



REVALITE



Harnessing Liberia's Potential Demographic Dividend: *The Education that Works*

WAINRIGHT ACQUOI
BRIMA BANGURA
LIMA SARHADI
MORGAN WACK

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The following individuals duly share the credits for this project, serving in various key roles from the project design to implementation:

James Kollie, Field Supervisor, Liberia
George Obiado, Research Assistant
Lexandine Taylor, Research Assistant
Lauren Sesay, Research Assistant
Solomon Mahn, Research Assistant
Jacob Doe, Research Assistant
Jallah Sumbo, Research Assistant
Elvis Browne, Research Assistant
Joseph M. Worlo, Enumerator
Rashida Giseay, Enumerator
Christian Quiah, Graphic Designer
Rye Nacasi, Graphic Designer

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

By 2034, Africa is projected to be home to a working-age population of over 1.1 billion, eclipsing the equivalent populations in both China and India (*McKinsey, 2016*). Fortunately for these prospective workers, the growth of Africa's economy in the twenty-first century has been rapid, particularly within regional hubs, providing the continent with an "economic pulse and new commercial vibrancy" (*McKinsey 2010:1*). Yet, despite this growth, the continued expansion of Africa's bulging working class threatens to undermine these gains. Though not inherently detrimental to development, this youth bulge is projected to produce a distorted dependency ratio that leaves a larger portion of the continent's workforce without the skills necessary to access Africa's newfound riches. In order to avoid this outcome, innovative economic and educational programs need to be implemented to ensure that Africa's youth are prepared to excel within twenty-first-century economies (*Lin, 2012*). The outcome of these ongoing efforts will determine the level of sustainability of Africa's rapid growth and budding commercial vibrancy.

More than 60% of Liberia's population under the age of 35 (*de Mel, Elder et al. 2013:1*). While these demographics could be advantageous, current deficiencies in the provision of education have stunted the country's growth and threatened its future, with Liberian society struggling to adequately provide its youth with the skills and resources necessary to unleash local creativity and entrepreneurship. As a result of these constraints, Liberia has struggled to create the businesses and markets necessary to employ its post-secondary population (*World Bank, 2010:1*). Amidst this backdrop of unemployment and constrained capacity, even the most promising efforts by industrious youth to embrace contemporary economic markets through personal ventures have often been undermined by the insufficiency of local infrastructure and resources (*Lindberg, 2014*). In response to these limitations, previous joint efforts by both the public and private sectors have attempted to improve the quality of local education and capital markets across the country (*UNESCO, 2011*). While these programs have been partially successful in establishing a foundation for local development, the aims of these programs have failed to keep pace with the demands of the modern workforce. As a result, progress and momentum have lagged, signaling that the country's distribution of resources is suboptimal for the development of Liberia's next generation.

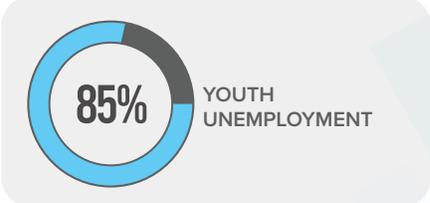
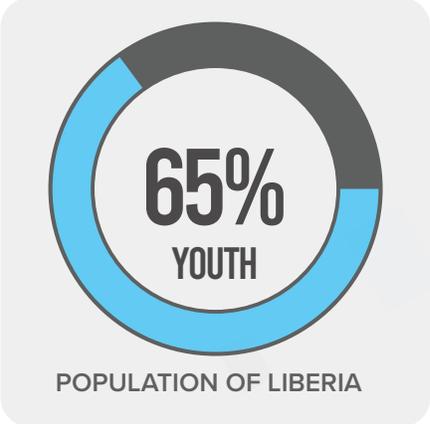
In this report, we highlight what these circumstances mean for the economic future of Liberia by analyzing the gaps extant within the country's education and employment framework. Using this assessment as a platform, we integrate data from qualitative interviews and quantitative surveys to establish a roadmap to lead Liberia away from escalating unemployment and depreciating welfare and toward improvements in local learning outcomes and sustainable economic development.

INTRODUCTION AND PROBLEM SCENARIO

Liberia is still rebuilding after its fourteen-year civil war. In its aftermath, it has become evident that one of the most devastating casualties of the war was the collapse of the nation’s education system. Schools are not equipping students with relevant skills to become employable.

Defining “youth” as those 15 to 35 (Lindberg, 2014), Liberian youth comprise 65% of Liberia’s 4.7 million population (ibid). Of this growing youth population, estimates place youth unemployment as high as 85% (Dunmore, 2013). Though the 2010 Liberian Labor Force Survey reported a lower number overall, both estimates underscore the severity of youth unemployment in Liberia. Worse still, Lindberg (2014) found that even among employed youth, about 76.9% were either self-employed or facing job insecurity. Collectively, this contributes to estimates that suggest that nearly 80% of employed Liberian youth could be considered underutilized labor (de Mel, Elder et al. 2013).

While the late 20th Century civil war contributed to the deterioration in Liberian living standards, the dilapidated state of the nation’s economy and public institutions cannot entirely be attributed to conflict. The weaknesses in Liberian institutions are most evident within the nation’s education system, which, having approached near-total collapse in recent decades, has indirectly devastated the nation’s post-graduate workforce (Alsemeiry et al. 2019). Studies have shown that a nation’s post-development, comprising employment and economic well-being, is directly related to potential access to quality education and productivity (Burgess, 2016). In order to deliver on the many promises of the country’s post-conflict governments, politicians, acting mainly through the education ministry, hold a crucial responsibility to bring Liberian schools into the 21st Century (UNESCO, 2011).



METHODOLOGY

In countries with disproportionately large youth populations, such as Liberia, the productivity of recent high school graduates is amplified within the larger economy. In order to turn Liberia’s deficiencies in employment and productivity into its strengths, we focused our study on gaps in pre-employment institutions and systems in order to identify how education frameworks can be updated to work for all Liberians.

Based on initial interviews with prominent stakeholders in Liberia’s education and business sectors, it became evident that there exists a widespread belief within the country that local education systems and schools are failing to prepare students to flourish as productive employees. In order to determine if these concerns were grounded in local realities, we conducted a series of quantitative analyses aimed at determining the association between the quality of Liberian education and success in the contemporary workforce.

	30	STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS LOCAL EMPLOYERS, PRACTITIONERS, EXPERTS, PUBLIC OFFICIALS
	189	STUDENTS GRADE 9 TO 12
	15	10 TEACHERS, 5 ADMINISTRATORS
	5	SCHOOLS CONVENIENCE AND TRUE RANDOM SAMPLING

For the purpose of this report, we measured workforce success through the quantification of an individual’s quality of education, employment outcomes, and their knowledge of the professional skills recommended for workers to excel in the modern global economy (*World Economic Forum, 2018*). In addition to these underlying outcomes, we also included in our analyses a constructed list of the hard skills necessary for professional success as identified through observation and interviews with local stakeholders.

In addition to the expert interviews, these student surveys enabled us to examine internal school efficiencies, curricula development processes, and learning framework design, ensuring our assessment of education quality was robust across a variety of outputs.

We also surveyed an additional eighty-five post-secondary youth from within the local workforce to highlight which factors play the largest role in influencing post-secondary employment. To supplement this primary data, we conducted secondary research involving the review of forty professional papers regarding youth unemployment, workforce development, education, and economic activities to ensure our report incorporated a holistic understanding of the most detrimental barriers to sustained national development and individual success.

LIMITATION OF THE RESEARCH

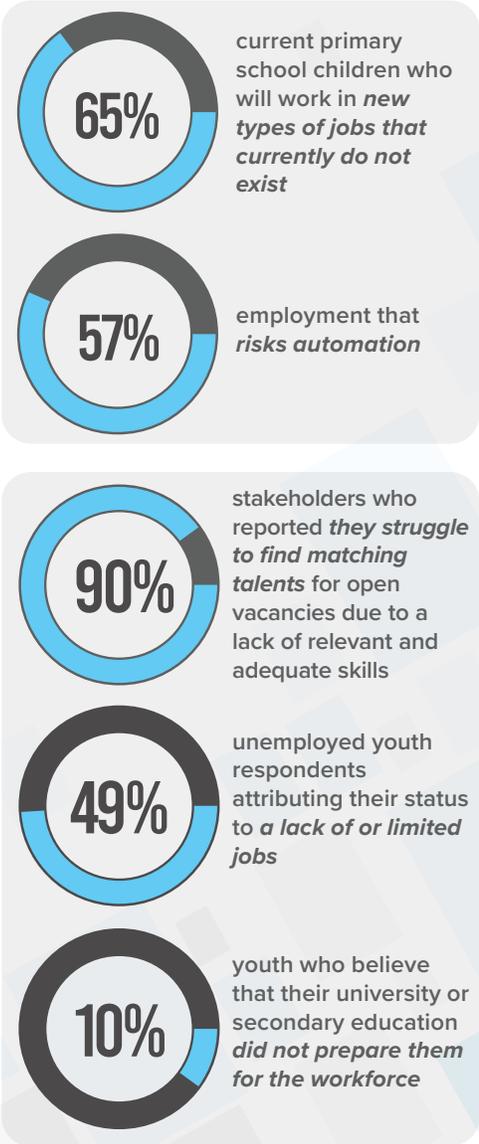
For the purpose of this report, we limit our findings to the *curricula framework for improving learning outcomes to guarantee students' success*. Additionally, we have outlined further limitations of our report: our limited sample of schools and students and organizations makes generalizations about the overall problem problematic. A lack of available and accurate data from outside sources limited the background information included in our study of systemic factors.

THE PROBLEM LANDSCAPE: THE CHALLENGE OF LIBERIA'S EDUCATION AND ITS FAILED PROMISE OF WELFARE

The Promise of No Ordinary Disruption

We are in the middle of the fourth industrial revolution, a period where improvements in information-based technology is expanding at an unprecedented rate. The intense advancement, scale, and impact of technology has been instrumental in redefining trends and structures. Sixty-five percent of current primary school children will work in new types of jobs that currently do not exist, while 57% of employment risk automation (*World Economic Forum, 2018*). In this rapidly changing workforce, schools and systems must be equipping students with the relevant skills to thrive in the uncertain future of work. Stable and well-paid jobs significantly increase the chances of poverty eradication (*Acumen, 2019*).

Over 90% of our stakeholders reported that they struggle to find matching talents for open vacancies due to a lack of relevant and adequate skills. In comparison, 49% of our unemployed youth respondents attributed their status to a lack of or limited jobs. A further 10% believe that their university or secondary education did not prepare them for the workforce. There is a clear mismatch between the skills schools are teaching students and the workforce demand.



THE LEARNING CRISIS: EDUCATION AND THE INTERSECTION OF CROSS FUNCTIONAL ECONOMIC GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT

For the purpose of this report, we advocate for transformational education, in which both teaching and learning align to develop students' cognitive, socio-emotional and behavioral skills and abilities. As Liberia's progress toward quality education goals has stalled, the necessary link connecting quality education and productive employment has remained equally tenuous. As a result, Liberia has struggled to deliver on other key growth and welfare indicators. The complex challenges borne of failings in education are a function of:



1. Poor learning frameworks and outcomes
2. Unproductive education systems
3. Inadequate school structures

Poor Learning Framework and Outcomes

STUDENTS ARE NOT LEARNING

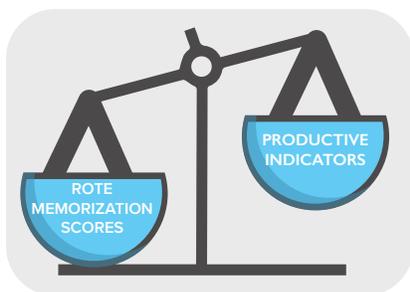
85% of the stakeholders in our study acknowledged that Liberian students are not learning the essential skills necessary to succeed in the modern workforce. According to the country's leading professionals, there is a lack of motivation and inadequate resources within the Liberian Government and Education Ministry to facilitate students in developing the right mindset in the classroom, and applying their knowledge as productive resources as graduates.



Echoing the most ominous outcomes of previous research on the nation's education system, our study suggests that students at both secondary and college levels do not come out of Liberian schools with skills necessary to succeed, with students in our high school survey confident on average in only 36% of their taken classes.

LEARNING OUTCOMES ARE INADEQUATELY MEASURED

Both the qualitative and quantitative results of our study suggest that the nation's schools measure learning outcomes based on rote memorization scores rather than on productive indicators. Worse still, there is little to no established monitoring and evaluation of learning outcomes and students' development. The abhorrent lack of data poses a great threat to understanding the depth of Liberia's learning crisis and interventions. Little to no data exists to track both school and national level indicators, from learning objectives to learning performance and learning outcomes.



CURRICULUM ARE OUTDATED

All schools follow the Ministry of Education's required curriculum, with a limited number of schools incorporating external learning resources into their curricula to aid student development. Based on our interviews with students, graduates, and professionals, it became evident that the government's current school curriculum is widely perceived as being outdated and insufficient. This finding has been substantiated by recent evidence suggesting that the national curriculum has been updated only once in the past decade, accounting in part for gaps in graduate knowledge of essential technologies (*Latim Da-thong, Personal Communication, January 25, 2020*). Worse still, when compared to the skills recommended for future success by the World Economic Forum (2018), a list which includes skills such as communications, creativity, problem-solving, critical thinking, technology, collaboration, negotiation, the flagging dynamism of the national education system and domestic curriculum portends long-term stagnation among the country's post-graduate workforce.

DEMOTIVATED AND UNTRAINED TEACHERS

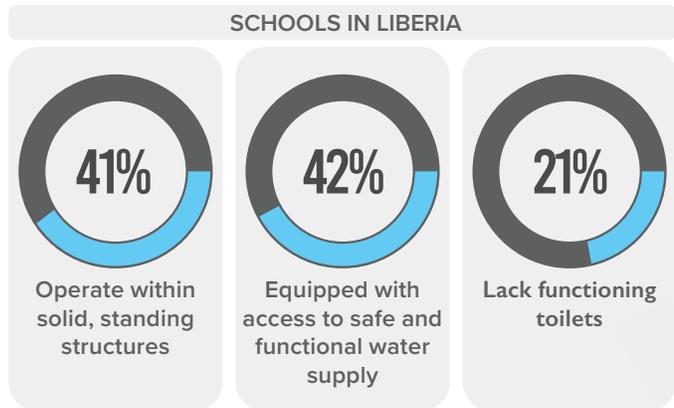
The International Labor Organization (2018) reports that for millions of people worldwide, merely obtaining a job does not guarantee the job-seeker economic security. This is the case for most Liberian teachers. Employment for many teachers offers returns that often fail to cover the baseline costs of weekly food, transportation, and communications. As a result of these low wages, teachers often lack motivation, hindering long term student development. These trends are reflected in our data, in which three in every four Liberian teachers reported having to take on more than one teaching job to provide for their families. These deficiencies have depressed the teaching pool writ large, leading the state to cut corners to fill classrooms. As a result, one in every three of Liberia's 55,243 active teachers doesn't possess the necessary qualifications to teach (*Kesselly, 2018*).



Inadequate School Structures

POOR SCHOOL AND LEARNING CONDITIONS

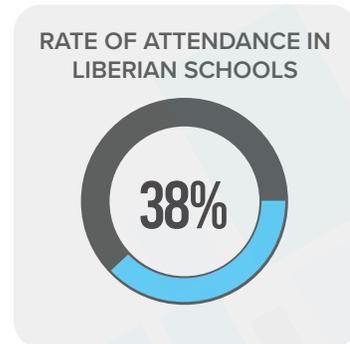
There are 1.49 million students and 5,438 schools across Liberia (Kesselly, 2018). Enrollment rates vary according to the location, access, and school affordability. Only 41% of schools operate within solid, standing structures, while only 42% are equipped with access to safe and functional water supply (Kesselly 2018). An additional 21% of schools lack functioning toilets (Kesselly, 2018). Studies have found that quality



curriculum and infrastructures are crucial in determining how much “students can learn, how long they stay in school, and how regularly they attend” (UNESCO, 2005). Without these fundamental inputs, it is unsurprising that both computer and science laboratories remain an out-of-reach luxury for many Liberian students. Even within the few schools in possession of these tools, they are often not fully equipped to accommodate student acquisition of relevant technical skill sets.

Unproductive Education System

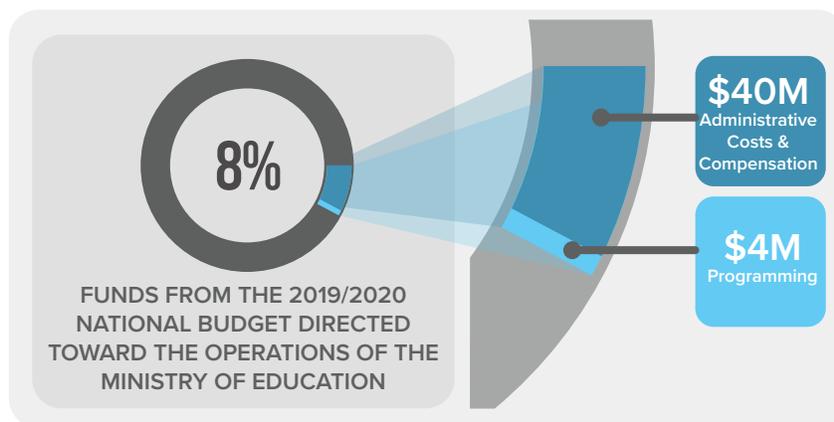
Enrollment remains a major challenge for Liberian schools, with rates of attendance suggested to be an appalling 38% (UNESCO 2015). The students privileged enough to be considered students struggle with limited access to relevant materials and inadequate infrastructure, which directly disrupts the quality of their education (UNESCO, 2018).



Even when students are able to attend, based on assessments conducted by the Ministry of Education, the standard of learning in Liberia fails to allow for the successful transition of high school students into higher education and the workforce (Latim Da-Thong, Personal Communication, January 25, 2020).

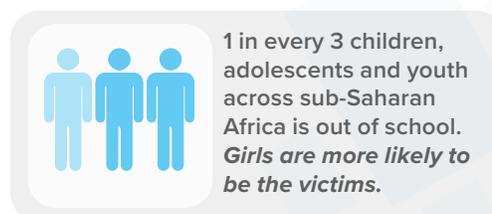
INADEQUATE INVESTMENT IN EDUCATION

The national budget does not prioritize adequate investment in education. The funds directed toward the operations of the Ministry of Education accounted for only about eight percent of the national budget in 2019/2020. Worse still, forty million out of the Ministry's forty-four million budget covers administrative costs and compensation, with a meagre four million dollars allocated towards programming (*Latim Da-Thong, Personal Communication, January 25, 2020*). The Ministry relies heavily on donor funding for programs and operations, often leading to disjointed efforts to train students that are underfunded and insufficiently managed.



GENDER GAP

One in every three children, adolescents and youth across sub-Saharan Africa is out of school. Girls are more likely to be the victims (*UNESCO, 2016*). Young girls are mostly not recognized for their skills and competence and as formidable candidates for the classrooms and employment, but sexual tools. Sexual harassment and sexual pleasures in return for grades and jobs are common concerns in both the education and employment settings (*Dr. Robtel Pailey, Personal Communication, February 2, 2020*). In addition to these challenges, our survey suggests that these gender inequalities persist after graduation, with male students ten percent more likely to find themselves employed in the two years following secondary graduation than their female counterparts.



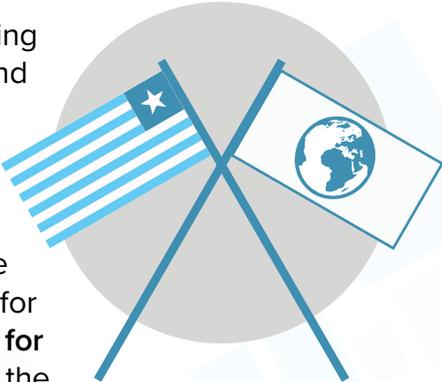
THE EMPLOYMENT NIGHTMARES

As a result of deficiencies in data collection and monitoring practices, our study was unable to find consistent definitions related to standards for workplace recruitment, limiting comparison between industries and creating further challenges for employers attempting to compare employee skills, track economic trends, and determine equitable wages. These issues have exacerbated recruitment from the country’s shallow talent pool. About 85% of our stakeholders acknowledged the lack of or limited standards for meritocracy in employment, where people are hired and not competent or qualified. All of the employers reported less than 15% of all of their applications usually meet the full recruitment criteria and qualification, and they spend a significant amount of time and resources training new hires, which becomes difficult, costly, and unproductive for the initial period.



ASSESSING THE SOLUTION LANDSCAPE: NARRATING THE STORIES OF THE SOLUTIONS AT WORK, AND EMPHASIZING THE NEED TO SCALE

The past decade has seen the rise of various efforts ranging from public policies to public-private partnerships and entrepreneurial solutions geared towards addressing the persistence of gaps in the education-employment nexus. The government of Liberia has invested in bilateral scholarship partnerships and foreign educational programs to students in fields that are not offered in Liberia to boost national capacity for development. Recently, the **Global Partnership for Education** promised the Ministry of Education that if the government can commit about 20% of its national budget to education, they will provide more funding to Liberia’s education (*Latim Da-Thong, Personal Communication, January 25, 2020*). Additionally, the leadership of the Ministry of Education conducted a nation-wide assessment of Liberia’s education systems, which they plan to use as the basis for the development of a new curriculum consisting of the skills and learning outcomes demanded by the contemporary workforce.



While these changes will help, deficiencies persist. As a result, organizations such as **SMART Liberia** have begun implementing programs to bridge the remaining skill and

employment gaps. The organization runs programs that prepare and match high school graduates with universities abroad to acquire quality education with the commitment of returning home to contribute to the system. Locally, **SMART Liberia** creates programs that equip young Liberians with relevant skills and match them with employment opportunities. Additionally, programs like the **PYPP (President's Young Professionals Program)** are preparing young Liberians to be effective public service officials in response to Liberia's capacity gap. The program recruits, trains, and places young professionals in public service roles, and provides continuous coaching and guidance that are crucial to their success.

Institutions like **Teach for Liberia** are addressing Liberia's teacher challenge and educational crisis by recruiting passionate college graduates or professionals, and providing them with tailored, high-quality training for placement in rural and urban primary schools for two years. Moreover, organizations like **KEEP Liberia** are continuing to offer varied educational support to Liberian primary students, promoting the culture of reading and comprehension through tailor programs across various schools in Liberia.

At the level of the educational institutions themselves, there are also systems like those run by the **Soltiamon Christian School System**. Soltiamon's system requires and teaches students to read and think critically from a young age, it offers effective advance planning to teachers, promotes mandatory student research and interactivity, and encourages students to take initiatives and be independent thinkers.

Employers including Shoana Cachelles (CEO, Cachelles International Creative Arts Center), Mahmud Johnson (CEO, J-Palm Liberia) and Roland Washington (CEO, The Kreative Zone) are recruiting local talents based on their abilities to be creative, innovative and work as a team in addition to being analytical and problem-solvers. These companies not only invest additional resources in preparing new recruits for new roles that align with the overall organizational values, but also continue to support their growth throughout the process.

GAPS AND LEVERS OF CHANGE

Gap : Lack of Collaboration and Investment

Lever of change : Build synergy among all stakeholders within the ecosystem

 POLICY	A law requiring at least 20% of national budget committed to education, with at least 40% of this commitment used for programming Increase the salary and benefits of teachers across the country
 GOVERNMENT	Subsidize local organizations and programs that are working to address the education-employment nexus and replicate the program across Liberia
 DONORS	Avoid quick impact solutions; Prioritize and invest in programs addressing systemic issues offering long-term benefits, impact
 EMPLOYERS	Partner with and offer financial investment to local solutions addressing the workforce challenge and outsource training and recruitment Invest in female recruitment, development, and retainment and provide a safe space for their growth
 SCHOOLS	Form relationships with employers, conduct market assessment; Facilitate students' placement post-graduation
 ORGANIZATIONS	Build relationships with employers, assess workforce demands and trends; Leverage insights to build programs relevant to employers' demands
 STUDENTS	Pursue mentorship and career development opportunities available through various networks

Gap : Mindset

Lever of change : Cultivate a mindset that education is a tool for social and economic freedom



POLICY

Address short-termism; mandate national education leaderships to prioritize and allocate resources to long-term systemic solutions, not short-term political mandates



GOVERNMENT

Complete or modify programs from past leaderships, don't create new priorities for each leadership.



EMPLOYERS

Functional systems; investment in personal development, not quick deliverables;

Provide resources to support the emotional and mental development of talents, in addition to work output



SCHOOLS

Cultivate a sense of entrepreneurial leadership and workforce preparation in students from young ages;

Recruit, train, and maintain teachers who have the values and skills to prepare students adequately;

Teach students to think critically and develop the drive to be curious and solve problems.



ORGANIZATIONS

Incorporate programs that build up the socio-emotional and behavioral skills of students, in addition to their cognitive abilities.



STUDENTS

Cultivate entrepreneurial, problem-solving mindset and invest time in personal development beyond the classroom

Gap : Outdated curriculum and lack of career development

Lever of change : Design curriculum and build programs that address contemporary demands and thrive through uncertainties



POLICY

Update national curriculum every three years;

Reduce the number of subjects for students to seven per class, math and English being required; students select the subjects that align with their career interests

Mandate all institutions of learning to integrate career development programs into their academic programs



GOVERNMENT

All schools must adopt the prescribed contemporary curriculum and ensure schools and teachers are effectively delivering on the learning objectives



EMPLOYERS

Offer career development opportunities to high schools students;

Facilitate students' development and successful transition into the workforce through internships, mentorships, and apprenticeship



SCHOOLS

Teach students skills that are relevant for the workforce;

Offer career development programs for students throughout their studies;

Reduce the number of subjects students take per year of study; align their course load to their career interests;

Ensure teachers are equipped to facilitate a collaborative and participatory class, not a teacher-centric class;

Encourage mentorship and internships within the learning system for students

Build and strengthen alumni system to foster mentorship, resource mobilization, and support towards the current student network



Offer career development and skill training to high school students;

Incorporate the workforce demand into the curriculum and program development processes

Facilitate mentorship for youth and students who participate in career development programs

Gap : Inadequate data and unmeasurable learning outcomes

Lever of change : Build and execute effective monitoring and evaluation systems across the education and employment industries



Create a policy to mandate all employers to frequently report on the state of affairs of their workforce



Conduct biennial monitoring and evaluation assessment on well-defined learning outcomes and the state of affairs of the Liberian education system



Conduct internal evaluations and publish public report on their state of workforce, skills demand, and career opportunities



Define clear learning objectives and outcomes for teachers and students, and develop an evaluation framework

Collect data on the defined learning indicators and track students' post-graduate performances, employment, or higher education



Define clear learning objectives and outcomes for career development programs

Conduct routine data collection from employers, schools, and students and leverage insights to design programs

FORMING THE NEXUS: THE EDUCATION THAT WORKS

Liberians of all ages have encountered the adage that “education is the key to success.” While, elsewhere in the world, few doubt its veracity, this statement has yet to become a reality for thousands of young Liberians who have lost hope in their nation’s education system and in their own potential to achieve success, social mobility, and economic freedom. In order for Liberians to reap the economic and social benefits associated with twenty-first century growth, the country needs to develop a holistic education system capable of shifting local mindsets and unleashing the potential of Liberia’s burgeoning workforce. Together, we can help the country achieve its lofty goals by utilizing modern education systems that enable Liberia to invest its bountiful domestic resources, labor, and talent to develop the cognitive, socio-emotional, and behavioral skills and abilities of young Liberians. As our report suggests, the road ahead for the country will be arduous, requiring political, economic, and social change. Yet, with robust education systems and institutions in place, the youth of Liberia will be granted – starting in high school – the skills and confidence necessary to help the country reestablish itself as a beacon of African prosperity.

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