
February 6, 2018

RESPONSE TO STATEMENT ATTRIBUTED TO THE PERMANENT SECRETARY OF EDUCATION

In reference to recent debate:

1. We are constrained to make a public response to the statement attributed to the Permanent Secretary regarding the status of Bridge community schools as part of the national conversation about the licensing process in Uganda, affecting 1,300 schools.
2. Bridge schools have not formally received any statement from the Ministry regarding pending licensing files, but rather encountered the captioned statement on WhatsApp groups. The statement is not duly signed.
3. The fact that it raises details of internal correspondence with the Ministry, means we are obliged to respond to the issues the Permanent Secretary raises point by point.

Bridge schools have become a lightning rod in a national conversation between the Ugandan Government and school operators over licensing. There are 1,300 schools and thousands of children across the country affected by this issue. An issue that has been debated in parliament, in our national media and by communities. We believe that it is important that the conversation is constructive and that schools that have followed the licensing process as outlined by the Ministry and have submitted the necessary files are able to operate and continue the important work of educating Uganda's children.

The Ministry has outlined three main areas which have prevented them approving the files for 42 Bridge schools. We address those three main concerns below.

A Safety and Security of Pupils

We have 42 health inspection reports fully endorsed by districts. We have 42 architectural blueprints approved and corresponding occupation permits issued by District Physical Planning Committees all of them submitted to the Ministry of Education.

i) Our Structures

The safety and security of our pupils has been guaranteed by different levels of approvals by architects and physical planning committees in districts where we operate. Copies of these endorsements and approvals have been submitted to

the Ministry of Education as part of the comprehensive files we submitted. In fact, Bridge has continuously worked with the Construction Management Unit of the Ministry of Education to clarify the nature and choice of building designs, compliance with standards through obtaining the said requisite approvals.

ii) Health and Sanitation

Bridge follows World Health Organization (WHO), National Environmental Management (NEMA), and Public Health requirements regarding its sanitation. Bridge has obtained occupation permits for its 63 schools. In keeping with WHO guidelines, Bridge connects all schools to the national water and sewerage corporation grid where available. It also installs a reservoir water tank on site with adequate hand washing facilities and antiseptic detergent at strategic sections of the school.

Bridge takes the extra step of ensuring its food vendors boil water for drinking and this is kept in clean storage containers at the schools. Bridge also uses a water guard to treat drinking water. In keeping with licensing guidelines which provides for one pit latrine for every 40 pupils, we have seven (7) stances and a urinal in all schools with a ratio of less than 40 pupils per stance. We have separate latrines for boys, girls and staff with a separating wall for privacy. Additionally, the National Water and Sewerage Corporation (NWSC) Central Laboratory at Bugolobi; has recently tested water in 32 Bridge schools and issued certificates of analysis showing that the water is safe. While testing for Bac: Faecal coliforms in CFU/100ml, it found the water to be 100% compliant with national standards for potable water for all the samples tested.

Relatedly, we have security guards at all our schools 24/7.

Based on the above, it's clear that we have complied with every step and strongly believe that the safety of our children has been sealed and is guaranteed.

B Failure to meet the requirements for Bridge Schools to be licensed as 'international Schools'.

We have communicated to the Permanent Secretary before that use of the word "International" as part of Bridge brand was only meant to communicate our trans-boundary operations. We have schools in Kenya, Liberia, Nigeria and India.

However, we acted in deference to the Ministry of Education requirements and have changed our registration details to Bridge schools. Infact, in our letters to Permanent Secretary Alex Kakooza, dated 22nd September, 8th November; 24th October, November 20th and 4th December 2017 we communicated that we in

effect renamed our schools to drop “international” and “academy” and that this had been formally registered. In fact, all our schools now take the name “Bridge School” followed by the location. For example two of our schools, “Bridge International Academy Nansana” and “Bridge International Academy Adalafu” are now “Bridge School Nansana” and “Bridge School Adalafu” respectively. Therefore requirements for international accreditation and or academy are not necessary. They do not apply to Bridge schools Uganda. Bridge schools are community schools anchored in communities steered by parents. To be clear, right from day one, Bridge sought to be registered as a community school in Uganda.

C The fact that normal / ordinary schools cannot be licensed as academies.

As per b) Bridge is not seeking registration as academies. We are seeking registration as community schools.

Like any normal/ordinary school, Bridge uses the Ugandan curriculum to produce all learning materials. Our teachers use National Curriculum Development Center (NCDC) approved books and supplement them with support materials developed in line with the Ugandan curriculum guidelines to increase literacy and numeracy achievement. Bridge also teaches Christian Religious Education, Islamic Religious Education; and keeps close partnerships with religious leaders in the community to inspire morals and ethical upbringing of children.

The evidence of all this is that our inaugural Primary Seven Candidates outperformed their peers across the nation. Nearly all (93%) of these pupils achieved top scores and were placed in Division 1 or Division 2. Nationwide, 56% of students scored in these top two divisions.

What is even more striking is that these pupils come from Eastern Uganda, where candidates have historically underperformed on the PLE. This year, while a respectable 87% of pupils in eastern Uganda passed the PLE, only 44% were placed in the top 2 divisions. Bridge pupils were twice as likely as their peers within their region to achieve top scores. Bridge girls’ performance equaled Bridge boys’ performance and challenged the prevailing gender performance gap. Bridge girls were almost two and a half times more likely to achieve Division 1 or Division 2 than girls across Eastern Uganda.

The protracted licensing journey.

Bridge followed the licensing process by starting at the local government level for initial approvals. Bridge obtains building plan approvals from the respective

District and Municipal planning committees that include, the physical planner, the District engineer, Public Health officer and Chief administration Officer and or Town Clerk depending on the location of the schools. At the completion of construction, Bridge applied and obtained occupation permits, which are issued by the public health offices after re-inspecting the school and ascertaining that it is safe to occupy.

Bridge further carried out National Environment Authority (NEMA) Audits for all the 63 Schools and has since received 63 Certificates to that respect. In line with the licensing requirements and process, Bridge applied for inspection of all the 63 schools by the respective District Education Officers and District Public Health Officers for purposes of licensing, and the Ministry of Education has so far received 42 fully endorsed applications for licensing recommending that the schools meet the minimum requirements and that they should be licensed. The remaining files are in the process of being completed.

On diverse dates beginning the 22nd of July 2016 Bridge proceeded to the Ministry to submit the applications for licensing but were turned away by the Officers insisting that they had no instructions to deal with Bridge applications. After further attempts and seeking intervention from the permanent secretary the applications were declined until the 25th of January 2017 when the Ministry received the first 28 applications for licensing duly endorsed and recommending licensing by the local governments. 14 more applications were submitted on the 19th of July 2017 bringing the total number to 42.

In some districts, local government officials have long finished positive inspections but insist on a letter from the Ministry allowing them to endorse the complete files. Bridge has consistently requested the Ministry for support on this.

Moving forward as a Ministry partner in the delivery of education.

- a. Bridge awaits independent responses from the Ministry on the 42 files submitted on case-by-case basis. We are confident that the Ministry will determine and approve each file based on its merits.
- b. We appreciate the clarity provided by Permanent Secretary at the Ministry of Education while addressing Federation of Non-State Education Institutions on the 19th of January 2018 at hotel Africana, categorically stating **“Schools with evidence to have submitted files to Ministry for licensing shall not be closed”**. We thank the Permanent Secretary for this clarity and remain optimistic that work on Bridge files will be expedited. We therefore remain open pending issuance of licenses by the Ministry.

- c. After one year of productive and ongoing engagement with the Ministry, it has been and remains our hope that the Ministry will expedite the licensing process of Bridge schools and enable the schools to be valuable partners in the delivery of education and the pursuit of SDG4 in Uganda.
- d. As always, Bridge reiterates its commitment to work with government, parents and communities to serve thousands of children in Uganda in need of quality education.
- e. We acknowledge that the ongoing conversation about the licensing backlog at the Ministry of Education does not affect just Bridge, but 1,300 schools across Uganda and we would like to work in partnership to help resolve this in any way we can.
- f. We reaffirm to our parents and the communities we serve our commitment to complimenting the government in expanding frontiers of delivering quality education in Uganda.

MANAGEMENT