

EDUCATION



Fixing Nigeria's Foundational Learning Crisis

Curriculum Reform, Institutional Alignment and Political Feasibility

Chinaza Igwe

Issues in the News

- Health Workers Suspend 84 Days Strike After Deal With FG
- 34,060 Obtain Credit in Mathematics, English NABTEB Result
- US Sending 200 Troops to Train Nigeria's Military
- NAPTIP Rescues 23 Nigerians From Thailand

Regional Update

- Benin's Private Sector Launches 2026 Economic Recovery
- Chad Receives N15 Million Support For Economy
- Niger: Over 47,000 Rounds and Significant Arsenal Seized in Diffa
- Cameroon at Risk of Debt Distress

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Cover Image: A primary school pupil solves a numeracy problem on the chalkboard under her teacher's guidance.

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Executive Summary

Nigeria has expanded access to schooling over the past two decades, yet foundational learning outcomes remain alarmingly weak. Only 32% of Primary 3 pupils meet the national literacy benchmarks, and 28% meet the national numeracy benchmarks. In practical terms, millions of children cannot read and comprehend an age-appropriate text by age 10, which is the internationally recognised threshold for foundational learning.

In a country experiencing one of the world's fastest rates of population growth, this trend represents significant structural risks to human capital development and long-term economic stability. Weak foundational learning constrains productivity, entrenches inequality, depresses lifetime earnings, and weakens fiscal sustainability.

Nigeria's learning deficits reflect systemic misalignment across language policy, curriculum design, teacher incentives, assessment frameworks, and federal-state governance.

This policy brief advances a sequenced reform strategy grounded in political feasibility and institutional realism, structured as follows:

- Early-grade language alignment pilots with structured transition to English.
- Flexible curriculum frameworks that allow state-level contextual adaptation.
- Incremental assessment and teacher incentive reform aligned with learning outcomes.

Reform should begin with state-led pilots supported by robust monitoring and evaluation, before scaling nationally.

With disciplined sequencing, fiscal realism, and vertical coordination, Nigeria can move from expanding enrolment to securing foundational learning.

Diagnosing Nigeria's Learning Crisis

Weak Foundational Outcomes

To understand the scale and implications of Nigeria's learning crisis, it is necessary first to examine foundational literacy and numeracy outcomes among primary school pupils.

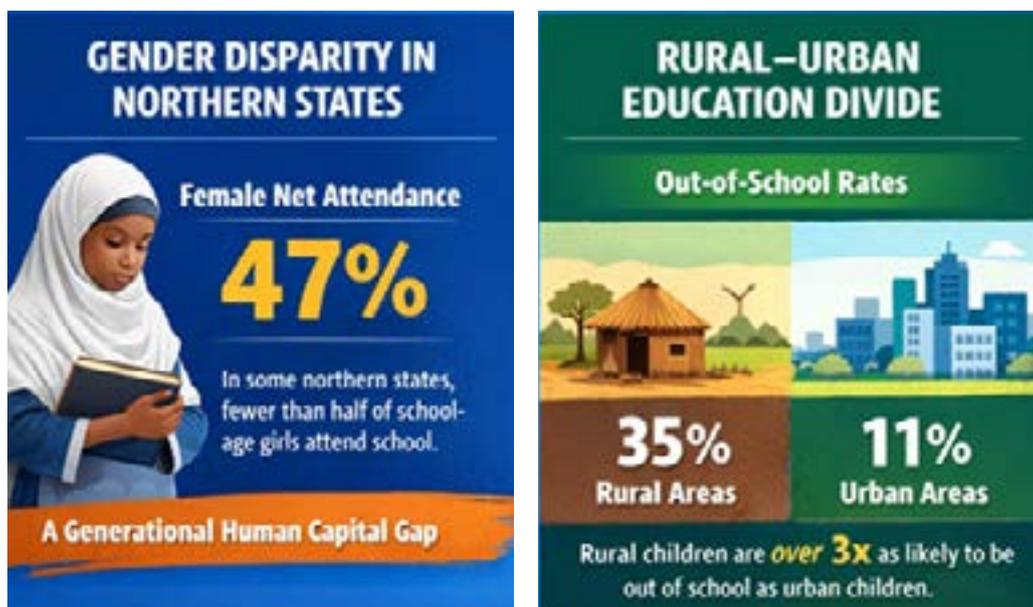
Despite improved enrolment rates, learning outcomes remain poor. The 2022 National Assessment of Learning Outcomes reported that only 32% of Primary 3 pupils met literacy benchmarks, and 28% met numeracy benchmarks. Many children in low-income households cannot read age-appropriate texts by age 10. This development reinforces learning poverty and limits future labour-market participation.

Regional and Socio-Economic Disparities

Learning outcomes in Nigeria are not uniform; they vary sharply across regions and socio-economic groups, reflecting underlying inequities in access and resources.

For example, female net attendance in some northern states is as low as 47%. Rural primary out-of-school rates reach 35%, compared with 11% in urban areas. Gender disparities are pronounced in parts of the North West, where literacy outcomes for girls trail those of boys by double-digit percentage points. States with lower per-pupil expenditure (often below N45,000 annually) consistently underperform in literacy and numeracy relative to higher-spending states.

These inequalities are not incidental; they reflect structural differences in fiscal capacity, teacher availability, and local administrative competence. Reform, therefore, must be geographically targeted and fiscally realistic. It should prioritise underserved regions while addressing systemic inequities.



Institutional Misalignment: The Core Problem

Beyond raw access, systemic misalignments in language policy, curriculum design, and teacher incentives exacerbate Nigeria's learning crisis. Each of the following institutional constraints plays a critical role in limiting foundational learning.

● Language of Instruction Misalignment

Only a small proportion of early primary pupils receive instruction in a familiar indigenous language, despite policy support for mother-tongue education. Nigeria's linguistic diversity creates logistical and teacher-training challenges, yet international and local evidence indicates that early instruction in a familiar language significantly improves comprehension.

A quasi-experimental study in Bauchi, for example, found that mother-tongue instruction increased early-grade literacy by 12 percentage points after one academic year. While replication at scale remains limited, the evidence suggests that language alignment is foundational to learning gains. Pragmatically, Early comprehension must precede formal English proficiency.

● Curriculum Rigidity and Limited Local Relevance

Nigeria's national curricula are standardised and content-heavy. While uniform standards ensure national coherence, they constrain the integration of locally grounded examples and project-based learning. Abstract content often bears little relation to regional economies or civic realities. The result is disengagement and limited application of knowledge.

The reform implication is that core national standards should coexist with structured flexibility for local contextualisation.

● Incentive and Accountability Misalignment

Assessments prioritise examination performance over applied understanding. Teacher incentives are linked more to certification and formal compliance than to classroom-level learning outcomes. Responsibilities are fragmented across federal ministries, curriculum bodies, state boards, and examination authorities.

This misalignment weakens accountability and reinforces exam-oriented instruction. Hence, Pedagogy, assessment, and teacher incentives must be aligned with foundational learning outcomes.

Federalism and Governance Constraints

Structural features of Nigeria's federal system shape both the opportunities and constraints for effective curriculum reform.

At the federal level, the Federal Ministry of Education and NERDC set curriculum frameworks and standards, while UBEC coordinates funding and monitoring. States, which own and operate the vast majority of public primary schools manage teacher deployment and school operations through SUBEBs and ministries of education. Of the roughly 65,529 public primary schools in Nigeria, only about 104 are federal, with the rest under state authority.

Per-student educational expenditure varies widely across Nigerian states, and overall spending remains low by international standards; states on average spent only N6,981 per student in 2024, and not a single state exceeded N20,000 per person, highlighting sharp disparities in resource allocation and implementation.

In Nigeria's federal system, curriculum reform is less a technical redesign exercise than a coordination and capacity challenge. Without vertical alignment and state-level ownership, national reforms risk remaining aspirational.

Lessons from Comparable Reform Contexts

Looking abroad, Nigeria can draw lessons from countries that have attempted large-scale curriculum reforms, particularly in contexts with complex governance and diverse student populations.

Table: Key Lessons and Reform Pathways for Addressing Nigeria’s Foundational Learning Crisis

Country	Reform Focus & Highlights	Key Challenges	Implementation Outcomes	Lessons for Nigeria
South Africa	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Curriculum decolonisation • African languages • Revised pedagogy 	Curriculum instability; uneven teacher preparedness, political contestation; administrative complexity	Mixed outcomes, teacher workload increased	Reforms without sustained teachers’ capacity-building risk fatigue; political contestation must be anticipated
Kenya	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Skills, relevance, & community-linked learning • Competency-based curriculum 	Teacher overload; escalating costs; litigation; parental uncertainty	Some improvement linking learning to skills and livelihood; administrative and fiscal strains allowed rollout	Link curriculum to skills; sequence reforms; pilot interventions; manage teacher workload and parental expectations

Although national contexts differ, common structural patterns are evident in teacher capacity, political contestation, and fiscal constraints.

Distilled Lessons for Nigeria

- 1** Reform fatigue emerges without sustained teacher support.
- 2** Curriculum instability undermines credibility.
- 3** Fiscal realism determines durability.
- 4** Political economy resistance is predictable and manageable with sequencing.

Sequenced Policy Pathways

Based on the diagnosis, this brief proposes three interlinked policy pathways designed to strengthen foundational learning through phased, politically feasible interventions.

Option 1: Early-Grade Language Alignment Pilots

Early-grade language alignment addresses the critical gap in comprehension caused by instruction in unfamiliar languages

Political Economy

Rural communities may support such reforms, while urban middle-class parents and private schools may resist due to perceived labour-market advantages of English-medium instruction.

Mitigation

Phased implementation, clear communication of transition plans, and engagement with examination boards.

Key Indicators:

Early-grade literacy and numeracy outcomes, pupil engagement, and successful English transition rates.

Estimated Cost: N1.5–2 billion per state over three years, including teacher training and materials. This represents a modest fraction of aggregate state education budgets and could be co-financed through UBEC matching grants.

Responsible Institutions: SUBEB, UBEC

Option 2: Curriculum Relevance and Local Adaptation Framework

Curriculum flexibility enables local contextualisation while maintaining national standards, improving engagement and relevance.

Political Economy:

Relatively low resistance, though uptake may vary across states depending on capacity.

Mitigation:

Technical support to lower-capacity states and peer-learning networks.

Key Indicators:

Adoption rates of local modules, retention, and student engagement.

Responsible Institutions: NERDC, State Ministries of Education

Option 3: Assessment and Teacher Incentive Alignment

Assessment and teacher incentive reforms align pedagogy with learning outcomes, reinforcing accountability and classroom practice.

Political Economy

Potential resistance from examination bodies and elite schools accustomed to high-stakes testing.

Mitigation

Pilot non-high-stakes assessment components before full integration.

Key Indicators

Changes in classroom practice, assessment reliability, and teacher participation in aligned professional development.

Responsible Institutions: WAEC, NECO, FME

Fiscal and Feasibility Considerations



Estimated Incremental Cost for State-Level Pilots:

N1.5–2 billion per state over three years (including teacher training, instructional materials, and M&E).



National rollout of all three reforms would require approximately N150–200 billion over five years, contingent on federal–state co-financing and UBEC support.



Funding gaps may be addressed via UBEC grants, donor partnerships, and reallocation of existing state education budgets.



Reform feasibility depends on sequencing, not immediate scale

Recommendations: Implementation Roadmap

To translate the proposed policy pathways into measurable outcomes, implementation must be structured in sequenced phases, balancing pilot testing, capacity building, and national scaling.

1. Reframe reform around literacy, numeracy, and comprehension rather than symbolic curriculum expansion. Establish outcome targets and a communication strategy.
2. Roll out state-led pilots within existing institutional structures. Collect baseline and follow-up data. Use robust monitoring and evaluation to identify bottlenecks and refine implementation.
3. Adjust teacher training, professional development, and assessments to reinforce foundational learning objectives and institutionalise successful pilot components before scaling.

Cross-Cutting Priority: Political Economy Management

Alongside technical reforms, careful attention to political economy dynamics and robust monitoring are essential to secure sustainability and measurable outcomes.

Engage parents, teachers, examination authorities, and private schools from the outset; anticipate potential resistance; cultivate broad coalitions; and pace implementation realistically to prevent reform fatigue.

Monitoring and Scaling Benchmarks



Embed systematic M&E with robust quantitative indicators.



At least 80% teacher participation in training modules.



Standardise the uptake of a minimum 60% adoption of approved local curriculum modules per participating state.



Target 70% foundational literacy and numeracy proficiency in pilot states within five years.



Federal and State Responsibilities

Federal Level

- **NERDC/FME:** Lead curriculum revision, provide technical support, and set core learning standards.
- **UBEC:** Coordinate funding, provide M&E frameworks, and track pilot performance.
- **WAEC/NECO:** Adjust assessment frameworks incrementally; participate in pilot evaluations.
- **Policy Communication:** Advocate nationally, reduce resistance, and manage stakeholder engagement.

State Level

- **SUBEBs/State Ministries:** Execute pilots, adapt curriculum locally, and manage teacher training.
- **Schools:** Deliver early-grade language instruction, integrate local modules, and participate in monitoring.
- **Local Stakeholder Engagement:** Parents, community leaders, and local exam authorities.
- **Data Collection & Reporting:** Track KPIs (literacy, numeracy,

Conclusion: From Access to Learning Security

In light of the evidence and lessons presented, Nigeria's education challenge is no longer access alone; it is learning. Weak foundational outcomes threaten productivity, equity, and long-term growth. The imperative now shifts from expanding access alone to securing foundational learning outcomes for all children.

Yet reform must acknowledge institutional realities. Curriculum redesign without governance alignment will fail. Symbolic reform without teacher support will stall. Sequenced, evidence-driven pilots anchored in state institutions offer a politically feasible path forward.

With disciplined coordination across federal and state actors, Nigeria can move beyond enrolment expansion and secure the foundations of learning for a new generation.

Author

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List of Abbreviations

FME – Federal Ministry of Education

M&E – Monitoring and Evaluation

NECO – National Examinations Council

NERDC – Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council

SUBEBS – State Universal Basic Education Boards

UBEC – Universal Basic Education Commission

WAEC – West African Examinations



Health Workers Suspend 84 Days Strike After Deal With FG

Health workers under the auspices of the Joint Health Sector Unions (JOHESU) on February 6, 2026, suspended their nationwide strike after 84 days.

The decision followed an emergency meeting of the union's National Executive Council (NEC) in Abuja to review the outcome of recent conciliation talks with the federal government. In a communiqué issued after the meeting, JOHESU said the strike was suspended to allow full implementation of the agreement reached during the negotiations.

The communiqué, signed by National Chairman Kabiru Ado Minjibir and National Secretary Martin A. Egbanubi, stated that the federal government had agreed to immediately begin collective bargaining with the aggrieved health workers' unions to resolve the CONHESS salary structure issue once and for all.

It added that the expanded NEC-in-Session unanimously voted to suspend the indefinite strike and directed all members nationwide to return to work.

JOHESU also said the federal government agreed to withdraw the "NO WORK, NO PAY" directive issued over the strike.

<https://www.thisdaylive.com/2026/02/07/health-workers-suspend-84-days-strike-after-deal-with-fg/>

34,060 Obtain Credit in Mathematics, English NABTEB Result

A total of 34,060 amounting to over 50 per cent of candidates who sat for the National Business and Technical Examinations Board November/December 2025 examinations passed with credits in English Language and Mathematics.

Speaking during the release of the examination results in Benin City, Edo State on February 9, 2026, the Registrar and Chief Executive Officer of NABTEB, Dr. Mohammed Mohammed, said the National Business Certificate and National Technical Certificate (NBC/NTC), as well as the Advanced National Business Certificate and Advanced National Technical Certificate (ANBC/ANTC) examinations, were conducted in 2,079 centres across the country from Monday, November 3, 2025 to Saturday, December 6, 2025.

He said a total of 61,591 candidates registered for the examinations, comprising 57,444 O-Level candidates and 4,147 A-Level candidates, adding that 34,185 were male, while 27,406 were female.

<https://punchng.com/34060-obtain-credit-in-mathematics-english-as-nabte-b-releases-result/>

US Sending 200 Troops to Train Nigeria's Military

The United States is planning to send about 200 troops to Nigeria to train the African nation's military to fight Islamist militants, a U.S. official said on Tuesday, weeks after President Donald Trump ordered airstrikes against what he called Islamic State targets. The U.S. military said last week it sent a small team

of troops to Nigeria without specifying a number, marking the first acknowledgment of U.S. forces on the ground since Washington struck by air on Christmas Day.

Trump has said there could be more U.S. military action in Nigeria and Reuters has reported that the U.S. had been conducting surveillance flights over the country from Ghana since at least late November.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/us-sent-200-troops-nigeria-train-african-nations-military-2026-02-10/>

NAPTIP Rescues 23 Nigerians From Thailand

The National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP) rescued and repatriated 23 Nigerian youths trafficked to Thailand for cyber-enabled criminal activities, raising concerns over a growing trend of trafficking to South-East Asia.

The victims were returned to Nigeria through a coordinated operation involving civil society partners in the South Asia region, Eden (Myanmar), the British Government, and the Nigerian Embassy in Bangkok.

In a statement issued on February 11, 2026, NAPTIP disclosed that the victims were lured with promises of scholarships and lucrative employment but were later forced to engage in online scams, including romance fraud, cryptocurrency schemes and investment scams in countries such as Myanmar, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia.

<https://www.nigeriainfo.fm/news/homepagelagos/naptip-rescues-23-nigerians-from-thailand-flags-new-trafficking-trend/>



Benin's Private Sector Launches 2026 Economic Recovery

Benin's private sector launched its 2026 Economic Opening in Cotonou on February 6, aimed at accelerating national economic transformation.

The Minister of Industry and Trade, Shadiya Alimattou Assouman, called on businesses to support reforms driven by President Patrice Talon to improve the business climate and advance industrialisation. She stressed that growth depends on a strong, organised private sector. She welcomed cooperation between the Conseil national du patronat du Benin (CNP Benin) and the Confederation des employeurs du Benin (CONEB), describing it as encouraging for investors.

<https://fr.apanews.net/news/benin-le-secteur-privé-lance-sa-rentree-economique-2026/>

Chad Receives N15 Million Support For Economy

The Chadian government and the French Development Agency (AFD) have signed a €15 million financing agreement as part of budgetary support for 2026. The agreement marks a new phase in coopera-

tion between Chad and its technical and financial partners to strengthen the national economy. It was signed on behalf of Chad by Minister of State Tahir Hamid Nguilin, and by French Ambassador Eric Gerard and AFD Director Philippe Chedanne.

The grant will support the government's macroeconomic and budgetary consolidation by funding eligible expenditures linked to key development projects. Two priorities are targeted: the modernisation of strategic transport infrastructure, including the runway at Hassan Djamous International Airport in N'Djamena, and the strengthening of the cotton sector through the Cotton Sector Support Fund (FSSC).

<https://fr.apanews.net/diplomacy/tchad-lafd-debloque-e-15-millions-en-soutien-a-leconomie/>

Niger: Over 47,000 Rounds and Significant Arsenal Seized in Diffa

Two recent operations by Niger's Defence and Security Forces (FDS) in Diffa thwarted an attack on an oil site and led to the seizure of a large cache of weapons and ammunition, the Nigerian Press Agency reports. The FDS recovered over 47,000 rounds, around ten firearms, rockets, and four vehicles during missions at N'Guigmi and the Agadem oil block, part of Operation "Nalewa Dole," following the February 10, 2026, attack on Jibela by MPLJ elements linked to Moussa Kounay.

Four individuals were arrested, and the seized arsenal included nine AK-47 rifles, one pistol, over 47,000 rounds, three vehicles, and

communication equipment. The oil site attack response also recovered one vehicle, three AK-47s, and three rockets, with three FDS personnel injured.

Diffa Governor Major General Mahamadou Ibrahim Bagadoma praised the forces' professionalism and said the region continues to face terrorist attacks and arms trafficking, but the FDS remain mobilised to protect the population and strategic sites.

<https://fr.apanews.net/news/niger-plus-de-47-000-cartouches-et-un-important-arsenal-saisi-a-diffa/>

Cameroon at Risk of Debt Distress

Cameroon is among the Sub-Saharan African countries at high risk of debt distress, according to the World Bank's latest debt sustainability analysis. Debt distress means a country is struggling or becoming unable to meet its financial obligations, failing to repay loans or service its debt, often leading to severe budget cuts in essential services like health and education, loss of investor confidence, higher borrowing costs, and potential default, requiring debt restructuring.

Cameroon's external debt now stands at 14,000 billion CFA.

While Yaounde continues to borrow to fill budget gaps and finance infrastructure, rising debt service costs are shrinking the fiscal space needed to tackle poverty, unemployment, and weak social services.

<https://cameroonnewsagency.com/cameroon-at-risk-of-debt-distress-world-bank-warns/>

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