THE LIBERIAN GOVERNMENT'S SCHOOL PRIVATIZATION PROGRAM EXPOSED

A leaked copy of a draft confidential summary of the Government commissioned Midline report investigating the Partnership Schools for Liberia (PSL) program concludes that the program has not demonstrate[d] that it can work in average Liberian schools, with sustainable budgets and staffing levels, and without negative side effects on other schools.

In January 2016, in a controversial move, the Government of Liberia announced its intention to outsource its primary and pre-primary education system to a US-based for-profit corporate actor, Bridge International Academies (BIA). Following considerable opposition to this unprecedented move the Government conceived a pilot program, Partnership Schools for Liberia (PSL), where eight actors would operate 93 schools in the first year.

Despite claiming that PSL would be subject to a rigorous evaluation through a Randomized Control Trial (RCT), six months into the trial, the Ministry of Education (MoE) decided to increase the number of schools to 202 in the project's second year.

"The negative findings of this report may explain the minister's rush to expand the privatization program, by more than doubling it, six months into the 'trial' and prior to the release of the report contrary to assurances that he would not do so" said Mary Mulbah, President of the National Teachers Association of Liberia (NTAL).

Commenting on the report's findings of some improvements in student outcomes, Mary Mulbah said "whilst improvements in student learning outcomes are always welcome, the report shows that these "improvements" were achieved on the back of *increased funding ranging from 100% to 2000% more than public schools, including 37% more teachers.”*

“The improvement in student outcomes is due to the increased investment. We didn’t need an expensive trial to tell us there would be an increase in student outcomes given such an increase in resources. We have been calling on the government to increase its investment in education for years. The Liberian government's investment in education of 3.96% of GDP and 14.36% of the national budget falls well short of recommended levels of 6% of GDP and 20% of the national budget.”

“What is most disturbing is that in many instances the improved student outcomes were achieved by pushing out students from schools on the “trial” denying children access to their local schools. In some cases, this has resulted in children being left out of school” added Mary Mulbah. Bridge International Academies, the government's preferred private operator, is the subject of particular criticism in the report.

As one of eight actors participating in the pilot program, Bridge International Academies was desperate to show that its model for school management is the future of education.

Unfortunately for Bridge, the facts and figures are in and it doesn’t look good for the company bankrolled by the likes of Pearson, the World Bank, DfID, Bill Gates and Facebook’s Mark Zuckerberg. The report, detailing the progress of the PSL, pulls few punches when taking a closer look at Bridge’s financial operations, behavior and lack of sustainability.

Under the PSL, the Liberian Government matches its investment per pupil, which is currently US$50, and hands it over to the private contractor to independently manage its public schools to see if this model presents a sustainable method to improving its education system.

However, when it comes to Bridge the numbers just don’t add up. According to the report, Bridge has spent an average of US$1,052 per pupil, shattering any possibility that its own financial model is sustainable.

With its billionaire funders footing the bill, Bridge has gone to any length to try and convince the public that it has the answer to quality education.

Yet, compared to other providers, student gains at Bridge managed schools were not as cost effective. Bridge also saw a decrease in enrolments. When it came to ensuring education for all students, Bridge found a way to skirt the rules. Not having to abide by the same contractual obligations as the other pilot participants, Bridge quickly moved to cap class sizes in its schools, pushing out thousands of students.

In addition to pushing out students, Bridge also purged 74% of existing teachers from classrooms. This behavior, all under the supervision of Minister Werner, reveals the desperate unethical measures that Bridge is prepared to undertake in order to sell its failed ideology to unsuspecting students, parents and business partners.

The government report vindicates the ***demand of National Teachers' Association of Liberia (NTAL)*** *and civil society organizations that the government immediately abandon the PSL program. The study has shown that Liberia must look within to improve its education system rather than selling it off to highest bidder who does not have free, quality public education at its core.*

If sustainability and a quality education system that serves all children is the goal, then Minister Werner and Bridge have failed its most important test.

"Outsourcing our most sacred duty to unaccountable for-profit education companies like Bridge has been exposed as a very costly private experiment" said Fred van Leeuwen, the General Secretary, Education International.

National Teachers' Association of Liberia (NTAL)