



POLICY BRIEF

Learning Outcomes Summary: Secondary Grade Learning Assessment 2018

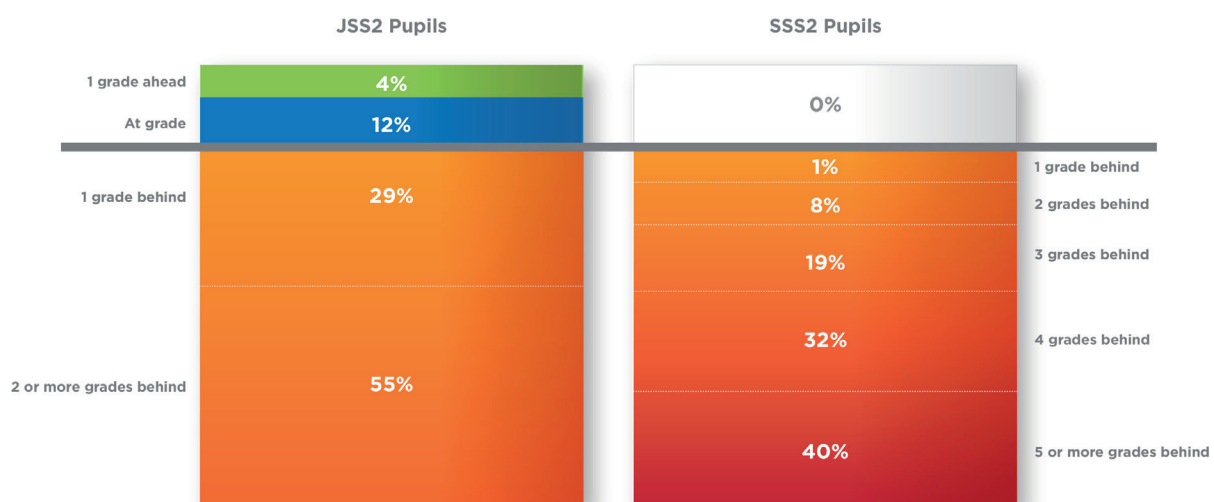
Summary

The 2018 launch of the Free Quality School Education Programme (FQSEP) was a milestone in Sierra Leone's drive to equip its citizens with the skills and competencies needed for the future growth of the nation. By focussing on quality, the FQSEP proposes to go beyond simply filling classrooms and increased enrolment to demonstrate how our schools can ultimately deliver sustained learning for all pupils.

Understanding learning outcomes is a vital part of this new focus on quality and the Sierra Leone Secondary Grade Learning Assessment 2018 (SGLA) provides invaluable information to inform our progress. Supported by the UKAid-funded Leh wi Lan/Sierra Leone Secondary Education Improvement Programme (SSEIP), the SGLA – the second of its kind - reveals many areas for improvement, with a fall in some secondary grade learning outcomes since the first SGLA, disparity between actual and expected performance and lack of progress between lower and higher bands.

It calls for urgent action to ensure that secondary education in Sierra Leone caters for the diverse learning needs of all pupils and sets out priority actions for the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education (MBSSE) to support improvement in learning outcomes.

Learning Levels for Secondary School Students



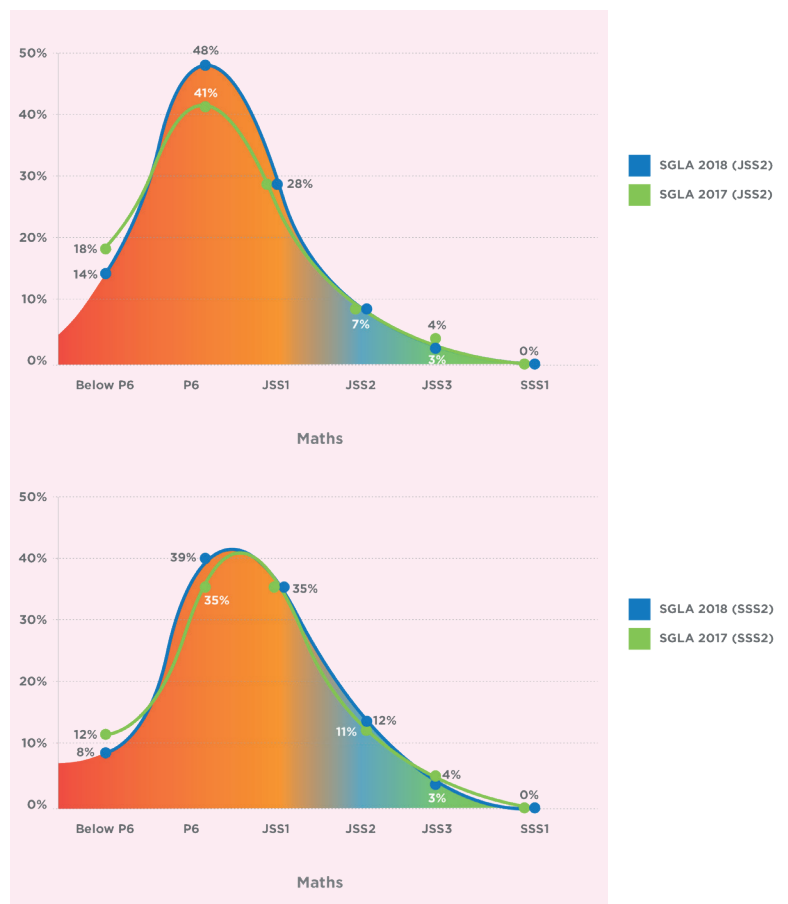
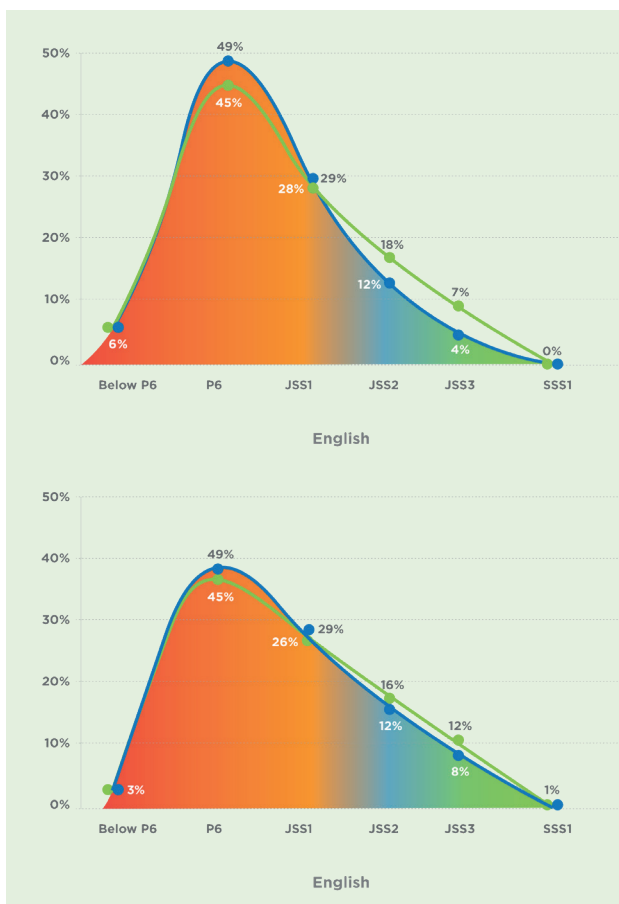
Leh wi Lan/Sierra Leone Secondary Education Improvement Programme (SSEIP) is a five-year (2016–2021) UKaid-funded programme aimed at improving English and Mathematics learning achievement in all secondary schools of Sierra Leone, especially for girls. The programme expects to impact learning conditions for 1.4 million boys and girls, leading to improved secondary exam passes, by making the learning environment safer and more productive.

Key findings on learning outcomes

Learning outcomes in English are far behind national curriculum expectations. Only 60 per cent of JSS2 pupils, and in the region of 40 per cent of SSS2 pupils, can demonstrate the level of English language skills that would be expected from a primary-grade pupil. In effect, JSS2 pupils have fallen behind curriculum expectations by two years, and SSS2 pupils by five years. Furthermore, just 10 per cent of JSS2 pupils show the English language skills that are expected at their stage, only 2 per cent exceed their expected level and almost no SSS2 pupil can show skills expected at the end of SSS1.

A greater proportion of SSS2 pupils than JSS2 pupils appear in higher performance bands. However, most of these pupils have fallen behind by up to four years and are now operating somewhere between expected JSS1 and SSS1 levels.

The pattern for learning outcomes in Maths is very similar. The percentages of JSS2 and SSS2 pupils able to demonstrate primary grade Maths skills is only slightly higher than for English (almost 70 per cent of JSS2 pupils and 50 per cent of SSS2 pupils are still at Maths primary grade level). However, the extents to which the two groups have fallen behind curriculum expectations is exactly the same as in English, with JSS2 two years behind expected Maths achievement levels and SSS2 five years behind. Furthermore, only 5 per cent of JSS2 pupils are reaching expected levels for their age and just 1 per cent are exceeding expectations.



There is minimal progress in pupils' learning outcomes as they move up the grades. Pupils starting with a weak foundation in JSS have little knowledge to build on as they progress to SSS grades so progression in learning is minimal. Despite 8-11 years of schooling and having officially passed the NPSE, a large proportion of pupils in both grades are demonstrating no more than some very basic English and Maths skills and will most likely struggle to respond to the pace of the BECE or WASSCE curriculum which makes much more ambitious demands from candidates.

Learning outcomes in English have actually deteriorated over the last year. There is a small but statistically significant drop in English scores between 2017 and 2018, and the fall is particularly marked for JSS2. While significant shifts are not expected within a single year, and long-term trends cannot be inferred from just two years' data, the real drop in English scores needs to be thoroughly understood and further rounds of SGLA will confirm if this drop continues. For Maths, there is a small improvement in lower bands, with more pupils now able to show at least P6-level skills in 2018, but the rest of the distribution is largely unchanged since SGLA I.

Pupil learning outcomes depend on their gender, social background and location. Pupils from the wealthiest backgrounds perform far better in both Maths and English than pupils from the poorest backgrounds. Similarly, in both subjects, and across both grades, performance appears to get worse the further you move from a district capital or headquarter town. Boys generally score higher than girls across both grades and subjects and this gap appears to widen as pupils move to higher grades from JSS2 to SSS2.

A wide range of factors impact on learning outcomes.

The SGLA II shows how teachers are only delivering half the 25-30 weekly prescribed school hours, just two and half hours a day on average, and this is consistent with SGLA I findings. Furthermore, a quarter of classes observed actually had no teacher, with teachers blaming personal or family illness for their absence. The SGLA II highlights other issues likely to impact on learning outcomes: teachers struggle to match lesson plan content with relevant JSS grades; there are issues of sexual harassment in schools. Furthermore, around 60 per cent of pupils report experiencing some kind of disability (difficulty in seeing, hearing, remembering, communicating, walking or taking care of themselves).

Recommendations

MBSSE needs to take urgent action to embed a focus on improving learning outcomes at the heart of the secondary school system, support all children to learn useful skills and ensure that the FQSEP can play its fullest possible part in the nation's future growth and development.

It should focus on the following:

- **Re-align the curriculum with pupils' learning levels,** possibly by meeting learners at their current performance level and bringing them up to required standards or by introducing non-standard learning approaches such as remediation
- **Better understand teachers' skills, knowledge and attendance** so teacher management issues can be addressed
- **Shift from process compliance to promoting learning** by better understanding situations where schools 'look' effective (use staff meetings and lesson plans etc.) but ultimately deliver poor learning outcomes
- **Learn from success stories** and pockets of effective practice that exist in Sierra Leone schools
- **Urgently address issues of sexual harassment** and girls' safety in schools by sensitising male teachers and pupils, improving accountability and considering recruiting more female teachers
- **Give pupils from poorer backgrounds a fair shot at success** by implementing and evaluating different support systems for disadvantaged pupils
- **Improve schooling experience for pupils with disabilities** by first delivering research to better understand the issues
- **Improve lesson plans based on teachers' feedback and content knowledge** by considering teacher comments and developing new support to use plans
- **Support principals to better manage and lead their schools,** with new accountability mechanisms and help to build stronger learning environments and administration processes.

The second annual secondary grade learning assessment (SGLA) was designed and implemented by Leh wi Lan's monitoring, evidence and research workstream in close collaboration with the Sierra Leone Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education (MBSSE). Any views and opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect those of UK Department for International Development (DFID) or MBSSE. SGLA II is based on data collected in May-June 2018.

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MBSSE (2018). Sierra Leone Secondary Grade Learning Assessment (SGLA) Technical Report.

New England, Freetown: Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education.