

REFOCUSING SECONDARY EDUCATION IN NIGERIA: BENEFITS OF PUBLIC - PRIVATE PARTNERSHIP

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Abstract

The newly introduced administrative structure that involves the public and private sector in the funding and administration of the Federal Government Colleges better known as Unity Schools has generated lots of positive and negative reactions from stakeholders. Some stakeholders are of the view that it is a ploy by the government to privatize the institutions while others see the reforms as a way of bringing the schools and indeed all aspects of secondary education back to its lost glory and pride of place. The paper reviews the state of secondary schools and secondary education in general. The benefits accruable to the educational sector as a result of the public-private partnership initiative was highlighted especially with regards to better management structure, adequacy of finance, outstanding infrastructure and quality inputs for tertiary educational institutions. Recommendations were made to ensure smooth implementation of the reforms.

Introduction

The media has been awash in recent times with the news of Federal Government hand-over of the Unity Schools (Federal Government colleges) to private individuals and groups for "effective Administration". This has resulted in all manner of crises. The teachers and other workers in the schools embarked on strike to press home their demand for the maintenance of the status quo. The government on its part has consistently argued that it was misunderstood and that the reforms were necessitated by the decay of infrastructure and decline in the quality of output.

The reform is expected to involve the private sector in the management of the institutions rather than an outright sale or privatization of the institutions as erroneously believed by some stakeholders. Government insists that the only way sanity can be brought to education is by involving everybody in the day-to-day running of these institutions. It is the belief of government that when the private sector handles anything including the running of schools, there is usually an improvement rather than a decline of infrastructure and quality of product (Oluchukwu, 2005; Okunamiri, 2005; Ayeni and Atanda, 2004). It is with this in mind that other stakeholders are being convinced to accept and support the new initiative for the overall development of secondary education in particular and education in general.

The quality of education in the public schools has declined to an extent that students are no longer focused in their classes. Continuous assessment which is the hallmark of the 6-3-3-4 system of education has been so abused that teachers now only record marks that were not earned but given so as to fill the spaces provided in the report/mark sheets. Teachers engage in all manner of indiscipline behaviour ranging from absenteeism to travelling abroad for a very long period without permission whatsoever. The school heads in some cases connive with these teachers either for personal gains because the salaries of these teachers are shared either on 50-50 bases or some other agreed percentages or afraid to sanction erring teachers because of their political connections and godfatherism.

The school system is now so bad that, the only way out for the students is to engage in examination malpractices and other indecent behaviour all for the purpose of passing examinations. The Unity Schools and some other public schools across the country had been noted for academic excellence. The schools have produced very notable Nigerians that are now well placed in society. The story has changed and it is in the light of these that government decided to introduce measures aimed at improving the quality of education in the country.

To enhance the quality of education in Nigeria, government embarked on the restructuring of the system. This restructuring has led to the institutionalizing of some basic rules and method of doing government business. The reform in the Unity Schools, which is being canvassed for in other sectors of education, is the public-private partnership initiative. These initiatives are expected to bring some benefits to education. The paper therefore x-rays the following benefits;

- Improved management structure
- Adequacy of finance

- Improved work ethics
- Outstanding infrastructural development.

Improved Management Structure

The structure on which an organization is built can either destroy or enhance attainment of objectives. The structure of the public secondary schools may be termed as defective. This is so because parents are no longer interested in sending their children and wards to the public schools. They will prefer to even send their children and wards to ramshackle private secondary schools where they feel the children will at least, be taught five to seven lessons per day. They believe that children sent to public schools these days are left to the mercy of uncommitted teachers and school heads.

A close look at the private secondary schools across the country paints the picture of seriousness and steady academic improvement. Their structures are continually improved upon and facilities to enhance the teaching learning situation are being provided. The private schools attempt to provide parents and guardians with feedback by attempting to send report sheets and other materials used for continuous assessment to enable parents follow their wards' steady progress. The story cannot be said to be the same in the public schools where results and continuous assessment are doctored and cooked up for parents.

The school heads and administrators of these private schools ensure that erring teachers are promptly disciplined and parents of students of questionable character invited and appropriate sanctions meted out as punishment to the students.

The weak administrative structure in the public schools has greatly affected the teaching and learning process. Teachers now come to school when it is convenient for them (Omvuasaonya, 2005; Nwadam 2005). Those who are in school would engage in gossips rather than teach the students. The emergence or acceptance of the reforms in the system would mean that the private sector that has succeeded in piloting the private schools and bringing about some level of sanity will help to bring about a change in the old ways of doing things. The principals and other persons responsible for the day to day running of the schools will have to sit up knowing that their activities will be "monitored and sanctions meted out to offenders. (Ayanniyi, 2005; Oluwatusin, 2005; Akpan, 2005).

Adequacy of Finance

Financial insufficiency has been the bane of development of most government agencies and parastatal. Finances, though never enough for the running of the system, could at least be maximized for efficiency. There have been allegations of wide scale corruption in the unity schools and indeed other schools owned by government. Every school is given subvention for the running of the schools. These subventions are however, seen by school heads as their own share of the national cake. They do not bother to appropriate the resources to those areas they are meant for. The principals and other management staff are said to convert monies and other school properties to personal use without even bothering to effect repairs. (Tabotndip, 2005). The environment continues to suffer degradation as a result of the non-challant attitude of the school management towards repairs and maintenance culture generally.

The reforms being advocated will ensure that monies appropriated for the running of the schools are judiciously utilized and adequate accounts rendered to appropriate authorities. (Fabunmi, 1999). A principal of a school will no longer see (he annual subvention as his or her share of national cake to be swallowed but that, which is expected to be used for a smooth academic environment.

The coming of the private sector to partner with government will help to enhance the financial base of the schools. The private concern though conscious of making profits, will be willing to partner with other stakeholders in the provision of funds. Most private educational institutions in the country may be seen as been too expensive for the common man but the intervention of government financially and technically will help to reduce whatever fees to be charged, to an acceptable and tolerable level. (Ekwevugbe, 2005). Unlike the purely private enterprise, the public-private partnership will bring about a middle position of cost effectiveness and efficiency of the system.

Areas of financial strength will be explored. The private sector will be able to obtain loans and other facilities from banks to enhance the funding needs of the schools. A properly sited school can expand their internally generated revenue by going into large scale farming both for profit and educational advancement of the students in the area of agricultural science. Home Economics department will be strengthened to produce pastries like cake, chin-chin, and doughnut for the general public. These business ventures will be better exploited to the advantage of the schools for better financial status. The era of 100% financial dependence on the government will be over and the

resultant effect will be a self-sufficient school and educational system.

Improved Work Ethics

The era of teachers and other workers coming to school at 9.00 am and leaving school before 12.00 noon will be over if we adopt the government-private sector partnership initiative. The non-challant attitude of workers in the educational sector more than anything else is responsible for the decline in academic activities in the schools. Teachers and even school heads come to school when they like and because government business is seen as nobodies business, it is allowed to suffer. Little wonder therefore, that parents are beginning to have preference for private schools where they feel their children and wards will be adequately catered for.

The teachers in private schools do not need the inspectors from ministries of Education to check or visit before lesson notes are written, dairies filled and lessons adequately taught. (Okoroma, 2005; Adetoro, 2005). The reason for this is the constant monitoring and closeness of management to the day-to-day running of the schools. The government-private initiative will positively impart on the running of the schools for greater efficiency. The teachers will ensure that they are at their duty post as at when due. The principals will also try to ensure that they are not messed up by constantly checking the activities of teachers and students at least to justify their pay and earn praises and commendation from management.

The attitude of workers whereby things going wrong are allowed to decay will likely change. The school environment will definitely be better for it, as teachers will ensure that the school is not allowed to over grow with weeds neither will they tolerate the littering of the school with papers and other dirt. Teachers on duty will be conscious of the new partnership and ensure that their jobs are properly done.

Outstanding Infrastructural Development

Researchers are of the view that facilities and other infrastructure in most secondary schools across the country are dilapidated, over used and death traps in some cases (Fasina, 2005, Fagbamiye, 2002). When compared to the private schools, Government owned schools are at the onset more equipped, better aesthetic value and so on. But given a period of years, we see fast deterioration in the government owned schools while the private sector run schools which initially started off on a small and manageable level, becomes suddenly the envy of all. It witnesses a steady growth in infrastructural facilities and great improvement of existing structures. It will be observed that while equipment and facilities in the state owned schools are allowed to rest, decay and even deface, that owned by the private individuals and corporate bodies are seen to witness improvement both in structure and in the number of available facilities and equipment. The question therefore is: Why is it that government owned enterprise in this part of the world suffers neglect and abandonment? The answer however, lies in the way government properties and businesses are run.

The educational reforms which preaches government-private partnership initiative in the running of the schools is likely to be the only solution to the wasteful ways government properties are used and allowed to go bad. If we have a committee made up of seasoned and trusted men and women to run the schools, it will be difficult for school heads, teachers and students to destroy or not care about the properties placed under their care. It will need the intervention of the private sector to care for and improve the existing infrastructure in the schools. The cost of maintenance is said to be less than what it cost to procure new equipment. It is therefore a step in the right direction to involve the private sector that has over the years, showed their managerial competence in administration and development of business ventures.

Recommendations

In the light of the debate for and against the reforms in the educational sector, the following recommendations are made to ensure enhanced educational advancement in the country:

- Support should be given by Nigerians for the success of the educational reforms which are perceived as one way of ensuring educational advancement of this country.
- The public-private partnership should not degenerate into making education available only to the children of the super rich as it is seen in the private owned tertiary institutions. To the end, scholarship and other student aid programmes should be put in place for indigent students.
- The teachers and other stakeholders should be carried along in all the aspects of the implementation of these reforms so as to give stakeholders a sense of belonging.

Conclusion

The managerial prowess that will take centre stage when the public-private initiative takes hold will be outstanding. The private sector known for its years of administrative competence will bring to bear in the management of the schools. Staff and students will be adequately policed and rewarded to get the best out of them. The private sector has a way of securing loans and exploiting all the sources of finance for the betterment of the system they are engaged in. It is hoped therefore, that the lean finances available will be judiciously utilized for efficiency and effectiveness. The old way of doing government business will give way for a more pragmatic working pattern and relations. Workers will be seen at their duty post as early as 8.00 am and may not leave until its closing time except with cogent reasons. There is need for infrastructural development and this can only be achieved through this partnership.

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