
**Journal of Education, Learning, and Management (JELM)**

ISSN: 3079-2541 (Online)

Volume 2 Issue 2, (2025)

https://doi.org/10.69739/jelm.v2i2.1069

https://journals.stecab.com/jelm

Published by
**Stecab Publishing**

*Research Article*

# Assessing The Free Senior High School Policy in The Savelugu Municipality of Northern Ghana: Successes and Challenges

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## About Article

**Article History**

**Submission**: September 07, 2025
**Acceptance** : October 14, 2025
**Publication** : October 25, 2025

**Keywords**

*Challenges, Free Senior High School Policy, Ghana, Students, Successes*

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**ABSTRACT**

This study sought to assess the Free Senior High School (FSHS) Policy in Savelugu Municipality, Northern Ghana in terms of its successes and challenges, using a descriptive survey design. Purposive sampling technique was used to sample fifty-nine (59) Senior High School teachers out of a population of three hundred (300). Data were gathered by the use of a self-made questionnaire. Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyse the data. These included means, standard deviation, and Principal Component Analysis (PAC). The findings of the study highlighted both successes and challenges of the policy. The main success was improvement in enrolment and access to secondary education through cost absorption by the government. However, challenges included overcrowding in the classroom, inadequate teaching and learning materials, and delays in funds distributed from the government. The study concludes that while some success was achieved with equal opportunity for widening access, issues such as infrastructure and distribution of resources are critical. In this regard, the study recommends stakeholders, i.e., NGOs in education, donor partners, community members, parent-teacher associations, and alumni of the schools contributing to support the government in the areas of infrastructure, timely distribution of resources by the central government and other equally relevant educational stakeholders. The study gives specific insights into how Ghana's Free SHS program works in rural areas, outlining significant success factors and shortcomings. By identifying areas for improvement, the policy accords with liberal ideas and contributing to policy reform and Sustainable Development Goal 4.

**Citation Style**:

Alagbela, A. A., & Denteh, K. F. (2025). Assessing The Free Senior High School Policy in The Savelugu Municipality of Northern Ghana: Successes and Challenges. *Journal of Education, Learning, and Management, 2*(2), 304-315. https://doi.org/10.69739/jelm.v2i2.1069

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The execution of Free Senior High School (SHS) policies has been a prominent educational agenda in a number of countries globally, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa. Free SHS policies seek to improve access to secondary education by lowering or eliminating financial barriers that students and families must overcome (Ansah *et al.*, 2020). For example, the Free Senior High School Policy (FSHSP) tends to produce an increase in enrolment because additional students with lower socioeconomic status can gain access to secondary education (Bahufite *et al.*, 2023).

For most people and most governments, the provision of education is a major step towards empowering the citizenry to contribute towards the improvement of their respective communities and daily lives. According to Asumadu (2019), through education, economic hardships can be lessened, poverty can be drastically reduced if not eliminated. Children's nutrition can be improved, peoples' incomes can be increased and the status of the underprivileged in society could eventually diminish.

It is acknowledged that free education policies such as the FSHS policy have a great potential to build the human capital requirement of countries and propel them to prosperity. However, implementing such policies always comes with huge opportunity costs and must be justified (UNESCO, 2020). Evaluating the impacts of free education policies constitutes an important basis for justification and continued investment of national resources into them. In this light, the impact of free education policies, which have been implemented across Africa, on various aspects of education has been extensively studied (Lilian *et al.*, 2020; Mashala, 2019). Most of these studies have reported that these policies in many instances have not improved students' achievement and have led to a decline in parental involvement in school matters (Minja, 2021).

Since the implementation of the progressively free senior high school policy and the free senior high school (FSHS) policy in Ghana, several studies have been conducted to analyze their impacts on senior high school education (Amponsah & Stonier,2021; Abdul-Rahaman *et al.*, 2018; Dwomoh *et al.*,2022). But this study attempts to situate the implementation of the free senior high school policy within the contexts of senior high schools in the Savelugu municipality to ascertain the benefits or otherwise of this policy intervention.

### 1.1. Statement of the problem

The implementation of Free Senior High School (SHS) has been an innovative initiative adopted by many countries to improve educational access and eliminate financial barriers for students. A key feature of evaluating Free SHS is its impact on students' performance (Agyman & Nkum 2015). Free SHS policies aim to achieve equity in education in terms of eliminating disparities and ensuring all students are given equitably a chance to gain secondary education (Ella *et al.*, 2015).

The most significant of these is evidently the national rollout of the Free Senior High School (FSHS) programme in 2017. The FSHS policy was established to provide senior high school education for more students and to afford diverse groups access to educational resources. The government addressed several issues. Some include costs, textbooks, quality teachers, and quality infrastructure so as to enhance quality. Reports have shown a national increase in student enrolment, a drop in dropout rates, and enhanced access to secondary education (Ansah *et al.*, 2020). According to the research by Ansah *et al.* the implementation of the policy has resulted in several unintended problems, such as increased student-to-teacher and school ratios, ageing school facilities, exhausted budget deficits, etc. So given the findings above, it is important to understand how the policy has affected senior high school education with a focus on its successes and challenges in sub-local regions (like geographic enclaves) in the country. Hence, this case study only focuses on the senior high schools in the Savelugu municipality in northern Ghana.

### 1.2. Research questions

The current study aimed at addressing the following research questions.

i. What are the successes chalked by the implementation of the free SHS Policy in the study area?

ii. What are the challenges that have bedevilled the implementation of the free SHS policy in the study area?

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. Benefits of the free senior high school policy (FSHSP)

Around the world, various nations have instituted free education policies for increasing access and equity in education. These policies are intended to alleviate cost barriers, allowing more children to attend school regardless of socio-economic status. These include countries such as Tanzania, Kenya, South Africa, and Indonesia. Indonesia's free education policy has seen positive results around access and equity and the quality of education (Romlah *et al.*, 2023).

Finland has a free senior secondary school policy which has many advantages and is important to the country's high standards of education and equitable education. In Finland, students from various socio-economic statuses are able to access post-secondary education without financial barriers. This complements Finland's philosophy of education which prioritises equity, flexibility, and public education. The country has a graduation rate of 95%, (Papp, 2018). In contrast the Kenya's policy is based on capitation funding to 18,000 schools and specifically supports educational materials and repairs to facilities resulting in increased enrolment and access (Wambugu, 2018). Similarly, free education policies have also been implemented in South Africa for lower primary and lower secondary education (CREATE, 2008). The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa protects the right to basic education (Arendse, 2011). Gradual inception of free education began with no-fee schools emerging in 2007, aimed at addressing the financial burden for economically deprived families and improving access to education.

Since its inception in 2017, Ghana's Free Senior High School Policy (FSHSP) has been effective in achieving remarkable improvements in access to education, especially for economically deprived households. The policy, which was designed to eliminate the cost barriers to secondary education, has demonstrated a massive impact on enrolment, including a rise of over 90,000 additional students recorded soon after

FSHSP was implemented (Animah, 2018; Danso *et al.*, 2020).

Increased access has particularly been transformational in rural and deprived areas, allowing students from the poorest households to have access without having to pay tuition fees, feeding fees, or boarding fees (Kwegyiriba & Mensah, 2021). Schools were able to realise improvements in functioning and service delivery due to teacher intervention allowances, teacher and student teaching and learning materials (TLMs), and support of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) (Gey *et al.*, 2023).

Empirical studies indicate that academic outcomes such as mathematics and English had improved, leaving marks of gains across the national core subjects of the required curriculum (MoE Deputy PRO, 2022). Also, while requiring additional infrastructure, the dual-track model was considered a success in terms of opening access and including relevant subjects along with entrepreneurship education, in support of Ghana's economic development agenda (Ratten & Jones, 2020).

Another key factor attributed to success was access to quality teachers and a low student-teacher ratio in some schools, which contributed to some engagement and improved student outcomes (Lee in Yakubovich, 2015; Bizimana & Orodho, 2014). The National Schools Inspectorate Authority (NaSIA) also provided critical oversight through quality assurance and monitoring and a framework to achieve accountability and standards in education (Abakah *et al.*, 2022).

In addition, FSHSP provided teachers with professional development opportunities, which improved delivery of instruction. The goal of the programme is to arm teachers with up-to-date pedagogical skills and techniques that allow for provision of inclusive education and improved student performance. This aligns with the Sustainable Development Goals for Quality Education (SDG 4) agenda: inclusive and equitable quality education.

### 2.2. Challenges of the free senior high school policy (FSHSP)

While there have been some remarkable successes, the FSHSP has faced many implementation difficulties that jeopardise its long-term viability. A major issue is the inadequate infrastructure to support the spike in enrolment. Many schools are struggling with crowded classrooms, which overload their facilities and inflate their student-teacher ratios, which both hurt the learning experience (Chanimbe & Prah, 2020; Duah *et al.*, 2023).

The other major challenge is the inconsistent and insufficient supply of teaching and learning materials, including textbooks, science laboratory equipment, and ICT resources. This limits students' potential to actively and effectively learn while in class, particularly in STEM fields (Mabena *et al.*, 2021; Mbarute & Ntivuguruzwa, 2022).

Funding issues have hindered policy implementation. Reports of late or lack of funding, in particular, have caused procurement and implementation issues with school feeding and caused schools to depend heavily on parents for additional provisions, which undermines the policy's equity objectives (Adu-Gyamfi *et al.*, 2020; Dwomoh *et al.*, 2022). Funding issues are typical in global mass access trends, where massive access reforms are undermined by the quality of educational offerings.

Moreover, teacher workload and morale have emerged as significant issues. The influx of students without a corresponding increase in teaching staff has led to burnout, reduced teacher engagement, and a decline in personalized instruction (Ackotia, 2016; Ayebale *et al.*, 2020). Further, professional development support is uneven and often not aligned with the challenges they face on the ground.

Dual-track system, which although beneficial in access, has resulted in academic calendar inconsistencies. This fragmentation disrupts school planning, impedes curriculum coverage, and complicates national exam preparation (Duah *et al.*, 2023). The policy also suffers from inequitable resource allocation, where urban and elite schools are often better resourced than rural and newly established ones. This disparity perpetuates educational inequality and hinders national cohesion in education quality (Deng, 2024; Zhu, 2024).

To address these issues as enumerated above, scholars recommend a comprehensive policy review, adoption of cost-sharing models, and strategic infrastructure investment to align access with quality (Liu *et al.*, 2023). Stakeholder collaboration, including local government units, parent-teacher associations, and development partners, is seen as essential in closing resource gaps and improving program ownership.

### 2.3. Theoretical framework

#### 2.3.1. The Classical Liberal Theory

The Classical Liberal Theory, primarily advocated by philosophers such as John Locke (1632-1704), Adam Smith (1723-1790), and John Stuart Mill (1806 – 1873), emphasizes individual liberty, free markets, and limited government intervention. This ideology emerged in the 17th and 18th centuries and became prominent in the 19th century, asserting that individual actions drive societal progress (Martin, 2024; Freeman, 2022). It advocates for fundamental rights, equality of opportunity, and minimal state interference in economic affairs, with the government focusing only on essential services and the common good. While it promotes personal freedom and meritocracy, critics argue that it overlooks social justice and economic inequality, prompting later liberal movements to call for greater government involvement.

The aforementioned theory anchors this study by way of its theoretical framework. Sherman and Wood as cited by Njeru and Orodho (2003), stated that the classical liberal concept of equal opportunities emphasizes the necessity of providing every learner with equal opportunity in the educational system. The theory argues that every learner has some inherent abilities and potential for greater achievement in life but is limited and constrained by the environment in which learners find themselves. According to Olang'o *et al.*, (2021), learners' socioeconomic status, one of the key factors that affect their ability to realize the full potential in education, is a product of the environment, and nature and nurture have a strong bearing on learners' destinies. Socioeconomic factors affect the quality and accessibility of education as well as the capacity of education to enhance the lives of learners. These elements include household income level of learners, educational attainment of parents, and the sufficiency of teaching and

learning resources (Olang'o *et al.*, 2021).

To make education accessible to all learners and provide them with equal opportunities to achieve their learning goals, this theory maintains that education systems must be designed and planned in a manner that removes sociocultural, socioeconomic and ecological or environmental challenges and barriers of any form that prevent learners from realizing their full potentials (Tuffour *et al.*, 2021). Through policy, the elimination of socioeconomic barriers to learners' access to education has been established. Such social and economic policies of governments and state agencies to enhance access, infrastructure, and supply of teaching and learning resources are important in establishing the same opportunity for learners from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Over the past four decades, this theory has been widely applied in both developed and developing countries in rolling out policies that are aimed at making education accessible to all learners at all levels. In countries such as the United States of America, the government and the state's interventions in education in the form of scholarships, grants, and bursaries have helped provide learners from poor economic and ethnic minority backgrounds equal opportunities to access quality education and improve their living standards. There was a time when all children of school age in England received free elementary education.

Many policy interventions have been implemented by successive governments in developing countries, especially in Africa, where the majority of people live below the poverty line, to provide free, high-quality education to children from low-income families. For instance, in Kenya, a free primary school education grant was introduced to increase access to public primary schools (Earle *et al.*, 2018). The goal of Ghana's education policy interventions, which include the capitation grant, the school feeding program, and free universal basic education, are to eliminate all socioeconomic barriers and provide equal access to high-quality basic education for all children, regardless of background.

The free senior high school policy (FSHS) introduced in 2017 in Ghana sits well within the classical liberal theory of equal opportunities because it is anchored on the removal of cost barriers, expansion of infrastructure, improvement in quality and equity, and development of employable skills. Under this policy, the government of Ghana provides free tuition to all students in public senior high schools, free textbooks, free meals, free boarding and utilities, and has removed all other forms of fees that hitherto served as major obstacles for many young Ghanaian children in accessing senior high school education.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

### 3.1. Research design

The study adopted a descriptive survey design. This research design was employed because it is principally concerned with answering the question of a scientific study and studying phenomena as they exist in their original and or natural settings (Kothari, 2017). Moreover, the design allows for accurate and detailed description of the variables of the study. With the descriptive survey design, data of various kinds can be gathered. This has the great benefit of allowing the researcher to gather quantitative data which constitute quantitative methods research the study adopted. When the goal of the study is to identify traits, trends, and categories, descriptive research design is a suitable option. The design enabled the accurate descriptive analysis of variables which made it possible to identify the successes and challenges of free senior high education policy in Savelugu municipality, Ghana.

### 3.2. Study site

This study was conducted in the Savelugu Municipality. Before the creation of the Nanton District on March 15, 2017, the Savelugu Municipal Assembly was known as the Savelugu-Nanton Municipal Assembly. In 1988, it was separated from the Western Dagomba District by PNDC Law 207. Under L.I. 2071, the Assembly was granted municipal status in March 2012. The Municipality is situated in Ghana's Northern Region's northern section. Its borders are shared by the districts of Karaga and Nanton to the east, Kumbungu District to the west, Sagnerigu District Assembly to the south, and West Mamprusi District to the north. There are roughly 81 settlements in the municipality, with many of them centred in the southern region. Additionally, the Municipality's total land area is roughly 2022.6 square kilometres. The Municipality has two Senior High Schools with a total estimated teacher population of three hundred. Below is Figure 1, a map of the municipality showing its boundaries.


**Figure 1.** Map of the savelugu municipality

### 3.3. Population

The Municipality has two Senior High Schools that include Savelugu Senior High School and Pong Tamale Senior High School with a total estimated teacher population of three hundred (300). The breakdown of the target population is seen in Table 1 below.

**Table 1.** Population of the study

| School | Total Population of Teachers |
|---|---|
| Savelugu Senior High School | 158 |
| Pong-Tamale Senior High School | 142 |
| Total | 300 |

*Source: Field data, 2024*

### 3.4. Sampling technique and size

The sampling technique employed was purposive Sampling. This non-random method was chosen deliberately to select respondents based on specific characteristics, qualities, or experiences directly relevant to the research objectives. The rationale for using this approach was to gain in-depth insights from individuals possessing particular knowledge or experience pertinent to the study. This allowed for strategic recruitment of information-rich cases capable of providing detailed data.

The sample size for the study was fifty- nine (59) respondents. This said number was informed by the scope and complexity of the research questions, the diversity within the target group, the accessibility of individuals meeting the selection criteria, and the available resources for data collection and analysis.

### 3.5. Data collection instrument

The study utilized a self -constructed five-point likert scale questionnaire designed in a continuum ranging from Strongly Disagree (1), Disagree (2), Neutral (3), Agree (4) to Strongly Agree (5) administered to the fifty-nine (59) teachers sampled for the study. A questionnaire was utilized because it makes it easy and simple to gather data. Also, it ensures a high level of confidentiality of the data gathered. Additionally, data collected from the same is easy and simple to analyze.

### 3.6. Validity and Reliability of the instrument

To ensure content validity, the researchers reviewed the instrument's items against relevant literature, theoretical frameworks, and the specific objectives of the study. Furthermore, we sought expert opinions from experienced researchers and academics in the field to evaluate the clarity, relevance, and comprehensiveness of the instrument's content. Their feedback helped in refining the items to ensure they accurately reflected the intended purpose.

In addition, we addressed construct validity. In doing this, we examined the correlation between the scores on the instrument and scores on other established instruments measuring similar constructs. A strong positive correlation will usually provide evidence that the instrument is indeed measuring a related concept (Abd Gani *et al.*, 2020).

The reliability of the instrument was determined using Cronbach's Alpha, a measure of internal consistency. This method requires only a single administration of the instrument and provides a quantitative estimate of the consistency of the scale (Kepoglu & Bayansalduz, 2021). A high-reliability coefficient, such as r = 0.98, indicates that the instrument is substantially free of measurement errors. Coefficients above 0.8 are considered very good, while those above 0.7 are deemed satisfactory (Kothari, 2017; Zohrabi, 2013).

To assess reliability of the instrument, a pilot study was conducted in the Kumbungu District because of the similar circumstances that the two places share such as school infrastructure and the socio economic backgrounds of the students. Data gathered were analyzed to compute the reliability coefficient which stood at 0.72. Generally, this result confirmed that the items in the instrument were reliable and suitable for use in the study.

### 3.7. Data collection procedure

Before data collection commenced, the researchers obtained permission from the Ghana Education Service which has supervisory authority of all pre-tertiary institutions in the country, through the headmasters of the schools, to carry out the study. The questionnaires were personally distributed to the teachers. The duration for the exercise lasted a week after which the same were retrieved. Issues of ethical considerations were strictly adhered to throughout the process. Informed consent was thus obtained from the respondents, ensuring their anonymity and confidentiality.

### 3.8. Data analysis

The Statistical Package for Social Sciences software (SPSS) was used to analyse the data. Means, standard deviation, and variance were determined, and results were presented in graphs, tables, and charts. To further determine the critical success factors and challenges of the program, Principal Component Analysis (PCA) was used to ascertain the most significant factors.

## 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1. Results

#### 4.1.1. Research question one. What are the successes chalked by the Free SHS Policy?

Responses to the above research question were obtained from the questionnaire. These responses have been presented in Table 2 as seen below.

**Table 2.** Successes of the Free SHS Policy

| Successes | N | Mean | Std. Dev |
|---|---|---|---|
| Adequate monitoring, measurement, support, and recognition | 59 | 3.44 | 1.56 |
| Infrastructure utilization | 59 | 3.66 | 1.03 |
| Use of automatic promotion and double-shifting | 59 | 4.19 | 0.71 |
| Motivating and training qualified teachers | 59 | 4.22 | 0.72 |
| Adoption of cost-effectiveness measures | 59 | 4.34 | 0.63 |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| High allocation of government budget to secondary education | 59 | 4.47 | 0.54 |
| Primary responsibility for education by the state | 59 | 4.53 | 0.50 |
| Implementation of school feeding programs | 59 | 4.56 | 0.53 |
| Mean of Means | | 4.18 | 0.78 |

*Source: Field data, 2024*

In reference to the table 2, implementation of school feeding programmes (Mean = 4.56, SD = 0.53) and the state assuming primary responsibility for education (Mean = 4.53, SD = 0.50) were rated most successful. Both had low SDs (closer to zero), indicating strong agreement among respondents thus suggesting homogeneity of responses of the respondents Similarly, the high allocation of government budget (Mean = 4.47, SD = 0.54) and cost-effectiveness measures (Mean = 4.34, SD = 0.63) were widely perceived as successes, again with relatively low SDs showing consistent responses.

Motivating and training qualified teachers (Mean = 4.22, SD = 0.72) and use of automatic promotion and double-shifting (Mean = 4.19, SD = 0.71) also reflect positive outcomes, with moderate agreement. Infrastructure utilization (Mean = 3.66, SD = 1.03) had a slightly higher SD, indicating some variation in opinions. The most diverse responses were for adequate monitoring, measurement, support, and recognition (Mean = 3.44, SD = 1.56). The standard deviation is above 1 which indicates that responses are relatively dispersed from the mean thus showing heterogeneity of views on adequate monitoring, measurement, support, and recognition. While still considered a success (being above the criterion mean of 3.0), the high SD suggests significant variability in respondent's responses. Overall, the average rating across all indicators (Mean of Means = 4.18, SD = 0.78) shows strong support for the policy's successes. Responses appear consistent with one another to some extent.

To further determine the critical success factors of the program, Principal Component Analysis (PCA) was also used to determine the most significant factors. This analysis was aimed at understanding how these factors contribute to the overall variance in the success of the policy. Bartleett's test of sphericity was found to be significant (X^2=70.440,df = 28,p= 0.00). This shows that the correlation of the factors was significantly greater than zero as shown in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Bartleett's test of sphericity

| **KMO and Bartlett's Test** | | |
|---|---|---|
| Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy | | 0.531 |
| Bartlett's Test of Sphericity | Approx. Chi-Square | 70.440 |
| | Df | 28 |
| | Sig. | 0.000 |

The table 4 as seen below presents the results of a Principal Component Analysis (PCA) on the success factors of the Free Senior High School (FSHS) policy. This analysis is aimed at understanding how these factors contribute to the overall variance in the success of the policy.

**Table 4.** Principal component factor analysis of the success chalked by free SHS policy

| **Total Variance Explained** | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Component** | **Initial Eigenvalues** | | | **Extraction sums of squared loadings** | | |
| | **Total** | **% of Variance** | **Cumulative %** | **Total** | **% of Variance** | **Cumulative %** |
| High allocation of government budget to secondary education | 2.162 | 27.030 | 27.030 | 2.162 | 27.030 | 27.030 |
| Implementation of school feeding programs | 1.492 | 18.646 | 45.676 | 1.492 | 18.646 | 45.676 |
| Use of automatic promotion and double-shifting | 1.229 | 15.369 | 61.044 | 1.229 | 15.369 | 61.044 |
| Primary responsibility for education by the state | 1.017 | 12.707 | 73.751 | 1.017 | 12.707 | 73.751 |
| Adoption of cost-effectiveness measures | .643 | 8.038 | 81.788 | | | |
| Motivating and training qualified teachers | .610 | 7.622 | 89.410 | | | |
| Utilizing abounded infrastructure | .499 | 6.239 | 95.649 | | | |
| Adequate monitoring, measurement, support, and recognition | .348 | 4.351 | 100.00 | | | |

From the table 4, the first eigenvalues, the percentage of variance described by each component, and the cumulative percentage of variance explained are all summarized. For instance, large government budgetary allotment to secondary education had an Initial Eigenvalue of 2.162 and a percentage Variance of 27.030%. This component explains 27.03% of the total variance,

suggesting it is a significant factor in the success of the FSHS policy. A high budget allocation to secondary education was crucial as it likely enhanced resource availability and overall education quality. Implementation of school feeding programs recorded an Initial Eigenvalue of 1.492 and a percentage Variance of 18.646%. This factor accounts for an additional 18.646% of the variance, bringing the cumulative variance explained to 45.676%. School feeding programs were essential as they can improve student attendance and concentration, contributing significantly to the policy's success.

The third item (use of automatic promotion and double-shifting) with an Initial Eigenvalue of 1.229 added 15.369% to the explained variance, indicating that strategies like automatic promotion and double-shifting were important in managing student flow and optimizing resource use, cumulatively explaining 61.044% of the variance. The fourth item on the table (the state's primary duty for education) accounted for an Initial Eigenvalues of 1.017 and contributed 12.707% to the variance, bringing the total explained variance to 73.751%. Adoption of cost-effectiveness measures with Initial Eigenvalues = 0.643 explains a smaller portion (8.038%) of the variance, inspiring and preparing competent educators with an Initial Eigenvalues of 0.610 added 7.622% to the variance, emphasizing the importance of teacher motivation and training in enhancing educational outcomes, Infrastructure utilizing was 7th with an Initial Eigenvalues of 0.499 with 6.239% of the variance explained, utilizing existing infrastructure efficiently was also a relevant factor, pushing the cumulative variance to 95.649% whiles Adequate monitoring, measurement, support, and recognition had an Initial Eigenvalues of 0.348 and explains the remaining 4.351% of the variance, highlighting the role of continuous monitoring and support in ensuring the policy's success.

The PCA results indicate that the first four components (factors) explain the majority of the variance (73.751%) in the success of the FSHS policy. These components were high allocation of government budget, implementation of school feeding programs, use of automatic promotion and double-shifting, and the state's primary obligation for education. The remaining factors, while still important, contribute less significantly to the overall variance as shown in Figure 2.

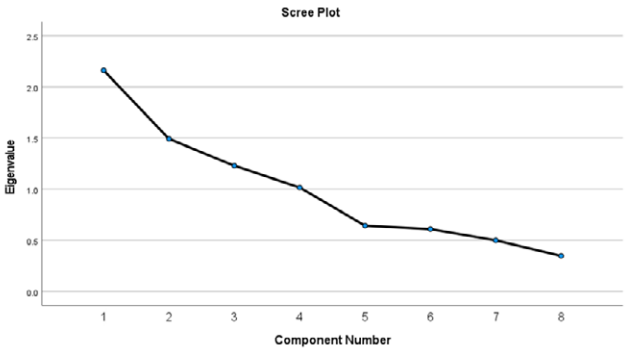


**Figure 2.** Scree Plot of PCA of Success chalked by Free SHS Policy

### 1.1.2. Research Question Two. What are the challenges facing the free SHS policy?

This question requested respondents to state the challenges of the FSHS policy in the study area. To that extent, respondents were required to rate the severity of the variables into not severe, less severe, neutral, severe, and very severe. Using a five-point Likert scale questionnaire, a Criterion Mean of 3.0 was used for the decision where a mean ≥3.0 indicated agreement and a mean <3.0 indicated disagreement.

**Table 5.** Challenges of the Free Senior High School (FSHS)

| Variables | N | Mean | Std. Dev |
|---|---|---|---|
| Inadequate teaching space and materials, infrastructure deficits | 59 | 4.17 | 0.81 |
| Inadequate and late disbursement of government funds | 59 | 3.98 | 0.78 |
| Inadequate Teaching and Learning Materials | 59 | 4.29 | 0.79 |
| High teacher-student ratio | 59 | 4.14 | 0.84 |
| Inadequate of Appropriate Class Size | 59 | 4.41 | 0.77 |
| Inadequate Favourable School Environment | 59 | 4.41 | 0.77 |
| Inadequate teacher capacity and training | 59 | 3.66 | 1.03 |
| Trade-offs in expanding access and improvising quality | 59 | 4.56 | 0.53 |

*Source: Field data, 2024*

From the table, the challenge of trade-offs in expanding access at the expense of quality (Mean = 4.56, SD = 0.53) was rated the very severe with strong agreement among respondents. The low SD shows strong consensus indicating homogeneity of responses by respondents. Similarly, challenges related to school environment (Mean = 4.41, SD = 0.77) and class size (Mean = 4.41, SD = 0.77) received high ratings, indicating that large classes and unfavourable environments are major concerns. Inadequate teaching and learning materials (Mean = 4.29, SD = 0.79) and infrastructure deficits (Mean = 4.17, SD = 0.81) were also strongly acknowledged, though the slightly higher SDs show mild variation in opinions. The high teacher-student ratio (Mean = 4.14, SD = 0.84) was similarly regarded as a serious issue. The most diverse responses were observed in inadequate teacher capacity and training (Mean = 3.66, SD = 1.03), reflecting varying experiences across schools and perhaps uneven access to professional development. The highest SD (1.03 >1) shows significant variability in responses. Inadequate and late disbursement of funds (Mean = 3.98, SD = 0.78) also emerged as a concern, though its lower mean suggests slightly less urgency compared to other challenges.

The PCA helped to identify the underlying factors contributing to the failure of the FSHS policy by summarizing the original variables into principal components. The "Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings" columns confirm that the variance explained by each component remains the same after extraction, focusing on the significant components (those with eigenvalues > 1).

The first component (Inadequate teaching space and materials, infrastructure deficits) accounts for 38.849% of the total variance.

**Table 6.** Principal Component Factor Analysis of Challenge Facing the Free SHS

| Total Variance Explained | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Component** | **Initial Eigenvalues** | | | **Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings** | | |
| | **Total** | **% of Variance** | **Cumulative %** | **Total** | **% of Variance** | **Cumulative %** |
| Inadequate teaching space and materials, infrastructure deficits | 3.108 | 38.849 | 38.849 | 3.108 | 38.849 | 38.849 |
| Inadequate and late disbursement of government fund | 1.389 | 17.367 | 56.216 | 1.389 | 17.367 | 56.216 |
| Inadequate Teaching and Learning Materials | .862 | 10.781 | 66.997 | | | |
| High Teacher-student ratio | .816 | 10.200 | 77.197 | | | |
| Inadequate or Appropriate Class Size | .742 | 9.273 | 86.470 | | | |
| Inadequate favourable School Environment | .693 | 8.658 | 95.128 | | | |
| Inadequate teacher Capacity and training | .390 | 4.872 | 100.000 | | | |
| Trade-offs in expanding access and improvising quality | 1.110E-16 | 1.388E-15 | 100.000 | | | |

This indicates that a significant portion of the data's variability can be explained by this component alone. The second component (Inadequate and late disbursement of government funds) explains an additional 17.367% of the variance, bringing the cumulative variance explained to 56.216%. This suggests that these two components together capture more than half of the total variance in the data.

The PCA reveals that the first two principal components together capture over 56% of the variance in the data, indicating that these components were key in understanding the primary factors contributing to the failure of the FSHS policy. These components likely represent broad and specific resource inadequacies, respectively. This is pictorially shown in Figure 3.

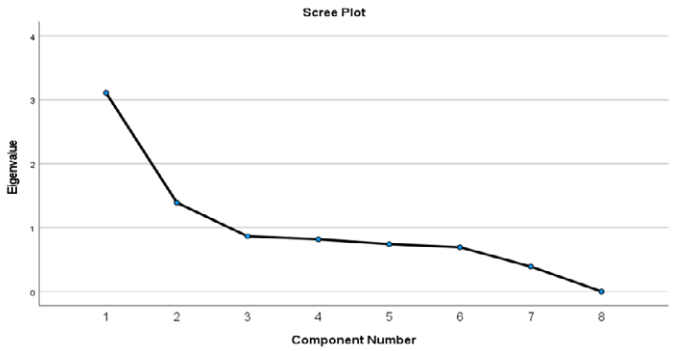


**Figure 3.** Scree Plot of PCA of Challenges Facing the Free SHS

### 4.2. Discussion

The implications of this research are indeed similar to the classical liberal theory of equal opportunities, which stresses the importance of removing socioeconomic barriers to provide equitable education access. The implications also overlap with the wider literature on Ghana's Free Senior High School (FSHS) policy in terms of successes and ongoing challenges. The study connects its implications for the theoretical lens and previous literature, ultimately providing a fuller scope of examination of the policy implementation of FSHS and its successes and failures.

The study identified a number of accomplishments of the FSHS policy, all of which fall under the classical liberal theory of equal opportunities. Relatively, it is worth noting that overall mean scores were high on all the success factors (mean of means = 4.18), indicating the policy was very successful in mitigating educational socioeconomic barriers. For example, the high allocation of the government budget to secondary education (mean = 4.47) is in line with the theory and attempts to ensure equal opportunities via the state. The government taking responsibility to pay for secondary education was a vital step towards removing the financial hardship of low-income families, as opined by Animah (2018) and Danso *et al.* (2020). Overall, the finding is consistent with the literature that finds investment in education as beneficial for educational access and quality (Kwegyiriba & Mensah, 2021).

The next accomplishment was the creation of school feeding programmes (mean = 4.56), which resulted in a major improvement in attendance and retention of students, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds. This is consistent with classical liberal theory's objective of cultivating learner potential by removing environmental and socio-economic barriers (Olang'o *et al.*, 2021). The achievement of this initiative reflects global approaches, such as free primary education in Kenya that involved feeding programmes to increase enrolment (Earle *et al.*, 2018).

The implementation of automatic promotion and double-shifting (mean = 4.19) is an innovative approach to managing increased enrolments. While double-shifting has been critiqued as burdensome on facilities, it has, nonetheless, increased access, which is a fundamental aspect of classical liberal theory. This is consistent with Ratten and Jones (2020), which who noted this common practice is important in balancing access and constrained resources. This information corroborated the

concerns found in the literature and reports in similar related papers (e.g., Ankomah *et al.*, 2023; UNESCO, 2022) about resource constraints and quality issues with the Free SHS policy. Emphasising motivated and trained qualified teachers (mean = 4.22) again provides evidence of the classical liberal theory position. The role of qualified teachers to improve student achievement has been reported in the literature (Bizimana & Orodho, 2014), and this finding adds to classical liberal theory's emphasis on learner potential. Trained and motivated teachers are critical to quality teaching, and their role cannot be minimized. Additionally, the result that the state is chiefly responsible for education (mean = 4.53) enhances classical liberal theory's claim that the government must take primary responsibility for equal access to educational opportunity. Government funding and implementing the FSHS policy is a major contributor to the socioeconomic gap, as intimated by Tuffour *et al.* (2021).

Despite these successes, the sustainability and implementation of the FSHS policy are in deep jeopardy. The challenges also speak to the conflict of expansion of access versus the quality of educational opportunity on the continuum. This contention continues throughout the literature. For example, the teaching space and materials shortages and infrastructure deficiencies (mean = 4.17) were a major limitation to the policy. The finding correlates to findings of Dwomoh *et al.* (2022) and Adu-Gyamfi *et al.* (2020); effectively, overcrowded classrooms and scarce resources were the priorities. Whereas the classical liberal theory speaks to alleviating environmental problems, these infrastructure deficiencies become debilitating.

Another significant challenge was inadequate and late disbursement of government funds (mean = 3.98). This inadequate and late payout interferes with the implementation of the policy. This represents the systemic inefficiencies (Duah *et al.*, 2023) and quickly points to the need for timely and adequate funds to sustain any opportunity of gains in the policy. Additionally, the high teacher-student ratio and improper class sizes (mean = 4.14 and 4.14) affect the quality and access to education opportunities. The teacher-student ratio is counter to the goal of the classical liberal theory; it also discourages any potential from the learner. Literature has also indicated the detrimental effect of a disproportionate class on students' outcomes (Mabena *et al.*, 2021). There is excessive moving of students into large classroom sizes, and that alone warrants the need for separate mechanisms for this concern. The worst challenge identified in the study is the trade-offs in expanding access and improving quality (mean = 4.56). This reflects the tension between access and quality (Liu *et al.*, 2023).

A larger SD indicates more variability, which is critical for determining the dependability of data in systematic reviews and meta-analyses (Darling, 2022). Relatively higher SD indicates heterogeneity and responses are a bit dispersed from mean and such SD are usually greater than one and the reverse of the above show that responses are clustered around the mean indicating homogeneity. This can be seen in table 2 and 5.

Finally, the Principal Component Analysis (PCA) results validate the study's findings by identifying the most significant factors contributing to the policy's success and challenges. The first four components high budget allocation, school feeding programs, automatic promotion/double-shifting, and state responsibility—explain 73.751% of the variance, highlighting their critical role in the policy's success. These findings align with the classical liberal theory's emphasis on state intervention and resource allocation to ensure equal opportunities. In contrast, the first two factors relating to challenges (i.e., inadequate infrastructure and delay in disbursement of funds) accounted for 56.216% of variance, which also demonstrates their significance as barriers to the objectives of the policy. These challenges are systemic inefficiencies that need to be worked out to achieve the goals of the theory.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Evidence from this study shows that the FSHS policy has made great strides in achieving its aims of increasing access and equal opportunity for everyone; however, many lingering issues, especially in terms of infrastructure and resource distribution hinder sustainability in future. Sustainability would require ongoing capital investment, dynamic adaptations and flexibility, and a better compromise between access and quality. Adopting these recommendations would allow Ghana to realize its vision of equitable and inclusive education for all.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations have been made;

i. The government should prioritise expanding the budgetary allocation to the Free Senior High Schools (FSHS) policy as well as provide the funds in requested times, as delays in funds are a key hurdle and lead to infrastructure deficits and a lack of appropriate teaching and learning materials. Establishing a transparent, effective, standards-based financial management system will help to sustain the policy.

ii. To help curb the significant infrastructure deficits and overcrowding in classroom layouts, the government should provide funding to build new school facilities and enough teaching and learning materials. Expanding public-private partnerships (PPPs) and partnerships with NGOs in the area of education, while also exploring alumni and donor agencies, will be an effective way of supplementing government efforts. Better use of current infrastructure to accommodate an expanded first-time senior high school population should be attained. Additionally, existing infrastructure should be optimised to accommodate the growing student population.

iii. The research underscores the necessity of qualified and enthusiastic teachers if the goals of the policy are to be met. The government should continue to offer Professional Development (PD) opportunities as well as motivation efforts to raise excitement and keep teachers in the system. PD programmes should train teachers to think differently or use innovative methods to teach students different ways to solve problems in large classrooms with multiple students.

iv. Increasing access to education is a principle of the policy on FSHSs, but this study illustrates that this has been achieved while sacrificing educational quality. As such, the education authority should consider gradual installation and coverage processes to safeguard quality. This may include capping class size, improving monitoring and evaluation, and incorporating

cost sharing to improve government funding. A periodic review of the policy should also provide a mechanism to respond to new challenges and ensure alignment to the policy's objectives.

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