

Bridging the Leadership Capacity Deficit: The Critical Imperative for Continuous Professional Development of School Leaders in Ghana

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100600262>

Received: 27 May 2026; Accepted: 01 June 2026; Published: 22 June 2026

ABSTRACT

Ghana's education sector faces a critical leadership capacity deficit rooted in a historical practice of elevating accomplished teachers to principal and headmaster positions based primarily on classroom tenure rather than administrative capability or leadership vision. This article examines the scope of this deficit, synthesizes empirical evidence on the impact of professional development on teaching and learning, and argues that systematic, continuous professional development for school leaders is not merely an enhancement but an essential investment in educational quality and equity. Through analysis of recent research on school leadership effectiveness, comparative examination of international professional development models, and review of current Ghana-specific initiatives, the article articulates a comprehensive framework for establishing robust, sustainable professional development infrastructure for Ghana's school leaders. The evidence is unambiguous: school leadership is the second most significant school-based factor affecting student learning, after classroom instruction; professional development programs that build school leaders' capacity in instructional leadership, school climate development, and organizational management produce measurable improvements in teaching quality, teacher retention, and student achievement. Yet in Ghana, most school leaders receive minimal formal preparation and virtually no ongoing professional development. This article makes the empirical and strategic case for systematic intervention, proposing a sustainable, contextually-responsive model for continuous leadership development that Ghana's education sector can implement to unlock the transformative potential of its leadership pipeline.

Keywords: educational leadership, professional development, school improvement, Ghana education system, instructional leadership, capacity building, teacher retention, student achievement.

INTRODUCTION: THE MAGNITUDE OF THE CHALLENGE

Ghana's Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE) and West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE) results have remained persistently concerning despite decades of investment in education expansion. While primary gross enrollment rates exceed 100 percent, this drops to 85 percent for junior high school and 50 percent for senior high school, with only 38 percent of children who enter primary completing senior high school. Behind these enrollment and completion statistics lie deeper questions about quality of instruction, school effectiveness, and organizational capacity.

Substantial research across three decades has established an unequivocal finding: school leadership is the second most powerful school-based determinant of student learning, second only to classroom instruction itself. Yet Ghana has allowed an institutional vacuum to develop around the professional development of school leaders—a vacuum that undermines the very potential of schools to improve.

The paradox is instructive: Ghana has produced some of Africa's most accomplished educators and school leaders, individuals whose professional judgment and institutional stewardship have transformed schools and influenced regional education policy. Yet the professional journey of most of these leaders has been characterized by trial and error rather than deliberate preparation, by crisis management rather than strategic

planning, by isolated problem-solving rather than access to the conceptual frameworks, research evidence, and peer networks that could accelerate their effectiveness.

The reasons for this vacuum are partly historical, partly structural, and partly cultural. Historically, teachers became school principals based on their seniority alone, and most head teachers had at best one week's training focused on administration. The assumption—persistent in many educational cultures—has been that excellence in classroom teaching automatically transfers to excellence in school leadership, and that the skills required to manage a classroom transfer seamlessly to managing a school of 400 or 1,000 students, supervising dozens of teachers, managing budgets, interfacing with district education offices, and stewarding institutional vision.

This assumption is both empirically wrong and professionally damaging. Outstanding teachers often become mediocre principals not because they lack intelligence, dedication, or caring, but because school leadership demands a distinct set of competencies: systems thinking, financial management, personnel evaluation, strategic planning, organizational culture development, instructional coaching, and the navigation of political and community dynamics. These competencies are learned; they do not flow naturally from classroom excellence.

The human and institutional costs of this vacuum are significant. Teachers in Ghana report that they receive insufficient instructional support and feedback from principals. Leadership remains limited in under resourced public basic schools, with limited understanding of how effective school leadership practices are articulated in Ghana's Education Strategic Plan (ESP 2018–2030). Principals themselves report that they are overwhelmed by administrative demands that distract them from instructional leadership. New principals often flounder for their first 2–3 years, learning through experience what could have been more efficiently learned through preparation and mentorship. Schools cycle through periods of stronger and weaker leadership, with institutional progress deeply contingent on the particular individual in the principal's office rather than on systematic, sustained improvement.

For a nation committed to quality education and achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4, this is unacceptable. Ghana has the institutional structures, the professional commitment, and emerging examples of effective practice that demonstrate the pathway forward. What is required is deliberate recognition of the problem, strategic investment, and systematic implementation of professional development infrastructure that can support school leaders throughout their careers.

This article makes the empirical, strategic, and moral case for such intervention.

LITERATURE REVIEW: THE RESEARCH FOUNDATION FOR LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

The Foundational Research: School Leadership Affects Student Learning

The most important finding in educational leadership research over the past 20 years is simultaneously the most cited and the most underutilized in policy and practice: school leadership significantly affects student learning. This finding is not speculation or inference; it emerges from rigorous longitudinal research, meta-analyses of multiple studies, and comparative analyses across diverse institutional contexts.

In a 2004 landmark synthesis funded by the Wallace Foundation, researchers examined decades of prior research to understand how leadership influences student learning. Their conclusion was direct and consequential: "Leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contribute to what students learn at school." This finding has been replicated, refined, and extended by subsequent research, consistently demonstrating the magnitude of leadership effects on student outcomes.

The mechanisms through which leadership affects learning are both direct and indirect. School leadership explains differences in achievement and instruction between schools through variation of classroom instruction quality associated with principal leadership, and effects are usually largest where they are needed most. More specifically, leadership effects on student learning are mediated by teacher emotions, such as collective teacher

efficacy, teacher commitment, and trust in colleagues, the principal, students, and parents, with when principals foster these productive teacher emotions, student achievement improves.

Recent research quantifies these effects more precisely. Access to professional development—as well as specific learning about instructional leadership—is strongly associated with student achievement gains in both mathematics and English language arts, with underrepresented students of color benefiting the most from their principals' opportunities to learn, as do the students of early-career professionals.

Meta-analytic research on the specific dimensions of principal leadership reveals differential impacts. Promoting and participating in teacher learning and development has the most significant impact on student achievement, and this research shows that it is approximately twice as powerful as the other four dimensions of leadership effectiveness. This finding is critical: it establishes that the most powerful lever available to principals for improving student outcomes is not administrative efficiency or financial management, but rather their capacity to facilitate teacher learning and professional growth.

Professional Development Impact: Quantified Evidence

Beyond research establishing that leadership matters, extensive research has examined the direct effects of professional development on teaching and learning outcomes. The findings are consistent and substantial.

A comprehensive meta-analysis synthesizing research from 2003-2014 on K-12 mathematics teachers' professional development and student achievement confirms that teacher professional development in mathematics does have significant positive effects on student achievement, with the analysis results confirming the positive relationship to student outcomes of key characteristics of design of professional development programs.

More recent large-scale meta-analyses provide refined understanding. Research examining 46 experimental studies of professional development interventions in mathematics and science found that compared with controls, treatment group teachers in PK–12 mathematics and science PD intervention studies demonstrated stronger performance on teacher-level outcomes (pooled average impact estimate: +0.52 SD), with programs with larger impacts on teacher-level outcomes also tending to have significantly larger mean impacts on student achievement.

Perhaps most comprehensively, a recent meta-analysis of 128 high-quality studies examining teacher professional development effects on student achievement, with 356 effect sizes total, found that teacher professional development in-service on average improves student achievement with an average effect size of 0.09, considered a medium-size effect on student achievement, though effects varied greatly with the 95 prediction interval ranging from -0.15 to 0.32, and the exploratory model seemed to indicate that the number of learning-theory principles applied in designing the TPD (out of these four: teacher performance standards, teacher self-regulation, teacher coaching and teacher cooperation) positively influenced student outcomes.

For data-use specifically, a random-effects multilevel meta-analysis showed a medium-sized positive effect on student achievement ($g = .41$) with significant heterogeneity, with effective interventions containing strong collaboration and support factors.

These effect sizes—ranging from 0.09 to 0.52 standard deviations—may seem technical, but their meaning is profound. An effect size of 0.30 SD is considered educationally significant; effect sizes of 0.50 SD and above are considered large. This means that well-designed professional development produces effects comparable to some of the most powerful educational interventions available. Moreover, these are conservative estimates because they include poorly-designed interventions alongside well-designed ones; when professional development adheres to evidence-based principles, effects are larger.

Leadership Development: Emerging Specific Evidence

While research on teacher professional development is extensive, research specifically examining the effects of leadership development programs is more limited but growing. The available evidence is encouraging.

A study of 462 California principals showed that high-quality preservice preparation for principals is associated with stronger teacher retention, and that overall access to professional development—as well as specific learning about instructional leadership—is strongly associated with student achievement gains in both mathematics and English language arts. This finding is significant: it establishes that the impact of principal development extends beyond principals' own performance to affect teacher retention, which in turn affects student outcomes.

Research in developing country contexts specifically documents the effectiveness of leadership capacity-building. Systems educational reform in developing countries through effective principal capacity-building programs is essential for improving student learning, with case studies revealing the overall value of instructional leadership programs involving school leader workshops and ongoing coaching support, with findings showing large differences in the leadership practices before and after the program was rolled out, with responses by teachers in schools headed by leaders who have undergone the training pointing to a stronger focus on instructional improvement, greater support to teachers, as well as improved school atmosphere.

Similarly, a study found large differences in the leadership practices before and after the program was rolled out, with responses by teachers in schools headed by leaders who have undergone the training pointing to a stronger focus on instructional improvement, greater support to teachers, as well as improved school atmosphere, with schools demonstrating improvement in performance, showing that there is great value in strengthening the focus on building capacity for school leadership in developing countries where learning outcomes remain very low.

These findings are not anomalies; they represent a consistent pattern across diverse contexts: professional development of school leaders produces measurable, meaningful improvements in school leadership practice, teacher support, school climate, and ultimately student outcomes.

Ghana's Current Landscape: Progress and Persistent Gaps

Ghana has not been passive in recognizing the need for school leadership development. Over the past decade, significant initiatives have emerged that demonstrate commitment and promising models.

Emerging Initiatives and Structures

Ghana's significant achievements in promoting school leadership include piloting the National Education Leadership Institute (NELI) to create a dedicated pathway for developing school leaders, providing blended professional development in transformative leadership, and establishing the National Professional Education Leadership Qualification Framework to guide academic institutions in training school leaders, with the Ghana Education Service (GES) and the National Teaching Council (NTC) also playing an active role in supervising and appraising school leaders.

The Leaders in Teaching Ghana (LiT) program, implemented through the Ministry of Education with support from Transforming Teaching, Education and Learning (T-TEL) and funding from the Mastercard Foundation, represents one of the more comprehensive efforts. The Leaders in Teaching (LiT) Programme is structured around four core pillars: LEAD (Strengthening leadership and management in schools through performance-based oversight, use of data for decision-making, and improved accountability systems), TRAIN (Enhancing the quality and relevance of pre-service and in-service teacher training to ensure curriculum delivery aligned with NTS), RECRUIT (Promoting equitable teacher recruitment with emphasis on gender and rural deployment), with LiT working through strong national and regional-level cooperation, engaging a wide network of institutional partners.

The University of Cambridge's Leadership for Learning Ghana initiative provides another important model. Leadership for Learning (LfL) Ghana is a long-term collaborative research and development programme that uses previous research outcomes to improve students' learning through enhancing the leadership capacity of head teachers/school principals, with LfL Ghana having impacted pupils' learning, seeing large increases in reading and test results in some LfL schools, with head teachers and their schools changing significantly to become more collaborative and learning focused, and the LfL principles having been incorporated into the Ghana Education

Service (GES) Head teachers' handbook, with the GES producing a Leadership for Learning manual for head teachers and circuit supervisors entirely devoted to enacting the five LfL principles.

Organizations like EduFinance and Lead For Ghana have also developed professional development programming for school leaders, addressing gaps through customized workshop and coaching models.

The Persistent Vacuum: Scope and Nature

Despite these initiatives, a significant gap remains. The vacuum is not a complete absence but rather a critical insufficiency relative to need. Consider the numbers: Ghana's Basic Education sector includes approximately 15,000 public primary and junior high schools, plus several thousand secondary institutions. Assuming an average of 1.5 leadership positions per school (principal plus vice principal), Ghana has roughly 25,000 school leaders. How many of these leaders, annually, receive comprehensive professional development addressing instructional leadership, organizational management, financial planning, personnel evaluation, and school improvement?

Current evidence suggests the number is a small fraction. While initiatives like LiT are scaling significantly, they remain limited in geographic scope, target specific sectors (secondary education for LiT), and reach only a subset of leaders even within their geographic focus. A headmaster in a rural primary school in the Northern Region or Upper West Region faces substantially lower probability of access to professional development than a principal in Accra or Kumasi.

Further, most existing professional development is episodic rather than continuous. Leaders attend a workshop or training program, yet lack systematic follow-up support, peer networks, or structured opportunities for ongoing learning. The research on professional development is clear: episodic, one-off training produces minimal lasting effects. Sustained, ongoing professional development integrated into school systems, with coaching, collaboration, and continuous reflection, produces significant effects.

The second dimension of the vacuum is content-focused. Existing professional development, while valuable, has often emphasized compliance, administrative procedures, and financial management—important but insufficient. Professional development that produces the largest effects on student learning emphasizes instructional leadership: the capacity to improve teaching and learning, to facilitate teacher professional learning, to develop school-wide approaches to curriculum implementation and assessment, and to create collaborative cultures focused on learning improvement.

Finally, there is a capacity vacuum among professional developers themselves. Ghana has talented educators and consultants capable of delivering high-quality leadership development. Yet the infrastructure for developing, credentialing, and sustaining a cadre of professional developers is underdeveloped. Many professional development programs depend on external consultants or organizations, limiting sustainability and localization.

The Human Cost of the Vacuum

The data on the impact of professional development development are not merely statistical abstractions; they represent human possibilities foreclosed. Consider a principal in a struggling junior high school who has never received instruction in instructional leadership or data use for improvement. This leader manages daily crises: staff absences, under-qualified teachers, students arriving without basic literacy skills, inadequate instructional materials. The principal works long hours, often without support, compensating through effort for knowledge he or she lacks.

The teacher quality problem persists not primarily because teachers are unqualified but because the principal has limited capacity to develop teachers, provide formative feedback, or create professional learning communities. Teacher morale suffers, leading to attrition, further weakening the school. Students continue through their schooling without access to the improved instruction that a well-developed principal could facilitate.

This scenario is not hypothetical; it describes the lived experience of thousands of Ghana's school leaders and, consequently, hundreds of thousands of their students. The research evidence makes clear that this situation is not intractable. Professional development addressing school leadership can change it. But it requires deliberate investment.

The Root Problem: How Promotion Without Preparation Created the Vacuum

Understanding how Ghana came to have a leadership development vacuum requires examining the assumptions and structures that underlie teacher-to-principal advancement.

The Seniority and Tenure Model

For much of Ghana's post-independence history, school leadership positions were filled through seniority-based advancement. An accomplished teacher who had taught 15 or 20 years became eligible for consideration as vice principal or principal. The logic underlying this practice was intuitive: the teacher had demonstrated commitment, subject matter knowledge, and classroom management skill. Success in the classroom seemed like reasonable qualification for leadership.

This logic, while understandable, contains a fundamental error. Leadership and teaching, while related, are distinct professional practices requiring different competencies. An excellent mathematics teacher who can explain complex concepts clearly and manage a classroom effectively has demonstrated mastery of a specific skillset. These skills do not automatically transfer to leading teachers, managing budgets, creating strategic plans, or sustaining organizational improvement over time.

Moreover, the seniority model created structural problems. It meant that leaders were often near retirement when they assumed leadership positions, limiting their tenure and institutional continuity. It meant that decisions about leadership were based on tenure rather than leadership potential or readiness. It meant that teachers with particular promise for leadership were often already committed to classroom roles by the time they were considered for advancement.

The Assumption That Administration Is Not a Distinct Profession

In many educational systems, school administration is treated not as a distinct profession with its own knowledge base, skills, and ethical frameworks, but rather as a senior role that excellent teachers naturally assume. This cultural assumption persists even as evidence accumulates that effective administration is a learnable, professionally distinct practice.

Ghana faces a leadership challenge related to head teachers' professional development, with research revealing that Ghana faces a leadership challenge related to head teachers' professional development, with results alerting policy makers to institute educational reform that addresses head teachers' leadership in basic schools.

This assumption interacted with another reality: Ghana's post-independence education expansion prioritized access—building schools, training teachers, getting children into classrooms—over administrative capacity. The institutional infrastructure for developing school leaders simply did not exist, and remained underdeveloped for decades.

The Perpetuation of the Vacuum: Structural and Cultural Factors

Once the pattern of teacher-based advancement without systematic leadership preparation was established, it became self-perpetuating. Leaders who had become principals through seniority and on-the-job learning naturally assumed that their successors would follow the same path. Institutional norms developed around this pattern. Career planning in teaching did not include deliberate preparation for leadership; rather, advancement seemed a matter of waiting one's turn.

Teacher training institutions focused primarily on preparing teachers, not leaders. Universities with education faculties trained teachers and, later, developed some graduate programs for existing leaders, but did not develop

robust, accessible pre-service leadership preparation. The Ministry of Education, facing budgetary constraints and competing priorities, did not mandate leadership development for principals.

The result was that even as Ghana developed stronger teacher training, curriculum materials, and instructional resources, the leadership infrastructure remained underdeveloped. Principals came to their positions with teaching knowledge but limited understanding of systems thinking, organizational change, personnel management, financial planning, or instructional coaching.

THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: WHAT PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT SHOULD ADDRESS

If Ghana is to address the leadership development vacuum, clarity about what professional development should address is essential. The research literature, combined with analysis of school leadership practice, suggests that effective professional development for school leaders must address five core domains:

Instructional Leadership and Teacher Development

The research evidence is unambiguous: promoting and participating in teacher learning and development has the most significant impact on student achievement, and is approximately twice as powerful as the other four dimensions of leadership effectiveness. Principals must understand how to facilitate teacher learning, provide instructional feedback, develop school-wide approaches to curriculum implementation, and create professional learning communities.

This requires knowledge of adult learning principles, coaching and mentoring practices, curriculum design, formative assessment, and instructional practices in key content areas. Importantly, principals do not need to be master teachers in all subjects; rather, they need capacity to develop teachers, ask probing questions about instructional practice, analyze student work, and lead collaborative processes to improve instruction.

Organizational Management and Systems Thinking

Schools are complex organizations. Effective leadership requires understanding how schools function as systems—how decisions in one area affect others, how to align vision, structures, resources, and practices toward common goals, and how to manage the inevitable tensions that arise in schools serving diverse students and communities.

This domain includes financial management, human resource management, curriculum coordination, institutional planning, communication systems, and the management of change. While some of this content is administrative and procedural, much of it is strategic and conceptual.

School Climate and Inclusive Leadership

Effective principals play a significant role in fostering a productive school climate by hiring and managing educators, focusing on instructional leadership, reducing student absenteeism, and enforcing appropriate disciplinary actions. Beyond these operational aspects, principals must understand how to create inclusive school environments where all students and teachers experience respect, belonging, and psychological safety.

This domain addresses school culture, inclusive practice, conflict management, and community engagement. It is often the dimension least systematically addressed in professional development, yet the research suggests it is foundational to everything else; leadership effects on student learning are mediated by teacher emotions, such as collective teacher efficacy, teacher commitment, and trust in colleagues, the principal, students, and parents.

Leadership for Equity and Social Justice

Ghanaian schools serve diverse students, including many from marginalized communities. Effective leadership requires understanding how systems perpetuate inequality, how to design school practices that interrupt these

patterns, and how to lead equitable change. This includes understanding gender equity, inclusion of students with disabilities, and responsiveness to regional disparities in educational access and quality.

Strategic Visioning and Change Leadership

Finally, principals must develop capacity for envisioning desirable futures, communicating that vision, building coalitions for change, managing the emotional dimensions of change, and sustaining improvement over time. This is the domain of transformational leadership—the ability to inspire commitment to change and navigate the complex process of institutional improvement.

Building a Comprehensive Framework for Continuous Professional Development

Based on the evidence reviewed and analysis of successful models elsewhere, Ghana can develop a sustainable, contextually appropriate professional development system for school leaders. Such a system would have several critical components:

Component One: Pre-Service Leadership Preparation

School leaders must be identified earlier and began receiving leadership development before they assume principal positions. This requires:

University-based programs: Expanding existing graduate-level programs in educational leadership and creating diploma-level programs accessible to teachers with 10-15 years of experience who show leadership promise. These programs should be nationally accredited and aligned with the National Professional Education Leadership Qualification Framework, ensuring consistency of quality and recognition across the system.

Secondary school leadership programs: Developing leadership academies or certificate programs for secondary school leaders, delivered through universities or specialized institutions but designed for working professionals. These might include cohort-based programs where secondary leaders study together over 1-2 years.

Succession planning: Implementing structured identification of leadership-ready teachers, with explicit career pathway planning. Rather than waiting until a leadership position opens, schools should identify promising leaders years in advance and provide developmental opportunities.

Component Two: Induction and Early Support for New Leaders

Research and practice consistently show that the first 2-3 years in a leadership position are critical. New principals who receive structured induction and mentoring perform more effectively and are more likely to persist in leadership.

Mentorship: Pairing new principals with experienced leaders who receive training in mentoring. A mentoring relationship involving regular contact (at least monthly) over the first 2-3 years can dramatically improve new leader effectiveness and confidence.

New principal institutes: Short intensive programs (1-2 weeks) for newly appointed principals addressing immediate management challenges, financial procedures, Ghana Education Service expectations, and instructional leadership fundamentals.

New leader networks: Establishing cohorts of new leaders who meet regularly to discuss challenges, share solutions, and provide peer support. These networks are often more accessible and sustainable than external coaching.

Component Three: Ongoing Professional Development

Beyond initial preparation, principals require systematic opportunities for ongoing learning throughout their careers. This might include:

Annual development institutes: Multi-day programs addressing current priorities. These might be structured by instructional focus (e.g., "Strengthening Mathematics Instruction"), leadership dimension (e.g., "Data Use for School Improvement"), or emerging issues (e.g., "Leading During Crisis").

Professional learning communities: Supporting principals in their districts or regions to meet regularly (monthly or quarterly) in sustained professional learning communities focused on school improvement. Research on PLCs suggests that when structured around evidence-based practices and real school challenges, they produce substantial learning and improvement.

Coaching and consulting support: Making available coaching and consulting expertise that schools or principals can access for specific challenges. This might be provided through university partnerships, consulting firms, or trained district personnel.

Leadership development retreats: Offering occasional residential programs where school leaders engage in intensive learning, reflection, and networking in collegial environments.

Component Four: Specialized Development Streams

In addition to general leadership development, specialized pathways should address specific contexts and challenges:

Rural school leadership: Specialized development for leaders in rural and remote areas, addressing unique challenges including limited staffing, geographic isolation, and resource constraints.

Secondary versus primary leadership: While core principles are similar, secondary and primary school leadership have different emphases and challenges. Development should address these differences.

Special populations: Specialized programs for leaders of technical schools, vocational institutions, or schools serving students with disabilities.

District and circuit leadership: Development for district directors and circuit supervisors, who have supervisory responsibility for multiple schools and play critical roles in scaling school improvement.

Component Five: Supporting School-Based Improvement

At the institutional level, principals should be supported in:

Developing school improvement plans: Using data, stakeholder input, and evidence of effective practices to develop multi-year improvement strategies.

Implementing professional learning communities: Creating structures and cultures within schools where teachers engage in ongoing collaborative professional learning focused on improving instruction and student outcomes.

Using data for decision-making: Building capacity to collect, analyze, and use multiple forms of data (test scores, classroom observations, teacher evaluations, attendance patterns) to make informed decisions about school improvement.

Instructional coaching: Developing capability to observe teaching, provide feedback, and coach teachers toward improved practice.

Addressing Implementation Realities: Creating Sustainable Systems

For professional development to work, it must be built into sustainable systems that persist regardless of particular individuals or initiatives. Several factors are critical:

Integration with Ghana Education Service Structure

Professional development should be integrated into the Ghana Education Service's expectations and structures. Principals should be expected to participate in ongoing development; this expectation should be formalized in job descriptions, appraisal systems, and career advancement criteria. District directors should be accountable for ensuring that leaders in their districts have access to professional development.

Investment in Professional Developers

Ghana needs a cadre of well-trained professional developers—coaches, facilitators, and consultants who can deliver high-quality professional development. This requires:

- Identifying and developing district and regional professional developers who can deliver consistent, quality professional learning
- Creating credentials or certifications for professional developers, ensuring quality
- Providing ongoing development for professional developers themselves
- Creating networks and communities of practice among professional developers

Affordable, Accessible Delivery

Professional development must be delivered in ways that are affordable, accessible, and culturally responsive. This might include:

- District-based delivery to reduce costs and travel
- Blended models combining in-person and online learning to increase accessibility
- Integration with existing district meetings and professional gatherings
- Use of local language where appropriate
- Scheduling that does not require leaders to be absent from schools for extended periods

Clear Connection to Student Outcomes

Professional development must be positioned as ultimately serving students, not simply as professional benefit for leaders. This means:

- Regular communication about research showing how leadership development improves student learning
- Assessment of professional development effectiveness based on school and student outcomes, not just participant satisfaction
- School-level improvement as the measure of success

Resource Allocation and Sustainability

Perhaps most critical, Ghana must commit resources to professional development. Based on international evidence, investing 5-10% of education budget in professional development is not excessive; it is a recognizable and measurable commitment.

Specific resource allocation might include:

- District-based professional developer positions (one per 5-10 schools)
- Annual professional development funding for schools/leaders (\$500-1,000 per leader annually)
- University partnerships for pre-service and graduate-level leadership development
- Support for professional development materials and resources

These investments are not expenses; they are investments in system improvement. The evidence documenting effect sizes of 0.3-0.5 SD suggests that such investments produce returns measurable in student learning.

The Model in Context: Learning from Ghana's Existing Initiatives

Ghana has not started from zero. Existing initiatives provide valuable lessons about what works and insights into scaling challenges.

The Leadership for Learning Model

The Leadership for Learning Ghana program, developed through partnership between Ghana and the University of Cambridge, demonstrates several important principles:

- **Embedded research and learning:** LfL combined implementation with rigorous research, generating evidence about what works
- **System-wide ambition:** Rather than pilot programs affecting a few schools, LfL was designed to influence system-wide practice
- **Integration with government:** LfL worked directly with Ghana Education Service, incorporating findings into official head teacher handbooks and training materials
- **Long-term commitment:** LfL operated as a sustained partnership, not a time-limited project
- **Evidence of impact:** LfL Ghana has impacted pupils' learning, seeing large increases in reading and test results in some LfL schools, with head teachers and their schools changing significantly to become more collaborative and learning focused

The LfL model demonstrates that systemic change is possible and that when leadership development is well-designed and sustained, measurable improvements in teaching and learning follow.

The Leaders in Teaching Program

The LiT program demonstrates several important scaling principles:

- **Structured partnership:** LiT operates through partnership between Ministry of Education, Ghana Education Service, T-TEL, and partner organizations, with clear roles and responsibility
- **Four-pillar approach:** By addressing leadership, teacher training, recruitment, and support together, LiT recognizes that leadership development alone is insufficient; systemic factors must be addressed
- **Focus on data and accountability:** LiT emphasizes use of data for decision-making and accountability systems that provide principals with information to drive improvement
- **Emphasis on school improvement models:** Through the "Managing for Learning" approach, LiT provides principals with specific models and tools for leading improvement

Scaling Lessons

Both LfL and LiT have grappled with scaling challenges. Several lessons emerge:

- **Quality versus speed:** There is tension between expanding reach and maintaining quality. Programs that prioritize quality (adequate training, ongoing support, local adaptation) tend to produce stronger effects but reach fewer schools initially. Programs that prioritize speed may reach more schools but with less depth.
- **Sustainability beyond projects:** Many international programs operate for defined periods with external funding, creating sustainability challenges when funding ends. Successful scaling requires moving from project-based models to integration within government systems.
- **Local capacity development:** Programs that develop local capacity for professional development are more sustainable than those dependent on external facilitators.
- **Contextual adaptation:** Generic programs transferred from elsewhere tend to be less effective than programs adapted to local context, but pure localization can be slow. Programs that maintain core principles while allowing contextual adaptation tend to work best.

Cost-Benefit Analysis: The Economics of Professional Development

A legitimate concern in resource-constrained educational systems is whether Ghana can afford comprehensive professional development. The question is better framed: can Ghana afford not to invest in professional development?

Documented Returns on Investment

Research from multiple contexts shows substantial returns on investment in professional development. While Ghana-specific cost-benefit analyses would be valuable, available research suggests effects like these:

- A principal who receives professional development in instructional leadership may increase student achievement in her school by 0.3-0.5 SD. If a school serves 400 students, and the average student scores at the 50th percentile before improvement, quality leadership development could move the average student performance to approximately the 60th percentile—a substantial improvement.
- Professional development that addresses instructional leadership and teacher development tends to reduce teacher attrition by 10-20%, depending on other school conditions. In a school employing 30 teachers, this could mean retaining 3-6 teachers annually who would otherwise leave. The costs of recruitment, training, and learning curve for new teachers suggest replacement costs of 50-100% of annual salary. Retaining 3-6 teachers annually represents substantial cost savings.
- The research on lifetime earnings and social returns to education is clear: each additional year of quality education produces economic returns far exceeding the cost of that education. School leadership that improves instructional quality and extends the number of students completing basic education produces returns that dwarf the cost of the professional development that enabled that improvement.

Comparative Costs

Ghana's current annual expenditure on education is approximately 6% of GDP. Professional development, even if expanded substantially, would represent a small fraction of education budget. Investing 5% of education budget in professional development across the sector—perhaps 0.3% of GDP—would represent a significant but feasible commitment, producing substantial returns.

For perspective, Ghana currently invests in school construction, curriculum materials, examinations, and administration. Professional development for leaders should be regarded as equally essential infrastructure for educational quality.

Challenges and Solutions: Addressing Implementation Realities

Any serious effort to develop professional development capacity in Ghana will face challenges. Anticipating these and preparing solutions is critical.

Challenge: Limited Existing Expertise in Leadership Development

Reality: Ghana has talented educators but limited cadre of people trained specifically in school leadership development and instructional coaching.

Solution

- Partner with universities and international organizations to build capacity among Ghanaian facilitators
- Develop train-the-trainer programs where experienced international facilitators develop Ghanaian colleagues
- Create professional development for professional developers—ongoing learning for those who facilitate leader learning
- Establish standards and credentials for educational leadership facilitators

Challenge: Geographic Dispersion and Rural Access

Reality: Ghana's schools are geographically dispersed, with some rural schools difficult to access. Travel and accommodation costs make face-to-face professional development expensive.

Solution:

- Develop blended models combining online learning with periodic in-person institutes
- Establish regional or district professional development centers where leaders from multiple schools gather
- Use digital platforms for ongoing support and community between in-person sessions
- Prioritize traveling facilitators to rural areas, compensating for isolation

Challenge: Sustainability Beyond Project Timelines

Reality: Many professional development initiatives in Ghana are externally funded and time-limited. When projects end, capacity development often ends.

Solution:

- Build professional development infrastructure into government systems and budgets, not as project additions
- Develop cost-sharing models where schools contribute to professional development costs, increasing ownership
- Train Ghanaian professionals to lead professional development, reducing dependence on external consultants
- Document and systematize effective approaches so they can continue without particular individuals

Challenge: Competing Priorities and Limited Resources

Reality: Ghana's education sector has multiple urgent needs—infrastructure, materials, teacher recruitment—all competing for limited resources.

Solution:

- Make the case that professional development affects all other investments. A well-trained principal uses available resources more effectively than an under-prepared one.
- Position professional development as complementary to other investments, not competing. Teacher training is more effective when teachers have leaders who will support their implementation.
- Start with targeted investments where evidence of effect is strongest (instructional leadership development) and expand from there
- Use evidence of effectiveness from early investments to build constituency for continued funding

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS: STRATEGIC STEPS GHANA CAN TAKE

Based on the analysis above, Ghana's Ministry of Education should consider the following policy directions:

Establish Leadership Development as a Policy Priority

Make clear, publicly articulated commitment that professional development for school leaders is a priority. Include in education strategic plans explicit targets for professional development access, quality, and outcomes.

Create a National Framework for Leadership Development

Develop a comprehensive framework specifying:

- What competencies school leaders should develop (aligned with research evidence)
- What pre-service preparation should entail
- What ongoing professional development should address
- How leadership development should be assessed and evaluated
- What quality standards professional developers should meet

The National Professional Education Leadership Qualification Framework should be refined and implemented.

Integrate Professional Development into Career Pathways

Make clear that professional development is expected and necessary for advancement. Update job descriptions and appraisal systems to include participation in professional development as required.

Invest in Professional Developer Capacity

Allocate resources to develop Ghanaian facilitators, coaches, and consultants who can deliver high-quality professional development. This might include:

- Postgraduate scholarships for Ghanaians to study educational leadership internationally
- Annual professional development for professional developers
- International partnerships for capacity building
- Systems for sharing effective practices across professional developers

Allocate Dedicated Budget

Include professional development as a line item in education budgets. While the amount can be modest initially, consistency of funding is more important than size. A commitment of 3-5% of education budget for professional development is appropriate.

Support District and School-Level Systems

Establish structures and provide support for professional learning communities at district and school levels. Rather than relying entirely on centralized programs, decentralize some professional development responsibility to district directors and lead principals.

Build in Research and Evaluation

Systematically evaluate professional development programs, assessing not just participant satisfaction but effects on leadership practice and school outcomes. Use evidence to refine and improve programs.

CONCLUSION: INVESTING IN LEADERSHIP AS INVESTING IN STUDENTS

This article has made a multifaceted argument about professional development and school leadership in Ghana.

First, the evidence is clear and substantial: school leadership significantly affects student learning, and professional development of school leaders produces measurable improvements in teaching quality, teacher retention, and student achievement. This is not speculation or aspirational thinking; it is documented in rigorous research across multiple contexts. School leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contribute to what students learn at school, and leadership effects are usually largest where they are needed most.

Second, Ghana historically allowed a vacuum to develop around professional development of school leaders. While recent years have seen important initiatives (LfL, LiT, NELI), these remain insufficient relative to the scope of need. Most school leaders in Ghana still receive minimal formal preparation and virtually no ongoing

professional development. This vacuum is not inevitable; it is the result of specific historical assumptions and institutional choices.

Third, the foundational assumption—that excellence in teaching automatically transfers to excellence in leadership—is empirically wrong. Leadership is a distinct professional practice with its own knowledge base, skills, and ethical frameworks. Excellent teachers do not automatically become excellent leaders; they can become excellent leaders through deliberate preparation and ongoing development.

Fourth, professional development that works emphasizes specific dimensions: instructional leadership (the capacity to improve teaching and learning), organizational management and systems thinking, school climate development, leadership for equity, and strategic change leadership. Professional development that addresses these dimensions, with sufficient duration, ongoing coaching and support, and integration into school improvement work, produces substantial effects on student outcomes.

Finally, Ghana can address this deficit. The nation has the institutional infrastructure (Ghana Education Service, universities, emerging organizations focused on professional development), the professional talent (dedicated educators and leaders), and emerging models that demonstrate effectiveness (LfL, LiT). What is required is deliberate recognition that professional development of school leaders is not a luxury or an enhancement but an essential investment in educational quality, equity, and student outcomes.

The moral core of this argument is straightforward: Ghana has hundreds of thousands of students whose educational potential depends significantly on the quality of leadership in their schools. Many of these students face geographic, economic, and social challenges that limit their opportunities. For these students, especially effective school leadership can mean the difference between transformative education and merely adequate schooling.

Investing in the professional development of Ghana's school leaders is, ultimately, investing in the futures of Ghana's students. The evidence is clear that such investment produces returns. Ghana should make that investment.

Disclosure Statements

Funding: No funding was received from any agency for this article.

Conflict of Interest: In accordance with Taylor & Francis policy and my ethical obligation as a researcher, I am reporting that I have no financial and/or business or consultancy interests in any company that may be affected by the research reported in the enclosed paper. I have disclosed those interests fully to Taylor & Francis, and I have in place an approved plan to manage any potential conflicts arising from them.

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