



**SPEECH DELIVERED BY VICE-PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE OF THE  
NPP, DR. MATTHEW OPOKU PREMPEH AT THE UNIVERSITY OF  
MEMPHIS, UNITED STATES OF AMERICA**

**18<sup>th</sup> October, 2024**

**Executive Director, Centre for International Education Services,  
University of Memphis,  
Deans of Faculties present,  
Members of the Academic Discourse Community,  
Leadership of the African Student Association,  
Ghanaian Students present,  
Other International Students present,  
Friends from the Media,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,**

1. It is a great pleasure to be here at the University of Memphis, an institution with which I have enjoyed a wonderful relationship, thanks to the fruitful partnership with the Asantehene, Otumfuo Osei Tutu II's Foundation. It is heartwarming that this important partnership, which I have had the privilege of modestly leading, continues to grow from strength to strength. Long may it continue.
2. In many ways, this partnership reflects the core of the political enterprise the Government of the Republic of Ghana is committed to — the goal of making a meaningful difference in the lives of those we serve. I am not only excited to be here but also thrilled to meet the beneficiaries of this programme, which was birthed with the best of intentions.
3. I was particularly pleased to read, about a week and a half ago, that the University of Memphis has updated the Asantehene on plans to expand the scholarship programme for Ghanaian students. That is great news indeed!
4. I bring you warm greetings from the New Patriotic Party (NPP) and its Presidential Candidate, His Excellency, Alhaji Dr. Mahamudu Bawumia to whom I serve as running-mate. We had to visit Memphis at a crucial time in our election campaign, but we believe this visit is worthwhile because the discussions we will have here are equally

central to the NPP's agenda of forging the needed partnerships, especially in education, for the benefit of our people.

5. I am delighted to address you generally on the gains we have made in the education sector with emphasis on—*Implementing a National Policy for Educational Access and Equity*— this speaks to my heart in a very personal way. I believe ardently, as I am sure most of you do, that education is a key foundation of a progressive, productive country and essential for development. Growing up in an inner-city part of Kumasi, Ghana's second-largest city, I saw many children from modest homes who were able to realize their educational aspirations, achieving transformational outcomes through education. Indeed, global studies have shown that there are significant returns made for every year of education that investment is made into whether the products of such education are ultimately employed in the public or private sector.
  
6. A nation that does not prioritize education and plan for its certain outcomes is bound to fail. Particularly in developing countries, education serves as a powerful tool for social mobility, enabling individuals to leap from deprivation to prosperity. As they say, it is brains—not natural resources—that build a nation. Many countries with limited natural resources but strong investments in education have seen remarkable development by opening opportunities for all.
  
7. It follows that access and equity are two crucial elements that every worthwhile education policy must focus on. We must reduce barriers to education so that a critical mass of citizens can access it. Furthermore, this access must come with an equity component to ensure that all children, regardless of their backgrounds, gender, geographical locations etc. have equal opportunities to attain the best possible education. In addition, key factors such as infrastructure and teaching and learning materials and aids must not be overlooked.

8. Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen, the main thrust of my speech today is centered on Ghana's Free Senior High School (SHS) programme, which the current government rolled out in September 2017. As then Minister for Education, I had the privilege — or perhaps the challenge — of implementing this monumental flagship policy within just seven months of taking office.
9. But before I delve into this specific policy, allow me to provide some historical context regarding the New Patriotic Party's (NPP) record in promoting educational access with equity as a core component.
10. Ghana's Constitution has from its inception recognized education as key to the country's development. With provision made for what is termed as Free Compulsory Universal Basic Education (FCUBE) and the commitment to making higher education progressively free. These constitutional mandates though have not been the focus of every government that has taken office since the inception of the Constitution in 1992.
11. During the first NPP administration from 2001 to 2009, under the distinguished leadership of President John Agyekum Kufuor, we took concrete steps to increase access to basic education. This included introducing the Capitation Grant, which abolished school fees (tuition) and provided direct funding to schools for operational costs. Attendance rates during this period exceeded 60%. Currently, the capitation grant per child, which was GHC 5 in 2016, stands at GHC 15 in 2024.
12. The Ghana School Feeding Programme, also introduced by the Kufuor administration, addressed hunger, malnutrition, and low school attendance by providing one nutritious meal a day to children in public primary and kindergarten schools. Initially a pilot project in 10 schools, the programme expanded rapidly, benefiting over 1.6 million children by 2017. Today, over 4 million children benefit from

the programme. In fact, under President Kufuor, Ghana achieved almost all the key indices bar one under the Millennium Development (MDGs) for basic education including universal primary education and gender parity. We had nearly 100% enrolment in basic education

13. Ladies and Gentlemen, this background sets the stage for my discussion on our commitment to ensuring quality education in Ghana without hindrance. His Excellency President Akufo-Addo first introduced the vision for Free SHS in 2008 during his initial presidential campaign. Despite an unsuccessful bid in 2012, he remained steadfast in this vision, and in 2016, Free SHS became a flagship campaign issue for the NPP, leading to his eventual election.

14. When we took office in January 2017, the situation was dire. Data from 2013 to 2016 showed that, on average, 100,000 children who passed the Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE) each year could not enroll in SHS due to financial constraints despite qualifying, thus becoming a termination point of their formal education. This represented about 35% of all students who sat the BECE examination. Among those who did enroll, 22% dropped out for financial reasons. Interestingly, in Northern Ghana, where students had historically benefitted from fee-free education since the 1960s, only 8-11% of children who passed and were placed failed to take up their place. Clearly, financial barriers were a significant obstacle to SHS education. It may be of interest to note that northern Ghana historically and even at present has lower economic opportunities and returns than southern Ghana. This has however not been the case for it in terms of education due to the early intervention from the 1960s.

15. If the status quo had remained, within 10 years, Ghana would have had one million young citizens whose highest educational achievement was at the junior high school level. Given that the average age of completing junior high school is 14, these individuals would have been unprepared to enter the job market due to both

legal and educational constraints. This situation was unacceptable and incompatible with 21st-century development, where education and skills are paramount.

16. President Akufo-Addo was determined to implement the Free SHS policy, despite skepticism even within his own political party. However, the President viewed this policy as a sacred covenant with the Ghanaian people, anchored in conviction, and designed to bear future fruits.
17. The programme was launched in record time in September 2017, just nine months after the NPP took office, following six months of intensive work.
18. Essentially, the Free SHS policy sought to remove the financial barriers impeding educational access. As the President stated in a speech in February 2017, "...by free SHS, we mean that, in addition to tuition which is already free, there will be no admission fees, no library fees, no science center fees, no computer lab fees, no examination fees, no utility fees; there will be free textbooks, free boarding, and free meals, and day students will get a meal at school for free." With these barriers removed, there was no excuse not to attend school.
19. Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen, within a year of implementing this policy, the 35% rate of students failing to take up their place had halved to about 17%. In fact, the overwhelming demand led to the introduction of the Double Track system in 2018 for over 400 of our 721 Senior High School (SHS) institutions to accommodate the additional students. Today, over 5 million children have benefited from this bold programme, with the enrollment transition rate in the Northern regions reaching an impressive 98% from what we inherited of about 85% whereas that of the southern regions has increased from 62% to 84%. This is the results of the

widened access to education. The Northern figures are always on the high side because that is where free education started from and as I always say, it is good for our country. Many of the 140 Ghanaian students currently studying here at this great institution benefited from the Free SHS programme, and some may not have made it this far without it. For us in the NPP, this is the essence of governance.

20. Throughout this process, it was not just about numbers. We placed great emphasis on the fundamental tenets of the policy: schools, students, equity, Teaching and Learning Materials (TLMs), and teacher satisfaction. Our targeted initiatives in teacher education and continuous professional development have raised teaching standards, significantly enhancing the classroom experience. This also included Teacher Licensure and Professional Learning Communities. Teachers are now leaving training with specialized and focused backgrounds and specialisms such as early childhood education, Science, Mathematics and more.
  
21. By focusing on these pillars, I can confidently say, by the grace of God, we have achieved outstanding results. In the first Free SHS cohort, 411 out of 465 students who earned 8 A1s across all subjects in the West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE) were from Ghana, topping the charts in West Africa—the highest performance ever in WASSCE history. The top three candidates were also from Ghana.
  
22. It is important to state that, a cursory analysis of core subject performance from 2015 to 2023 points to a significant improvement in the past 5 years. For the 2022- and 2023-year groups for example, more than 60% of candidates obtained A1-C6 in all core subjects, which are the qualification grades required for admission into a tertiary institution in Ghana. In fact, the 2023 results in this context, is the best in 9 years. This, clearly, further refutes the argument by some naysayers that the Free Senior High School Policy was to compromise quality education.

23. Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen, the equity component of the Free SHS programme has been crucial. Beyond removing financial barriers, we actively ensured that children from disadvantaged backgrounds could access our top schools. This led to the introduction of the 30% equity policy, reserving 30% of spaces in top schools for children from public basic schools, who often come from deprived backgrounds but had performed well in their final junior high school exams the BECE considering their backgrounds and other challenges within their study environment.
24. This affirmative action policy has demonstrated that many such children can excel in elite schools when given a level playing field, showcasing the potential of all our children if given equal opportunities. The discussion on gender imbalance does not even arise anymore, as the enrolment data is now reflective of our national population dynamic with gender parity achieved.
25. Ghana has become a stellar example in Africa, investing heavily in expanding access to quality education. This is a legacy I am proud to have contributed to as a former Minister for Education. I firmly believe that public service is about improving the lives of one's people, a creed I hold dear and have followed throughout my nearly 16 years as Member of Parliament.
26. Ghana remains committed to creating an educational environment that equips higher education graduates with the skills, knowledge, and adaptability needed to succeed in a rapidly changing world. Since 2017, we have undertaken bold and unprecedented reforms in higher education, resulting in significant changes to policies, regulations, institutional mandates, governance, and curricula.



27. In 2016, the data showed that girls in SHS constituted 35% of the High School Population but in 2024, the percentage of girls who sat for WASSCE is 53.77%. This is a testament of the clear increase in access to education. One of these girls, Esther Benita Aidoo of Abakrampa Senior High Technical School (SHTS) had this to say in 2020 ***"The Free SHS has given access to some of us who would not have had the chance to attend High school the opportunity to do so. In my family, one has to wait for the second or third term or up to a year before having the chance to go to school but thanks to this policy, I am now in school without any difficulties"***
28. We do not and cannot pretend that challenges remain. They do. But we will continue to confront them boldly and honestly. For no challenge is insurmountable. We will keep removing barriers to education at all levels, ensuring that every young Ghanaian's educational journey is determined by their abilities, not the financial circumstances of their family, not their gender, not their location. We believe education must provide every Ghanaian child with open opportunities and a fair start in life, especially as we seek to participate actively in the Fourth Industrial Revolution.
29. Distinguished ladies and gentlemen, I have had a wonderful time here at the University of Memphis. Although my visit has been brief, I leave with fond memories. I believe I will return soon, by the grace of God, as the Vice-President of the Republic of Ghana. We do this not only for ourselves but for generations yet unborn.
30. Thank you for your attention.