

# “Religious Debate” and the “School Mergers”: Neo-Liberal Reform of Nigeria’s Educational System

Osun School Merger Policy: Beyond Religious Distraction

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*Government’s method of reducing number of schools and replacing them with fewer mega-schools as a way of addressing rot in education is clearly unscientific and bogus. Osun State has an average school age population (those between ages 2 and 15) of 1, 600, 000. With over 2, 100 public primary and secondary schools, it means an average of 700 pupils are expected in each school, while at least 23 teachers are expected per school at the ratio of a teacher to 30 students/pupils, or 53, 000 teachers for all schools.*

The whole issue about school merger and reclassification policy of the Osun State government has been diverted to religious debate no thanks to the media and the religious groups especially the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN). This has thus blurred the real analysis of the policy, with religion being placed at the centre of the debate.

This tends to suggest that immediately the religious diversionary issue is resolved, the policy is ok. This is clearly far from the truth. Indeed, the intervention of CAN in the debate and analysis is a disservice to the interests of several thousands, if not millions of Osun indigenes who are affected by this policy.

However, CAN’s position taken on both its face value and long-term implication is retrogressive and neo-colonial. CAN has as its main demand the return of schools to former missionary owners. This simply interpreted will mean privatization of education, leading to exclusion of vast majority of the children of the lowly; and stratification associated with the colonial missionary heritage. Inasmuch as these schools are public properties, attempt of religious groups to claim control over or ownership of any of these schools, under any guise, is tantamount to rolling back the wheel of history. It will deny people of different faiths and cultures their right to education by limiting their choices. However, the religious digression to the issue is caused by the government’s divisive policy and undemocratic approach on not only the merger, but also on other issues. For instance, government has been unduly promoting religious identities. This has generated unwarranted division, which this school merger policy only exacerbates. Therefore, the religious diversion of the policy actually reflects the failure of the merger policy.

This policy of school merger is ill conceived and undemocratic. It is indeed a superficial solution, if at all a solution, to myriads of problems confronting education in the state. While government’s claim that education in the state is bedeviled with chronic lack of quality is right, the approach of government is undemocratic and neo-liberal. It is deplorable that a government will introduce such far-reaching policy of merging, over two thousand schools without democratic involvement of teachers, education sector workers, students, parents

and communities. Yet, these are the people who will implement or be affected by this policy. Organizations like Campaign for democratic and Workers' Rights (CDWR), that tried to organize public debates on the issue were hounded down by the state security agents with the approval of the Osun State government.

On the contrary, government went ahead to implement the policy without even addressing the concerns of and discomfort to the people, especially students and teachers alike, relying on its propaganda machine. Without being equivocal, genuine reform should start from not just stocktaking but also democratic debate among the people about the direction education should take. However, this presupposes that government does not have hidden agenda vis-à-vis award of bogus contracts, as this democratic approach will expose any corrupt tendency. Government of course claimed to have organized an Education Summit at the inception of its tenure, but this was nothing short of a jamboree, as invitees and speakers are big people with little or no connection with the real conditions of education in the state. Meanwhile, genuine stakeholders, including education workers and their unions, students and communities were sidelined from the whole process or made mere passive participants as listeners and side commentators. Yet the government claims to be implementing the outcome of this summit!

**Government's method of reducing number of schools and replacing them with fewer mega-schools as a way of addressing rot in education is clearly unscientific and bogus.** Osun State has an average school age population (those between ages 2 and 15) of 1, 600, 000. With over 2, 100 public primary and secondary schools, it means an average of 700 pupils are expected in each school, while at least 23 teachers are expected per school at the ratio of a teacher to 30 students/pupils, or 53, 000 teachers for all schools. Currently most of the schools have chronic shortage of teachers with the state having less than 12, 000 teachers. Most of the schools lack functional laboratories, libraries, computer facilities, not to mention nursery services. In fact, a survey of schools shows that most are unfenced, with no sanitary and first aid facilities.

What education need is not some 30 'mega' schools which has taken the government three years to build, but holistic revamping of school infrastructures which will include expansion of physical facilities like well-stocked laboratories, libraries, workshops, sport and recreational facilities and adequate classrooms and staff rooms. It will more importantly involve massive staffing of schools with enough teaching and non-teaching workers, and continuous and systematic training of these staff. Government claims it plans to reduce number of public primary and secondary schools from current 2, 000 to 900 "mega-schools". However, this, aside being bogus, sounds more like political propaganda than serious policy plan. If it takes three years to re-build 30 schools, how many years will it take it to build 900 schools? If in three years, the government could hardly employ more teachers into schools, how many years will it take it to employ at least an additional 15, 000 teachers to meet this population. The reclassification aspect of the policy is not only superficial but also farcical. Reclassifying decrepit schools is like painting a fracturing house.

Government did not even wait to build at least half of its projected 900 mega-schools before closing down and merging schools. This means that many students will be studying

in worsening conditions, as the schools into which students and teachers were transferred are overcrowded and in rundown state. This is aside problems posed for students and pupils, many of whom will now have to travel longer distance to get to their 'new' schools. Yet, there is no government provision to ease students' transport problem. In fact, the trauma of settling down will take toll on students' ability to learn. It is a different matter entirely if the students are moving to better schools with improved facilities. In this case, it is the contrary. This situation is similar to the colonial era where students travelled several kilometers to get educated in other areas. This school merger policy, among others may throw back the education sector in the state and mushrooming of private schools and examination/coaching centres.

A practical and revolutionary approach should have been government's commitment to improve massively the conditions of current schools. This has said earlier, will involve massive expansion of facilities in schools, coupled with employment and retraining of more teaching and non-teaching staff. Where some structures or even a whole school have to give way, this can be done with direct involvement of affected communities i.e. teachers, students, parents and the communities, and government representatives. Based on this approach, government will be able to have a long-term plan that will take cognizance of expected population growth for the next, say 10 to 20 years. Where there is need to build new schools and facilities such as nursery schools, more technical colleges, and special need schools - which are either non-existent or grossly inadequate - this will be done without destroying the whole education system. On this basis, it can be possible to attract pupils from private schools - majority of which are substandard - back into public schools, while giving free but quality education to children of the poor. Consequently, government will be able to have long term and holistic developmental education programme while reducing financial burdens on parents.

But genuine education reforms and programmes can only be carried out by a working people's government with socialist orientation and programmes, committed to using huge public resources for public needs such as education, health, housing, jobs, water, industry, etc. This can be done through a democratic involvement of affected stakeholders and relevant professionals that will undertake public discussions, planning, executing and monitoring of these projects. For instance, over N15 billion to be expended on computer tablets for a small fraction of students (when even tertiary institutions do not have functional ICT facilities) can foot significant part of the bill of expanding facilities including functional computer facilities. Furthermore, by equipping public works department, huge cost of private contracting can be drastically reduced. Only democratic committees can genuinely plan and direct focus on priorities.

A capitalist government that wants to compensate political cum business friends and patrons with bogus contracts and projects can never resolve education problems on a long-term basis.

This is clearly visible in the government merger policy in which schools such as Fakunle high School, are being closed down and demolished to provide space for elitist facilities like shopping mall, privatized parking space and shopping complex!

Conclusively, the labour movement's silence over the issue again shows the crisis of leadership in the labour movement, both in Osun State and nationally. Despite the serious implications the school merger will have on working conditions of teachers (which may include retrenchment), not to mention the effects on students and education as a whole, the

teachers' union, NUT and labour movement in the state simply maintained a suspicious silence. This questionable silence has given space to religious diversion of the debate over the ill-conceived policy. This again underscores the need for rank-and-file workers to get more interested in their unions, and take steps to rebuild their unions on democratic, principled and fighting basis.

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