *Leh Wi Lan*'s monitoring, evidence and research workstream as part of the annual secondary grade learning assessment. Any views and opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect those of UK Department for International Development, Sierra Leone Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education, Mott MacDonald or Oxford Policy Management. For more details please contact: **Diana Ofori-Owusu at +232 76803741**

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