

BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS WHERE FAMILIES, SCHOOLS, AND COMMUNITIES STAND TOGETHER IN SIERRA LEONE

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“Schools do not stand by themselves. They belong to the community; they are the community.”

-Foday Kalokoh, EducAid

Executive Summary

Recognizing the important role that families play in their children’s education, the Government of Sierra Leone has designated family and community engagement as a key pillar of their current education policies, frameworks, and plans. The Basic and Senior Secondary Education Act (2023), National Policy on Radical Inclusion in Schools (2021), and Education Sector Plan (2022-2026) all include efforts to build greater family, school, and community engagement (FSCE) in education. Despite the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education’s (MBSSE) efforts to support greater partnerships between families and schools, little data on FSCE exist in Sierra Leone. To provide a clearer picture of the FSCE landscape in Sierra Leone, the MBSSE and the Center for Universal Education at the Brookings Institution initiated mixed-methods and community-based research with two civil society organizations—EducAid and Rising Academies—that work directly with government schools in Sierra Leone.

The purpose of this research is to provide key recommendations for the MBSSE and partnering institutions on how to build family, school, and community partnerships that are sustainable, equitable, and inclusive while supporting students and schools to thrive. These findings and recommendations are detailed in this policy brief alongside the participatory and community-based methodology used. Between February and April 2023, EducAid and Rising Academies collaborated with the Center for Universal Education to conduct surveys and focus group conversations to gauge families’ and educators’ beliefs on and experiences with education to identify promising strategies for promoting greater FSCE. The research took place in 25 schools in three districts (Kono, Port Loko, and Western Urban [Freetown]). The five key findings and recommendations are summarized below.

TABLE 1

Findings and Recommendations

Findings	Recommendations
<p>1. The main ways that families are involved in their children’s education are supporting learning at home and communicating with educators and school staff.</p>	<p>1. Strengthen and expand the ways families and communities support their children’s learning at home and create more two-way communication with schools.</p>
<p>2. Families said that the main barrier to their engagement with schools is the expectation that they contribute financially at every event or interaction coupled with a lack of transparency in how their contributions are used.</p>	<p>2. Decouple family, school, and community engagement efforts from financial asks, and make school finances more transparent.</p>
<p>3. School Management Committees routinely involve families more connected and engaged in schools, and vary greatly in their level of efficacy, transparency, and inclusivity of marginalized families.</p>	<p>3. Make School Management Committees more inclusive, more effective, and more accountable to families, especially marginalized families.</p>
<p>4. Families and educators reported that the most important purpose of school is to further their children’s education and that they are most satisfied when students are getting good marks.</p>	<p>4. Use the strong alignment in beliefs and perspectives to build a shared vision of education and greater coalitions and partnerships between families and schools.</p>
<p>5. Educators are highly regarded and trusted by families, but schools need new and innovative strategies to better engage all families, especially those who are most marginalized.</p>	<p>5. Content on how to effectively and intentionally build partnerships between families, schools, and communities should be more clearly integrated into professional development of educators.</p>

This policy brief supports schools and educators, including education leaders, teachers and staff, in recognizing families as an important asset to schools’ and learners’ success and provides effective strategies for promoting greater FSCE in policies, frameworks, and school plans.

Introduction

Engaging and partnering with families is a central pillar of the Government of Sierra Leone's efforts to improve student and school outcomes in their current education policies, frameworks, and plans. In the *Basic and Senior Secondary Education Act (2023)*, *National Policy on Radical Inclusion in Schools (2021)*, *Sierra Leone Education Sector Plan 2022-2026 (2022)*, and other policies, families are positioned as critical to the implementation of policies. An identified need across these frameworks is contextually relevant data on family engagement and strategies that support greater partnerships between families, schools, and communities. The purpose of this participatory and community-based research is to provide key findings and recommendations for the MBSSE on how to build family, school, and community partnerships that are sustainable, equitable, and inclusive while supporting students and schools to thrive. This policy brief supports education leaders and schools in recognizing families as an important asset to schools' and learners' success.

This research was initiated at the request of the MBSSE and conducted as a collaboration between the Brookings Institution's Center for Universal Education, EducAid, and Rising Academies. The Center for Universal Education provided the Conversation Starter Tool methodology, research and support, while EducAid and Rising Academies conducted participatory and community-led research with 25 government schools in three districts (Kono, Port Loko, Western Urban [Freetown]) where they have longstanding relationships with school teams. The following strategies and recommendations were gathered through intentional conversations with schools and build upon existing assets and opportunities. They address the barriers to FSCE identified through the research process. These strategies support a mindset shift of moving beyond thinking of families solely as beneficiaries of education systems, to working with them as active partners in shaping and transforming the future of education in Sierra Leone. As Foday Kalokah (EducAid researcher) said after listening to families and educators share their perspectives on family involvement across the districts, **"Schools do not stand by themselves, they belong to the community, they are the community."**

Family, School, and Community Engagement in Education Frameworks

Family, school, and community engagement is addressed in the following seven key education frameworks in Sierra Leone:

TABLE 2

Roles of families across education frameworks

Education Framework	Role of Families
The Basic and Senior Secondary Education Act, 2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decision making and leadership • Being informed • Providing resources
Comprehensive School Safety Policy, 2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implementation of policies and practices • Decision making and leadership • Being informed • Shifting mindsets
National Policy on Radical Inclusion in Schools, 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implementation of policies and practices • Decision making and leadership • Being informed • Providing resources • Shifting mindsets
National Policy on Integrated Early Childhood Development, 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implementation of policies and practices • Being informed
Sierra Leone Education Sector Plan 2022-2026, 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implementation of policies and practices • Decision making and leadership • Being informed • Providing resources
Code of Conduct for Teachers, 2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decision making and leadership • Being informed
National Education Policy, 2010	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decision making and leadership

Roles and responsibilities of families and communities in education frameworks

In these frameworks, the roles of families fall into five categories as defined below:

- **Implementation of policies and practices:** Utilizes families to implement education policies and frameworks, and/or to promote decentralization of education systems. This includes enlisting families in supporting learning at home, enhancing communication with teachers and school leaders, and encouraging active participation and volunteerism in school events and activities.
- **Decision making and leadership:** Involves families in school decisions and governance bodies through various committees, associations, and boards, and/or in accountability and advocacy efforts.
- **Being informed:** Ensures families and communities are aware of key education policies, practices, responsibilities, and rights, such as the right of all children to a quality education and healthy nutrition at home.
- **Providing resources:** Designates parents/caregivers as contributors of financial and in-kind materials and services to schools. This includes any financial or in-kind contributions to teaching, learning, infrastructure, supplies and equipment, management, and other critical areas.
- **Shifting mindsets:** Mobilizes families, schools, and communities to work together to promote inclusion and reduce stigma and norms prohibiting marginalized children and families from participating in schools. Shifting mindsets also includes intentional efforts to promote positive attitudes and beliefs about family, school, and community partnerships.

According to the document review, the MBSSE has integrated families into the seven frameworks in different ways. The most frequently cited roles and responsibilities for families and communities were decision making and leadership and being informed about education policies, practices, responsibilities, and rights, which were present in six out of the seven frameworks. In three of the frameworks—the *Basic and Senior Secondary Education Act (2023)*, *National Policy on Radical Inclusion in Schools (2021)*, and *Sierra Leone Education Sector Plan 2022-2026 (2022)*—there are full sections or objectives dedicated to parental/caregiver involvement, and families are positioned as key stakeholders in implementation of policies and practices. In one framework, the *National Policy on Radical Inclusion in Schools*, families are given the role of shifting mindsets to support greater inclusion of all children in education. However, missing from the seven frameworks is a clear vision and implementable strategies for building sustainable, equitable, and inclusive partnerships with families, a vision that positions parents/caregivers as collaborators in their child’s learning and success. More in-depth analyses of the seven government frameworks are included below.

Passed in April 2023, *The Basic and Senior Secondary Education Act, 2023* is the regulatory framework across Sierra Leone. This 2023 Act replaces the *National Education Policy 2010*, where families are positioned as supporting with accountability of nonformal learning centers and programs, ensuring children with disabilities and other marginalized groups are enrolled in school, and serving on Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs) or Community Teachers associations (CTAs). Families are not listed as an internal or external stakeholder in implementing the *National Education Policy (2010)*. In the 2023 Act, FSCE also serves as a mechanism to support better decision making and leadership as enacted through SMCs (as well as nonformal education center committees and con-

tinuing education center committees). SMCs are defined as “a group of persons appointed or elected to oversee the operations of a primary school.”¹ SMCs are responsible for: “overseeing the running of the schools, assisting in the drawing up of development plans for the schools, helping to raise funds for the general development of the school, and performing other functions as may be directed by the local council or the District Education Office.”²

In the 2023 Act, minimum quotas are given for the number of parents/caregivers (two to three) who must be involved in the management committees as well as guidance on ensuring committees are gender balanced. While it is suggested that schools and education centers monitor how active committees are, there is little guidance in the 2023 Act or the other frameworks analyzed below on how this is done. Unlike in SMCs, parents/caregivers are not explicitly designated as key members of Board of Governors (BoGs), an advisory body that has greater oversight of schools. Like in the previous 2010 Act, the 2023 Act also lays out rights and responsibilities of parents/caregivers, particularly pertaining to families of children with disabilities and those experiencing discrimination. For example, parents/caregivers are given the right to appeal to the local council or MBSSE if they suspect discrimination of their child.³

In MBSSE’s *Comprehensive School Safety Policy* (March 2023), families and communities are positioned as key stakeholders. Stakeholders “include both those who are directly involved - such as parents, teachers, and students - and those indirectly impacted - such as MBSSE Officials and District Officers of Education and Local Council and Chieftain leaders - by the success or failure of an educational system.”⁴ Families are not only positioned as serving important decision making and leadership roles on SMCs and BoG’s, but also on Community Teacher Associations and School Safety Committees. In the policy, parents/caregivers also serve critical roles in informing other families and changing mindsets to support school safety. For example, a parent/caregiver representative is a key member of the School Safety Committee in addition to head teachers and other school staff who oversee discipline, food, health, and counselling. The parent/caregiver representative is expected to serve as a liaison with community members and families to support the inclusion of marginalized children and build greater awareness of school safety issues (i.e., tolerance, anti-bullying, discipline, gender-based violence, etc.). They organize community-based activities like community radio programming and town halls. In this Policy, there is a key objective dedicated solely to building school-community relations. This objective is focused on sensitizing families on how to support their children to do well in school and overcome barriers, for example, by ensuring students get to school safely and reducing chores at home to ensure students have more time to study.

The *National Policy on Radical Inclusion in Schools* (2021) has the most comprehensive approach to FSCE in addition to the *Comprehensive School Safety Policy*. The *National Policy on Radical Inclusion in Schools* positions parents/caregivers as key to not only decision making and leadership, but also as a critical link to ensuring that all children and learners have access to and complete basic education. Engaging Families and Communities is one of its four key policy statements; FSCE is also mentioned under the other three policy statements. Engaging Families and Communities entails building awareness of education policies and practices and helping shift mindsets, namely challenging stigma and norms on school participation and ensuring historically marginalized groups have equal access to education. Marginalized groups encompass: “girls, including girls who are or have been pregnant and are parent learners; children with disabilities; children from low-income families; and children from rural and

1 MBSSE, *The Basic and Senior Secondary Education Act*, (Sierra Leone: MBSSE, 2023), 10. <https://mbsse.gov.sl/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Basic-and-Senior-Secondary-Education-Act-2023-.pdf>.

2 Ibid., 40.

3 Ibid., 52.

4 MBSSE, *Comprehensive School Safety Policy*, (Sierra Leone: MBSSE, 2023), x-xi. https://mbsse.gov.sl/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/2023_Comprehensive-School-Safety-Policy_vf-1.pdf.

underserved areas.”⁵ Families are important stakeholders for countering negative stigma and norms, and efforts to designate parent/caregiver volunteers to act as community champions to promote greater inclusion are outlined in the policy. Examples include sensitization of communities on the needs of girls and on relevant policies that promote the rights of other marginalized learners. Strategies to reduce household spending on education, including the provision of uniforms, bags, and learning materials are included to ensure economically marginalized families have equitable access to education. Elected parents/caregivers also play decision making and leadership roles on SMCs, Board of Governors, and Community Child Welfare Committees as the “formal bridge between schools and communities.”⁶

The roles of MBSSE and families are clearly laid out in the *National Policy on Radical Inclusion in Schools* (2021). MBSSE’s role is to provide advice and guidance on developing parent/caregiver community champions and leading community dialogues on issues like engagement of pregnant and parent learners. The schools’ role is to recruit parent/caregiver volunteers, map marginalized children/families in their community who are not enrolled in school, and facilitate community engagement opportunities like “parent-teacher meetings, open days, graduation ceremonies, or other community events.”⁷ There is also recognition of the importance of engaging families in “learners’ accessibility and vulnerability assessments to create a link between school, home, and individual.” Additional efforts to build awareness of the Policy through mass communications and public engagement strategies, including involving parents/caregivers in back-to-school campaigns, are also named.

The *National Policy on Integrated Early Childhood Development (IECD)* (2021) emphasizes the importance of a strong home and community environment for effective early childhood care and positions parents/caregivers as key beneficiaries and stakeholders of the policy.⁸ Each of the six policy statements in the National Policy includes at least one activity involving parents/caregivers. Generally, these activities focus on providing parents/caregivers with information and involving them in the implementation of policies and practices. Activities include capacity building, sensitizing parents on good health and nutrition practices, and promoting the physical safety of children.⁹ Policy Statement Four carves out the most significant role for parent/caregivers; it seeks to “promote responsive caregiving” through: public education campaigns, advocacy for a national program of paid parental leave, and participation in parent/caregiver-child play sessions at community-based early childhood development centers.¹⁰ The role of parents/caregivers in the IECD Policy is noteworthy as families are woven throughout every section, but their role is also limited to participating in activities as opposed to situating them as equal partners in shaping the vision of the policy.

The *Sierra Leone Education Sector Plan 2022-2026* (2022), has nine objectives, four of which mention parents/caregivers as key stakeholders. Most notable is objective 8.1, strengthened partnerships with parents and communities in support of learning, which entails providing “information to parents on how to support their children learning at home, taking into consideration gender roles.”¹¹ This entails a sensitization program meant to show parents/caregivers how they can assist efforts to improve children’s learning. In the other objectives, families are intended to help with oversight and compliance of efforts to counter corporal punishment and corruption. Infor-

5 MBSSE. *National Policy on Radical Inclusion in Schools*. (Sierra Leone: MBSSE, 2021), 4. <https://mbsse.gov.sl/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Radical-Inclusion-Policy.pdf>.

6 Ibid., 30.

7 Ibid., 47.

8 MBSSE. *National Policy on Integrated Early Childhood Development (IECD)*. (Sierra Leone: MBSSE, 2021), 15-16; 35-37. https://mbsse.gov.sl/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Integrated-Early-Childhood-Development-Policy_June_2021.pdf.

9 Ibid., 21-28.

10 Ibid., 24-25.

11 MBSSE. *Sierra Leone Education Sector Plan 2022 – 2026: Transforming Learning for All*. (Sierra Leone: MBSSE, 2022), 44. <https://www.unicef.org/sierraleone/reports/sierra-leone-education-sector-plan-2022-2026>.

mation, communication, and capacity building are largely one-way (schools and MBSSE reaching out to parents/caregivers) as opposed to creating FSCE opportunities where families have the chance to share their ideas and concerns. Finally, the framework recognizes families' role in providing resources, including significant household spending towards "fees, tuition, uniforms and supplementary materials, and transport."¹²

Teachers in Sierra Leone are expected to encourage and support collaboration with families in the MBSSE's *Code of Conduct for Teachers* (2019). In the Code, teachers make commitments to their students' parents/caregivers in three broad categories: (1) supporting families' capacity to lead and hold schools accountable (i.e., actively participating in SMCs); (2) promoting families' participation in their child's learning (i.e., encouraging parents/caregivers to visit schools); and (3) respecting the rights of families related to their child's education (i.e., providing families with information on the welfare and progress of their child). The Code provides a strong starting point for guiding teachers in how to interact with and support families in their child's education, but it is not clear how the capacity of families and teachers is built in practice or how the Code is enacted and enforced.

This analysis of education frameworks demonstrate that while the MBSSE has created a strong foundation for FSCE in its leading government frameworks, there is a lack of clear guidance and activities for supporting effective partnerships between families and schools. The data collected over the course of the Conversation Starter Tool Process can help suggest evidence and community-driven strategies to build greater FSCE and partnerships, as elaborated below.

12 MBSSE, *Sierra Leone Education Sector Plan 2022 – 2026: Transforming Learning for All*.

Conversation Starter Tools Methodology

The findings and recommendations in this policy brief draw on data collected through the Conversation Starter Tools research methodology. The goal of this approach is to guide schools and community teams in examining the landscape of family, school, and community engagement in their context. Through this approach, they can develop greater relational trust and craft a shared vision of how to build stronger family, school, and community partnerships. Family, school, and community engagement strategies relevant to each context emerge through this community-driven research, and strategies are integrated into school practices and policies.

The Conversation Starter Tools were developed by the [Family, School, and Community Engagement in Education initiative](#) at the Brookings Institution's [Center for Universal Education](#) and in collaboration with school and civil society organization teams around the world. This approach guides schools and communities through the process of collecting survey **data** with families, educators, and students, using data as a springboard for **dialogues**, and ultimately generating strategies and new **directions** to support greater family, school, and community engagement. The Conversation Starter Tools suite includes surveys, focus group discussions guides, and other protocols that can be used by school, district, and/or civil society groups to conduct research that fosters **data, dialogue, and directions** to inform efforts to build greater collaboration and partnerships between families, schools, and communities.

The Conversation Starter Tools approach supports school and civil society organization teams in understanding educators, families, and students' perspectives on school and experiences with family, school, and community engagement. The mixed-methods approach is not intended to judge or assess schools or districts but to help teams develop strategies that work for their community and foster relational trust between schools and families. School and civil society organization teams use quantitative and qualitative data to inform family, school, and community engagement strategies (policies, practices, programs, and personnel) relevant to the school or district.

EducAid and Rising Academies, two civil society organizations that work closely with government schools across Sierra Leone, surveyed 1,978 government primary school teachers, education leaders, and families (parents/caregivers) in three districts (Kono, Port Loko, and Western Urban [Freetown]) between March and May 2023. The survey was extended to all families (50-75) in given primary grades at the sample schools, with a variety of grades surveyed across the total 25 schools. All teachers at the schools were invited to participate in the surveys. Surveys were conducted in-person with trained enumerators from the two organizations. Enumerators administered the surveys orally to maximize the inclusion of families not comfortable with written surveys or technology. Data were shared with school teams and all families through short summaries designed for low-literacy audiences. Small groups of families and educators were invited to participate in conversations around the data and use the data to brainstorm strategies that responded to given needs in their school communities. In-person conversations were held at 15 of the 25 schools, with the remaining ten schools participating in virtual conversations. After the quantitative and qualitative data were synthesized and analyzed, the Center for Universal Education, EducAid, and Rising Academies worked together to define clear findings and recommendations.

This research was conducted with a limited number of schools in three districts and is not meant to generalize FSCE practices in Sierra Leone. The participating schools were purposively selected from the schools where EducAid and Rising Academies already work through their collaboration with MBSSE. Despite these sampling limitations, the data provide an in-depth look at schools' needs and aspirations for family and school partnerships in different districts and contexts. Another limitation of the study was an underrepresentation of male parents/caregivers in the sample; while there were sufficient males in the surveys and conversation to allow for gender analyses, more research on how to support greater engagement of male parents/caregivers is needed.

Analysis and Discussion

DEMOGRAPHICS

This research was conducted in 25 government schools in three districts, 5 schools in Kono, 10 in Port Loko, and 10 in Western Urban (Freetown). Roughly 50-75 families of students in primary 1 to 6 at each school were surveyed; all primary school educators, which includes school leaders, teachers, and supporting staff, were invited to participate. Roughly 38 percent of family participants had children in primary grade 2 or lower, 39 percent in primary grades 3 to 4, and 23 percent in primary grades 5 to 6. The majority of family participants were female (72 percent) and had never attended school (44 percent), as shown in the table below.

TABLE 3

Demographic data

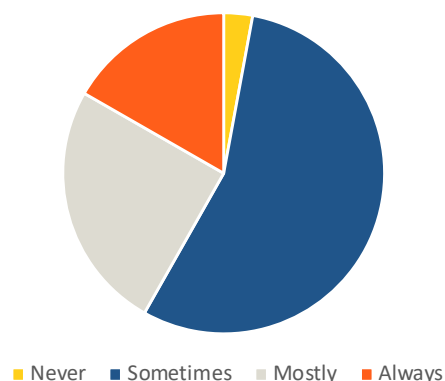
Participants	Districts			Gender		Level of Education		
	Kono	Port Loko	Western Urban	Female	Male	No school	Primary	Secondary or Above
Families (n=1,767)	20%	40%	40%	72%	28%	44%	26%	30%
Educators (n=211)	21%	31%	48%	45.5%	54.5%	1%	5%	94%

The primary language spoken at home among survey participants was Krio (43 percent of families, 60 percent of educators), followed by Temne (36 percent of families, 17.5 percent of educators), and Limba (5 percent of families, 6 percent of educators). Only 5 percent of families reported having a child with a disability, although the actual number is expected to be much higher.

Families were asked on average how often they are able to cover basic food and living expenses, ranging from never to always. Over 58 percent of families reported that they never or sometimes were able to meet their basic needs, meaning they were struggling daily with poverty or extreme poverty. Nearly 42 percent of families said that they meet their basic needs most of the time or always.

FIGURE 1

On average, how often is your household able to cover food and living expenses?



Findings and Recommendations

Five key findings and recommendations emerged through the research.

Finding 1: The main ways that families are involved in their children’s education is supporting learning at home and communicating with educators and school staff.

According to families and educators, the main ways families were involved in their children’s learning and schooling was by supporting learning at home, communicating with school staff and teachers, and attending school events. These were consistent across education levels with a few nuances, for example, parents/caregivers with some schooling (primary or above) reported supporting their child’s learning at home to a greater extent (89 percent) than parents/caregivers with no schooling (82 percent). This difference was statistically significant.

The surveys also revealed the ways in which parents/caregivers were less involved in their child’s schooling. A little over a tenth of families (13 percent) said they provided feedback on school decisions, and an even smaller proportion of families (5 percent) said they were involved in a leadership role in SMC.

In conversations, families and educators discussed the main ways that they were involved in their children’s learning and schools. Families described supporting learning at home as encouraging their children’s academic growth by helping with homework and paying for tutoring. They also supported their child by providing basic needs and emotional support, transportation, and accompaniment to and from school, laundering school uniforms, and

TABLE 4

Top three types of family involvement and engagement according to families and educators

Types of Involvement and Engagement	Families	Educators
Supporting or monitoring student learning	86%	84%
Communicating with school staff and teachers	78%	81%
Attending school events	61%	64%
Following school news	37%	40%
Volunteering in school activities	29%	31%
Donations	22%	15%
Providing feedback on school decisions	13%	23%
Leadership role in a parent organization	5%	10%
Not involved	0.2%	2%

Note: Responses were select all and do not equal 100%.

other caregiving and financial responsibilities. Families also provided more detail on how they were communicating with school staff and teachers. They mentioned attending in-person meetings with teachers, sending text messages or speaking on the phone, receiving written notes from teachers, attending SMC and CTA meetings for updates, and communicating through social media groups (i.e., WhatsApp). School events included end-of-year celebrations, and all school meetings, among others. With the exception of social media groups and text messages/speaking on the phone, most of the examples were one-way communication, schools communicating information to families as opposed to opportunities for families to share their perspectives and ask questions. It is not clear the frequency and consistency of communication between families and schools.

During the conversations, families reiterated that supporting learning at home and communicating with schools were seen as the responsibility of not only parents/caregivers, but also students' wide kinship networks including siblings, extended family, elders, and other members of the community. Given parents/caregivers' relative low levels of education and experiences navigating school coupled with their obligations/work that often take them away from their homes, this kinship network was critical to supporting children's learning.¹³

Recommendation 1: Strengthen and expand the ways families and communities support their children's learning at home and create more two-way communication with schools.

Findings revealed that families are actively supporting learning at home and communicating with school staff and teachers, but more could be done to enhance these practices. Families with low education and literacy levels are in particular need of effective strategies for supporting learning at home. To support the participation of low-literacy mothers in their child's learning, EducAid created the Mothers' Conversation Starter list. This list of questions guides mothers in asking their children's teachers about their learning, recognizing that mothers are the main point of contact for schools and learning in most families (See Appendix A for example). This resource helps build parents'/caregivers' knowledge of what to ask, increases confidence in asking questions, and supports a mindset and practice that family and educator communication is important for children's success. Expanding this practice to encourage all family members, including men and extended families, would help build a culture of asking questions and building two-way communication, which has been shown in research to support children's progress.¹⁴

Another strategy already in practice is mobilizing families to support children at home through mixed-media, such as radio programs for families and mobile phone campaigns. Rising Academies has piloted *Rising on Air*—a free to download, 20-week program of radio scripts and SMS content adapted from structured curriculum content. The program delivers interactive lessons on literacy and numeracy directly to families and students through technology. This approach models to parents/caregivers how they can support their children's learning.

Findings show that one-way communication is one of the main ways parents/caregivers are involved with school, but even so roughly 20 percent of families did not report communicating with schools or educators at all. Furthermore, in the conversations, families and educators alike highlighted the importance of building more frequent two-way communication and ensuring that educators and all families have consistent ways to contact each other, such as phone calls, sending information through community chairpersons or parent/caregiver committees, WhatsApp groups, home visits, in-person meetings, and more. Two-way communication means communication is consistent, respectful, ongoing, accessible and reciprocal, where families can communicate with educators

13 Personal communication, May 31, 2023.

14 Karen L. Mapp et al. *Everyone Wins!: The Evidence for Family-school Partnerships & Implications for Practice*. (Scholastic, Incl., 2022).

and educators with families. Two-way communication provides spaces where all families and educators can be heard.¹⁵ Many of the suggested two-way communication platforms required mobile phones, phone credit, and Internet access. Schools need strategies to combine different modes of communication—including those that are technology and non-technology dependent — to ensure they are communicating with all families. Families and educators suggested that the MBSSE could provide greater guidance to schools on how to build two-way communication between families and schools that take into consideration digital divides, and work with other ministries, civil society organizations, and private sector organizations to support communication platforms and opportunities.

In addition to expanding efforts to support learning at home and building two-way communication, research teams noted that awareness-raising efforts were needed to help families and communities see learning and schooling as a shared responsibility with educators and to build their confidence in being engaged in their child's schooling and learning. Shifting the mindset that schooling is the sole responsibility of educators and schools is critical to building sustainable, equitable, and inclusive FSCE partnerships.¹⁶ All of the findings and recommendations intend to build this collective and mutual mindset.

Finding 2: Families said that the main barrier to their engagement with schools is the expectation that they contribute financially at every event or interaction coupled with a lack of transparency in how their contributions are used.

Survey data revealed financial constraints as the main barrier to FSCE as reported by families (90 percent) and educators (94 percent). Financial costs included: school development fees, school renovation fees, exam fees, transportation to school, school materials, school events/activities, and the salaries of community teachers. Families reported being reluctant to attend school events and get engaged out of fear they would be asked to contribute financially to the school at each interaction or event. Families have thus come to assume parent/caregiver engagement events and activities will involve a financial request from school staff and teachers. This pressure on families to contribute to school financing is not unique to Sierra Leone, but this coupling of FSCE with financial contributions discourages families from seeking active partnerships with schools. This is especially true of families living in poverty, which, according to World Bank data from 2018, is 57 percent of households across the country.¹⁷ As one parent/caregiver in Port Loko said, “The huge amount of money that the school asks for school development projects and activities sometimes prevents us from attending school meetings because some of us hardly have the money at the time it is being requested for.”¹⁸

Interestingly, two barriers to family involvement often assumed in global policy frameworks—lack of motivation/interest of families and lack of a welcoming/inclusive environment—were relatively low in Sierra Leone. Less than a tenth (6 percent) of families and educators (8 percent) said that families lacked motivation/interest, and a very small proportion of families (1 percent) and educators (3 percent) felt that the environment impeded their involvement. However, a quarter (24 percent) of families and a third (31 percent) of educators noted that literacy, language, or cultural barriers and differences impacted parental/caregiver involvement, suggesting that there is still work to do to build inclusion across groups and communities.

15 Mapp et al., *Everyone Wins! The Evidence for Family-school Partnerships & Implications for Practice*.

16 Mapp and Bergman, *Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships (Version 2)*.

17 World Bank, “Poverty headcount ratio at national poverty lines (% of population) - Sierra Leone,” The World Bank. Accessed July 7, 2024. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.NAHC?locations=SL&type=shaded>.

18 Focus group discussion. Port Loko, Sierra Leone, March, 20, 2023.

TABLE 5

Top three barriers to involvement according to families and educators

Barriers to Involvement	Families	Educators
Financial constraints	90%	94%
Lack of transportation	54%	59%
Lack of technology	46%	49%
Lack of time	27%	39%
Health issues or disability of family members	10%	10%
Lack of interest (not interested)	6%	8%
Insufficient communication between family and school	5%	5%
No challenges	2%	0%
Not welcoming environment (not comfortable with school staff)	1%	3%

Note: Responses were select all and do not equal 100%.

Recommendation 2: Decouple family, school, and community engagement efforts from financial asks, and make school finances more transparent.

According to data from conversations, as well as global research, schools should strive to decouple FSCE practices from financial asks and instead co-plan meetings, events, or activities with families and communities that encourage participation over donation. This means creating more opportunities for engagement in children’s learning and development at schools that do not require financial contributions. For example, schools can hold activities like school plays, spelling bees, and football competitions that allow all families to participate without cost. Avoiding using family-oriented events and activities as an opportunity to fundraise will help support the mindset that families feel their children’s schools belong to them, and they to the schools. It will also help families facing financial insecurities feel that their participation is valued, even if they cannot contribute at a given event.

Wherever possible, schools should look for ways that parents/caregivers and communities can contribute to the planning and execution of these activities, including soliciting family volunteers to lead staff events and activities. If historically marginalized families are involved in determining the time, place, and agenda of school events, this will encourage participation of all families and ensure practices are responsive to the needs of the most marginalized groups and individuals. As Rising Academies noted in their conversations with families, parents/caregivers are willing to volunteer, but there are challenges, including language barriers, literacy levels, and other factors that need to be taken into consideration. During their conversations with schools, EducAid noted the importance of holding school meetings, events, or activities closer to the community, such as local community spaces known as “barriers” where chiefs discuss community issues, which will help encourage attendance of families who either live far from the school or do not feel at ease in the school environment. If MBSSE and collaborating government enti-

ties and civil society organizations provide guidance and tips for facilitating community-responsive and transparent FSCE strategies, this will help ensure that all schools have frameworks to build effective partnerships between families and schools.

Finding 3: School Management Committees routinely involve families more connected and engaged in schools, and vary greatly in their level of efficacy, transparency, and inclusivity of marginalized families.

SMC training and capacity building are positioned by international and national agencies as the main vehicle for engaging with families and communities (see projects implemented by **USAID** and the **World Bank** as examples). According to the 2023 Education Act, SMCs are given three main responsibilities

1. Overseeing the running of the schools
2. Assisting in the drawing up of development plans for the schools
3. Helping to raise funds for the general development of the schools

Globally, school advisory teams and committees are not meant to be the primary type of FSCE, but rather a way to ensure that families have a voice in school leadership. SMC leadership involves very few families, as the data from this study reiterate. As noted under Finding 1, a little over a tenth of families (13 percent) said they were providing feedback on school decisions. Five percent of families (and 89 parents/caregivers) said they were involved in a leadership role in a parent association. Of these 89 families, 57 percent were female and 43 percent were male. Although SMC and parent association meetings are open to families beyond parents/caregivers who serve on the leadership teams, debriefings with research teams found that these meetings are not widely attended by most families and are rarely inclusive of the most marginalized families, including parents/caregivers of parent learners, children with disabilities, and children from low-income families.

In conversations, families discussed how a lack of transparency on how financial contributions to the school and SMCs are used further discouraged them from contributing and feeling like they had an equal vestige in the school. One parent/caregiver in Port Loko raised the issue of paying for school supplies, stating: “Our school produces its own uniforms, shoes, textbooks, and other educational materials, and it charges us a high price for them.”¹⁹ It was suggested that there be more procedures for helping monitor “The school subsidies [including those that go to SMCs] because the authorities are sometimes misusing them.”²⁰

Recommendation 3: Make School Management Committees (SMCs) more inclusive, more effective, and more accountable to families, especially marginalized families.

Survey and conversation data indicated that SMCs are an important strategy of FSCE but should not be treated as the main strategy for FSCE—a finding not unique to Sierra Leone alone. Lessons learned from mobilizing margin-

19 Focus group discussion. Port Loko, Sierra Leone, March 20, 2023

20 Focus group discussion. Western Urban, March 22, 2023

alized families and communities in the process of adopting the National Policy on Radical Inclusion in Schools of 2021 should be applied here, namely the importance of building a coalition of diverse families and community representatives, and creating a culture of advocacy and action with schools.²¹ Suggested ways to build coalitions and a culture of advocacy and action discussed during conversations are listed below:

- Invite community leaders (i.e., town criers, village chiefs, mamie queens, and youth leaders) to attend the SMC meetings so they can communicate activities and updates to their communities who cannot attend.
- Build coalitions with not only mothers' clubs, but also fathers' clubs to reiterate that family engagement involves both male and female parents/caregivers.
- Ensure gender quotas on SMCs are enforced so there are female leaders as well as male leaders, and consider quotas for ensuring representation of families of students with disabilities.
- Create mentorship activities that can be run by SMCs but involve all families. Mentorship activities can link parents/caregivers new to the school, or those that have never navigated school themselves, with parents/caregivers that have knowledge and experience with the education system. Special attention should be paid to creating mentorship opportunities between marginalized families, such as students with disabilities and parent learners.
- Hold SMC meetings in places that are most accessible to families to attend, such as in "barrie" centers or market spaces.

The second part of this recommendation is to ensure that when financial contributions are made to schools and SMCs by families—and ideally not as a part of family engagement events—that management and use of funds is transparent and there is a feedback loop to families so they know how their funds have been used. This also goes for school decisions and policies, which should be transparent to all families. As noted by EducAid, "Families are more willing to participate in schools when they know that their contributions are helping their children learn." Although there have been efforts to train SMCs on transparent and effective management of funds and decisions, monitoring and ensuring transparent processes are used requires further attention. This includes ensuring head teachers and SMC chairs are trained on the guidelines for use and transparency of financial contributions, and that there are clear accountability mechanisms that can be followed. Additionally, there should be some form of communication or feedback process, like an anonymous hotline or text-in option, where families can communicate with MBSSE representatives if they have concerns that their school's SMC is not active or transparent according to the government policy frameworks.

Finding 4: Families and educators reported that the most important purpose of school is to further their children's education and that they are most satisfied when students are getting good marks.

When asked "What is the most important purpose of school?", almost half of families (47 percent) and educators (45 percent) said "to prepare for further education (e.g., university, vocational, or technical)." When asked when they were most satisfied with their child's/students' education, the majority of families (41 percent) and educa-

21 David Moinina Sengeh, *Radical Inclusion: Seven Steps to Help You Create a More just Workplace, Home, and World*. Flatiron Books: A Moment of Lift Book, 2023

tors (43 percent) said when students were “getting good marks on subjects/exams.” Both of these responses fall under the category of academic learning. This pattern of prioritizing academic learning held true across parents/caregivers regardless of their education level, gender, or socioeconomic status. Educators were also asked what purpose they thought their students’ families prioritized and families were asked what purpose their child’s educators prioritized. Educators understood that families prioritized academic learning and were on the same page with them, which was unique from the other countries that have participated in this same research where families and educators were rarely on the same page. Families and educators also had the option of selecting “other” and entering a response. Less than one percent of families (0.5 percent) chose the “other (please, specify)” option. Some of their responses were “to take care of me in my old age” and “to be independent.”

TABLE 6

Purpose of school and satisfaction with school according to families and educators

Purpose of School			Satisfaction with Education		
	Families	Educators		Families	Educators
Academic: Prepare for further education	47%	45%	Academic: Getting good marks on subjects/exams	41%	43%
Economic: To develop skills for work	14.9%	12%	Economic: Learning skills for work	15%	8.5%
Civic: To be active citizens and community members	24.9%	23%	Civic: Participating in community service/learning	19%	16%
Social and emotional: Understand oneself and develop social skills or values	12.7%	20%	Social and emotional: Gaining skills to understand themselves, developing social skills or values	25%	32%
Others	0.5%	0%	Others	0%	0.5%

Families and educators were also asked about their beliefs on teaching and learning (pedagogy) and to identify their ideal pedagogical practice for their children or students. For the most part, families and educators were on the same page in regard to what practices they most preferred for their children or students. Families (49 percent) and educators (64 percent) alike preferred student-centered instruction that emphasized student participation, followed by teacher-centered instruction (33 percent for families and 19 percent for educators). Using technology for learning was third (8 percent for families and educators), followed by experiential learning (8 percent for families and 5 percent for educators). Using home culture for teaching and instruction and play for learning was very low, with roughly 2 percent and 1 percent respectively across both groups. Families with low levels of education experienced some difficulty answering this question as they had limited exposure to different pedagogies. In conversations, educators questioned whether these preferred pedagogical practices, namely student-led instruction, were regularly enacted and if families and educators knew what this pedagogical approach entailed.²²

22 Focus group discussion. Freetown, Sierra Leone, April 27, 2023.

TABLE 7

Preferred pedagogies according to families and educators

Preferred Pedagogies					
	Families	Educators		Families	Educators
Teacher Led	33%	19%	Technology-based	8%	8%
Student Led	49%	64%	Play-based	2%	1%
Experiential Learning	8%	5%	Reflects home language and culture	2%	3%

During the follow-up conversations with families and educators, they emphasized how important schooling is for their children's future and how education is seen as a key to economic prosperity and lifting families and communities out of poverty. As was summarized in one conversation, education is important for "getting a good job and making more money," and getting a university certificate is seen as key to advancing youth's skills and networks. As one conversation participant said, "You can acquire a job that pays more by continuing your education. Ending your education midway through won't help you get a job that pays more, but continuing your education will help you find a well-paying job once you graduate."²³

Families and educators also discussed how education is key to "being respected in their community." As one of the participants in the family and educator conversations noted, "All those who have served as role models are educated people who have graduated from different colleges and all our kids admire them because of the achievements they have attained so far."²⁴ This strong belief that the purpose of schooling is to further academic learning has been found to be true in other contexts, especially where education access has been historically low and parents/caregivers are focused on the importance of education for promoting social mobility.²⁵ ²⁶Social mobility is the movement of groups or individuals - especially those marginalized historically by race, ethnicity, class, caste, gender, religion, and/or geographical residence - between different economic and social strata and towards greater life outcomes.²⁷ As the majority of the parents/caregivers surveyed had no education (44 percent) or only primary school education (26 percent), it is not surprising that they are focused on social mobility and ensuring their children's generation has greater access to and completion of schooling.

In a few conversations, families and educators made the important link between social and emotional learning and academic learning. For example, one conversation participant said, "Further education can help individuals develop better communication and interpersonal skills. These skills are important in personal and professional relationships and can lead to better collaboration, teamwork, and more effective leadership."²⁸ However, the vast majority of families and educators were focused on students obtaining foundational academic skills in literacy, numeracy, and other core subjects.

23 Focus group discussion. Port Loko, Sierra Leone, March 22, 2023)

24 Focus group discussion. Western Urban, Sierra Leone, March 20, 2023)

25 Emily Markovich Morris and Millicent Adjei, "First Generation Students Navigating Educational Aspirations in Zanzibar and Ghana," in *The Oxford Handbook of Global South Youth Studies*, eds. Sharlene Swartz, Adam Cooper, Clarence Batan, and Laura Kropff Causa, (Oxford University Press, 2021) 421-431.

26 Divya Vaid, "Patterns of Social Mobility and the Role of Education in India," *Contemporary South Asia* 24, no. 3 (2016): 285-312.

27 Ibid.

28 Focus group discussion. Port Loko, Sierra Leone, March 21, 2023).

This alignment between families and educators on the purpose of school presents an opportunity for building FSCE, but also indicates that efforts to shift deeply held beliefs—such as eliminating corporal punishment or changing the curricula—will require considerable mobilization of families and educators.

Recommendation 4: Use the strong alignment in beliefs and perspectives to build greater coalitions and partnerships between families and schools.

The data in this study indicated that there is deep respect for educators by families and that they are aligned their beliefs. Families and educators had similar beliefs on the main purpose of school, when they are most satisfied with education, and preferred teaching and learning practices. Families and educators were more aligned in beliefs than in any other of the other 15 countries where this research was conducted. As discussed in conversations, this strong alignment is likely because families and educators come from the same communities, attend similar religious institutions together, and have similar aspirations for their children.

This strong alignment in beliefs and viewpoints provides important opportunities as well as challenges. One challenge is that it will take considerable sensitization and mobilization efforts to make changes to curricula or teaching that can be perceived as moving away from the academic purpose of school. As beliefs on the importance of academic learning and adhering to the exam culture are so deeply rooted among families and educators—as noted in their response that they were most satisfied with learning when their students were getting good marks on subjects or exams—efforts to emphasize greater social and emotional learning or life skills education in national curricula, teacher training, or climate education, will require deep sensitization among families and educators on the importance of social and emotional learning for building foundational academic skills. Part of building this mindset and awareness of the importance of social and emotional learning entails listening to families’ questions and concerns, as well as hopes and expectations for their children’s education, as they see education as a critical step towards social mobility and well-being of their child and families (as noted in conversations across districts).

As suggested under Recommendation 1, using multiple modes of communication, such as radio, mobile phone, television, and word-of-mouth campaigns to build conversations and FSCE, will be critical to reaching a wide breadth of families. Efforts to change hearts and minds require listening deeply to educators and families, identifying their beliefs and points of contention and exclusion, and helping envision a new normal.²⁹ In the case of FSCE, this will involve working with families, schools, and communities to think about what sustainable, equitable, and inclusive partnerships entails, and in picturing family engagement beyond solely SMC activities and trainings.

Finding 5: Teachers are highly regarded and trusted by families, but schools need new and innovative strategies to better engage all families, especially those who are most marginalized.

When families were asked where they get their information on what a good quality education is, they said “educators” (72 percent) followed by their “family members” (31 percent). This deep regard and respect for educators was also captured in relational trust questions. Families reported that they felt deeply respected and valued by educators; on a scale of 1 to 4 (1 being not respected and 4 being highly respected), parents/caregivers reported 3.4. Educators reported the same level of respect (3.4) with families. Across the four items on the relational trust

29 Sengeh, *Radical Inclusion: Seven Steps to Help You Create a More Just Workplace, Home and World*.

TABLE 8

Relational trust and shared beliefs of families and educators

Likert Question (on a scale of 1 to 4)	Families	Educators
Satisfaction with the quality of education	3.6	3.5
Share beliefs about what makes a good education	3.3	3.3
Respect and value each other's input and suggestions	3.4	3.4
Parents/caregivers are involved in child's learning or school	3.5	3.3
Mean score across four items	3.47	3.36

scale, families had a slightly higher score (3.47) than educators (3.36). Feeling respected and sharing of beliefs were highly correlated ($r=0.612$), meaning the more respected families felt by educators the more they felt they shared beliefs. The same was true for educators. Conversations revealed that, while there was an overall trust between educators and families, there was less trust when it came to the use of finances and school management, as discussed under Finding 3.

The conversations and survey process also exposed that there is little professional development or intentional work done to ensure that teachers and school leaders have the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and practices on how to effectively work with different kinds of families, especially those who are most marginalized—including families of parent learners, children with disabilities, children living in extreme poverty, among others. There was no known content in in-service or pre-service training and professional development curricula and programming that focused on how to effectively collaborate with families.³⁰ This was also the case in administrative trainings for education leaders. Like in other parts of the world,³¹ this lack of intentional training and support to educators on how to work with all families, especially the most marginalized, inhibits efforts to build strong FSCE partnerships and practice.

Recommendation 5: Content on how to effectively and intentionally build partnerships between families, schools, and communities should be more clearly integrated into professional development of educators.

Although there is deep respect for educators by families, and acknowledgment that families are important stakeholders in education frameworks, schools need support in building sustainable, equitable, and inclusive partnerships with families. This includes building the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and practices of teachers and education leaders on how to work in collaboration with families. One important strategy is developing pre-service and in-service trainings for educators that help them understand the research on why FSCE is critical to student and school success, and how to implement strategies that address the barriers to engagement—such as decoupling FSCE from financial requests and imagining involvement beyond SMC trainings. Trainings can be tailored to class-

30 Focus group discussion. Freetown, Sierra Leone, April 27, 2023

31 "Family Engagement Pre-Service Educator Preparation Initiative," NAFSCE, accessed July 3, 2024. <https://nafsce.org/page/edprep>.

room teachers, head teachers, district education officers, SMC leaders, and other groups. In addition to building the knowledge and skills of educators, building a commitment to FSCE among families and schools should also be part of the overarching MBSSE strategy.

Finally, establishing mentorship opportunities for educators and schools to work with champions of FSCE in their networks was a suggested strategy to support FSCE in practice. For example, a school that holds annual consultations with families and communities to gather and share input on school vision and plans for the upcoming school year could mentor other schools in this approach. This commitment to capacity building, greater resources, and mentoring will help ensure FSCE partnerships are responsive to communities and sustained over time.

Conclusion

The purpose of this Policy Brief and the accompanying research is to provide key recommendations for the MBSSE and partnering institutions on how to build family, school, and community partnerships that are sustainable, equitable, and inclusive while supporting students and schools to thrive. Contextually-based strategies that support schools, districts, and ministries' efforts to build greater collaboration and partnerships with families are detailed, alongside ways to mitigate barriers to FSCE. As the findings reiterate, "Schools do not stand by themselves, they belong to the community, they are the community." In order to build collective action to support the learning and development of all children across Sierra Leone, a first step is building a collective mindset and expanding the efforts and strategies already in place.

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Appendix

MOTHERS' CONVERSATION STARTER QUESTIONS

EducAid has created a checklist for mothers that prompts them to check-in about five topics relevant to their children's day at home: **friends**, **time**, **books**, **teachers**, and **safety**. The topics are represented through icons in this table.

EducAid also provides example questions mothers can ask on each topic, found below:











Friends: How were your friends today? Did you play well together? Who did you help? Who helped you?

Time: Were you on time at school today? What about your friends? And your teachers?

Books: Let's have a look at your books. What work did you do today? This looks (doesn't look) very nice and tidy. Has the teacher looked at your books recently?

Teachers: How was your teacher today? Did she say anything kind/unkind to you today?

Safety: Is there anything you need to tell me about something that made you/your friends feel unsafe?

Mother's Conversation Starter	
	
	
	
	
	

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