



THEMATIC NOTE 2

Teachers for All: Advancing Equity-based Teacher Deployment in Sierra Leone

Managing and formalizing Sierra Leone's volunteer teachers

Key takeaways

Sierra Leone's primary education system heavily depends on volunteer teachers, particularly in rural and remote areas, to cope with gaps in teacher supply, deployment, workforce planning and financing, and sustain basic service delivery. Clearer pathways into the formal payroll, stronger management structures and fairer compensation are needed. Volunteer teaching is unsustainable for the teachers and the system alike, and risks driving away experienced educators whom the system cannot afford to lose.

The Government of Sierra Leone is taking important steps to address these challenges. Sustaining this momentum will require coordinated reforms across three areas:

1. **Prioritize the deployment of qualified teachers in hard-to-staff schools** by allocating payroll positions (Personal Identification Number [PIN] codes) to the pool of qualified volunteers already serving in rural and remote areas, supported by transparent, data-driven recruitment and localized teacher training, and an enhanced Teacher Management Information System serving as a centralized registry for all teachers including volunteers.
2. **Strengthen workforce governance and formalization pathways** through standardized volunteer role guidelines, criteria-based payroll waiting lists, improved sensitization of teacher allocation policies, and expanded accredited qualification routes, including recognition of in-service and NGO-led training.
3. **Address resource constraints** through school-level microgrants to fund modest, performance-linked stipends prioritizing the highest-need schools, alongside sustained advocacy for increased education financing and targeted improvements to payroll efficiency, including ghost teacher removal, stronger data integrity, and expanded use of data-driven deployment tools.



About this note and the Teachers for All research

[Teachers for All \(T4A\)](#) is an applied research initiative, led by UNICEF Office of Strategy and Evidence - Innocenti, that aims to generate evidence on teacher deployment in sub-Saharan Africa. The research is underpinned by a co-creation process to ensure that its scope and direction align with local priorities. In Sierra Leone, this co-creation began with a multi-stakeholder workshop in November 2023, bringing together the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education (MBSSE), the Teaching Service Commission (TSC), civil society organizations, researchers and development partners.

This note – the third in the series on Sierra Leone – analyses the role of volunteer teachers in sustaining education delivery amid structural challenges. The findings are based on an analysis of national policy documents, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with key informants at the national, district and school levels, and 2022 data from the Annual School Census and the Educational Management Information System (EMIS) (MBSSE, 2022).¹ It highlights the financial and structural barriers to integrating volunteer educators into the formal workforce and offers recommendations to enhance teacher management, professionalization and retention in Sierra Leone's education system.

Key findings

Volunteer teachers as a structural response to chronic system constraints

Sierra Leone's education system relies heavily on volunteer educators² due to financial and administrative constraints dating back to the civil war (1991–2002), which caused severe infrastructure destruction and teacher shortages. Subsequent crises, including the Ebola epidemic (2014–2016) and the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2022), further disrupted the education system. However, the demand for education, particularly in rural areas, has continuously expanded, compelling communities to recruit volunteer teachers to meet growing needs. Over time, this practice became institutionalized (Wright, 2018).

1 For the detailed methodology, see Annex 1 and the other two documents in the series, '[Research report: Mapping shortages, distribution challenges and teacher workforce factors shaping foundational learning](#)' and '[Thematic research note 1: Insights for enhancing women's representation](#)'.

2 Throughout qualitative fieldwork, the terms "volunteer", "contract", and "community" teacher were used interchangeably by interview and focus group participants. This usage differs slightly from the EMIS classification, which distinguishes between these categories.

The Free Quality School Education (FQSE) programme contributed to improved access,³ but further increased demand without a corresponding budget expansion, deepening the system's reliance on unpaid volunteers. Fiscal limitations have prevented qualified teachers⁴ from entering the civil service; a pattern mirrored in health, where caps on the public-sector wage bill have similarly produced a tier of unsalaried 'volunteer' health workers (Pieterse and Saracini, 2023).

The distribution of primary teachers across the country remains highly unequal. As of 2022, the national average Pupil-Teacher Ratio (PTR) in government-approved primary schools was 47:1, with the Pupil-Qualified-Teacher Ratio (P-QTR) at 90:1 (MBSSE, 2022). One in four schools exceeded a P-QTR of 110:1, and one in ten had nearly 200 learners per qualified teacher; shortages are most acute in remote districts: Kono averaged 125 students per qualified teacher, Falaba 122:1 and Kambia 121:1 – more than double the ratio in the Western Area, where Freetown is located.⁵

To fill these gaps, schools rely on volunteer teachers who are systematically younger, less experienced and less qualified than their non-volunteer counterparts. EMIS data (2022) show that in government-approved primary schools, volunteer teachers are on average eight years younger than their non-volunteer counterparts (32 versus 40 years) and have roughly half the teaching experience (7 versus 13 years of service). Women volunteers are slightly younger and less experienced still, averaging 30 years of age and 6 years of service (*Table 1*). Further, volunteers are often secondary school graduates or individuals without formal teacher training: more than half (51 per cent) hold no formal teaching qualification compared with 20 per cent of non-volunteer teachers. This concentration of less qualified, less experienced teachers in a workforce that many schools depend on to stay operational has direct implications for instructional quality. Box 1 provides more context on the structural and economic conditions shaping the volunteer teacher workforce in Sierra Leone.

3 According to the Center for Global Development, student enrolment in Sierra Leone rose from approximately 2.0 million in 2018 (pre-FQSE) to 3.1 million by 2021, with the largest gains observed at the primary level (Rossiter and Abreh, 2022).

4 A qualified teacher must hold one of the following: Teachers' Certificate (TC), Higher Teachers' Certificate (HTC) Primary or Secondary level BSc, Ed, BEd, MEd, PhD in education, or a degree in another field plus a postgraduate diploma in education. Minimum requirements vary by school level – TC for primary, HTC – Secondary for junior secondary, and a bachelor's degree in education for senior secondary (TSC, 2019; Gutierrez Bernal et al., 2021).

5 See 'Research report: Mapping shortages, distribution challenges and teacher workforce factors shaping foundational learning'.

Table 1: Teacher demographics across government-approved primary schools (2022)

Demographics		Men	Women	All teachers
Non-volunteer teachers (includes government teachers)	Age	40.26	39.35	39.94
	Service years	13.36	13.11	13.27
Volunteer teachers	Age	32.47	30.00	31.75
	Service years	7.02	5.72	6.64
Total	Age	37.46	36.56	37.16
	Service years	11.08	10.91	11.02



BOX 1

Volunteer teachers in Sierra Leone: Essential but vulnerable

Also known as community or contract teachers, volunteer teachers remain integral yet precarious components of Sierra Leone's primary education workforce. Their critical role stems primarily from the shortage of government-paid teachers, especially in remote and rural areas. However, their status outside the formal payroll system poses operational and policy challenges.

- **Geographic concentration:** Over half of the teaching workforce in remote districts like Falaba and Pujehun are unpaid volunteers (MBSSE, 2022). This concentration underlines their indispensable role in regions where qualified teachers are scarce.
- **Economic realities:** Volunteers frequently experience significant financial insecurity due to unreliable, minimal stipends or solely in-kind community support. This instability forces many into secondary employment, notably mining or trading, diminishing classroom effectiveness and attendance.
- **Systemic challenges and responses:** Efforts by MBSSE and TSC to integrate qualified volunteers into the government payroll remain constrained by budgetary limitations and complex administrative procedures.
- **Education quality:** While volunteer teachers enable access, their limited training correlates with lower student outcomes, particularly in foundational grades and in rural areas (see 'Research report: Mapping shortages, distribution challenges and teacher workforce factors shaping foundational learning').

MBSSE and TSC continue to pursue administrative reforms, including improved recruitment processes and digital tracking systems. Most notably, in the 2024/2025 recruitment cycle, the TSC deployed 2,341 newly licensed teachers using a data-driven matching algorithm, marking the first time that Teacher Licensing Exam results formed the basis for all new payroll admissions (Koutecký et al., 2025). Although promising, years of chronic underfunding, persistent logistical barriers and systemic data discrepancies have left volunteer teachers occupying a critical yet largely unsupported role in Sierra Leone's primary education system.

Sierra Leone relies heavily on volunteer teachers, particularly in rural and hard-to-reach areas, where teacher shortages are most severe

According to 2022 EMIS data, over half the workforce (nearly 60 per cent) of primary teachers are not on the government payroll.⁶ Of this group, 34 per cent are volunteers, receiving little to no compensation, and 23 per cent are paid by households or private institutions. Across 41 per cent of chiefdoms nationwide, volunteers constitute more than half the teaching workforce (MBSSE, 2022), filling gaps that would otherwise leave classrooms without educators (*Figure 1*).

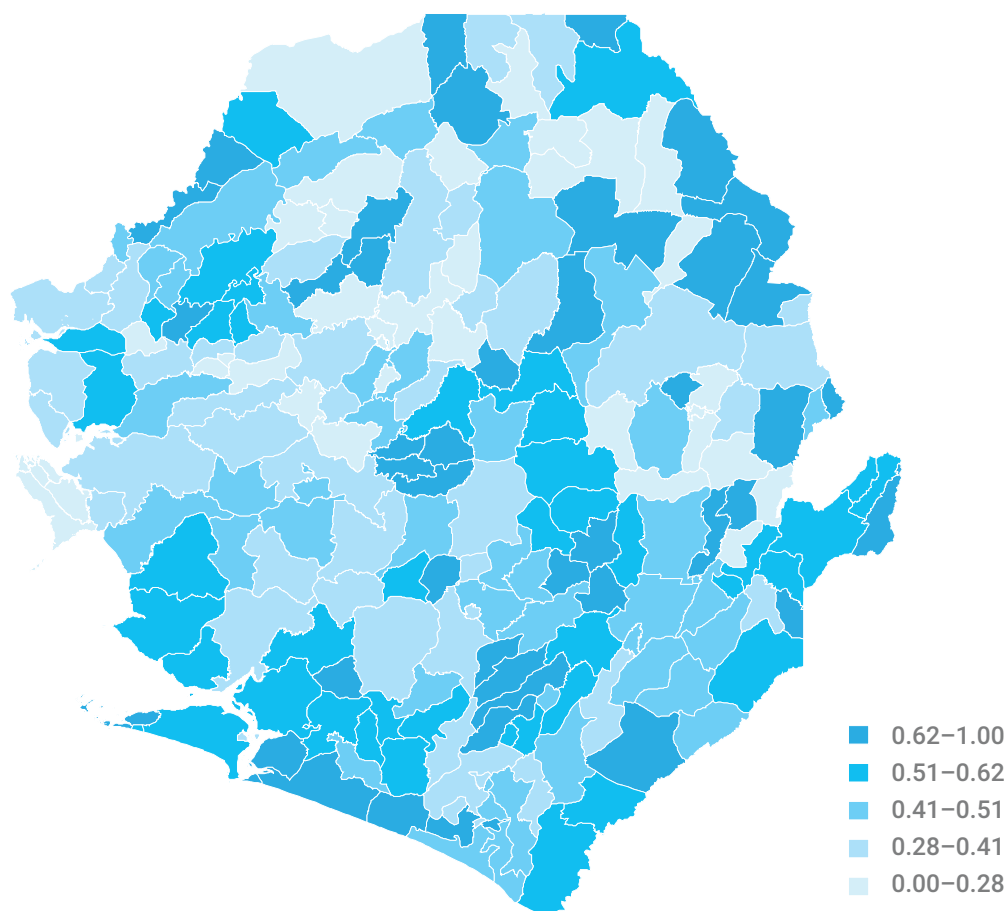
Children in rural and remote areas are more likely to be taught by a volunteer teacher – and by one without formal qualifications.⁷ As distance from urban centres increases, volunteer teachers make up a growing share of the workforce (*Figure 2*); yet they are also less likely to be formally qualified: 51 per cent of urban volunteers hold formal qualifications, compared with 43 per cent in rural and 40 per cent in remote schools. A key driver of this pattern is that the teacher payroll system offers no location-based differentiation. A qualified teacher earns the same salary regardless of where they are posted, meaning rural or remote service carries no additional financial compensation for the hardship involved. TSC has identified payroll reform (including potential hardship allowances or location-linked incentives) as a mechanism to address this (Espinoza-Revollo et al., 2023).



⁶ According to 2022 EMIS data, only 43 per cent of primary teachers in approved primary schools across Sierra Leone are on the government payroll, while the remaining 57 per cent are non-government paid (MBSSE, 2022).

⁷ 20 per cent of non-volunteer teachers were also unqualified, prior to requirements for licensure and registration (MBSSE, 2022).

Figure 1: Share of volunteer teachers, by chiefdom (2022)

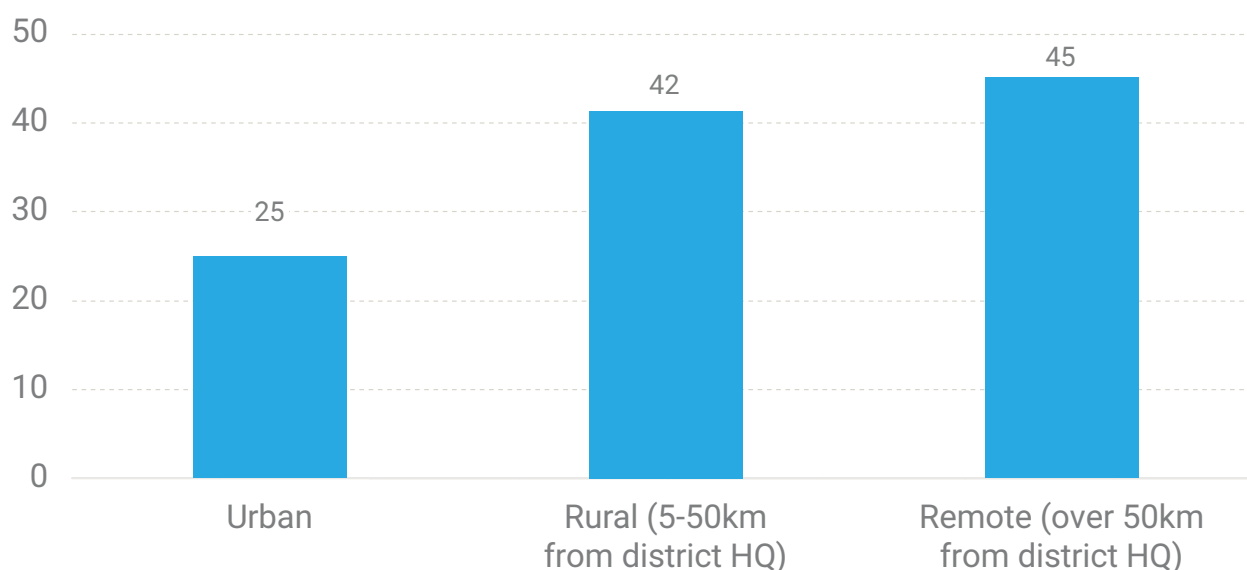


Source: Author's calculations using EMIS data (MBSSE, 2022).

Note: Includes 5,764 government-approved primary schools (government, mission and community schools). Legend thresholds correspond to limits that divide the population of chiefdoms into five parts (quintiles of the distribution); each group represents 20 per cent of the total number of chiefdoms. For example, the lowest quintile has an average volunteer teacher share of 0–28 per cent, on average. Darker shades represent chiefdoms with a greater share of volunteer teachers.

Head teachers recruit volunteers to fill gaps left by the system's limited capacity to recruit, deploy and retain qualified teachers. As one MBSSE representative acknowledged, this practice *"is unofficial, but it is accepted because without them (volunteers), the schools cannot run."* In hard-to-reach areas, head teachers typically recruit volunteer teachers based on recommendations from respected community members, strong performance on West African Senior School Certificate Examination results, or self-referral – rarely through formal applications or standardized criteria. As a volunteer teacher from Kono described, *"I never sought out this opportunity. It came to me unexpectedly when the late Mr. X (head teacher) approached me at home. He mentioned a vacancy due to a shortage of teachers and proposed the idea of me becoming a volunteer teacher."* Once in a school, many hope eventually to secure a formal teaching position, a pattern observed in similar studies (e.g., Beoku-Betts, 2023).

Figure 2: Share of volunteer teachers (%) across geographic locations (2022)



Source: Author's calculations using EMIS data (MBSSE, 2022).

Note: Includes 40,570 teachers from 5,764 government-approved primary schools (government, mission and community schools).

Urban = 2,468 schools (21,099 teachers)

Rural = 1,817 schools (11,067 teachers)

Remote = 1,479 schools (8,404 teachers)

Volunteer teachers are essential for sustaining primary education but create important management challenges

Despite guidance from the African Union Commission (2020) that all teachers should be trained and qualified, **the widespread use of volunteer teachers reduces the urgency to recruit formally trained staff** (World Bank, 2021). While volunteers help keep schools operational, their informal status creates management challenges. Head teachers report difficulty enforcing accountability because volunteers lack formal contracts and often receive low, irregular or no pay. Common concerns include tardiness, absenteeism, reluctance to follow the curriculum and failure to return for subsequent school years. In high-need districts like Kono, where a large share of teachers are outside the government payroll, district officials and head teachers noted that insufficient school subsidies leave them with few practical tools to incentivize attendance and performance.

Grade-level placement of volunteers raises concerns. Volunteer teachers are reportedly frequently assigned to lower primary grades, while trained teachers are concentrated in upper grades. A TSC official explained, *"At these lower levels, most of the time it is volunteer teachers that teach, while the qualified ones go for Class Four, Class Five, Class Six. But it should be strongest where it is weakest."* These allocation decisions mean that volunteers – who tend to be unqualified – are more likely to be responsible for students' foundational years of schooling, when strong instruction is most critical.

These have implications for student learning, with effects varying by location.

Regression analysis of 2022 EMIS data (detailed in ‘Research report: Mapping shortages, distribution challenges and teacher workforce factors shaping foundational learning’) shows that urban schools with higher proportions of unqualified teachers are associated with slightly higher National Primary School Examination T-scores, after controlling for contextual factors (see Annex 2). However, the association reverses in rural schools, where higher shares of unqualified teachers are associated with lower exam scores. This trend is particularly problematic as rural areas have a higher proportion of unqualified volunteers.

“Volunteer teachers are moonlighting everywhere, and the rate of absenteeism is very high among them, which is why learning outcomes of students of volunteers are not really at par with the learning outcomes of the government teachers who are on payroll. They are late a lot, they are absent a lot.”

MBSSE representative

Differences in learning outcomes between volunteers in urban and rural areas are likely multi-causal, but access to professional development is likely a key contributing factor.

Volunteer teachers are eligible to participate in classroom-based training offered by MBSSE, TSC, NGOs and development partners. Notably, interviews suggested that unqualified volunteers may actively seek out more in-service training opportunities than their payroll counterparts, likely to compensate for the lack of formal credentials. However, interviews also indicate that these opportunities are more accessible in urban areas. As a result, urban volunteers may receive more practical training than their rural counterparts.

Beyond training, some urban volunteers hold additional qualifications but treat teaching as temporary while pursuing other opportunities – further complicating any straightforward comparison. These dynamics reflect the broader picture: evidence on volunteer teacher effectiveness is mixed and outcomes depend heavily on the quality of preparation, continuity of support and conditions of service.

Regardless of context, most unqualified volunteers require substantial training and support to meet national teaching standards. Fragmented management further complicates this effort, as volunteers often operate outside formal monitoring and accountability systems (Gutierrez Bernal et al., 2021). Addressing these challenges will require integrating already qualified volunteers into the formal workforce while concurrently expanding training pathways for those who are currently unqualified.

Volunteer teaching is increasingly unsustainable, prompting many to seek alternative income sources or leave the profession.

Most volunteer teachers, regardless of qualifications, receive little or no regular pay, making their roles difficult to sustain. Many depend on small stipends drawn from school subsidies⁸ and community contributions (van den Boogaard, 2020), which are often both inconsistent and insufficient. T4A fieldwork confirms that compensation is typically piecemeal, leaving volunteers in financially precarious positions. School subsidies must cover a wide range of operational costs, including facility maintenance and support for volunteer teachers, and available funds frequently fall short.

"We haven't eaten since morning because I am not on a payroll. Sometimes it is very embarrassing to be fed by the head teacher."

Volunteer teacher, Bo District

To address these gaps, head teachers and communities sometimes provide additional in-kind support, such as food or farm labour, particularly during harvest periods when resources are more available. However, the level of community support varies significantly. Some villages can offer meaningful assistance, while others lack the resources to contribute, resulting in highly unpredictable support for volunteer teachers from month to month. As an MBSSE representative put it, *"The community people pay them in kind around the harvest season. They will give a bag of rice to the community teacher... We [the government] give schools subsidies. Some schools take something like two hundred, three hundred [Leones], and that's what they give to these teachers as stipends."*

Because of low or irregular compensation, many volunteer teachers take on other income-generating activities or leave teaching entirely. T4A interviews indicate that in rural areas, women often supplement income through small-scale trading, while men frequently seek work in mining, both of which can offer higher and more reliable earnings, drawing volunteers away from the classroom. As a result (and as noted in the management challenges above), many volunteers reportedly arrive late, miss class sessions or struggle to balance their teaching responsibilities with the need for paid labour. Those who remain in volunteer positions often do so in the hope of eventually securing placement on the government payroll, despite uncertainty about when – or whether – such opportunities will materialize.

⁸ According to MBSSE guidelines, schools may use subsidies to support volunteer teachers, but no specific percentage is mandated (MBSSE, 2021a).

"Government should set up a fund purely for volunteer and community teachers. Even the subsidies they pay to schools are too small. We cannot cover school needs and still pay stipends to volunteer teachers, it is very challenging."

Head teacher, Kono District

Placement on the government teacher payroll is a complex, multi-stage process shaped by both systemic constraints and informal dynamics

To be placed on the government payroll teachers must obtain a Personal Identification Number (PIN) code. Securing a PIN code formally marks a teacher's transition from volunteer status to government-paid civil servant, bringing with it employment recognition, regular salary and benefits, and greater job security. The number of available PIN codes is limited by the national education budget and annual recruitment quotas managed by TSC in collaboration with the Ministry of Finance (MoF) – quotas that consistently fall short of system demand (Box 2). Where budget permits, MoF allocates district-level quotas to TSC, determining how many teachers in each area are eligible for new PIN codes that year. As a result, teachers often begin working as volunteers while waiting to be formalized.

Securing a PIN code is often a lengthy and uncertain process. Systemic bottlenecks across the central, district and school levels can delay the allocation of available positions. Interviews revealed that many teachers and head teachers lack clear information about current requirements and procedures for obtaining a PIN code, and relationships and local networks can influence hiring decisions. Together, these factors create significant barriers to payroll placement, leaving many teachers – including those who meet formal requirements – unpaid for extended periods.

BOX 2

New versus replacement PIN codes in Sierra Leone

Teachers are placed on the government payroll through either new or replacement PIN codes, each with different implications for budget and processing timelines. Replacement PIN codes, which fill vacancies left by teachers exiting the system, draw on already-budgeted positions and are therefore typically processed more quickly than new ones.

	New PIN codes	Replacement PIN codes
Purpose	Assigned to teachers for the first time, enabling them to join the government payroll	Reassigned to different teachers when an existing position becomes vacant (e.g., due to retirement, abandonment, health or resignation)
Source	Adds new positions to the payroll/ expands current workforce	Reassigns existing payroll positions without increasing the total number of funded positions
Budgetary impact	Requires new budget allocation	Utilizes existing/already allocated resources
Availability	Limited by national finances and district quotas	Depends on teacher attrition
Timeline	Can take months to years	Typically processed more quickly

Teachers dedicate significant time and resources to obtaining the required qualifications, yet many face prolonged waits – ranging from months to even years – for a PIN code to formalize their employment. These delays stem from budgetary constraints, which in some years prevent the recruitment of new teachers or allow only a limited number of hires. As a result, many qualified candidates remain in limbo despite fulfilling all necessary requirements.

"They have their qualifications and their names are on the waiting list, volunteering in our schools for a pittance. Short of that, I don't think there is anything specific that they do to fast track them into the government payroll."

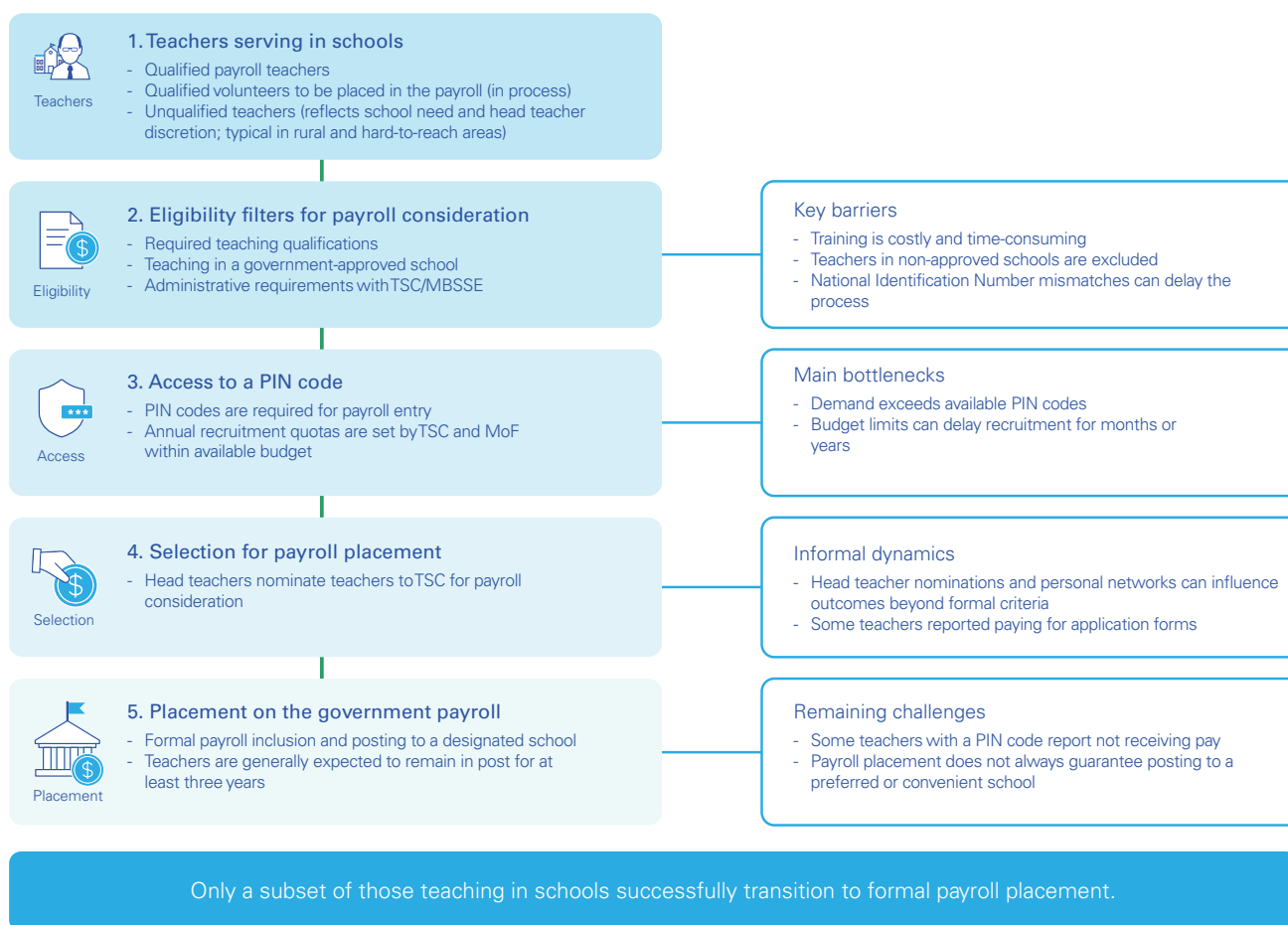
MBSSE representative

MBSSE and TSC recognize the difficult position for teachers waiting. As one district MBSSE education officer explained: “If there are 500 to 1,000 teachers waiting, but only 330 can be recruited, what can we do?” Within these constraints, the government has historically prioritized the recruitment of qualified volunteer teachers over newly trained teachers who had not been teaching in schools before (Beoku-Betts, 2023). However, the 2024/2025 recruitment cycle marked a notable shift: TSC introduced a mandatory Teacher Licensing Exam passage as the primary gateway to payroll entry (Box 3), meaning exam results – rather than prior teaching experience or volunteer status – determined eligibility. All 2,341 teachers deployed in this cycle had passed the exam and were matched to schools by need and geography rather than by their volunteer history (Koutecký et al., 2025).

Figure 3 and the text below outline the steps involved in obtaining a PIN code and the challenges encountered at each stage.⁹

Figure 3: Teacher placement on the government teacher payroll

Illustrative pathway showing eligibility filters, fiscal constraints and informal dynamics



⁹ The documentation of the payroll process reflects conditions prior to and during the introduction of the new mandatory registration and licensure measures and the 2024/2025 deployment protocol. While these reforms represent important steps forward, systemic change is incremental; the patterns and challenges documented here remain largely relevant to understanding the current landscape.

Qualification requirements can create significant barriers to payroll entry. Teacher training typically takes three to four years and can be financially and logistically prohibitive, creating a major barrier to entry, particularly for women (see [‘Thematic research note 1: Insights for enhancing women’s representation’](#)). Interviews indicate that tuition, transportation and study materials are often unaffordable and financial aid programmes that once supported volunteers have reportedly disappeared. A teacher in Kono recalled, [“We benefited from study leave and stipends, including transportation and allowances, but now those supports are gone.”](#)

For long-serving volunteers, seeing newly qualified teachers hired ahead of them often creates a sense of inequity. A teacher in Kono District explained, [“It’s difficult to see someone who has been volunteering for years passed over \[for government payroll\] for someone new just because they have the right qualification.”](#) Several factors contribute to this dynamic, including a historical lack of strict enforcement of training and qualification standards for payroll after the civil war, which allowed unqualified teachers to be included in the payroll, many of whom would not meet today’s eligibility criteria (Beoku-Betts, 2023). This dynamic is corroborated by Godwin et al. (2025), who found that school leaders in Sierra Leone reported deep frustration among long-serving volunteers at being overlooked, with no compensation or formal recognition for their years of service and called on TSC to provide clearer guidance on how to support these teachers through the transition. However, ensuring that teachers are trained and qualified remains essential for improving education quality nationwide and it is strategic for the government to find ways to support volunteers and facilitate their integration into the formal teaching system.

In addition, TSC recently introduced mandatory teacher registration and licensure to establish professional standards (see Box 3). While intended to ensure that only qualified individuals are authorized to teach, some teachers perceive the new requirement as an additional hurdle to payroll entry. The Sierra Leone Teachers Union acknowledges these early implementation challenges but recognizes the long-term benefits of licensure for strengthening the profession. One representative said, [“Teachers will feel disinterested, disenchanting and frustrated as they think this \[licensure and registration\] is just meant to impose additional challenges on them. But we believe with time this will help professionalize their work.”](#)

Professionalization of the workforce

TSC has introduced teacher licensing exams alongside a strengthened registration process. Prior to this, payroll entry required a teacher to be trained, qualified, working in a school and captured in the Annual School Census – with their head teacher advocating on their behalf. Two additional steps have now been added:

- **Registration documentation:** Teachers must hold a qualification certificate, a National Identification Number from the National Civil Registration Authority and a bank account. Identification mismatches are reportedly common and can delay approval, adding a layer of complexity for applicants.
- **Licensure exam:** TSC's standardized online exam assesses teachers' competencies before certifying them for government positions. Low pass rates raise questions about whether failures reflect inadequate teacher preparation or flawed test design, or both. The online-only format presents a particular barrier in a context where digital literacy cannot be assumed. *"One big challenge for them will be technology because it has to be online... Even when they are supplied with a tablet to give basic data, it is still difficult for them,"* a TSC representative remarked. This approach risks excluding otherwise qualified teachers and foreshadows a broader challenge as the education system increasingly demands digital adaptation from both teachers and students.

The 2024/2025 recruitment cycle illustrates both the promise and the early growing pains of this approach. The licensing requirement significantly constrained the eligible pool – only 2,341 non-payroll teachers had passed the exam out of approximately 55,000 nationwide – and a gender gap in pass rates (59 per cent men versus 43 per cent women) contributed to a lower-than-target share of women recruits (Koutecký et al., 2025). These results reflect logistical, technological and administrative hurdles that will need to be addressed in successive cycles. Nevertheless, central-level officials broadly support the necessity of licensure as a foundation for higher professional standards, and the policy helps reposition volunteer presence as a conditional pathway rather than a permanent substitute. As one MBSSE representative stated, "Now teachers need to be trained, qualified and licensed. We will allow volunteers in the classroom, but professional development has to be a part of the contract agreement."

Qualified volunteers must be teaching in a *government-approved* school to be recommended for payroll inclusion. Teachers working in non-approved schools are excluded from this pathway because the TSC is responsible only for teachers in approved institutions (TSC, 2020).¹⁰

Additionally, schools seeking government assistance must meet specific criteria, including time-bound plans that ensure trained and qualified teachers are volunteering at the school as a prerequisite for approval (MBSSE, 2021b).¹¹ As MBSSE confirmed through this study, “They [schools] know that we are looking for trained and qualified people before we can approve you.” However, securing government funding can take up to three years, meaning that pending approval may significantly delay the timeline for eligible teachers to start applying for their PIN codes.

Head teachers also play an influential role in the nomination process during recruitment cycles. Since this process is largely discretionary, head teachers hold significant influence over nominations. As a result, securing a payroll position is not solely determined by district recruitment quotas but also by the head teacher’s efforts, making personal relationships a crucial factor in the process. Further, some teachers reported being asked to pay for ‘Employment Data’ forms¹² – documents which are officially free – creating an additional financial burden and putting a spotlight on vulnerabilities that can undermine fairness and transparency in teacher recruitment. However, Godwin et al. (2025), drawing on evidence from the 2024/2025 recruitment cycle, find that the centralized, data-driven allocation process shifted power dynamics in teacher deployment, reducing the scope for personal networks and head teacher discretion to influence outcomes and improving transparency.

Despite its design as a formal administrative mechanism, the PIN code system in practice faces significant challenges that undermine its fairness and efficiency. First, some teachers reported securing PIN codes, but remaining unpaid due to administrative delays, highlighting inefficiencies in the payroll system. Second, others reported that in

10 In Sierra Leone, schools are categorized as government-approved or non-government-approved based on their compliance with MBSSE criteria. Approved schools (government or government-assisted) have met minimum standards and are eligible for financial support, including teacher salaries and subsidies. This approval is granted in two stages: initial verification and subsequent funding allocation. Non-approved schools include community, private and mission schools that have not yet met the approval criteria or are awaiting government funding. These schools rely on private contributions and/or community support (see ‘Research report: Mapping shortages, distribution challenges and teacher workforce factors shaping foundational learning’).

11 Government-assisted schools are defined under the Basic and Senior Secondary Education Act (Sierra Leone, 2023) as basic or senior secondary schools receiving financial assistance including subsidies and other regular support from MBSSE and government. “Minimum Criteria for Level Two Approval” contains the following criterion: “Appropriate number of teachers for the curriculum to be offered with a targeted optimum pupil-to-qualified-teacher-ratio (PQTR) of... 40 for Primary and Junior Secondary... These teachers should meet minimum qualification standards and be recruited in line with applicable TSC policies.”

12 In Sierra Leone, teachers complete the Employment Data form as part of the process to obtain a PIN code and be placed on the government payroll. This form collects essential personal and professional information, including qualifications, teaching experience and other relevant details.

some instances unqualified individuals have secured payroll positions, bypassing formal requirements. Third, teachers and head teachers reported that personal connections can sway recruitment decisions, creating barriers for those without influential ties. One teacher from Bo said, “It has been almost two years since we have been striving for a PIN code but to no avail because we are not connected. We met all requirements, submitted our original certificates and ID cards, but still, no PIN code has been awarded.” These dynamics risk eroding trust in the system and driving qualified teachers out of the profession – making the recent shift toward more transparent, data-driven deployment not just promising, but necessary.

Yet even for those who successfully navigate the process, obligations remain. Teachers assigned a PIN code must remain at their designated school for a minimum of three years (Espinoza-Revollo et al.; 2023. TSC, 2020) – a rule designed to ensure stability and more equitable distribution in hard-to-staff schools, and to reduce the turnover that has long undermined continuity of instruction.

Despite efforts, budget constraints and payroll management challenges continue to limit the government’s ability to fully support primary education

The Sierra Leone Government’s education budget has grown in nominal terms, reflecting a sustained commitment to the sector. Although the 2025 education budget allocates a higher nominal amount – SLE 3.4 billion, up from SLE 3 billion in 2024 – it accounts for only 14 per cent of national expenditure, down from 15.5 per cent in 2024 and still below the Education 2030 benchmark of 15–20 per cent of total public expenditure (MoF and National Council for Civic Education and Democracy, 2024a; MoF and National Council for Civic Education and Democracy 2024b).¹³ The Government continues to navigate a constrained fiscal space, characterized by low domestic revenues and high debt service obligations, which limit the resources available for social sector spending. This balance is further shaped by external factors – including global economic conditions and donor support trends – that introduce uncertainty into longer-term budget planning.¹⁴ More recently, declining inflation and projected economic growth of 4.5 per cent present a more favourable context for gradually expanding investment than in previous years (MoF and National Council for Civic Education and Democracy 2024b).

¹³ Education spending is calculated as a share of total recurrent expenditure plus domestic capital expenditure (2025: SLE 24.3 billion; education SLE 3.4 billion = 14 per cent. 2024: SLE 19.3 billion; education SLE 3 billion = 15.5 per cent). The Government applies a different but widely used methodology, calculating education as a share of discretionary expenditure only, which yields approximately 20 per cent for 2025. The two approaches reflect different analytical purposes: the total expenditure measure is used here because the international benchmarks cited – Education for All and Education 2030 – apply the same denominator.

¹⁴ While positive, the budget nevertheless faces various risks, including escalation of the Middle East conflict and prolonged war, weak global economic growth, decline in donor support, among others.

“Everything depends on government finances, which limit recruitment opportunities.”

MBSSE representative

Fiscal constraints have had direct consequences for teacher supply. Between 2017 and 2022, although the government nominally increased the education wage bill by 65 per cent, rising inflation over that period meant that real wages decreased by 5 per cent (Budget Advocacy Network and Christian Aid, 2023).¹⁵ This context makes it challenging to attract and retain qualified teachers in hard-to-staff schools. Head teachers, communities and NGOs responded by contributing stipends, transport support and training opportunities – a sign of strong local commitment, though these efforts remain informal and unrecognized, limiting their contribution to formal professionalization pathways.

¹⁵ The Government of Sierra Leone committed to a 45 per cent increase in teacher salaries, starting in 2023 and increasing by a 15 per cent tranche in each successive year.

Payroll misalignment and ghost teachers

Interviews revealed ongoing concerns about the misalignment between payroll records and teacher presence in schools, describing the presence of “ghost teachers” – individuals who remain on the payroll despite having left the profession or never reporting to their assigned schools. These inefficiencies not only inflate the wage bill but also crowd out resources that could otherwise support qualified, unpaid volunteers. As one head teacher in Kono noted, “Some teachers have been recruited but they leave the school and start looking for other jobs. Their names are still on payroll. That’s why government money is not enough.”

Central and district education officials echoed these concerns, citing limited authority to update payroll data and remove absentee teachers. As described by one district-level MBSSE official, “Some teachers leave the country or the profession, but if they are close to retirement age, they try to stay on the list. They are still being paid, and it’s difficult to remove them from payroll.”

These findings are strongly aligned with the Wi De Ya Project Report, which found that 14 per cent of payroll teachers were not teaching in any approved school, and over 12 per cent were unknown to head teachers – further validating concerns of inefficiencies in payroll governance (CGA Technologies, 2023). TSC has begun addressing this through improved recruitment protocols to prevent unqualified or fake teachers from being recruited. Strengthening real-time monitoring, enabling local payroll oversight, and automating attendance systems could reduce waste and free up funds for volunteer integration and equitable recruitment.

A gap between teacher supply and need remains – a direct consequence of the fiscal constraints outlined above. According to the World Bank (2021), approximately 14,000 qualified but unpaid teachers had pending TSC applications as at 2021, nearly 30 per cent of the teacher workforce,¹⁶ representing a ready pool that could help address staffing shortages if resources allowed.¹⁷ Yet Sierra Leone still needs an estimated 32,574 additional qualified teachers to meet the Global Partnership for Education’s benchmark

16 According to 2022 EMIS data, there were 46,289 primary-level teachers in the system. This implies that a third of the teacher workforce applied to be on government payroll (MBSSE, 2022).

17 These figures reflect the situation as at 2021 and 2022 respectively, and more recent recruitment cycles suggest incremental progress. In 2024/2025, for example, 2,341 licensed teachers were deployed onto the government payroll using a data-driven matching algorithm prioritizing schools with the greatest need (Koutecký et al., 2025).

of 40 students per teacher, requiring a 20 per cent increase in the education wage bill at current costs (Sierra Leone, 2022; Budget Advocacy Network and ActionAid, 2021). While the addition of 5,000 teachers to the payroll under the FQSE initiative between 2018 and 2019 demonstrated the government's capacity to act at scale, enrolment growth continued to outpace workforce expansion: the reform drove almost 700,000 additional learners into the system in 2019 alone while teacher numbers grew at a significantly slower rate, contributing to rising PTRs in underserved areas (MBSSE, 2019; Gutierrez Bernal et al., 2021). With an estimated 25 per cent of primary school-age children out of school, the Government has committed to reaching them through its National Strategy for Out-of-School Children and the FQSE framework – meaning demand on the teacher workforce will continue to grow (Sierra Leone, 2022; UNICEF, 2024). The system needs solutions to absorb the qualified volunteers already waiting, offer meaningful incentives to attract and retain teachers in the schools that need them most, and adequately compensate those already on the payroll.

Addressing these challenges will require both additional resources and continued improvements in how existing resources are used. Mobilizing international partners and exploring innovative financing, including public-private partnerships and targeted donor funding, can help sustain stipends and training programmes, as seen in recent system-strengthening investments in primary education in Ghana and Liberia.¹⁸ Strengthening the efficiency and equity of payroll management – ensuring funds reach the most underserved areas, improving payroll data integrity and creating clear pathways for qualified volunteers to enter the formal workforce – would also maximize the impact of current investment. Early evidence from the 2024/2025 deployment cycle suggests that data-driven tools, such as the matching algorithm piloted by TSC, can support more transparent and equitable teacher allocation (Frazer et al., 2025; Koutecký et al., 2025), though sustaining them will require investment in institutional capacity once external technical support ends (Godwin et al., 2025). Sierra Leone's teacher workforce challenge is significant, but it is not without solutions. There is a pool of qualified teachers, the data tools are improving and the policy intent is clear. What remains is the sustained political and financial commitment to bring these elements together and to ensure that the teachers who hold the system together are given the recognition and support their role demands.

18 Recent examples include Ghana's Accountability for Learning Outcomes Project, approved in 2020, which supports foundational learning through investments in teacher training, coaching and system strengthening (World Bank, 2020). In Liberia, the Excellence in Learning in Liberia programme, approved in 2025, represents a large-scale blended financing initiative supported by the World Bank and the Global Partnership for Education, funding nationwide teacher professional development, instructional materials and EMIS strengthening in public primary schools (World Bank, 2025). These examples are further discussed in recent T4A country studies for [Ghana](#) and [Liberia](#) (UNICEF Innocenti, forthcoming).

Policy recommendations

This section synthesizes the key findings from the preceding analysis and connects them to some recommendations for consideration by MBSSE and TSC. Sierra Leone's education system depends significantly on volunteer teachers, especially in rural and hard-to-reach areas where staffing shortages are most severe. While volunteers ensure that schools remain operational, many lack formal training and receive little to no pay, affecting teaching quality and student learning conditions. The transition from volunteer to government-paid teacher status can be slow and complex: financial constraints, administrative bottlenecks and informal networks mean many teachers wait years to be formalized in unpaid or precarious positions, even when they meet formal requirements. These conditions risk undermining the attractiveness of the profession despite ongoing reforms in licensure, deployment and payroll.

Although education spending has increased in recent years, fiscal limitations do not allow MBSSE and TSC to recruit at scale or offer competitive salaries. Rising costs, national debt and competing budget priorities restrict teacher recruitment, leaving many schools dependent on volunteer teachers and highlighting the need for sustainable workforce strategies. The targeted recommendations below address both short-term stabilization and long-term sustainability.

Key finding 1. Sierra Leone relies heavily on volunteer teachers, particularly in rural and hard-to-reach areas, where teacher shortages are most severe. Addressing this requires targeted deployment, stronger incentives and better support systems for teachers willing to work in underserved communities.



Recommendation 1a. Prioritize the deployment of qualified teachers in hard-to-staff schools. While MBSSE and TSC have taken steps to formalize teaching, i.e., allocate PIN-coded positions to schools, in the most needed settings, further action is needed to ensure equitable and sustainable deployment. This includes:

- prioritizing the allocation of PIN codes to volunteer teachers already working in rural and remote areas over urban counterparts, with a political commitment to reserve a fixed percentage of new PIN codes for hard-to-staff schools. Regularizing experienced educators not only ensures continuity in teaching but also enhances motivation and job security, reducing reliance on unpaid or underpaid labour.
- ensuring the payroll recruitment process is more transparent (see recommendations 2b and 2c). The 2024/2025 deployment cycle offers early evidence that TSC's data-driven matching algorithm may reduce reliance on informal networks and better direct

teachers to schools with the worst shortages, including remote and disadvantaged areas (Godwin et al., 2025; Koutecký et al., 2025).

- promoting localized recruitment, which will require that teachers from rural and remote communities are trained and supported in filling vacancies that continue to not be filled (see recommendation 2c).



Recommendation 1b. Enhance the Teacher Management Information System (TMIS) portal to better support volunteer teachers. The TMIS portal brings together key actors across the education system and is open to both payroll and non-payroll teachers. If enhanced, it could serve as a centralized registry tracking volunteer teachers' qualifications, experience and placement, streamlining coordination and payroll integration while also giving volunteers access to training resources, career progression guidelines, payroll updates and direct communication with district education officials.

Key finding 2. Volunteer teachers are essential for sustaining primary education but operate without the formal management structures and clear employment pathways they need. Strengthening governance at both the school and system levels – through clearer role expectations, more transparent payroll processes and expanded qualification pathways – would improve accountability and support volunteers' longer-term integration into the formal workforce.



Recommendation 2a. Together with local education leaders across mission, community and public schools, establish clear guidelines for volunteer teachers. Introduce simple, standardized agreements outlining expectations and responsibilities for volunteer teachers. These guidelines can eventually support head teachers in making informed decisions when recommending volunteers for future payroll inclusion, ensuring a more transparent and merit-based recruitment process.

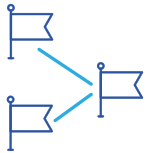


Recommendation 2b. Increase sensitization of teacher allocation policies. While the TMIS portal now provides accessible guidelines on registration and licensing requirements, teachers with limited digital access need additional channels. District-level workshops, engagement of Sierra Leone Teachers Union and community leaders, and radio or SMS outreach – particularly in areas without reliable internet – would help ensure consistent messaging, build trust and improve awareness of deployment processes across all school contexts.



Recommendation 2c. Establish a transparent, criteria-based waiting list system.

Regularly publishing and updating a list of teachers awaiting PIN codes would reduce reliance on informal networks and strengthen trust in the system (Béteille and Evans, 2021). Prioritization criteria should be equity-focused – weighting school location, years served as a qualified volunteer, and gender – to ensure recruitment decisions are needs-based and consistent rather than subject to head teacher discretion.



Recommendation 2d. Create multiple pathways for qualification.

Continue to offer in-service training to all teachers but include targeted courses or programmes that are part of a wider scheme where unqualified volunteer teachers can get credits towards certification. Alternatively, tap into NGO-delivered trainings, which could potentially reach volunteers in areas where formal programmes cannot, yet currently do not count toward qualification. Formalizing these programmes in national quality assurance frameworks – in partnership with Tertiary Education Institutions and Teacher Training Colleges – would transform an existing resource into a recognized pathway, extending certified training provision to rural and hard-to-staff areas at relatively low additional cost.

Key finding 3. Despite sustained commitment to the education sector, fiscal constraints and persistent payroll inefficiencies continue to limit the government’s ability to fully compensate and absorb the teachers the system depends on. Recent reforms, including the 2024/2025 data-driven deployment cycle, demonstrate that the system can act at scale when tools and political will align, and point to where targeted efficiency gains are most achievable. Addressing this will require both sustained advocacy for increased education financing and continued improvements in how existing resources are allocated and managed.



Recommendation 3a. Evaluate the provision of minimal stipends to volunteer teachers.

Allocate small, dedicated school grants (separate from existing education subsidies) to provide minimal stipends to volunteer teachers. These can continue to be enhanced with in-kind contributions. Stipends can be:

- based on performance and/or attendance: Payments can be conditional on regular attendance and lesson delivery, ensuring accountability and enhancing motivation.
- targeted for rural and hard-to-staff schools: Priority should be given to schools in remote areas, where reliance on volunteer teachers is highest.



Recommendation 3b. Improve the equity and efficiency of education spending. Based on well-documented challenges in Sierra Leone’s payroll governance, this research reinforces the case for increased education financing while offering more targeted recommendations on improving how existing resources are used. This includes: addressing payroll misalignment by strengthening mechanisms to identify and remove ghost teachers – estimated to inflate the wage bill while crowding out qualified volunteers (CGA Technologies, 2023); improving payroll data integrity; closing the gender gap in licensing pass rates documented in the 2024/2025 cycle (Koutecký et al., 2025); and expanding data-driven workforce management tools, including the matching algorithm, to ensure resources reach the schools and teachers that need them most.

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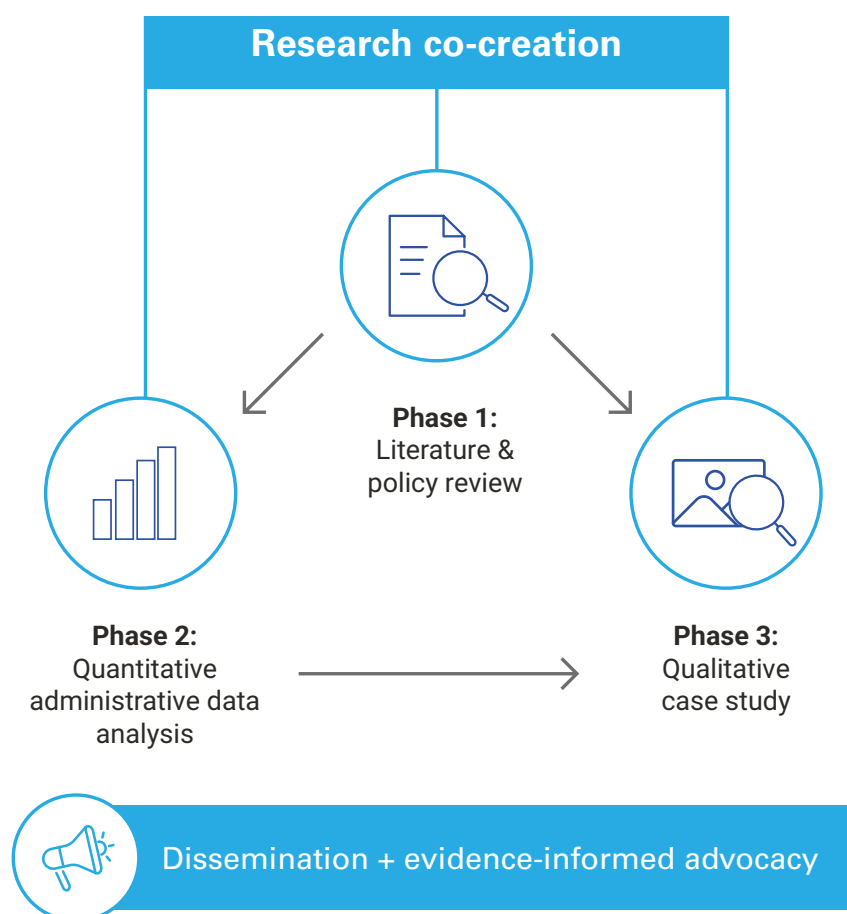
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Annexes

Annex 1 – Methodology: Leveraging qualitative and quantitative data

The Teachers for All (T4A) research relies on a mixed-methods research design underpinned by a co-creation process to ensure the relevance of its scope and direction. A multi-stakeholder workshop was held with MBSSE and TSC officials, civil society organizations, researchers and development partners in November 2023. This consultation collaboratively shaped project objectives and research questions, ensuring the analysis responds directly to MBSSE challenges, policy priorities and the ongoing education reform agenda.

The findings draw on a desk review, quantitative analysis of the Educational Management Information System (EMIS) and examination data to identify patterns in teacher allocation, in addition to key informant interviews and focus group discussions to understand the drivers and dynamics behind teacher deployment challenges. More details on the phases of the research are provided below.



Phase 1 (Literature and policy review):

The T4A analysis draws on an extensive body of national and international evidence. Key sources include Government of Sierra Leone policies and frameworks from MBSSE, TSC, the Ministry of Finance and related agencies, as well as global guidance and research from organizations, including the United Nations Children's Fund, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, Global Partnership for Education and the World Bank. The review also incorporated recent Sierra Leone-focused studies from EdTech Hub, the Learning Generation Initiative and the Education Workforce Initiative, among others. Together, these sources offer a robust foundation for examining teacher recruitment, deployment, and retention across the country, allowing the T4A study to dig deeper and position its findings alongside ongoing efforts in this space.

Phase 2 (Quantitative data analysis):

The quantitative analysis was conducted using the 2022 Annual School Census data (MBSSE, 2022) in order to produce descriptive statistics and estimate multivariate regressions at the school level. Regressions were conducted using different outcome variables such as the number of teachers in a school, the number of qualified teachers, teacher tenure and National Primary School Examination (NPSE) scores. For more nuanced comparisons, regression models were also run for separate subsamples. The regression models control for contextual variables available in the Annual School Census, including school location, school infrastructure and the teacher profile. However, omitted variables and unobservable characteristics not captured in the models may influence the dependent variable, which should be kept in mind. Annex 2 gives more details on the models analysed.

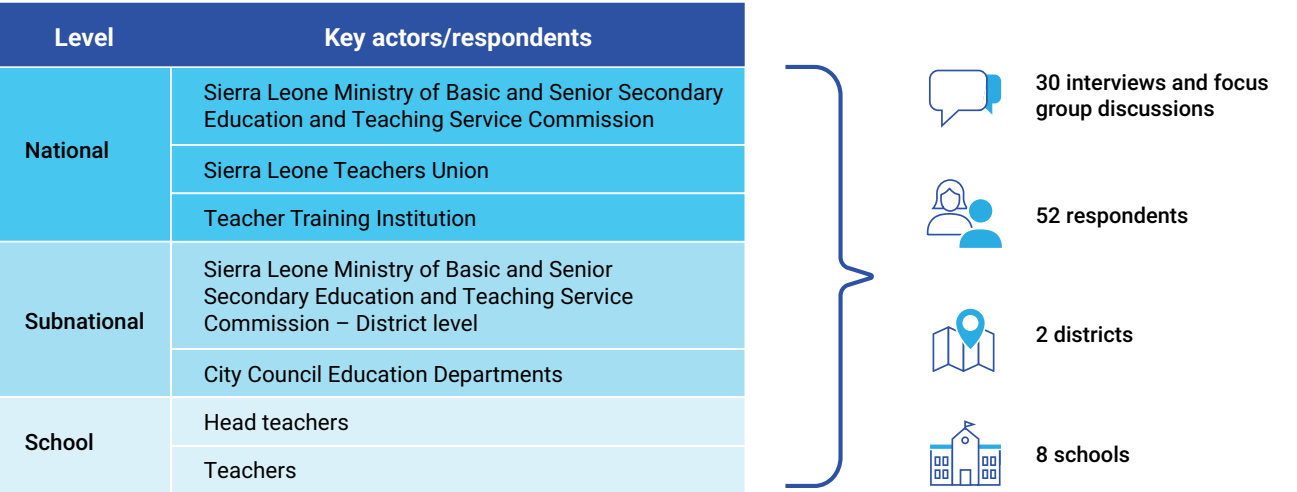
Phase 3 (Qualitative case study):

An explanatory case study was conducted, drawing on a review of policy and planning documents and primary qualitative data collection. Location selection followed data-driven and feasibility criteria, including variation in teacher workforce characteristics, the presence of both urban and rural schools, and school road accessibility. From the list of districts that met these criteria, Bo and Kono were selected by members of the T4A project core technical team as suitable sites for fieldwork. In total, 30 pieces of data were collected: 22 semi-structured key informant interviews and 8 focus group discussions. Key informant interviews and focus group discussions were conducted in English and, where needed, in Krio. In total, 52 respondents voluntarily participated at the central, district and school levels across the selected districts.¹⁹

¹⁹ The sample size was determined by the saturation point reached during data collection, ensuring that no new information or themes emerged from additional interviews or discussions.

All research protocols and data-collection guides were approved by the Health Media Lab Institutional Review Board and the Office for Human Research Protections, providing ethical assurance for the protection of human subjects in international social and behavioural science research for children, education and vulnerable and high-risk populations, among other topics. The Institutional Review Board application for this research phase was approved on 30 April 2024.

The qualitative component of the study faced some limitations that may affect the scope of the findings. The research was limited to Bo and Kono Districts, which may not capture the full range of experiences of volunteer teachers in other districts of Sierra Leone. Experiences of volunteer teachers in other districts may shape who volunteers and on what terms, suggesting the potential value of further context-specific investigation. Additionally, while efforts were made to accommodate language preferences using Krio, subtle nuances in the translation to English could affect the responses. Finally, as with any qualitative research, reliance on self-reported data may introduce some bias, as participants might have presented their experiences in ways that align with social expectations.



Annex 2 – Regression tables (learning outcomes)

Multivariate regression techniques were used to analyse student learning outcomes at the end of primary schooling. The following regression model was estimated:

$$Y_{ij} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \mathbf{Teacher}_j + \beta_2 \mathbf{School}_j + \beta_3 \mathbf{Other}_j + \beta_4 \mathbf{Chiefdom}_l + \epsilon$$

where:

Y_{ij} represents the NPSE T-score for student i in school j . The T-score is a statistical measure indicating how far a student's exam score is from the mean of the t-distribution of exam scores. It is expressed in terms of standard deviations

$\mathbf{Teacher}_j$ is a set of variables representing average teacher characteristics for school j

$\mathbf{School}_j$ is a set of variables representing school-level characteristics for school j

$\mathbf{Other}_j$ is a set of variables representing other contextual information for school j

$\mathbf{Chiefdom}_l$ are unobserved time-invariant heterogeneities across each chiefdom l in which school j is located (chiefdom fixed effects)

ϵ is the non-stochastic error term

Multivariate regression analysis was conducted at the student level with robust standard errors and chiefdom-level fixed effects, weighted by school size. Main sample of all students includes 116,660 students (from 3,144 government-approved schools that have a West African Examinations Council code). The regression models were run for both Pupil-to-Qualified Teacher Ratio (P-QTR) and Pupil-Teacher Ratio (PTR), with similar results. The sample was created by merging data from 2022 NPSE scores with 2022 EMIS data and only includes schools for which a West African Examinations Council code was available and thus may not be representative of all schools.

Table A1: Factors associated with NPSE T-Scores in primary schools in Sierra Leone

	All learners	Male learners	Female learners	Urban learners	Rural learners	Remote learners
P-QTR (for 10 learners)	-0.077***	-0.072***	-0.068***	-0.199***	-0.002	0.026
School type (reference category: Government)						
Mission/religious	0.542***	0.327***	0.376***	0.607***	0.180*	0.667***
Community	1.083***	0.396*	0.697***	1.058***	-0.294	-1.453**
School location (reference category: Urban)						
Rural	-0.419***	-0.366***	-0.471***		0.596***	
Remote	-0.841***	-1.012***	-0.630***			
School approval						
Approved	0.096	-0.518*	0.505*	-0.054	0.122	0.19
Electricity access (reference category: No electricity)						
Generator	-0.212**	-0.811**	-0.606*	-0.364	-0.801*	
Grid	-1.377***	-0.806***	-0.987***	-1.009***	-0.457*	0.948**
Solar	0.666***	0.703***	0.511**	0.934***	0.483***	0.012
Water and sanitation						
Access to water (any source)	0.092**	0.039	-0.084	0.001	-0.183*	0.259
Handwashing facilities	0.079**	-0.128	-0.145	0.094	-0.227**	-1.169***
School infrastructure						
School fence	-0.063*	0.207*	0.153	-0.065	0.728***	2.476***
School feeding	0.429***	0.769***	0.500**	0.672***	0.553***	-0.568*
Proportion of solid material classrooms	0.029	0.469***	0.567***	0.844***	0.449***	0.415*
Teacher housing	0.175***	0.333**	0.09	0.063	0.557***	0.755***
School management committee present	0.073	-0.584***	-1.003***	-0.799***	-0.608**	-1.153**
Mobile network access	-0.251***	0.365*	0.243	0.809***	-0.425**	-0.934***

Table A1 (Continued): Factors associated with NPSE T-Scores in primary schools in Sierra Leone

	All learners	Male learners	Female learners	Urban learners	Rural learners	Remote learners
Teacher characteristics						
Proportion of women teachers	1.490***	1.951***	1.794***	2.440***	1.969***	2.655***
Proportion of payroll teachers	-0.058	0.015	-0.545***	-0.704***	0.171	-0.684*
Proportion of unqualified teachers	0.842***	0.322	-0.442	1.764***	-0.879***	-1.535***
Constant	48.929***	49.021***	49.101***	48.420***	48.369***	51.173***
Observations	115083	56769	58222	55690	59301	18605
Adjusted R-squared	0.04	0.08	0.073	0.076	0.096	0.119

Note: *p<0.01 ** p<0.05 ***p<0.001.

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About us

UNICEF, the United Nations agency for children, works to protect the rights of every child, everywhere, especially the most disadvantaged children and in the toughest places to reach. Across more than 190 countries and territories, we do whatever it takes to help children survive, thrive, and fulfil their potential.

UNICEF Office of Strategy and Evidence – Innocenti accelerates progress for children by working to ensure that policies and programming are informed by high-quality evidence. As the global custodian of child-related official statistics, it works closely with governments and partners to strengthen national statistical systems. Through world-leading data, research and foresight, it underpins UNICEF's global leadership on children's rights and serves as the organization's hub for setting strategy and monitoring programmes. With the active engagement of young people and other partners, it supports advocacy and dialogue aimed at improving the lives of children everywhere.

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