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POLICY BRIEF · THE GAMBIA

Does the Double-Shift Schooling System Affect Learning Outcomes? Evidence from The Gambia

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Key messages

Foundational Literacy (Primary Level):

- *Students in public primary Double Shift Schools (DSS) score poorly on the Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) compared to students in public primary Single Shift Schools (SSS).*
- *The negative impact is stronger for girls, students in grade 1 and those in the* Greater Banjul area which comprises the capital- Banjul and the Kanifing Municipality. *For instance, the impact on girls could be up to threefold higher than on boys.*
- *Converting public DSS to SSS can slightly improve students' foundational literacy skills, but the increase is very small—less than one extra correct letter on basic reading tasks.*

Higher-Order Learning Outcomes (High School Level):

- *Private high school students in DSS are at most 7% less likely to pass both English and Mathematics in the WASSCE than those in SSS.*
- *The negative impact is stronger for performance in English and for students in* the capital- Banjul and the Kanifing Municipality *region 1.*
- *Converting private DSS to SSS could increase national pass rates in English and Mathematics for private high schools from 24% to 31% or by up to 30%.*

Overview

In The Gambia and many developing countries, two main schooling shift systems operate: the SSS, where one group of students attends school all day, and the DSS, which divides the day into two shorter sessions to serve two distinct groups – one in the morning and another in the afternoon. The DSS has been instrumental in rapidly increasing access to education across all levels in The Gambia, enabling the government to accommodate growing student demand despite limited resources and infrastructure constraints.

However, despite its benefits, the DSS faces criticism for potentially contributing to declining student performance-especially in key exams like the West African Secondary School Certificate Examinations (WASSCE). So far, there is limited empirical evidence to confirm these claims or to measure the true impact of the DSS on learning outcomes. As The Gambia's Education Sector Policy 2016–2030 aims to phase out the double shifting of teachers and reduce the double shifting of classrooms by 2030, understanding its effects is vital for informed decision-making and strategic investment.

This study addresses critical evidence gaps regarding the trade-offs between expanding educational access through the DSS and maintaining learning quality-a central challenge in education policy across developing countries. By analyzing the effects of the DSS on learning outcomes at both foundational and secondary levels in public and private schools, the study provides essential insights to guide policymakers and stakeholders committed to balancing increased access with improved education quality.

About the study

This study uses two main data sources: Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) data for students in grades 1 to 3, and the WASSCE data for high school students. Since few private primary schools use the DSS, the analysis of early-

grade learning focuses only on public primary schools. At the high school level, the study looks only at private schools to understand how DSS affects more advanced learning skills.

Instead of providing a single estimate, the study explores a range of possible effects of attending double-shift schools, showing both the best- and worst-case scenarios. This helps decision-makers understand the full scope of potential impacts even when data or evidence is limited or uncertain. The analysis also takes into account differences in student backgrounds and school types. For example, it assumes that within each school category (public or private), students in DSS schools generally do not perform better than those in single-shift schools, and that students from wealthier families tend to do better academically-findings that align with the data.

Key Findings

At the high school level, attending a private school operating under the DSS significantly lowers students' chances of passing the WASSCE exams in core subjects like English and Mathematics, as well as meeting the minimum university entry requirements. Meanwhile, in public primary schools, the DSS also negatively affects foundational literacy skills such as oral reading fluency, though this impact is very marginal when compared to the effect in private high schools.

Notably, the negative effects of DSS are more pronounced among girls, students in Region 1 (which comprises the capital- Banjul and the Kanifing Municipality), and grade 1 learners. English outcomes at the secondary level suffer more than Mathematics. This gender disparity echoes earlier research indicating that girls in DSS settings often face increased household chores and farm labor, especially in rural areas, which can hinder their academic progress.

Based on the findings, simply eliminating the DSS in public primary schools could improve standardized oral reading fluency scores and other literacy measures-such as the number of correct words and non-words read per minute-by less than one correct letter. At the secondary level, phasing out the DSS in private high schools could increase the percentage of students passing English and Mathematics by as much as 30%, with even larger gains in the share of students achieving five credits including these core subjects, which are the minimum requirements for university entry. The more pronounced effect observed in private schools, compared to public schools, is understandable given that private school expansion is often profit-driven, whereas public schools primarily focus on equitable access.

Conclusion

The findings of this study underscore the trade-offs inherent in the DSS: it effectively expands access and reduces class sizes, but often at the cost of reduced instructional quality and learning outcomes. Notably, the negative impact is more pronounced in private high schools than in public primary schools, suggesting that policy efforts to abolish DSS may yield greater learning gains if focused on the private secondary schools. Importantly, the benefits of DSS in expanding access and reducing costs remain substantial, and the trade-offs between access and quality must be carefully balanced.

Policy Recommendations

The variation in the impact of the DSS across school management and level by grade level, region and subject suggests that policy responses should be nuanced.

- **Acknowledge DSS's role in expanding access under budget constraints, while carefully managing trade-offs** between enrollment and learning outcomes.
- **Prioritize phasing out DSS in private secondary schools where** learning losses are most significant and proceed cautiously with reforms in public primary schools.
- **Implement targeted, gender-sensitive support programs and after-school initiatives** to address the disproportionate negative impact of DSS on girls and underserved regions.
- **Invest in teacher training, improved school facilities, and parental engagement** to enhance learning quality alongside expanding access within DSS schools.
- **Strengthen evidence collection, monitoring, and data transparency systems** to evaluate DSS reforms effectively and support adaptive, evidence-based policymaking.

References

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Figure 1: Potential Gains in Foundational Literacy Skills in Public Primary Schools if DSS is Eliminated

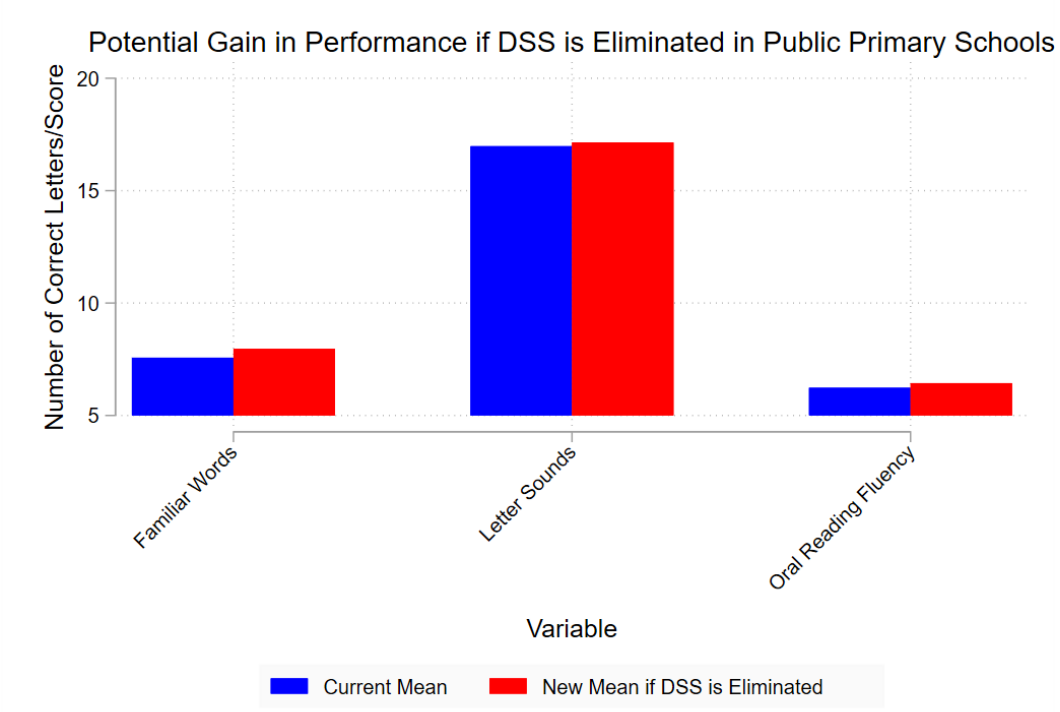
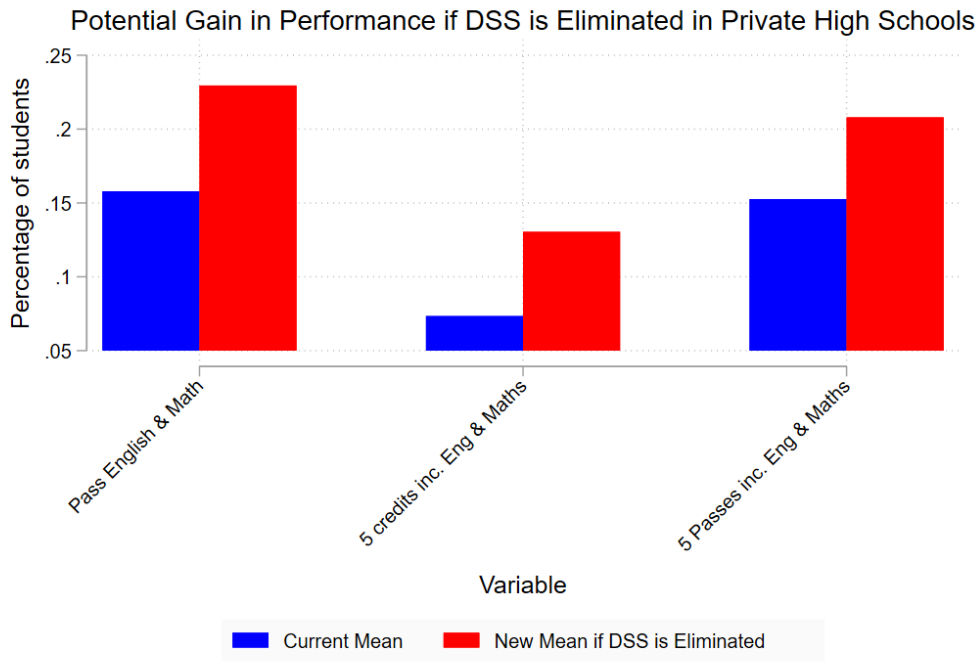


Figure 2: Potential Gains in learning outcomes in Private High Schools if DSS is Eliminated



About this brief

This brief is based on the AFEP Working Paper *Double-Shift Schooling System and Learning Outcomes: A Nonparametric Bounds Analysis* (Jallow, 2025).

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