

ACCRA, Ghana, September 12 - Ghana's president Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo on Tuesday launched his government's flagship free second cycle education programme in Accra with the pledge that it will not compromise on the quality of education.

“A key component of the policy must be the provision of quality education; the government is collaborating with various partners to implement major programmes and interventions such as the secondary education improvement programme, the expansion of physical infrastructure and free supply of core subject text books to students,” President Akufo-Addo said.

He added that the government was also working to improve upon the standard of teaching in the country through various programmes in collaboration with the UK Department for International Development (DfID).

President Akufo-Addo campaigned on free Senior High School (SHS) in the presidential election 2012 but lost. He campaigned on the same promise 2016 and won.

Second cycle schools reopened on Monday with some 400,000 students who qualified for admission expected to enjoy free tuition, textbooks, meals, library, admission, examination, uniforms and Students Representative Council (SRC) dues.

The government said to ensure the successful implementation of the policy, it has released 280 million Ghana cedis out of the 486 million required for the flagship programme. (US\$1=4.5 Ghana cedis.)

President Akufo-Addo said teachers were central to the achieving positive results from the programme hence government's interest in making sure they are adequately resourced to carryout their mandate.

Parents and guardians of first year students benefiting from the policy have since Monday thronged the various Senior High Schools (SHSs) across the country to register their children and wards.

Reports said though many parents expressed satisfaction with the efficiency of the process, some expressed worry that their children were to be day students, instead of boarders. Some were also not given their preferred courses.

Second cycle education in Ghana is for three years. Only the first year students are benefiting from the programme this academic year. The first and second year students will benefit next academic year while all students will benefit in the 2019/20 academic year

Critics of the programme have since 2012 said the government could not bear the cost. Further, critics are still saying today that the full cost has yet to be made public. They add that given many other promises by government such as one factory for each of the 2016 districts, US\$1 million for each of the 275 constituencies and one dam for every village in northern Ghana, the free education policy could be in danger.

The Minority National Democratic Congress (NDC) in Parliament cautioned that the SHS policy was not sustainable as there was no guaranteed funding to support its implementation.

Besides, it said, the policy was not equitable as second and third year students were exempted from enjoying free education.

At a press conference in Accra on Monday, the Minority Leader, Mr Haruna Iddrisu, said the free SHS policy in its current state would affect the quality of secondary education and make the students poorer.

"The Free SHS policy is not sustainable, equitable and will jeopardise the future of secondary education in the country," he said.

He, therefore, asked the government to build consensus with stakeholders on how to increase its coverage and make it sustainable.

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