

**Coalition for Transparency and  
Accountability in Education**

**COTAE**



**Public Private Partnership in Education  
MONITORING REPORT**

 **OSIWA**

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## ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

CENTAL	Center for Transparency and Accountability in Liberia
BIA	Bridge International Academies
COTAE	Coalition for Transparency and Accountability in Education
CSB	County School Board
CSO	Civil Society Organization
DEO	District Education Officer
ESP	Education Sector Plan
ESDC	Education Sector Development Committee
FLY	Federation of Liberian Youths
GOL	Government of Liberia
LEJA	Liberia Economic Journalists Association
MOE	Ministry of Education
MOFDP	Ministry of Finance and Development Planning
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
OSIWA	Open Society Initiative for West Africa
PPCC	Public Procurement and Concession Commission
PPP	Public Private Partnership
PSL	Partnership Schools for Liberia
WFP	World Food Program

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COTAE comprises the following organizations: Center for Transparency and Accountability in Liberia (CENTAL); Federation of Liberian Youths (FLY); Child Steps International; Liberia Economic Journalists Association (LEJAL); and AIESEC Liberia.

**COTAE is Coordinated by**



## BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

The delivery of good quality, inclusive and affordable education in Liberia continues to be undermined by limited funding, weak enforcement of regulations and policies as well as limited trained manpower. The Ministry of Education (MOE) has described challenges of the sector as being “difficult to resolve simultaneously”, and that it will require multi-faceted and innovative approaches to revive the system. Although experts believe such approaches must be well-designed and based on evidence, the involvement of key stakeholders is even more critical in providing valuable inputs to fine-tune, properly design, and implement such novel initiatives.

Convinced that radical and innovative approaches were required to improve learning outcomes in Liberia, especially at the primary level, the Ministry of Education (MOE) introduced as part of its Public Private Partnership undertaking, the Partners Schools for Liberia (PSL) Program in 2016, which is currently ongoing. Amidst criticisms from civil society and other key stakeholders, notably the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education, Kishore Singh, MOE proceeded and finalized its arrangements with Bridge International Academies (BIA) and other private providers to pilot the program. Since September 2016, 94 public primary schools, sparsely distributed across the country, were given out to the private providers to manage. BIA was given 24 of those schools to operate in Nimba, Montserrado, Margibi, Bong, Grand Bassa and Rivercess Counties.

The Coalition for Transparency for Accountability in Education (COTAE), which the Center for transparency and Accountability in Liberia leads as head of secretariat, then embarked upon a monitoring exercise to report on key activities and processes linked to the program. Although other key issues are covered in this report, it mainly focuses on the operations of Bridge International Academies. Findings were drawn from more than five months of field monitoring and visits to counties and communities in which BIA operates. Key issues and processes monitored include: the competitiveness and transparency of processes leading to the recruitment of private providers (BIA and others); deployment and compensation of teachers; the status of funding/financial support for the program; and citizens’ access to relevant information and participation in key decisions. Others are equity, access and quality concerns emerging from introduction of the program, mainly at non-partnership schools; logistical support to schools to operate; provision of uniforms and learning materials to students and schools; and statuses and welfares of students denied access to BIA’s schools owing to limited class size.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since the PSL program was introduced in January 2016, the Ministry of Education has invested so much time and energy in ensuring that it succeeds. From all indications, currently, it is the foremost priority of the Minister of Education and his team. From numerous public relations activities (press releases, radio talk shows, jingles and etc.) and engagements with potential donors, MOE has endeavored to mobilize moral and financial support for the program. While these activities have helped to convince some members of the public about the goodness of the program, a lot more are still apprehensive about its timeliness, appropriateness, sustainability and ability to holistically address the problems in the sector. Among other reasons, those somehow convinced about the importance of the program were said to be moved by her tablet-based mode of instruction and prolong instructional period (two to three hours more than the regular school time). Also, news about the provision of free uniforms and meals, especially for already poor parents and students, seemed attractive to many.

But with more than five months into full-scale implementation of the pilot, there are more challenges to the program than its benefits and chances of succeeding. The much-anticipated financial supports from donors and the Government of Liberia (GOL) are not forthcoming as expected. Due to limited resources, which have been the leading challenge of the traditional system, some private providers (those contracted to implement the pilot) have not started full operation. Even those who have started are experiencing serious constraints to effectively operate. For example, in some Bridge schools visited in Grand Bassa and Margibi Counties, school administrators are still encountering difficulties in charging tablets and smart phones provided for operation. Also, despite nearing the end of the school year, some students in the Bridge schools (mainly at early childhood level) do not have uniforms, while only one set of uniform was given to students for the entire school year. Meanwhile, the school-feeding program/meals needed to help keep students in school for the extended period is irregular, as some schools feed students only twice weekly. In fact, it must be noted that meals given students in Bridge schools visited are being provided by other partners, notably World Food Program and not through funds mobilized by MOE and Bridge. The glaring funding challenge corroborates critics' assertions about the dangers of heavily relying on donors to introduce policies and programs with serious financial implications and sustainability concerns.

Contrary to the MOE's claims of lawful and competitive recruitment, all providers under the pilot, including Bridge, were not recruited through transparent and competitive procurement processes. Simply put, the Public Procurement and Concession says it has no records on any transparent and competitive process (ies) carried out by MOE in recruiting Bridge and those operating the pilot. Also, disparity in the levels of financial, moral and political support to providers was observed. We realized that Bridge International Academies receives more support and attention from MOE than other providers, evidenced by the fact that they were the first group to begin operation, long before their counterparts started. In fact, currently, other providers like Stella Maris Polytechnic, have not started operation, mainly due to lack of funding. Meanwhile, all Bridge-assigned schools visited were seen operating, although with serious challenges.

Furthermore, communities' participation in and access to information about the program is also very limited. In nearly all of the counties and communities with the PSL schools, most citizens are uninformed about the pilot and what it hopes to achieve. Even some local officials of the ministry of education, including members of county school boards and district education officers, cannot clearly articulate the objectives of the program. Accountability to parents and community residents is limited and even under further threat. Teachers and managers of the Bridge-run schools are reportedly warned against speaking to investigators and visitors. On several occasions, CO-TAE staff and field monitors were referred to Bridge Authorities and officials of the Ministry of Education in Monrovia to seek information on happenings at schools in the counties. This seriously undermines accountability to citizens and stakeholders, as these schools are owned by government and should be accessible to citizens for scrutiny and monitoring purposes, especially where necessary.

Lastly, there is scant availability of documents and information on the entire PSL program, especially critical information that will enable stakeholders make more informed decisions. For example, details of how "independent evaluators" of the program were recruited are not publicized. Such information is necessary to inform the decisions of stakeholders in terms of researching and gathering detailed information on their independence, integrity, track records and competences. With proposed expansion of the program dependent on findings of any evaluation of the pilot, the importance of credibility and competences of those carrying out such exercise cannot be overemphasized.

### **Key Recommendations**

1. The Ministry of Education must remain committed to scaling up and or continuing with the PSL program beyond the pilot, only when outcomes of the proposed independent evaluation suggest otherwise. Plan to solicit proposals for possible extension and expansion of the program, without clear evidence on the pilot, contradicts earlier commitments and undermines evidence-based decision-making in relation to the program. Any plans to expand the program must be halted and implemented only when findings of the exercise, expected to be conducted by a competent and credible group/firm, suggest otherwise.
2. If already recruited, details about would-be evaluator(s) of the PSL pilot and the recruitment process must be publicized to enable stakeholders independently investigate their track records, competences and credibility as well as determine if they were recruited competitively and transparently.
3. MOE must ensure fair play and equality in dealing with all providers under the program. Preferential treatment for Bridge International Academies disadvantages other providers and undermines their abilities to effectively perform, as the performances of all

providers will be measured to determine if they will remain engaged with the program in the future, should it be extended beyond the pilot.

4. The Ministry of Education must ensure that PSL schools remain accessible to the public and independent investigators desirous of scrutinizing the pilot. Creating bottlenecks and hindering access to information about activities at Bridge-run schools is against democratic principles and undermines Liberia's freedom of information regime. Limiting access to these facilities will only justify critics' points about the dangers of outsourcing/privatizing public schools when accountability to stakeholders and access to these facilities will be restricted and limited due to complex corporate requirements and practices.

5. The Ministry of Education and BIA must timely fulfill commitments made to the public and various stakeholders under the program. Among other things, there must be consistency in meals for student, adequacy of logistics and learning materials as well as timely payment of salaries to teachers. Reported delayed salary payment, which led to abandonment of classes by teachers in Grand Bassa, Montserrado and other counties early this year, is a serious challenge that needs to be addressed.

6. The Government of Liberia must provide adequate financial and logistical support to schools accommodating students denied access to BIA's schools to enable them equally acquire "quality education". Appalling learning conditions, mainly due to over crowdedness and limited teachers at schools receiving students turned away by BIA are unacceptable and need to be urgently remediated. Additionally instructional materials and teachers must be provided, as well as more classrooms created to ensure conducive environment for learning.

7. Lack of access to key information and documents that will help civil society and other stakeholders effectively monitor the program is a major concern as well. MOUs and contracts with the rest of the providers must be publicized, as in the case of Bridge, to enable stakeholders equally monitor and report on their activities. This will enable holistic and independent monitoring and reporting on the pilot and not only the operation of BIA.



## METHODOLOGY

The Coalition for Transparency and Accountability in Education has been closely following and actively engaged with the PSL program since it was introduced in Liberia. Chiefly, we have demanded accountability, transparency and evidence-based decision making from it's the Ministry of Education and other proponents of the initiative. Through financial and logistical support from the Open Society Initiative for West Africa, ActionAid and the Center for Transparency and Accountability in Liberia, we have remained constructively engaged with the program. And findings of this report are drawn from close monitoring of the program, both nationally and sub-nationally, including review of relevant documents and interaction with key stakeholders (representatives of some providers, MOE officials, the National Teachers Association of Liberia, parents, and etc.).

Most importantly, between September 2016 and February 2017, (COTAE) intermittently visited Bong, Grand Bassa, Margibi, Rivercess, Nimba, Gbarpolu Counties and obtained first-hand information. Meanwhile, CENTAL and COTAE's focal persons and monitors, based in the target counties, gathered information from diverse stakeholders on varying issues relating to the operation of Bridge International Academies. Parents, community residents, students, teachers, members of county school boards, county and district education officers as well as those closely connected to Bridge schools contributed information to this report. Our field monitors provided updates on key happenings in the counties, while at the national level; we closely followed key developments appertaining to the initiative. These include, but not limited to Akon's visit to Liberia in October 2016, strike actions by teachers of Bridge schools and some members of the National Teachers Association of Liberia; recruitment of Bridge and other private providers; and the February 20-23, 2017 public forum, which key stakeholders and critical voices, including COTAE and the National Teachers Association of Liberia, were excluded from.

Although there are eight (8) providers under the PSL program, this report mainly focuses on Bridge International Academies. Emphasis on the operation of Bridge is due to unavailability of key information and documents about other providers, particularly MOUs and Contracts signed with GOL and MOE. In the absence of such essential information and documents, which should outline the obligations of other providers and financial terms of their agreements, we could not assess and gather detailed information on their activities. We hope that such information and documents will be publicly available to enable COTAE and other stakeholders investigate and report

on the operation of other private providers not fully covered in this report.

## FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### 1. Limiting Access to Education for All, a Dangerous Trend

Bridge International Academies' schools restrict class size to maximum 55 students. Besides, these schools have only one class per grade, compared to other traditional schools with two or more sections (for example, 1st grade a, b and sometimes c). As a result, collectively, the number of students in schools being managed by BIA has drastically reduced. Apart from the class limit and single class policies, extending the school time from 1pm to nearly 4 pm without adequate planning is undermining retention in these schools. Besides, some students denied entry into the Bridge schools ended up not enrolling at all, as nearby schools were filled or they could not travel long distances to access other schools. . For example, in Margibi County, due to limited space, the Hilda Knight Cooper Foundation School could not accommodate all students rejected by the Bridge-run Cinta public school in the area.

**Recommendation:** While the exact number of students affected by this situation has not been determined, the fact that some students ended up not enrolling into schools due to BIA's presence in the sector is concerning. This is even compounded by the increasing number of students dropping out, especially from schools not providing food for such extended hours of schooling. Thus, the Ministry of Education must ensure government's commitment to providing equal access to education for all students is fully upheld. Policies that promote discrimination and undermine the delivery of quality, affordable and inclusive education to all students and children undermines government's commitment to providing quality education to all Liberians and its obligation to ensure the attainment of Sustainable Development Goal 4 and its related targets. So, such PSL must be halted or pursued with extreme caution to limit its negative effects on the students in terms of ensuring that everyone has equal access to educational opportunities.

### 2. "Improving Learning Outcomes" in Bridge Schools while Creating Mess in Non-bridge Schools

One of the key and sticky elements of the PSL Program, which borders on quality, equity and access, is restriction on the number of students in each class (maximum 55). This is remarkably different from the number of students enrolled in traditionally run schools and even prior enrollment of most schools being run by Bridge. With enforcement of its 55 students per class and a single class per grade policies, many rejected students compulsorily enrolled at nearby schools, thereby significantly increasing their population. For example,

the number of students at Hilda Knight Cooper Foundation School in Margibi County has nearly doubled due to accommodation of students rejected by the Bridge-run school in the area.

Basically, schools accommodating students turned away by Bridge are overcrowded and often lack the necessary space, logistics and financial resources to adequately cater for the needs of their students. With many of these schools already experiencing difficulties, the increasing number of students, with no corresponding financial and logistical support, further compounds their problems. As a result, while attempting to improve learning outcomes in the Bridge Schools, MOE and Bridge are creating more mess in schools receiving student denied access to partnership schools. Because of the above, some parents intervene by arranging compulsory study classes for their kids. And they have to do these using meager resources that could be spent on other priority needs. Meanwhile, students who do not attend classes due to weak financial backgrounds of their parents live with whatever limited instruction received on campus. While pursuing reforms under the PSL, this situation is equally creating mess in the sector. Making few students well-off, provided Bridge will actually provide quality instructional services, while making several others worse-off, undermines holistic and sustainable reforms and improvements in the quality of service delivery in the sector.

**Recommendation:** The government of Liberia must provide adequate financial and logistical support to schools accommodating students rejected by the Bridge schools to enable them equally acquire “quality education”. Appalling learning conditions, mainly due to over crowdedness and limited teachers at schools receiving Bridge-reject students are unacceptable and need to be urgently remediated. Additionally instructional materials and teachers must be provided, as well as more classrooms created to ensure a conducive environ-



Sarah Simpson George Elementary School, Annex 2,  
Sawmill Community, Buchanan Grand Bassa County

ment for learning.

### 3. Financial Commitments from Donors and GOL not forthcoming as Expected

The MOU between MOE and Bridge International Academies, signed in March 2016, provides that the entity will receive 8 million USD (which does not cover salaries for teachers) to manage 50 primary schools across the country. With seven other providers contracted under the pilot, the total cost of fully implementing the program significantly increased, considering that 94 schools were finally given out instead of the original 50 meant for BIA alone. Besides, MOE has indicated that each provider will receive 100 USD per child (\$ 50 from GOL and the remaining \$ 50 provided by donors) and that a total of 28,000 students will be enrolled in the partnership schools (MOE's PowerPoint summary on G2Best Agenda, Oct. 2016).

Currently, it's not clear whether the Government of Liberia and donors have released needed resources to enable providers fully operate, as such information has not been widely publicized, if available to be shared. But one thing that remains clear is that some providers have not started full operation, while even those fully operating, like BIA, are experiencing serious financial difficulties. Resultantly, salaries for teachers in the Bridge schools are delayed while school authorities and teachers are sometimes compelled to charge tablets and smart phones assigned to them. In fact, during COTAE's visits to the counties between September and October 2016, all of the Bridge schools visited had not received financial support to charge tablets and smartphones given them. Already challenged by lack of pay, those teachers were incurring extra expenses to ensure that BIA's schools remained open and functional.

It remains to be seen whether MOE will mobilize the requisite financial resources, which will somehow be belated/untimely as the school year nears completion. This indicates the danger of over reliance on donors' support to introduce and sustain policies with serious financial implications for the country.

**Recommendation:** Although somehow belated, even if fully provided, the Government of Liberia and Donors' reported financial commitments to the program must be actualized to enable full implementation of the pilot. In part, this will prove government's commitment to fully supporting the program as well as MOE's ability to attract donors' support for the intervention. Glaring difficulties in mobilizing needed resources to fund just 94 schools under the pilot justifies sustainability concerns raised by critics and the danger of relying on donor's support to introduce such program with serious financial implications for the country.

#### 4. Exclusion of Critical Voices From Major Activities Linked to the PSL

One of the leading criticisms of the PSL program, when it was first introduced in Liberia, is lack of adequate consultations and engagements with key stakeholders to solicit their cooperation and inputs. Back then, concerns were raised about the exclusion of key civil society organizations, media, youths and students from the January 2016 Bella Casa Stakeholders Consultative Forum, during which GOL launched the PSL program. And MOE promised to do more in engaging with civil society and other key stakeholders in implementing the pilot.

However, such exclusion is still ongoing, as COTAE and other critical voices were also excluded from a major stakeholders forum, during which providers reportedly gave updates on their activities. As access to relevant information is very key and an enabler of constructive dialogues and peaceful co-existence, actions like these have the proclivity to undermine functional relationships among partners and even deepen suspicions and allegations of ill intents in pursuing policies like these.

**Recommendation:** The Ministry of Education must remain committed to fostering mutually benefiting partnership with civil society and other critical voices in initiating and implementing key policies and programs, especially the Public Private Partnership. Among other things, the exclusion of critical voices, including civil society, from key forums and activities related to the pilot will create more suspicions and doubts about the true intent of the program. This may even validate concerns about limited access to information, MOE's challenge in mobilizing funds to adequately support the program and dissatisfaction among other providers about preferential treatment for BIA. The roles of civil society and critical voices in helping to report existing and potential challenges for remedial actions cannot be overemphasized; they must be engaged and included in key activities and processes to ensure participatory decision regarding the program.

#### 5. Limited Accountability of Providers to the Public

One of the key ingredients of democracy is the voice citizens have to hold their leaders accountable---participate in key processes and remain informed about key government's policies and programs, especially those essential to their wellbeing. Such participation and

increased access to relevant information are critical lynchpins for entrenching core democratic and good governance principles such as participation, transparency, accountability and integrity. The same cannot be said for private actors with profit-making objectives, especially when given increased leverage to manage public properties and assets.

In this case, preliminary results from monitoring visits to the counties show that schools managed by Bridge are becoming less accessible to stakeholders, especially civil society and independent actors desirous of closely monitoring the pilot. Due to threats of dismissal and/or administrative actions, getting teachers and principals to speak out about challenges affecting them is extremely difficult. Critical voices and independent actors desirous of gathering information on the PSL program, including the Coalition for Transparency and Accountability in Education, have been experiencing immense difficulties in getting needed information from on-the-ground staff. On several occasions, COTAE and CENTAL's staff and field monitors were referred to Bridge Authorities and officials of the Ministry of Education in Monrovia to seek information on happenings at schools in the counties. This seriously undermines accountability to citizens and stakeholders, as these schools are owned by government and should be accessible at all times to citizens for scrutiny and monitoring purposes, especially where necessary.

**Recommendation:** Government must ensure that authorities of the Bridge schools remain accountable to citizens and the public. Both Bridge and MOE must remain committed to allowing independent assessment of the pilot to highlight critical issues, which MOE and private providers may not easily publicize. The rights of citizens must be respected in creating an enabling environment to constructively engage with the program considering that any underperformance and major challenges will negatively impact the education and future of their children.

## 6. Poor Working Condition for Teachers (Welfare Issues)

Generally, working conditions for teachers under Bridge are very poor. These include untimely payment of salaries, transferring of teachers to far-away places without resettlement packages, and inadequate compensation that does not enable teachers adequately cater for the needs of their families. In fact, in many of the schools visited, the Bridge teachers those in cohort five and six categories (teachers who received some training, but were not employed by the government or the Ministry of Education). With very high unemployment rate in Liberia, many of these teachers had to settle for what ever was being proposed by Bridge International Academies and the Ministry of Education.

Firstly, many of the teachers were transferred from faraway locations without proper compensation and resettlement packages to cater

for their needs and those of their families back home. Also, many teachers lamented low salaries, which are not even being timely received. It's reported that the teachers have not been paid for the last three months, thereby affecting their morale and ability to adequately cater for their needs and those of their families and relatives. In late August and October 2016, when COTAE first visited the counties, many of the teachers complained about lack of logistical support and funding, which meant that they had to use their meager funds and sometimes borrow money to charge their tablets and smart phones. More than three months after, most of these issues still linger. Salary payment is still irregular; tablets and smart phones not functional in some instances; prolonged hours of schooling and teaching, especially without meals, are seriously undermining effective implementation of the program.

**Recommendation:** That teachers' salaries be paid on time and their welfare taken care of. This is required since they teach longer hours than counterparts in other schools.

#### **7. Key Information not Flowing: Uncertainty Around Current Arrangement with BIA**

In part, the March 2016 and publicly available MOU between the Ministry of Education and Bridge International Academies provides that the entity will manage 50 Public Primary Schools for 8 million USD (excluding salary for teachers) during the first year of the pilot. At 8 million for 50, this means around 160,000 per each school. Considering that Bridge International Academies now has less than half of that number (24 schools), it's still unclear whether the MOU has been revised to reflect significant reduction in the number of schools they are currently managing. It has been more than six months since the decision was reached to give Bridge fewer schools, and generally increase the number of schools under the pilot from 50 to 94. The absence of such important information hinders the ability of civil society, media and other stakeholders to constructively engage with the program in terms of matching BIA's performance against the exact amount of funding and other resources it is anticipated to receive.

With continuous unavailability of essential information, not just to COTAE but the general public, it makes it increasingly difficult to convince the public about equality and fair play in MOE's dealings with all private providers under the program. With providers expected to receive 100 USD per child, it's not clear whether the same applies to BIA, as their 8 million USD budget means they will be receiving at least 160,000 USD per school and over 300 USD per child.

**Recommendation:** The Ministry of Education and GOL must ensure that all relevant information related to the PSL and BIA's activities operation in Liberia is publicly available and accessible, especially by rural dwellers. If any, the revised MOU or contract between MOE and Bridge must be publicized to clarify whether or not Bridge is receiving/will receive the same amount to manage only 24 schools, as provided for/indicated in its March 2016 MOU with the Government of Liberia.

## 8. Unequal Playing Field: More Support to Bridge than Other Providers

Disparities in the levels of moral, political and financial support to BIA, compared to her counterparts, are glaring and undermine fair play and equality under the program. While Bridge schools visited were fully functional, with serious challenges though, other providers like Stella Maris Polytechnic and Omega have not started full operation..

Meanwhile, according to section 3 of BIA's publicly available MOU with MOE, it will have maximum 55 students per class and run single stream schools (only one class/section per grade). Also, there will be a total of nine (9) classes per school (three years of Early Childhood Education and 6 other classes from 1st to 6th grade). With the above, holding everything constant, it means BIA's 50 schools will have 450 classes and serve 24,750 students. At 100 USD per child, BIA should be receiving 2,475,000 million to manage its 50 schools and 24,750 projected students. But with more than 8 million USD budgetary projection to manage 50 schools, which has significantly been reduced to 24, BIA will be receiving over 300 USD to educate each student, compared to the 100 announced by the government that other providers will reportedly receive. At 24 schools, it means they will be receiving whopping 673 USD per child compared to the reported 100 USD for other providers, which is not even forthcoming as projected.

**Recommendation:** The government of Liberia has indicated that the performances of all providers will be measured/evaluated at the close of the pilot to determine their levels of competences, effectiveness and efficiency in managing assigned schools. Unequal treatment and biases in dealing with providers disadvantages others and places BIA in prime position to outperform others. MOE must give all providers equal attention and resources to provide everyone equal opportunities and possibilities of succeeding, if they will ever do. Preferential treatment for BIA undermines competition and disadvantages other providers, as their performances under the pilot are expected to determine whether or not they will remain engaged with the program, should it be continued beyond the current phase.

## 9. Scaling Up/Extension Attempt Without Independent Evaluation Report

During numerous radio appearances and meetings with stakeholders, MOE's officials indicated that any continuation and expansion of the program would be based on evidence gathered from independent evaluation of the program. In the absence of such evaluation report and findings, MOE is making gradual efforts to continue and expand the PPP. For example, despite not being proven worthwhile, it is included in Liberia's newly developed Education Sector Plan (ESP) as a priority program of the Ministry. Besides, at the February 2017 forum,

which COTAE and other critical voices were excluded from, the Ministry of Education reportedly informed stakeholders that “any expansion of the PSL program will not be more than twice the size of its existing pilot”. Such statement contradicts previous commitment that the program will be continued based on evidence from evaluation of the pilot. So, on what basis is the government contemplating such expansion, when results from the current pilot has not been concluded, reviewed and deemed satisfactory?

**Recommendations:** The Ministry of Education must remain very committed to its plan to scale up the program only based on independent evaluation of the pilot. Any plans to expand the program must be halted and implemented based on final evaluation of the pilot and only when findings of the exercise, expected to be conducted by a competent and credible group/firm, suggest otherwise. Importantly also, the proposed evaluation must be conducted by a “credible, competent and an independent ” firm or individual with no strong ties with Bridge and others closely linked to their operation, whether in Liberia, Kenya, Uganda or other countries.

#### **10. Non-competitive and Transparent Recruitment of Providers**

When the PSL program was initiated, one of the main contentions of the COTAE and its partners was violation of the Public Procurement guidelines in recruiting BIA—the lone provider then. MOE signed more than 8 million USD worth of contract with a private and foreign firm without any reference to and respect for public procurement guidelines and regulations. Unfortunately, commitment by MOE and the government to correct the situation has not been fulfilled, as the remaining seven (7) providers were also contracted through opaque and non-competitive processes. The PPCC says it has no records on any competitive and transparent procurement processes carried out in recruiting BIA and other providers. This runs contrary to MOE’s claims that providers were hired transparently and competitively.

**Recommendation:** Revelations from the PPCC brings into question the credibility and competitiveness of processes that led to selection of BIA and other providers and even places more doubts over their abilities to deliver. COTAE believes that the public and education stakeholders need ample evidence on processes that led to the recruitment of those piloting the program, to whom 94 public primary schools were given to manage. MOE must provide timely and detailed information to the public on how these providers were selected to increase public trust and confidence major decisions surrounding the program.

### 11. Free Uniforms and School Materials Hyped than the Actual Story

Although not clearly indicated in its MOU, it was agreed in principle that BIA would provide free uniforms to students, in part, to make the program more appealing. While they have partially fulfilled that commitment, key issues still remain. While in the counties between September and October 2016, some students had received had not received uniforms. Precisely, students received one set of uniform for the entire school year. As a result, parents complained about experiencing serious difficulties in managing one set of uniform for their children, especially underage kids. Meanwhile, students seen without uniforms said theirs were either big or small, as BIA carried out mass production without considering the specific needs of students. Interestingly, neither the school authorities nor students knew when their supplies would arrive.

The situation remains the same and is even worse off than we met in October 2016. Still, some students have not received uniforms, while those of others have significantly faded due to frequent washing. Considering that even two sets of uniform maybe inadequate for students for an entire school, it's unthinkable that the provision of one set of uniform for an entire school year will be touted as a major achievement under the program. While it is true that some children attend school without uniforms and some use only one set under the traditional system, a much publicized and "savior-like" program like the Public Private Partnership cannot genuinely boast of meaningful improvements by providing one set of uniform to mostly underage students.

**Recommendation:** Having boasted of increased commitments from donors and the Liberian government to fund the program, it's



Students of MacIntosh Elementary School in Rivercess County

concerning that some students have not received uniforms despite the school year nearing completion. These challenges further expose the hasty and unplanned manner in which the PSL program was introduced in Liberia. Those without uniforms must be served, while Bridge authorities must ensure that students receive at least two sets of uniform for the school year.

## 12. Extended Hours of Schooling Not Fully Being Observed

One of few factors that made the PSL Program somehow attractive to many was proposed extension of the school time from 1pm to nearly 4pm, which would enable students remain in school longer than before and cover more materials, compared their counterparts in other schools. However, such policy comes with huge financial implications, which Bridge authorities and MOE did not properly plan for under the existing pilot. In part, to keep students motivated and attentive in school from 7:30am to nearly 4pm, they have to be well-fed and kept engaged. Even teachers and school authorities have to be adequately compensated and motivated to teach, as they will be required to spend almost their entire day on campus.

However, poor planning and abrupt introduction of the PSL Program is seriously undermining enforcement of this policy, especially in schools not providing food for students and paying adequate and regular salaries to teachers. Students and parents reported that some schools close sooner than the stipulated end time, as they it make no sense keeping hungry students on campus from 7:30am to nearly 4pm. For example, at the Cinta Public School in Margibi County, students have not been fed since the beginning of the school year. Wearied kids interviewed while returning from school said lack of food has caused many of their colleagues to drop out. From 55 students at the beginning of the school year, they said some classes now have less than 30 students.

**Recommendation:** This situation has serious implications for the curriculum, as early closure of schools means all relevant materials may not be covered. Government must carefully review the implications of this policy and institute all measures to ensure that it does not have adverse effects on students' learning. Extension of school time without proper planning undermines parents ability to send their children school and places extra burden on underpaid teachers to feed and keep themselves motivated to attend to students during the extra hours.

## LESSONS LEARNT

1. Improper planning and abrupt introduction of the program is undermining its successful implementation, as mobilization of the resources to fully support the operation varying private providers is posing immense problem for MOE.
2. Parents and community residents are getting increasing disappointed over multiple challenges associated with the pilot, including inadequate logistics, low and irregular pay for teachers and lack of meals for some schools. Probably, these challenges would have been mitigated had MOE proceeded with caution, planned properly and solicited inputs from critical voices on how to proceed.
3. Donors do not seem committed to funding other providers; expect Bridge and few others with increased international connections. Those who originally wanted the program introduced in Liberia were convinced about BIA's capabilities and not the other providers recruited to satisfy local procurement requirements and also create the impression that Bridge as competing with other actors in the country.
4. Considering existing difficulties in mobilizing funds to fully implement the pilot, it will be extremely difficult to mobilize the required resources to fully implement the program within the next five years, even if MOE decides to continue beyond the pilot.
5. Without proper accountability and evidenced-based decision-making, MOE will struggle to implement the program, as the inputs of critical voices, which are necessary to highlight flaws and or limitations for possible actions, will not be solicited.
6. BIA's prolong school time is a new phenomenon that must be carefully studied. Successful implementation of the program will require continuous availability food and feeding program for students and even teachers. This is cost-intensive and will be extremely difficult to successfully implement in all public primary schools across the country.

