POLICY BRIEF

Free education for all: Assessing the future of Gratuité

Context

Free primary education was implemented by the Ministry of Primary, Secondary and Technical Education (MEPST) in 2019 with plans for an extension to pre-primary education and all basic education in the future. The Free Basic Education policy (Gratuité) means that the cost of the education system is borne by the state and not by individual households, creating equitable access to education.

However, given its ambition, the policy has raised a series of questions concerning financing. In a context of scarce resources and a limited education budget, it is vital to understand the wider implications of the policy so that budgeting and planning is effective and realistic.

This Information Brief presents an overview of predicted challenges, projections of resources required, and analysis of what needs to be done to ensure the success of the policy.

What are the predicted challenges?

Planning for the successful implementation of Gratuité requires an assessment of challenges based on analysis of data and major trends, including projections for population, revenue and costs. It is also vital to anticipate issues that may contradict forecasts, such as national and international economic, social and political uncertainties. These considerations are particularly important in the case of a fragile state.

Planning for Gratuité

1. Budgeting to replace income from fees

A large proportion of the sector's funding still comes from school fees paid by parents, especially at the secondary level. These school fees supplement teachers' salaries and schools' monthly allowances. To implement Gratuité, the state must bear these costs.

2. Tackling increases in class sizes

Gratuité has caused an influx of registration from children previously in the private sector or children who were not in school. The student-teacher ratio increased from 31 to 41 between 2017 and 2019 creating large classes that impact on the quality of teaching and learning. This increase could also be due to the loss of unpaid teachers, who had to look for another profession because of the lack of remuneration.[1]

3. Accommodating a growing school age population

The population of the DRC is mostly young and there is strong population growth. As access to education becomes more democratic, the school-age population will continue to grow rapidly.

4. Providing more schools and teachers

The need for additional schools, classrooms, and teachers increases as more pupils join the school population. Teachers will need to be recruited, trained, and paid, schools built and more and classes provided.

5. Planning by region

There are large regional disparities in the student-teacher ratio, with many urban schools with classes of more than 100 students. This regional difference is likely to continue, so the planning for additional schools, classrooms and teachers must reflect this.

6. Anticipating growth beyond primary level

Free education at primary level will create more potential pupils to be educated at secondary level and beyond. Planning needs to extend beyond primary level to ensure there are opportunities for children to continue education and become productive citizens.

Projections and strategies for Free Education Policy

Accelere!2 has calculated specific projections to address these challenges, based on known data and trends. In doing so, it is possible to realistically identify the extent of future challenges, their associated risks, and costs. This enables actors to proactively prepare technical plans to meet challenges as they arise and limits the need for reactive thinking or crisis management approaches.

The analyses here are based on population projections to understand the likely increase in the number of children receiving free education in the medium and long term. From these forecasts, it is possible to anticipate the number of teachers and schools needed by 2025, 2030 and 2040 and the associated budget required.

Our methodology

The demographic projections are from the simulation model carried out by Agence Française de Développement (AFD) for the establishment of the Training Institutes for Teaching Profession (IFME), authored by Serge Peano.

- The model uses the National Statistical Institute estimates for 2019 and extends the projections to 2040 for school-age population numbers.

- The projections of school enrolment use the objectives from the National Education Sector Strategy, assuming no change to school conditions or pupil/teacher ratios.

- The estimates are based on unit costs defined as adequate in the ACCELERE!2 study on the cost of education, carried out in 2019.

Calculation of appropriate allowances for schools

The average unit cost of running an 8-class primary school is estimated at USD 1,600 in urban areas and USD 2,000 in rural areas, per year. This covers a list of materials considered essential: pedagogical, maintenance, etc.

For this simulation, the amount of 1800 USD/year is used as an average.

We considered schools of 6-11 classes for our calculations, as they are the most widespread in the country and therefore cover most cases.

[1] Evaluation Gratuité, MECC, 2021

**Calculation of appropriate salaries**

The costs are based on an anticipated salary of 250 USD/month for teachers, which would exceed the amount currently received by most teachers[2]. The cost increase is justified by the fact that current salaries do not satisfy most teachers, leading to multiple strikes and an increase in those leaving the profession. The increase salary would be achieved by combining the motivation bonus from school fees and salary paid by the state.

Over 300,000 more teachers needed by 2040

Population growth suggests that an increasing number of children will enter basic education in the public sector. It is also important to note that analysis of the current teaching workforce shows an ageing population, so more children enter the education system, more teachers will leave the workforce.

To fill this gap, an even greater number of new teachers will need to be recruited, trained and budgeted for. This need will increase sharply from 2025.

**Figure 1:** Projections of the number of teachers required in the public sector.
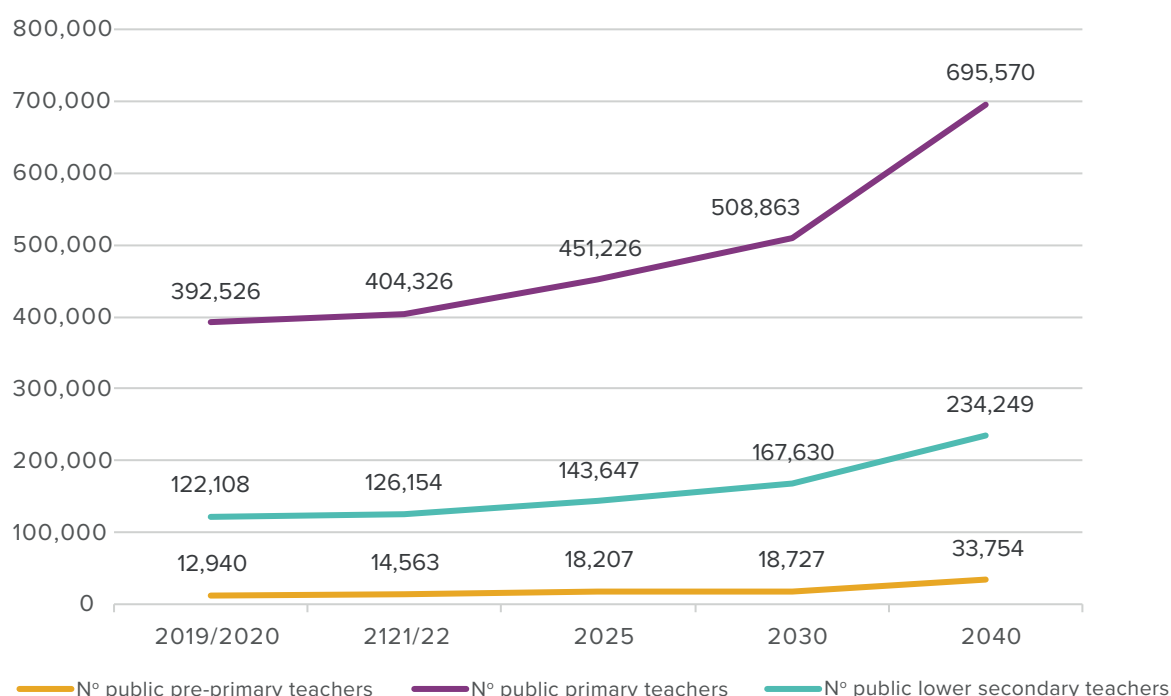
Source: AFD simulation model / INS figures / Ministry of Health

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[2] In 2021, rural teachers received 90 USD/month and urban teachers received 140 USD/month. Some received a transport and housing bonus.

Public classes need to be doubled by 2040

Given the increasing population of school-age children, and the ambition to limit the number of children at 55 per classroom, nearly 400,000 extra public classes will need to be provided by 2040. This means almost double the number that exist in the 2019/2020 school year.

Figure 2: Projections of the number of public classes needed for 2025, 2030 and 2040 according to the increase in the school-age population.
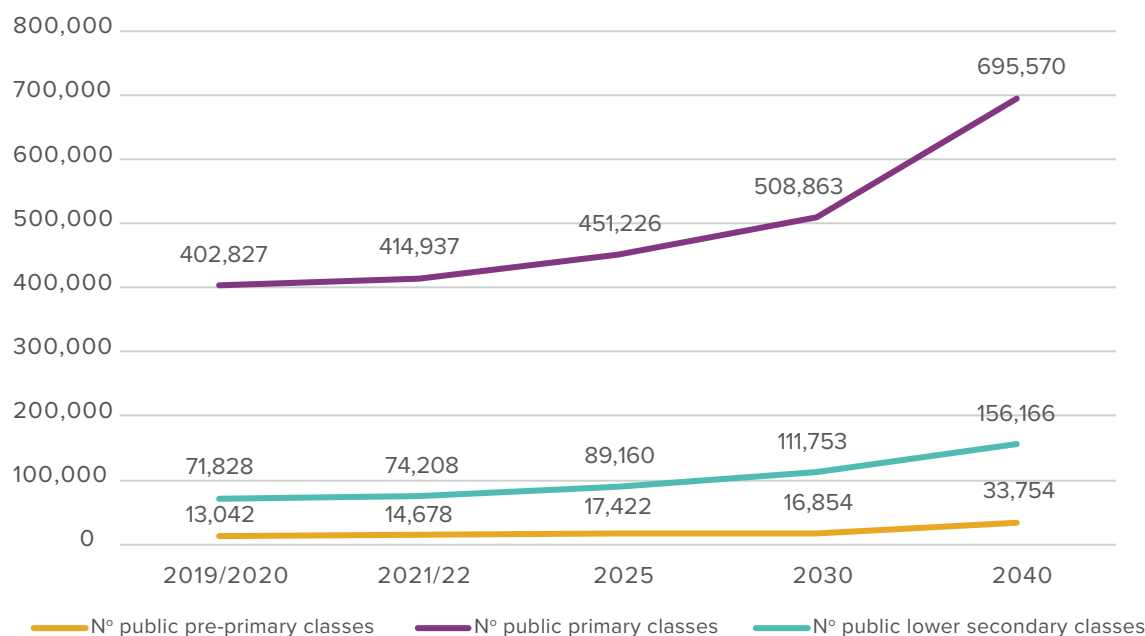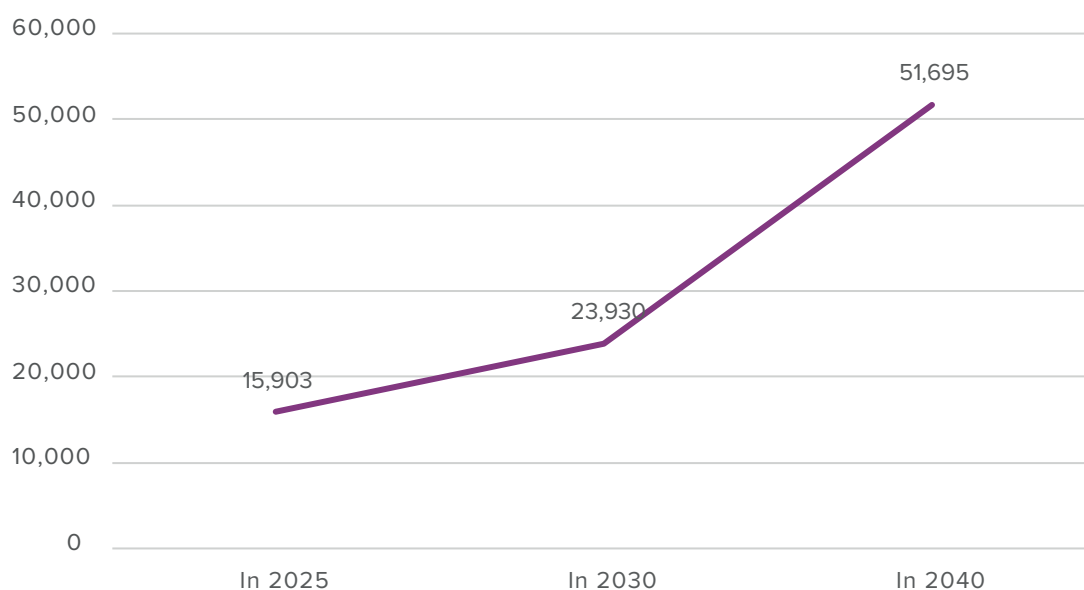

Source: AFD simulation model / INS figures / Ministry of Health

More than 50,000 new schools required by 2040

To provide sufficient facilities for the increasing school-age population and growth in classes, a substantial number of additional public schools will need to be built by 2025, 2030 and 2040. The location of these schools will depend on regional data – more will be required in urban areas where there will be a greater number of children to enrol.

Figure 3: How many schools to build?

Source: AFD simulation model / INS figures / Ministry of Health

$3.2 billion additional budget needed by 2040

To cover the growth in teacher, class and school numbers, annual budgets will need to increase for pre-primary, primary and secondary schools. Based on forecasts of staff salaries and monthly school allowances, it is anticipated that the costs for free education will be more than $3.2 billion by 2040.

Table 1: Estimate of the budget required per year in 2025, 2020 and 2040

Topics to be financed	Budget needed/ year in 2025 (USD)	Budget needed/ year in 2030 (USD)	Budget needed / year in 2040 (USD)
Recurring costs			
Teachers' salaries in pre-primary education	$54,621,000	$56,181,000	$101,262,000
Teachers' salaries in primary school	$1,353,678,000	$1,526,589,000	$2,086,710,000
Teachers' salaries in lower secondary	$484,260,000	$646,575,000	$903,534,000
Monthly allowances for pre-primary schools	$10,307,154	$10,246,161	$20,520,020
Monthly allowances for primary schools	$106,853,708	$123,071,315	$168,227,185
Monthly allowances for lower secondary	$67,746,308	$94,663,820	$132,285,088
Total budget/year	**$2,024,147,171**	**$2,313,641,296**	**$3,211,751,292**

Sources: AFD simulation model and Study on the cost of the education system (A!2 / Johan Verhague)

Recommendations: Meeting the costs for free education

1. Increased efficiency in the use of existing budget

Spend the full MEPST budget every year. When considering only non-salary-related costs, only 47% of the MEPST budget is spent on a given year – the rest remains untouched (Ministry of Finance, 2020).

Clearly coordinate the different levels of the MEPST under the Secretaire General with a focus on efficiency (e.g., limited travel in the provinces, reduce expensive workshops, etc.).

Ensure transparent preparation and implementation of the budget involving civil society, parliamentary control.

Continue to fight corruption to ensure maximum budget is kept in the system.

Develop school map and needs of the subdivisions through the Annual Performance Review to determine where new infrastructure is needed.

Only add other levels of the education system when primary education is fully operational and free.

2. Make savings to increase available budget

Rationalise the number of administrative offices and officials to create savings from salaries etc.

Reform SECOPE for transparency of budget use, clearer delineation of roles and responsibilities, elimination of duplicate teachers.

Review the process of creating schools to ensure spending only happens where it is most needed.

What's next? Building predictions into strategy

Once the projected challenges, their timeframes and budgets are understood, they should be reflected in the strategic vision, implementation approach and objectives of the policy.

Some questions that may need to be asked, include:

What will happen after free basic education has been introduced (in 2025, 2030 and 2040)? What will be the situation at these times if the forecasts come true?

Does this allow for the education sector goals in terms of access and quality to be achieved?

If not, what needs to be done to change the situation? What cannot be changed (e.g. population growth)?

What needs to be reflected in planning?

Limited resources and budgets will constrain possible options for how projected challenges can be dealt with and therefore must inform choices. It is vital that these are understood, and actions implemented, before extending the policy to other levels of education.

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