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Hearing on “Improving Access to Quality Public Education in Africa “
U.S. House of Representatives
House Foreign Affairs Committee
The House Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, and Global Human Rights.

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Chair Bass, Ranking Member Smith and other distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to testify at this hearing on “Improving Access to Quality Public Education in Africa”. While I must admit it is always a tough task speaking on behalf of the entire African continent, I do truly believe that the single most important investment any government can make to transform our society is an investment in “Public Education.” And Quality Public Education is the closest thing we have towards a universal silver bullet for solving our planets most intractable challenges now and in the future.

The question you have asked to consider at today’s hearing is how the United States in particular can help facilitate the accessibility of quality pre-primary, primary and secondary education in African countries with moderate to low human development indices and incomes.

A recent report by UNESCO’s Institute for Statistics and the Global Education Monitoring Report shows that while the world has come a long way since the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were adopted in 2015; countries, by their own estimates, will fail to meet critical agreed-on targets for a universally inclusive and equitable quality education, unless of course, we all commit to transforming education, now.

In Sierra Leone, we have made some accelerated progress on that front since H.E President Julius Maada Bio announced a “Free Quality School Education” policy for all children in public schools in 2018. More than 700,000 learners have joined our education system in the last three years, bringing the total to 2.7 million enrolled children. What’s more, in 2021, more students passed the national transition exams in basic and senior secondary education than at any point in our country’s history. And this is all against the backdrop of a global pandemic that forced over 1.6 billion children including yours and ours out of school for significant periods of time between 2020 and 2021.

Today, I would first like to share my view on how we are doing in Sierra Leone, and then to invite the United States to help us and the world accelerate progress towards the SDGs.

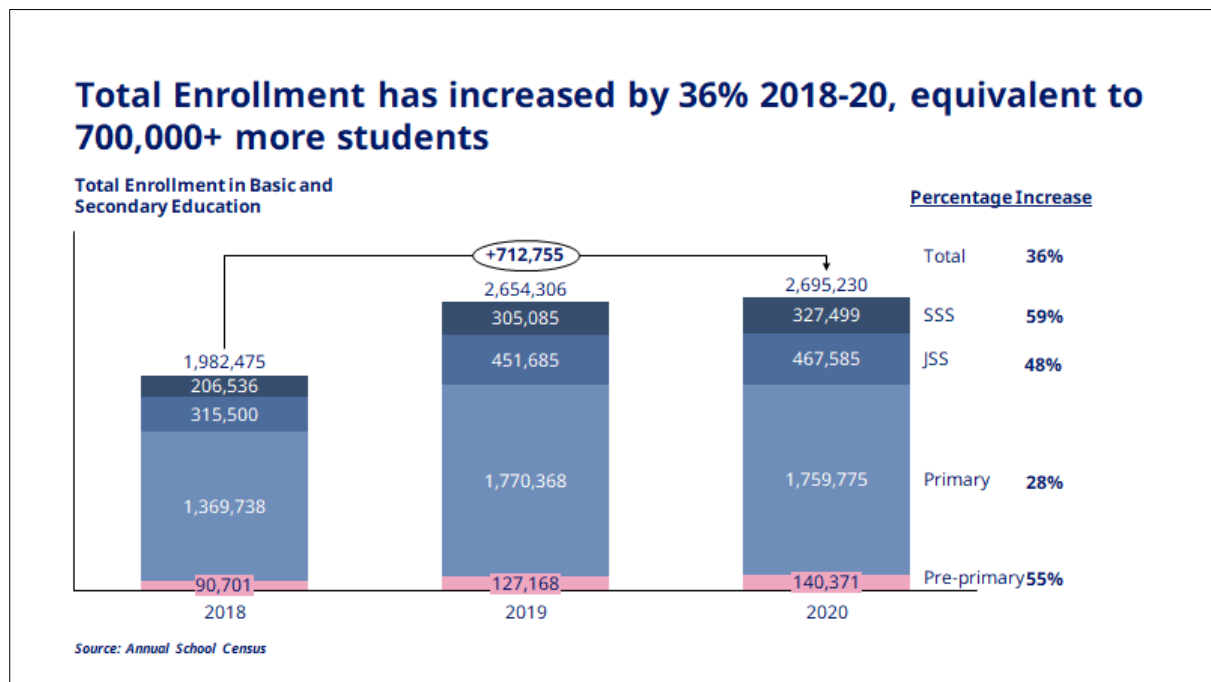
On Ranking Low on Human Development Indices and Incomes – For Now

Firstly, my country – Sierra Leone – certainly falls into the category of scoring low on human development indices. In the 2020 edition of the World Bank’s Human Capital Index, we came in at number 165. Only 8 countries ranked below us. Countries currently ravaged by war and famine are outperforming us. For Sierra Leone, education scores were among our worst performing indicators. I am mentioning this just to note that while we certainly do fall in the category of low human development, we are working very hard to change that. Just last week, we published new

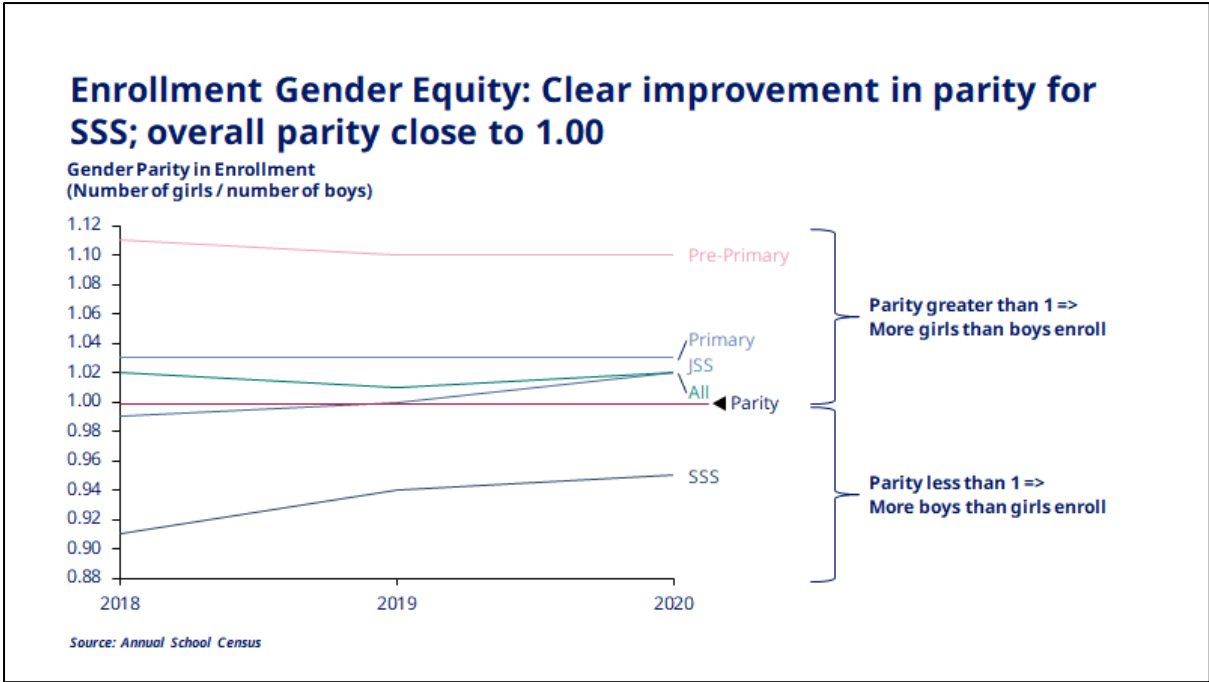
data on the Early Grade Reading Assessment and Early Grade Mathematics Assessment – two indices used for calculating the Human Capital Index and the results show significant improvement since the last study, which was done in 2014.

Expanding Access to Education – Adding 10% of the Population To The School System While Improving Gender Parity

Between 2018 and 2020, we added more than 700,000 new learners to our pre-primary, primary and secondary schools. Data from our Annual School Census show growth in enrollment in pre-Primary education, Primary education (six years of education), Junior Secondary School (three years) and Senior Secondary School (three years).



We have achieved this while accelerating towards overall gender parity in enrollment. In fact, at all levels except for Senior Secondary School, more girls than boys enroll, and even in Senior Secondary School the trend is encouraging as we are moving ever closer to parity.



Ensuring That Access and Quality Go Hand In Hand

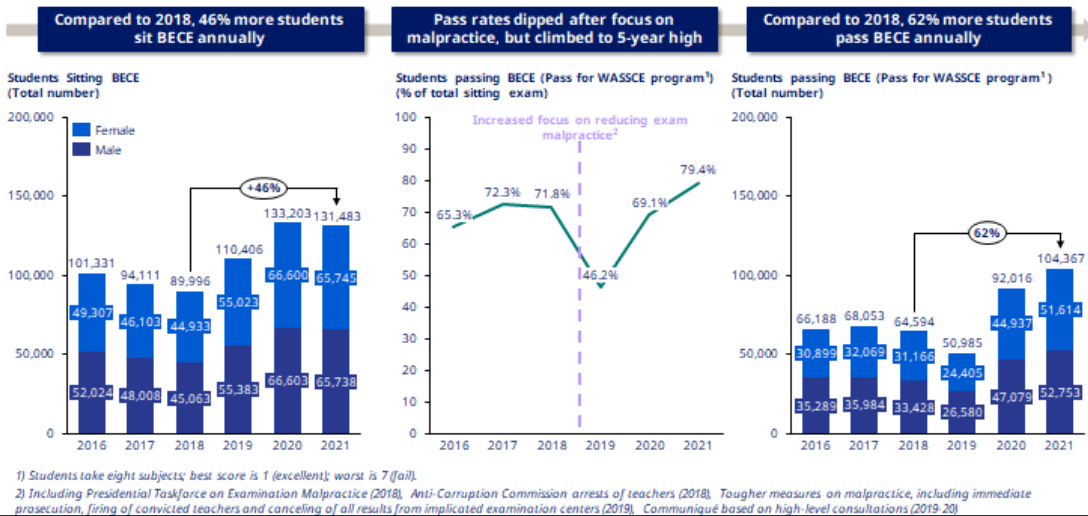
Globally, the world has made great strides in expanding access to education in recent decades. However, learning has too often lagged behind. If we ensure that access and improved learning go hand in hand, it can have an enormously beneficial impact. A research study from 2021 found that if you look at learning and not just access, the gains from education for girls are 3 times higher than from access alone.¹ And access was already a very good start, but we need to improve quality across the board.

In Sierra Leone, we track learning in two principal ways: national transition exams, and specific assessments following an international format like the Early Grade Reading Assessment and Early Grade Mathematics Assessments (EGRA / EGMA) for primary education.

Firstly, we now have more students sitting and passing the national transition exam after Primary School (National Primary School Exam, NPSE) and Junior Secondary School (Basic Education Certificate Examination, BECE) than at any point in our country’s history. For Junior Secondary School we were even able to improve the pass rate from 72% to 79% while adding more than 40,000 students to the examination roster in 2021.

¹ Kaffenberger, M. and Pritchett, L. 2021. Effective Investment in Women’s Futures: Schooling with Learning. *International Journal of Educational Development*. Volume 86, 102464,

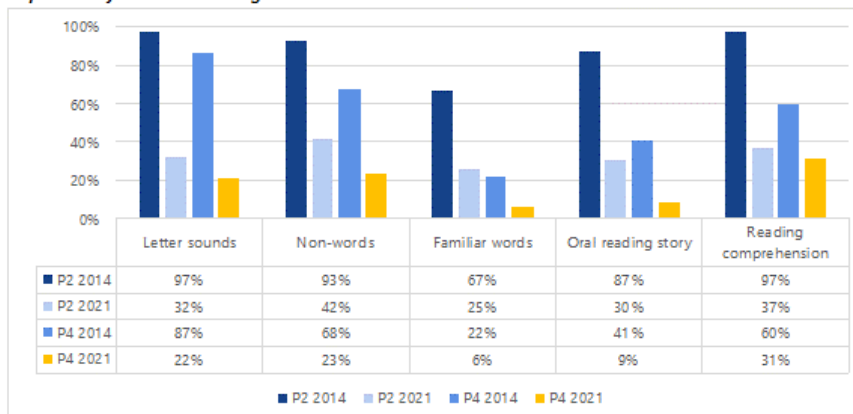
BECE: Since 2018 the number of students passing has increased by 62%, or 39,772 students



Secondly, we have made significant strides on our EGRA/EGMA results. One way to compare performance over time is to look at zero scores – the percentage of students who score zero on a given reading or mathematics task. I am proud to say that across nearly all tasks, we have cut the percentage of zero scores in half or better in seven years. Our learners are now getting the building blocks that will allow them to benefit from the entire educational system and Sierra Leone is faring better in comparison to other countries in our economic bracket. This is no coincidence as we for the first time added a minimum of one year pre-primary education to our school system in 2018.

EGRA scores: Significant performance improvement from 2014 to 2021 even if much work remains (1/2)

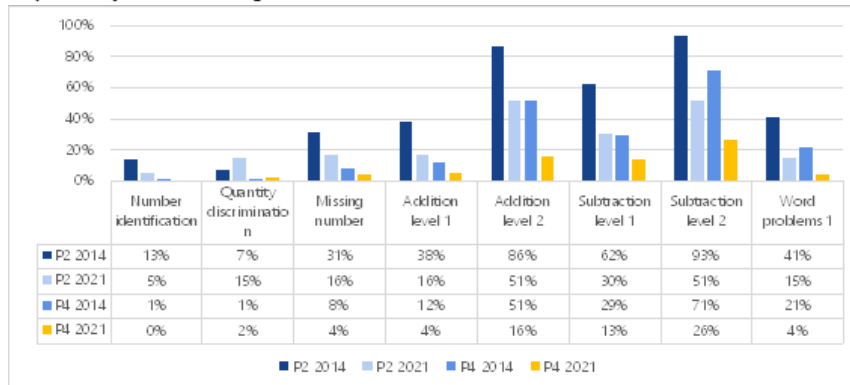
Proportion of Learners Scoring Zero on EGRA Subtasks in 2014 and 2021



Source: Montrose

EGMA scores: Significant performance improvement from 2014 even if much work remains (2/2)

Proportion of Learners Scoring Zero on EGMA Subtasks in 2014 and 2021



Source: Montrose

How Sierra Leone Got There

You may ask yourselves, well, how is it that Sierra Leone is progressing like this? In a word, “investment”- we are investing heavily in public education. The current government led by the Sierra Leone’s People Party (SLPP) won the 2018 election on a platform of Free Quality School Education for all. His Excellency the President, Dr. Julius Maada Bio’s agenda promise was implemented in government and government-assisted schools through the abolition of school fees and the abolition of examination fees for all students including those in private schools. In addition, we invested in new teaching and learning materials and school feeding programs. Moreover, we have hired thousands of additional teachers and increased their salaries by 30%. The President has instituted the Presidential Best Teacher Awards to recognize and celebrate the contributions of teachers to our society and doubled down on professional development. We have a new set of curricula relevant for the 21st century at all school levels.

This is not “free” of course. We are spending 22% of our national budget on education, making human capital development the core focus of the Sierra Leonean government’s agenda. We have been forced to make some hard choices to protect the education budget, but we are confident that our country will reap the rewards for decades to come. In fact, Sierra Leone is one of only a few countries to expand our education budget in the year of COVID-19.

In addition, we have clamped down on examination malpractice. In 2018, Sierra Leone launched the Presidential Taskforce on Examination Malpractice and in 2019 we adopted new, tougher measures on malpractice, including immediate prosecution, firing of convicted teachers and canceling of all results from implicated examination centers. The national Anti-Corruption Act was updated to include education malpractice as a corruption offence.

Furthermore, we innovated, especially during the COVID-19-related school closures. We used radio teaching to continue classes, and we invested in stronger radio transmitters and solar-powered radios to ensure coverage in farthest reaches of our country.

We introduced digital, sms-based learning tools, including a free SMS dictionary and word-of-the-day service. After the final NPSE and BECE exams, students could check their results and school placement on their phones instead of waiting for the paper results to travel to their school- a process that took up to 10 weeks and cost poor families up to \$10 before. Our digital tools have been used millions of times. Just recently, we introduced the Learning Passport in partnership with UNICEF that gives students access to all past papers in a browser and an app (online and offline). Thousands of users registered immediately. This spring, we will pilot the one-tablet-per-school program to generate more frequent data on student and teacher attendance and introduce digital teaching tools.

Within our Government Incubation Hub in the Office of the President, we launched the Education Innovation Challenge where service providers support primary schools with interventions across the country to generate evidence on how learning can be even further improved in Sierra Leone. The results have been promising and we will scale that to cover even more schools in partnership with the Education Outcomes Fund from September 2022. This approach links investments to impact and outcomes.

Moreover, we are now laying the policy groundwork for education to improve on all fronts in the years to come. We have introduced policies on Radical Inclusion which promote equity; Integrated Homegrown School Feeding which ties in health, agriculture and education; Integrated Early Childhood Development which deals with the holistic preparedness and welfare of the child; Comprehensive Sexuality Education and more. By Radical Inclusion, we will specifically ensure the inclusion of girls, especially pregnant ones, disabled learners, learners from remote areas and from impoverished backgrounds. We have already overturned the 2010 ban on pregnant girls attending school, and we are only getting started. For to us to achieve inclusive education meaningfully, I personally believe that all children must learn the basics of braille and sign language in addition to the English alphabets and numbers

When I speak to my colleagues from countries that have grown consistently over the past half-century, such as China and Rwanda, they tell me that they have been investing heavily in public education throughout. We are three years in and can already show results, but we also want to underscore that this is only the beginning.

Internationally, I serve as the chair of the Advisory Board of UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring Report, as an Executive Committee board member of the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) and member of the High-Level Steering Committee for Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4: Quality Education, which is the highest body in the UN related to SDG 4. I avail myself of these fora to share our story of transformation, learn from others and to urge that the world invests in enabling similar improvement everywhere. We are aware that we still have a lot to do with poor infrastructure, large class sizes, poor metrics with regards Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene in schools but we are confident in the agenda to #TransformEducation in Sierra Leone.

What Is Needed – How the United States Can Accelerate Progress

In Sierra Leone, we are fortunate to work with a set of development partners who are committed to supporting our journey to advance education. We are working closely with the United Kingdom's Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office, the European Union Commission, The Republic of Ireland's Irish Aid program, UNICEF and the World Bank, to name but a few of the major partners, on crucial projects across the sector. In addition, we work closely with a number of international and local NGOs. This has given us important lessons on the type of support that accelerates progress the most.

Indeed, Sierra Leone's education sector is already benefitting from American support through multilateral institutions such as the World Bank and GPE. In addition, we receive generous support from the McGovern-Dole International Fund for Education and Child Nutrition Program for Catholic Relief Services' school feeding programs, as well as American support for other education NGOs.

As mentioned, I serve as board member of the GPE, and I believe that this is the best place for pooling international efforts to accelerate progress toward our common education goals. The GPE represents a wealth of expertise and an approach to supporting education sectors that is constantly being improved through feedback from the member countries. The United States has supported GPE generously over the years, but, if the distinguished members of the committee will forgive me for the observation, their contributions are surpassed by cumulative contributions from countries such as Denmark and Norway, whose populations are smaller than the state of Maryland.

I believe the United States can do more.

The Millennium Challenge Corporation which Sierra Leone is now eligible to develop a Compact for also is a vehicle for supporting largescale development in our countries. While most of the investments are not in education, the fact that education metrics remain on the scorecard is an excellent motivation for countries. Sierra Leone looks forward to completing and executing its Compact Development process.

In the Ministry of Education, we have been fortunate to benefit from a set of embedded advisors who are working shoulder to shoulder with our own education experts. The advisors represent institutions such as the Education Partnerships Group, the EdTech Hub, the Overseas Development Institute, Oxford Policy Management and the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change. They build trust-based relationships that directly support our work, and I can only encourage this approach to joint problem solving. We also work closely with researchers and academics from institutions in the United States including Harvard, Yale and MIT. We believe that the US Government should support these exchanges between academic institutions in the United States and those in Africa.

I studied in the United States for close to ten years, and I know that when you support bold goals alongside the international community, there is nothing that can stop us. I think I need only mention the PEPFAR acronym to recall the United States' massive investment in saving millions of lives and helping countries control HIV/AIDS epidemic to underscore my point. This kind of investment and commitment is needed in Public Education.

Finally, Sierra Leone sits on the board of the UN Digital Public Goods Alliance. We work to accelerate progress toward the SDGs by facilitating the discovery, development, use of, and investment in digital public goods. As an international technology leader, the United States is an obvious fit. We

encourage your support and leadership in this area of ensuring universal access to connectivity to all schools.

Sierra Leone would be honored to continue to partner with you on the journey to improving access to quality public education around the world in in particular, in Africa. Together, nothing can stop us.