

BUILDING THE FOUNDATION OF A BRIGHTER FUTURE

Support for early learning helps Ghana's
children to reach their potential

GHANA LEADS THE WAY IN EARLY EDUCATION

Investment and innovative teaching
transform foundational learning

Championing Change for Children

A UNICEF Ghana bulletin



INTRODUCTION

UNICEF Representative to Ghana,
Mr Osama Makkawi Khogali



Welcome to the second bulletin in our series that shines a spotlight on critical issues facing our children. In each bulletin, we will focus on a timely topic that holds significant importance for us and our partners. Our first issue explored the multifaceted challenges of the polycrisis and highlighted how UNICEF Ghana works with key partners to tackle these challenges. Now, we turn to a critical issue for children: foundational learning.

Foundational learning equips young children with basic skills in literacy and numeracy, as well as essential socio-emotional skills. A strong foundation is essential for children's ability to learn and succeed. Without it, their whole educational journey will be compromised. A strong foundation will lead to quality lifelong learning.

The African Union has declared 2024 to be the Year of Education. For Ghana, a nation with a young population full of potential, this represents an opportunity to direct attention to the value of foundational learning and the need for renewed investment in this

critical part of a child's educational journey.

At UNICEF, we believe quality education is the key to human development. By concentrating on foundational learning, we can invest in every child's ability to succeed. In this issue, we aim to start a wider discussion, involving government, development partners, educators, academics and subject experts. Together, we can create an education system that empowers children to reach their potential and teaches them how to think critically, solve problems and be creative.

Our world is constantly changing. From the rapid pace of technology to the complexities of global challenges, the future our children face is uncertain. It is essential that we give them the best possible start in life through strong learning foundations.

We encourage you to join the conversation to spark ideas that could lead to change. By working together, we can build a future where every child not only survives but thrives.

Building the foundation of a brighter future: Supporting early years education in Ghana

Ghana has successfully expanded access to education at both primary and secondary levels. However, there is scope for significant improvement in foundational learning levels, where learning outcomes remain low and stark disparities exist across regions and demographics. Urgent action is needed to renew investment in early years learning. With the African Union declaring 2024 as the Year of Education, Ghana has a crucial opportunity to renew its commitment to quality education for all its children.



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In recent years, Ghana has made remarkable strides in expanding access to education. The country has achieved strong enrolment rates at both primary and secondary levels: in 2021–2022, Ghana's gross and net enrolment rates at the primary level were 99 per cent and 80 per cent, respectively. Ghana also has one of Africa's highest pre-primary enrolment rates, having successfully increased the net enrolment rate at kindergarten level over the past five years, from 75 per cent to 89 per cent. Despite this progress, foundational learning outcomes remain concerningly low. Country-wide, at Grade Four (P4, or children aged 9–10 years), 51 per cent of Ghanaian children score below basic proficiency in mathematics and 49 per cent score below basic proficiency in English.¹

While Ghana has made great progress in educational access, 1.2 million Ghanaian children remain out of school. Often, the school environment is not conducive to learning, with challenges including overcrowded classes, inadequate water and sanitation facilities and a lack of trained teachers and equipment. Children living with disabilities face even greater challenges and adolescent girls are often denied the chance to complete secondary education due to facing issues including a lack of appropriate hygiene facilities in schools, and early marriage and pregnancy.

As in other countries in the region, there are some stark disparities between different groups, with urban learners substantially outperforming rural students and students from wealthy areas outperforming those

¹ Ghana 2022 National Standardized Test.



from deprived areas. There are also significant disparities between regions: for example, 97 per cent of learners scored below basic proficiency in P4 mathematics in the Eastern Region, compared to only 44 per cent of learners in the Northern Region. Likewise, 88 per cent of learners in the Upper West region scored below basic in P4 English, compared to 36 per cent in the Northern Region.

Domestic financing for education, previously an area of success for Ghana, has declined, from 15.4 per cent of the Government budget in 2019 to 13 per cent in 2024. To address Ghana's challenges in education, the Government should renew its commitment to investing in foundational learning, focusing on the country's most vulnerable children, and ensure that decisions on funding allocation are evidence-based. This would allow the country's education spending to become more effective, efficient and equitable.

The African Union has declared 2024 to be the Year of Education, which is intended to galvanize action to accelerate the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (quality education) and the Continental Strategy for Education in Africa. The Year of Education offers a platform to showcase Ghana's commitment to early education and is a valuable opportunity to be leveraged to support and improve the education sector in Ghana.



Supporting early learning for a strong foundation

Ghana has successfully adopted innovative approaches to boost children's learning. These cost-effective initiatives, ranging from differentiated learning to complementary basic education, are tailored to address the diverse needs of Ghanaian children and improve learning outcomes. The following examples showcase Ghana's commitment to providing quality early education and ensuring no child is left behind.

Differentiated learning: targeted, play-based education ensures no child is left behind

To address the learning crisis in early education, Ghana is implementing a Differentiated Learning approach, integrating three key ideas. The first, targeted instruction, involves regularly assessing students to group them according to their abilities, ensuring tailored support. Secondly, Universal Design for Learning principles recognize that each child learns uniquely and accommodates various learning styles and needs. Finally, play-based learning engages students through play and games, fostering active learning. UNICEF has played a crucial role in developing and expanding this harmonized approach, supporting policy development, capacity building and evidence generation. This approach is being implemented across 10,500 schools under the World Bank and

Global Partnership for Education-financed GALOP programme. UNICEF is currently working alongside the Government to enhance the model. Significant progress was seen in the 2023–2024 school year, where an additional 16 per cent of learners in primary schools demonstrated proficiency in English and an additional 25 per cent in mathematics as a result of this remedial approach to boost learning levels.

Complementary Basic Education: Prioritizing services for those most in need

In Ghana, 1.2 million are out of school and not learning.² To address this urgent issue, in 2020 the Government of Ghana established the Complementary Education Agency, which provides Complementary Basic Education (CBE) as catch-up education for out-of-school children



across the country. By teaching literacy in 11 Ghanaian languages, CBE utilizes interactive pedagogy that incorporates play-based learning and locally made teaching materials. Classes are taught in local languages by facilitators who are often from the local community (rather than official government teachers), and take place in school buildings after school hours or other community structures over a nine-month period. The programme has achieved a high success rate, with over 70 per cent of participants returning to regular schooling.³ The Ghana Education Outcomes Project, funded by the Global Partnership for Results Based Approaches, FCDO and the Government of Ghana, targets the integration of 70,000 out-of-school children into formal schools by 2025. Strong community involvement, including active participation from community-based organizations, hiring local facilitators, using community structures, and engaging parents in their children's educational progress, is crucial to the success of CBE.

Boosting evidence and accountability

Evidence and accountability are crucial in education services to ensure that policies and programmes are effective, transparent and enable data-driven decision-making. Improved accountability can also lead to more efficient use of education funding. However, according to the Jacobs



2 Ministry of Education, Government of Ghana, Education Sector Analysis 2023.

3 Data from UNICEF-supported CBE classes with funding from Jacobs Foundation.

“We are working with the Ministry on top-down accountability, to increase district-level supervision of schools, reduce teacher absenteeism, improve teachers’ ability to teach, and ensure the regular assessment of student learning. We are also working with school communities on bottom-up accountability, by strengthening school management committees through democratic elections and introducing community scorecards to mobilize parents and community leaders to hold schools accountable. The goal of these efforts is strengthening education systems and increasing citizen engagement to improve teaching and learning outcomes.”

Kimberly Rosen,

Mission Director, USAID Ghana

Foundation, while some evidence is used in policy creation in Ghana, there is significant scope for improvement in the quality, rigour and reliability of this evidence, as well as in the capacity to analyse and synthesize it effectively.

The Ghana Education Service developed the mobile school report card (mSRC) and accountability dashboard to address the limitations of the paper-based school report card. The mSRC, an Android-based mobile application, was designed to provide more reliable, quick and up-to-date data on key educational indicators. Launched in 2015, the programme has since been expanded and now covers over 10,500 schools across all 216 districts in Ghana. The mSRC supports improved data collection and monitoring, which allows for better decision-making at the school and district levels. It also promotes community participation and social accountability in education

by providing accessible and timely information on school performance.

USAID/Ghana recently launched the \$50 million, five-year Strengthening Accountability in Ghana’s Education System (SAGES) initiative to help the Ministry of Education enhance accountability in 1,254 primary schools, aligning with the Ministry’s 2018–2030 Strategic Plan. That funding includes both direct financing to the Government of Ghana and technical assistance to enhance accountability structures and processes.

To increase the utilization of evidence at the systems level, the Ghana Embedded Evidence Lab (GEEDLab) integrates data and evidence into public policy to improve education outcomes. The GEED Lab is a collaborative initiative between Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA) and Ghana’s Ministry of Education, with support from the Jacobs Foundation, which plays an important role in strengthening accountability and ensuring that education policies are informed by rigorous empirical evidence, ultimately leading to improved learning outcomes in Ghana. According to the Jacobs Foundation, the GEEDLab aims to address challenges in education in Ghana by embedding technical expertise within the Ministry of Education, building a coalition of research institutions, and supporting a Research and Learning Agenda. It also focuses on creating a

Repository of Evidenced Interventions, supporting Communities/Districts of Excellence, and building capacity across the system to effectively use and generate evidence.

Elevating local education champions

The Data Must Speak (DMS) project is a collaborative research initiative in Ghana co-created and implemented by the Ministry of Education, UNICEF Ghana and UNICEF Innocenti – Global Office of Research and Foresight to improve the quality of education in Ghana. The project aims to identify and scale up successful practices from schools that are outperforming others operating in similar contexts and with similar resources, known as ‘positive deviant’ schools. The project is already revealing important findings around the reasons for the success of positive deviant schools. For example, the results suggest that school leadership and management practices are major contributing factors. Positive deviant schools tend to have head teachers who adopt the role of instructional leader and offer more frequent and effective professional development opportunities for teachers. Positive deviant schools also prioritize practice-based and learner-oriented teaching and create a positive school climate that supports student learning. Crucially, the findings highlight the importance of local champions – teachers, head teachers and community members – who drive these positive practices and create supportive learning environments.

Building on this, strong community and district leadership is essential to ensuring accountability and improving education. Through a whole community approach, Ghana’s Communities of Excellence initiative enables local leaders and parents to drive the changes needed to improve learning in their schools. With financing from the Jacobs Foundation, UNICEF and Transforming Teaching, Education and Learning (an initiative that aims to



improve the quality of teacher education and professional development in Ghana) implemented Communities of Excellence in a total of five focus districts since 2022, building local leadership and capacities, and engaging

communities to create community solutions to issues ranging from school infrastructure needs to teacher absenteeism to student health and well-being. The Ministry of Education is now preparing to scale Communities

of Excellence programming to 40 additional districts in Ghana to further strengthen local champions to support learning outcomes.

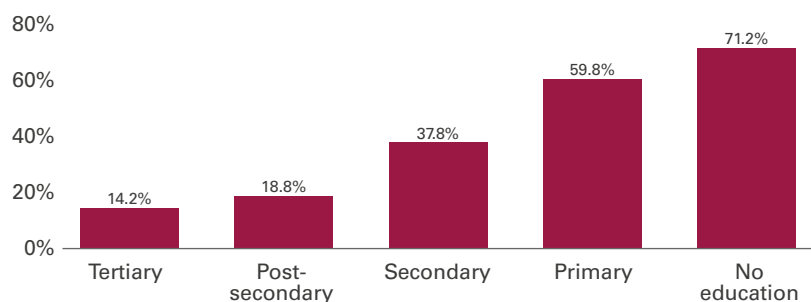
Investment in education can support Ghana's poorest families

A lack of education impacts across generations. Households headed by people with no education, or only primary-level education, experience significantly higher levels of poverty. Where the head of household has no education, the incidence of multi-dimensional poverty is 71 per cent; where they have primary education, it is 60 per cent. More than one third (38 per cent) of households headed by people with secondary education experience multi-dimensional poverty, declining to only 14 per cent for those with tertiary education (Figure 1).

Education can be an engine of social mobility – but to achieve this, Ghana must aim to minimize inequalities in learning outcomes by prioritizing investment in foundational learning.

Investment in foundational learning is effective, delivering an estimated rate of return of over 10 per cent (1–2 per cent higher for girls) per additional year of learning, on average. Yet while the Government of Ghana places a high priority on education generally, funding for basic education has almost halved in recent years, from 39 per cent of the Ministry of Education budget in 2019 to just 20 per cent in 2023. Over the same period, the number of primary school-aged children increased by 8 per cent, meaning an even greater fall in real funding per pupil. The decline in investment in basic education is particularly concerning, as it reaches the broadest segment of Ghana's population (as 38 per cent of Ghana's population are children) and offers higher returns on investment compared to higher levels of education.

Figure 1. Multidimensional poverty and education



Source: Ghana Statistical Service, 'Ghana Annual Household Income and Expenditure Survey: Quarterly Multidimensional Poverty Report', 2022

Figure 2. Total expenditure per pupil (2023)



Currently, Ghana's education spending disproportionately benefits children from wealthier families. As in other countries, secondary level expenditure in Ghana tends to be greater than primary level (Figure 2). While children in the wealthiest quintile are somewhat more likely to attend primary school than those in the lowest wealth quintile (84 per cent vs 69 per cent attendance rate), the discrepancy is much greater at secondary level, with 70 per cent of children in the wealthiest quintile attending secondary school, compared to just 35 per cent of children in the poorest quintile. Combined, these factors mean that children from the wealthiest

households benefit from, on average, 72 per cent more educational funding than the poorest children. A similarly stark contrast exists between urban and rural areas. Resource allocation processes that result in less funding for deprived rural districts contribute to very different learning outcomes: 8 of the top 10 performing districts are in urban areas, while 6 of the 10 lowest performing districts are in rural areas.⁴

Basic education spending is allocated to two key areas: teacher salaries, and learning materials and

⁴ National Development Planning Commission and UNICEF Ghana, 'District League Table Report 2022, UNICEF, 2023.

school infrastructure. Both are vital to create a stable, quality learning environment in Ghana's schools. One possible way for Ghana to boost spending on basic education would be to re-focus and strengthen the Ghana Education Trust Fund (GETFund), a

government agency that provides finance to supplement educational activities at all levels. GETFund is equivalent to 9.5 per cent of the total education budget and is funded by a levy, although not all the levy revenues are allocated to GETFund. If they were,

funding for basic education could increase by 71 per cent, allowing additional investment in teaching and learning materials and improved schools and classrooms, as well as other interventions proven to enhance learning outcomes.

Scaling quality kindergarten education in Ghana



Larry Cooley, founder and former president of Management Systems International, an international development consulting firm, is an expert in scaling development outcomes with over four decades of experience. He leads a global community of practice on scaling innovation and recently visited Ghana to lend his expertise on scaling to the topic of quality kindergarten education in Ghana. While Ghana has already made significant investments in kindergarten education, the returns from those investments, in terms of educational gains, have the potential to grow dramatically. As a critical step towards improving early childhood education in the country, a consortium of NGOs⁵ developed a comprehensive and evidence-backed plan for a full national roll-out of in-service teacher training intended to equip all of the nation's kindergarten teachers to teach to the new standard.

Cooley was able to apply his expertise to support the programme, focusing on creating a sustainable and cost-effective model for scaling training to kindergarten teachers in Ghana. He emphasized that, with new incoming funding from the Global Partnership for Education, Ghana has a unique opportunity to make a one-time US\$30 million investment in kindergarten teacher training over the next three years that could significantly improve early years education in every public kindergarten classroom in the country.

Cooley gives the Ghanaian Government an A+ for laying the right foundations for strong early childhood education, with kindergarten teachers employed by the governments, basic schools with kindergarten classrooms in place, and teacher training colleges supporting new cohorts of kindergarten teachers. This one-time investment would fund in-service teacher training for all kindergarten teachers, elevating them to this new standard and equipping them to support quality and play-based learning. Crucially, following this initial investment, the recurring costs of the initiative should be minimal. "The initial investment is a one-time cost, and the recurring costs [to the Ministry's education budget] are negligible," says Cooley.

Drawing on the evidence, investments and sound policies accumulated over 15 years, Ghana should be well-placed to sustain this initiative at scale over the long term – a

rare achievement for an intervention that began with project funding and grew organically and incrementally. "The philosophy is that once the programme is scaled, it becomes a regular part of the curriculum – the new normal – rather than a donor-supported, NGO-led project," says Cooley, highlighting that the programme is already being sustained in 15 per cent of schools.

Leveraging the strengths of both government systems and local communities is key to the success of the initiative. Cooley stresses the importance of community engagement and the utilization of local resources in the success of educational programmes, with technical assistance from the Government District Education Office. This both builds local capacity and enables solutions to be tailored to the specific needs of local communities.

Cooley emphasized that, through this one-time investment, Ghana has the potential to make a long-term transformative impact on its education system, ensuring that every child has access to quality early education and setting an example that could be followed by other African countries in the future. As Cooley highlights, the programme's emphasis from the outset on sustainability and integration of government systems provides a robust framework for other countries looking to improve their educational outcomes.

5 Sabre Education, Right to Play, Innovations for Poverty Action

UNICEF PARTNER SPOTLIGHT:

The African Union and the Year of Education 2024

The African Union has declared 2024 to be the Year of Education to shine a spotlight on education across the continent. Encompassing the educational journey from early childhood to preparation for employment, the Year of Education aims to drive transformative efforts in education throughout Africa.

Africa has a large youth population. The continent's children and young people need the education and skills that will equip them for a successful future, including by being able to take advantage of emerging employment opportunities. With this in mind, the key theme of the Year of Education is 'educate an African fit for the 21st century'. This theme, according to Nicholas Ouma, Senior Youth Advisor for the African Union, focuses on

"We aim at revitalizing and transforming education ecosystems in Africa, through the achievement of the goals set out in the continental education strategy for Africa, the global Sustainable Development Goals and Agenda 2063."

Nicholas Ouma,
Senior Youth Advisor, African Union

"building resilient education systems for increased access to inclusive, lifelong quality and relevant learning in Africa."

The idea for the Year of Education arose in 2022, following several high-



level education events and a broad recognition that Africa was off-target to meet Sustainable Development Goal 4 (quality education). While many countries, like Ghana, have made notable progress in recent years, education across Africa continues to face diverse challenges. During the Year of Education, the African Union hopes to direct attention to these challenges – and, perhaps most importantly, their solutions. According to Ouma, some of these solutions can be found in good practices that are already in place in the education ecosystem in some African countries. "It is always good to sometimes bring out these promising practices and good practices and share them for peer learning," he says.

There are five key areas of focus: access to education – as Ouma points out, this is a human right; quality of education, which can be improved by strengthening teaching, among other factors; relevance, to ensure young people are equipped with the skills needed to secure employment; financing, particularly sustainable financing options; and governance, so that education priorities can be effectively implemented. Ouma also emphasizes the need to improve teacher development and working conditions to enhance education quality.



“Strengthening multi stakeholder partnerships for education... we see as key in the delivery of not only the year of education, but even post 2024 towards implementation of the education strategy and Sustainable Development Goal 4, and ultimately our continental development Blueprint Agenda 2063.”

Nicholas Ouma,
Senior Youth Advisor, *African Union*

Partnerships and collaboration will be vital to achieving the goals of the Year of Education. The African Union relies on a collaborative partnership model with member states and other stakeholders, including those focused on different educational sectors, such as early childhood education and vocational training, to facilitate the sharing of resources and expertise. By fostering multi-sectoral collaborations, the African Union aims to ensure a cohesive and comprehensive approach to educational reform.

For Ghana, Ouma’s message emphasizes the importance of implementing the African Union’s roadmap for the African Year of Education through 2024 and beyond. Ouma highlights the need for high-level policy dialogues, knowledge exchange and community-level actions such as school feeding programmes and initiatives to enhance girls’ and women’s access to education and stresses the significance of training and capacity building for teachers to improve educational outcomes.

The goals of the African Union Year of Education 2024

- ▶ Ensure quality education for all, including girls and women, youth, young people with disabilities and those living in emergency contexts
- ▶ Ensure that teachers are trained through comprehensive, quality teacher development programmes
- ▶ Invest in education to promote sustainable development
- ▶ Consider the needs of young generations
- ▶ Reduce the number of children out of school at the primary level



Scaling success: Ghana leads the way in early education

Ghana has made significant strides in foundational learning, particularly at kindergarten level and in the promotion of the differentiated learning approach. The launch of a new Early Child Education Policy in 2020 has helped to ensure that this progress will be sustained in the coming years. “We are excited about the transformation we can see in the early childhood space,” says John Ntim Fordjour, Deputy Minister for Education in Ghana. A series of successful ‘right age’ enrolment campaigns have been a key part of this transformation, allowing Ghana to achieve 100 per cent gross enrolment rates in pre-primary education, as well as gender parity at the pre-primary level.

Innovative teaching practices are at the heart of Ghana’s efforts to improve early childhood education. One such practice is differentiated learning, in which teaching is tailored to meet each child’s unique needs. More than 1,000 teachers in Ghana have now been

Innovative teaching practices are at the heart of Ghana’s efforts to improve early childhood education.

trained in the differentiated learning approach, and are now, as Ntim Fordjour says, “able to identify the various ways in which different learners learn.” The approach has already led to improved learning outcomes, while teachers suggest that differentiated learning allows every child to find excitement in the classroom. Play-based learning is a vital part of differentiated learning, which encourages a focus on play-based pedagogies and learning through play.

Ghana has achieved robust outcomes in pilot programmes in early childhood education, particularly at the kindergarten level. The challenge now is to take those findings and programmes to full scale.



“We’re also excited about play-based [learning] that we have implemented with the support of our donors... teachers in kindergarten and primary school are trained to be able to adopt familiar games, singing, jumping and other indigenous games that the children are familiar with – as they play, they learn.”

John Ntim Fordjour
Deputy Minister for Education, Ghana

In the meantime, Ghana is already well-placed to act as an example in foundational learning by sharing the lessons learned from pilot programmes. Due to the similar contexts, what works in Ghana is also likely to work in other countries in the region. Ghana regularly hosts knowledge-sharing tours to enable other African countries to learn from Ghana’s experiences. The Government of Ghana and UNICEF continue to actively seek out and welcome opportunities to share successes in





early childhood education, including through events linked to the African Union Year of Education.

For Ghana, the Year of Education is not a standalone event, but an ongoing commitment – the catalyst for a longer and more ambitious drive to improve learning in the country and wider region. “We think that the year of education will be, perhaps, a decade of education,” says Ntim Fordjour, “and that is why we have the education strategic plan from 2018 to 2030, to ensure that foundational literacy and numeracy are attained.”

Ghana’s success in pilot programmes and its development of credible scaling plans, alongside the creation of accountability systems and an environment that encourages innovative financing opportunities, should help to attract additional investment in early years education from the international donor community. “We want the donor community to take notice of Ghana,” says Ntim Fordjour, emphasizing that the Government of Ghana has

“The education sector in Ghana has seen really incredible transformation... we’re seeing great transformations and initiatives that are improving literacy and numeracy, that are ensuring that children at the right age are enrolled.”

John Ntim Fordjour
Deputy Minister for Education, Ghana

demonstrated its commitment to early learning by prioritizing funding for education.

Ghana has proven that with targeted investment and innovative approaches, it can significantly improve its educational outcomes and build a brighter future for the country’s children. With the support of the international donor community, Ghana could scale these successes across the nation and beyond, unlocking great potential for social and economic development.

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for every child

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