

Better inclusive education

Learning brief

The hidden costs of education: exploring official and unofficial school fees in Sierra Leone



Photo: Leh Wi Lan

Introduction

Leh Wi Lan, in collaboration with Focus 1000, carried out a study to explore how school fees create barriers to school access and retention, especially for more vulnerable learners (i.e. pregnant learners, children with disabilities, children from rural and underserved areas and children from low-income families)¹. Financial barriers to school generally impact on families, but for vulnerable learners they tend to inform choices around early marriage and dropping out of school to generate income.

The Free Quality School Education initiative launched in 2018 by the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education (MBSSE) was a positive step towards reducing financial constraints on families. Education is now officially free except for uniforms and student badges. However, there is evidence that additional unofficial fees are being collected at school level². This study aims to determine the magnitude and nature of this phenomenon and the perceptions of different actors around these unofficial fees.

“Each contribution isn’t much individually, but when added up, it becomes quite burdensome for many parents.”

Parent, Bombali

Summary of findings

- **The reality of school fees varies from school to school.** Some ask only for official fees and a contribution to pay community teachers. Others charge to cover maintenance, repairs, sports or cultural events, generally with parents’ prior agreement.
- **Many schools request small amounts more frequently** to cover a ‘Welfare Fund’, photocopying and marking learners’ work. These fees are difficult for parents to track.
- In some schools, **many small fees are listed with different names** and collected in the year, in addition to in-kind contributions.
- **Parents are often unable to assess how much education costs.** Some estimate costs of about 200 SLE per year, whereas others say 2,000 SLE or more.
- **Parents and students do not have a clear understanding of which fees are official** or unauthorised, and would welcome more clarity on this from the Government.
- **Not all fees are announced** at Community Teacher Association (CTA) meetings.
- **Learners face retaliation** from school staff when families fail to pay.

¹ Radical Inclusion Baseline Report, 2022

² Radical Inclusion Baseline Report, 2022

Types of school fees

Participants in the study confirmed that most schools collect a long list of fees from parents and students - some official and some unofficial. Figure one identifies five categories of school fees. Parents and students mention a much greater number of different types of fees than teachers and school principals. For example, almost all parents and students mention that they pay for sport events, community teacher salaries, tuition (in schools not supported by the Government), school maintenance, exercise books, textbooks and photocopies, and fees for correcting work.

Less frequently, some participants in the study mention fees for a welfare fund and fees to cover teachers' medical bills or transportation to school.

In their Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE) year, all students must pay, on average, a fee of 240 Leones (or 10.5 USD) for the exam and preparation costs.

This fee covers extra classes, transportation and accommodation for those who live far from an examination centre.

Families are also asked for in-kind contributions (e.g. rice, building materials, cleaning implements, school materials, agricultural and labour products) throughout the year to support school maintenance and new items of equipment.

In some schools, parents are asked to help with school maintenance or cleaning tasks. This is a financial cost when it prevents them from working.

Fees are typically collected at the start of every school year, though some schools ask for fees to be paid termly or collect them in very small amounts (a few leones) over a longer period. This makes it much harder for families to keep track of the total amount paid.

Financial payments are mostly made in cash but sometimes by mobile money or even bank transfer.

Figure 1. Types of school fees

Official 2024/25 fees set by MBSSE	Fees benefitting teachers	Fees benefitting school	Fees linked to exams	Fees benefitting students
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uniform (NLe430) • Veil or other religious uniform (NLe45 - NLe170) • Pocket badge (NLe20) • Minimum NLe450 (state school) to maximum NLe620 in Christian schools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community teachers not on payroll • Marking work, providing photocopies of resources, etc • Teachers' medical bills, transportation costs, etc 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contribution to toilets • Building projects or Development Fund for the school • Report cards • Tuition fee • Welfare fee • Subject practicals fee • Textbook fees 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • BECE exam fee • Additional classes for BECE exam preparation • Attendance of BECE exam, e.g. transportation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extra classes • Contribution to games or extracurricular activities • Exercise books

Families' understanding of school fees

Although school principals, teachers and most parents say that fees are communicated during Community Teacher Association (CTA) meetings, around 20% of CTA members interviewed said that they were not involved in these discussions and could not say what the fees were for, or what amounts were requested. Some parents and learners added that the smaller fees collected throughout the year are often not mentioned in CTA meetings. In some schools only the CTA Chairman is involved in these discussions.

"The school is not fully telling us some of these things, they are a no-go area."

CTA member, Bombali

"We discuss every financial decision and agree upon it in a CTA meeting before agreeing to pay. The teachers inform us what they are collecting the money for. Sometimes, if the price is too much, then we would negotiate."

Parent, Kakuru

Parents are broadly in agreement that fees should be collected to support teachers who are not on the Government payroll, and for maintenance or improvement of the infrastructure of the school. In many cases, parents have made a collective decision to pay for community teachers, as they understand they are needed for the school to function properly.

"The school has not charged us anything but we come together to support the teachers who are not on payroll because our children are doing well in the public exams. That is why we decided to give the teachers NLe30 as an extra fee."

Parent, Bontho

"When school reopens, the teachers call the parents and tell us about the school feeding programme from the Government. But we need to contribute to buy some cooking items. We decide whether to contribute SLE 2 per week or SLE 10 per month, and we pay that."

Parent, Bombali

However, they often do not know if fees being requested are official or not.

"Really, I don't know which of the fees we pay are allowed and which ones are not. The Government needs to make it clear to us so that we know."

Parent, Bombali

"If the Government can make public the extra charges allowed and the ones which are not that would be good."

Parent, Western Area Rural

Consequences of not making the payments

According to parents and students, not paying the requested fees has consequences and can create disadvantages for learners, including:

- Being mocked by peers for not being able to pay
- Being denied access to the service they should be paying for: extra classes, access to school manuals or exercise books, access to corrected exercises, etc.
- Being denied exam entry.
- Being denied grading/marking of assignments pay.
- Being sent home until payment is settled.
- Being flogged by teachers.
- Being asked to engage in sexual relationships.
- Being sent to work in the school garden in compensation.

"If the parent is unable to pay those extra fees, it prompts the student to engage in sexual relations with men to be able to raise the money and pay to the school authorities."

Male learner, Bo

"If a pupil fails to pay the teacher's welfare, the teachers will go around the classes to beat the ones that failed to pay, which is very embarrassing."

Learner, Kabala

"The payment is compulsory, and if you do not pay, they will send you home, or they will send you to work in the school garden."

Learner, Bonthé

However, in some schools, parents reported that these measures are not strictly enforced and payment of school fees is more of a community decision rather than a school mandate.

From the teachers and principals' point of view, there are no negative consequences for students and parents who do not pay fees. However, they did say that when students cannot pay, they seek assistance from school alumni, community stakeholders, NGOs, and other organisations to gather the missing amount (including the mission for Government-supported mission schools), or the school may delay repairs and maintenance.

"We would write some stakeholders in the community for assistance, like in the case of the teachers quarter we are trying to build. We are trying to write Sierra Rutile Company for financial."

Principal, Bonthé

"I think most of the fees we are paying are not allowed. The Government is not providing the necessary support to the schools, so as a responsible community we will not wait, otherwise our children's education will be affected."

Parent, Bonthé

Recommendations

- Provide guidance to schools and communities about what charges can (and cannot) be requested by schools, and set a cap on fees. Disseminate this information on the radio and through a variety of other widely accessible communication channels.
- Require all schools to display an up-to-date list of fees they charge and when they are due to be paid.
- Make timely payment of school subsidies to reduce the need for schools to charge fees to cover maintenance costs and payments to community teachers.
- Consider using cross-subsidies or other solutions to reduce fees for exams for learners from poorer households.
- Work towards reducing unofficial fees by including all teachers on the Government payroll and consider paying allowances for teachers who travel long distances to school.

Methodology

This qualitative study collected insights from 517 stakeholders through focus group discussions (472) and key informant interviews (45) in 5 districts with high dropout rates: Karene, Bombali, Bonthé, Western Area Rural and Kailahun. Participants included male and female students, parents, principals, teachers, CTA and Board of Governors (BoG) members. In total, 15 schools (Government, mission, and community) were involved - three per district to ensure rural and urban representation.



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