



MANAGING THE BUSINESS OF EDUCATION: LIBERIA CLEANS UP ITS TEACHER PAYROLL, 2015-2017

BACKGROUND

In 2015, over a decade after the end of a devastating civil war, Liberia’s government school system was failing its students. Teacher payrolls included many ghost workers (teachers who never showed up for their jobs or were fraudulently included on the payroll) as well as teachers who lacked even basic qualifications.

George Werner, who became Liberia’s education minister in 2015, had to reestablish control over the education ministry’s payroll – not just the bottom-line numbers but the identities and qualifications of every person on it. The ministry also had to identify teachers who had exceeded the mandatory retirement age of 65 and were holding jobs that could go to new, better-trained instructors.

The education ministry had little knowledge of who was on its payroll. During the war, the government had created a “supplementary” payroll next to the existing “general” and “regular” payrolls to compensate community members who stepped in to ensure that classes continued. In practice, the distinctions between the payrolls and categories quickly blurred. The existence of three parallel yet interlinked payrolls aggravated problems of corruption and poor control. To overcome the lack of control, the ministry had to create one integrated payroll that was disaggregated by school, district, and county.

To streamline the system, the ministry needed to coordinate with the Civil Service Agency, which had to authorize any changes. Just as important was coordination with the National Teachers’ Association of Liberia, a statutory body that represented most of the country’s more than

19,000 paid public-school teachers. The ministry also had to work with district and county education officers who oversaw school administration.

REFORM STRATEGY

Fixing the problem required the ministry to design and implement a credible system for vetting teacher identities and qualifications. The ministry needed a system that could integrate mounds of information into a comprehensive, detailed, and accessible framework. Werner’s team also hoped to issue new biometric identity cards to all salaried teachers.

A pilot project in three countries, financed by the US Agency for International Development, provided a path forward. In February 2016, Big Win Philanthropy approved a US\$1 million grant to scale-up the program across the entire country.

Werner decided to go beyond just checking qualifications. Following a series of meetings between ministry officials, advisers from the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, and representatives of Big Win, he decided to incorporate mandatory competency testing for all teachers – paid and unpaid – alongside the process of vetting qualifications by checking paperwork. The tests aimed to identify salaried teachers who lacked competence or required retraining, and also to identify talented volunteer teachers who lacked formal qualifications but who could go for training.

Another important step was to create a project implementation unit. The ministry hired four people, each on a 12-month contract. Werner

also seconded in-house support staff from the ministry.

ACTIONS TAKEN

With the official launch of the teacher vetting and testing project in July 2016, the implementation team's first challenge was to secure buy-in from two crucial stakeholders: The Civil Service Agency and the National Teachers' Association. The Civil Service Agency initially did not see the vetting project as part of its responsibility, arguing that it was up to individual ministries to ensure that personnel listings were accurate.

Werner's ministry went directly to the finance ministry to lobby for support. Werner's team took its lobbying to another level by going to the finance ministry. The team informed the finance minister that the government could save up to US\$7.5 million per year through payroll reform. The team also relayed to the Civil Service Agency and the finance ministry that Liberia's president agreed that the funds recovered would be earmarked for reinvestment in education. The agency agreed to cooperate

Next, the team turned to the teachers' association. The association's main concerns were that no teacher should be fired summarily based on the outcome of competency testing, that those who failed but held at least a high school qualification should receive training, and that the government should pay adequate to any teachers who lost their jobs. Despite initial resistance, the teachers' association agreed to the planned vetting and testing, and the ministry agreed to provide future training opportunities to all teachers deemed trainable, and severance packages to others.

Werner's team created a database that allowed users to see the big picture as well as to focus on specific schools, districts, and counties. After a teacher's fingerprints were digitally scanned, a computer would generate a unique enrollment number. Using the same number, the team would upload information – including digital copies of documents – to the corresponding file in the database. The cost of setting up the system was minimal because the team used the ministry's

existing computer systems and worked with the in-house IT specialist to design the platform. Once completed, the ministry could use the database for professional development and to track replacements and transfers between schools.

After completion of countrywide vetting and testing, education officers in each of the 15 counties would gain access to the database. Those officers would update the system whenever a teacher was hired, transferred, or otherwise changed status.

The team's next task was to inform teachers about the planned project. The education ministry produced a series of radio spots, distributed flyers at schools, and engaged with community leaders and county authorities during town hall meetings.

Teachers from each school received assignments telling them when and where their vetting and testing would take place. The vetting process began when school principals submitted personnel lists to the project team. The team then compared each principal's list to lists submitted separately by district and county education officers. If principals and local officials could not explain why a name appeared on one list and not on the other, the name moved to the "ghost worker" category. When a team identified a ghost worker, they submitted a name to the agency for removal from the payroll.

The competency test, designed by the education ministry, contained two papers, one on mathematics and the other on English. Both tests included questions on teaching methods. The tests were mandatory only for salaried teachers, but the ministry recommended that volunteers who did well on the test but lacked formal qualifications should attend a teacher training institute and then apply for formal positions. Volunteers who scored well *and* held teaching qualifications would be in line to replace ghost workers on the payroll.

Teachers submitted their credentials to the vetting team. It was particularly important to confirm dates of birth and the exact spellings of names in order to stop the practice where some teachers received salaries made out in someone else's name. Those who submitted fake documents were given up to two months to provide the proper documentation before their

names were submitted to the Civil Service Agency for removal from the payroll. The team also regularly encountered qualified teachers who were older than the mandatory retirement age of 65.

Teachers who submitted all of the required documents had their fingerprints scanned and were issued special biometric ID cards.

In an effort to curb fraud, the team carried out follow-up spot checks a few weeks after completing the vetting process, in order to identify any ghost workers who slipped through the net.

RESULTS

The vetting exercise generated some immediate payoffs, while the benefits of the competency tests would take longer to materialize. By February 2018, the education ministry had vetted the qualifications of almost all the country's estimated 19,500 teachers, while 14,237 wrote the competency test (teachers past retirement age and those identified as ghosts did not write the test). The ministry, working with the Civil Service Agency, removed 83% of 2,046 ghost teachers identified through the payroll cleaning exercises. The remaining 17% were identified during the last

six months of the project, and the ministry planned to remove them soon. The removal of ghost teachers generated US\$2.3 million of annual savings that opened spaces for new teachers in the school system and budget. The ministry expected this number to increase to US\$3.1 million when there were no longer any ghost teachers on the payroll.

As a result of the space created on the payroll, the ministry hired 1,371 newly-trained teachers. That meant 80,000 additional students – over 10% of public school pupils – who previously had a ghost teacher now had access to a real one who not only showed up for class but was qualified to teach. The project also revealed that more than 1,000 teachers older than the mandatory retirement age of 65 were still on the payroll at an estimated annual cost of US\$2 million.

Problems with the biometric machines meant that the team fell short of its initial goal of capturing biometric information on all bona fide teachers who had the requisite qualifications.

Both the vetting and testing exercises equipped officials with much-needed data for future policy decisions.

LESSONS LEARNED

- **Gaining top-level support facilitates coalition-building and buy-in.** Werner's team used the potential money saved to assure the support of the president and finance minister, which helped gain the cooperation of other institutions.
- **Do what is possible with existing resources.** Building the database with existing education ministry resources kept costs low and made the project more appealing to external donors.
- **Good data collection and database design leads to better policymaking.** The vetting and testing project gave the government, for the first time, a clear idea of the number of teachers it needed to hire and the level of competence among existing teachers.

For related interviews and in-depth analysis of teacher payroll cleanup in Liberia, read the full case study: [Managing the Business of Education: Liberia Cleans Up Its Teacher Payroll, 2015–2017](#).

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