



Fiscal Accountability in the Nigerian Secondary Educational Sector: Challenges and Remedies

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Abstract

This paper focused on the fiscal accountability in the Nigerian secondary educational sector: Challenges and remedies. This study defined fiscal accountability as the act of showing in details how the public funds and resources are managed in order to show openness in all activities of the government. The importance of fiscal accountability were mentioned as: enhances teaching and learning in the school system, preventing mismanagement and misappropriation of funds, enhances the realization of institutional objectives, brings about discipline and disciplinary actions in the system, improves teaching and learning in the school system, etc. The challenges of fiscal accountability include improper documentation of costs and expenditure, embezzlement and misappropriation of public funds, Inadequate of auditing and control system, and lack of clarity in procedures. Some remedies were discussed and they include accurate documentation of costs and expenditure, selection of competent leaders with integrity to manage public funds, consistent auditing of records and effective control system, clarity in procedures. Finally the paper concluded that fiscal accountability is very important in the education system as it serves as checks and balances and also shows transparency.

Keywords: Education; Fiscal Accountability; Accountability; Auditing; Embezzlement; Misappropriation; Disbursement; Mismanagement.

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INTRODUCTION

Every sector of the economy has needs to be met by the government and the educational sector as part of the economy is not left out. The government is fully involved in the educational sector by ensuring that quality education is delivered to the learners. Quality education is subject to the resources available to the teachers which helps teaching and learning activities. These needs form part of the national budget and financial resources are allocated to them. Upon approval, these resources are disbursed and managed by the school authorities. The level of understanding and skills of the school management determines the effective and efficient utilization of these financial resources. If these resources end up into the wrong hands, it will be difficult for it to be accounted for. Ensuring that the public funds allocated and disbursed for educational programs are fully utilized is a high priority for governments worldwide. The schools is held accountable for funds allocated to them to facilitate educational programs and activities the same way governments are held accountable for the use of public money and this is known as fiscal accountability. This paper examined fiscal accountability as it relates to educational funds starting from the budget, allocation, disbursement, utilization at school level and accountability.

Accountability can be defined as a mechanism used by the government to compel educational institutions to show stewardship and deliver high quality of education. Accountability is ‘the practice of holding educational systems responsible for the quality of their products – students’ knowledge, skills and behaviors’ (Stecher et al., 2004). Accountability is the process by which individuals that are assigned to manage public resources are made to be answerable for the fiscal, managerial and program responsibilities that have been vested on them and to report to those that have assigned these responsibilities to them. Agabi (2019) defined accountability as the ability to effectively account for one’s performance on any given role or responsibility. It can be defined as presenting detailed records of all the activities that take place in the school so that appraisal can be done on how far the educational goals have been achieved. It is giving a report, furnishing a justification analysis, providing a statement of explanation of one’s action (Eze & Onwudinjo, 2021; Romzek, 2000). Administrators can be said to be accountable if they are willing to be transparent about their actions, be monitored and questioned by others, and accept criticism if warranted.

Education

Education is a tool that avails people with knowledge, skill, technique and information which empowers them to know their rights and duties toward the family, society, and the nation, (Ogbonnaya, 2020). It is described as a process of leading the individual to uphold his in-built qualities (Amaele, 2017). According to Nwankwoala (2016), Education improves the standard of living and assist individuals to contribute to the development of the nation or society. It is the light that drives away the darkness of ignorance and enables mankind to find its ways through the tortures and labyrinth of development and civilization (Ikechukwu, 2006). It is the process of teaching and learning which transmits ideas and knowledge from one person to the other. It is through education that the knowledge of society, country, and of the world is passed from one generation to the next generation. No society can develop without education either formal or informal (Hughes, 2021).

The Educational Sector

The educational sector or education system is the sector of the economy that is responsible with the provision of education to the citizens of a country. It is made up of a group of institutions (ministries of education, local educational authorities, teacher training institutions, schools, universities, etc.) whose main purpose of establishment is to control the teaching and learning activities of the children and young people in educational settings. The education industry provides its students with the knowledge and skills to adapt to a continually changing working world.

The Nigerian Secondary Educational Sector

The Nigeria secondary educational sector is the educational sector in Nigeria that is in-charge of the secondary educational programmes and activities. It starts after the primary education and graduate learners into the tertiary institution. They are headed by the principal and assisted by the vice principal.

Accountability in Education

Accountability in education is all about keeping records of school activities and it for the assessment and the appraisal of the institutional performance in relation to the achievement of set objectives. It is ensuring that people entrusted with public funds have a duty to report the way in which the resources were allocated, applied and the results achieved. It is also the ability of citizens to hold their government responsible for the actions it has taken on behalf of society. Accountability exists in every organization which the public sector is not left out and accountability in the public sector is seen as fiscal accountability (Hughes, 2021).

Fiscal Accountability

Fiscal accountability is the act of showing in details how the public funds and resources are managed in order to show openness in all activity of the government. It is a way of properly managing funds, using them economically, efficiently and effectively and giving detailed account of how it is used. Fiscal accountability assesses whether money has been spent as agreed or, is based on a projected budget, whether particular processes have been implemented and outcomes, or defined results have been accomplished and has to do with the management of public funds in such a manner that meets the expectations of all tax payers (Agabi, 2019).

Fiscal accountability is the responsibility of governments to justify that their actions in the current period have complied with public decisions concerning the raising and spending of public monies in the short-term, usually one (1) year. Any government that is working towards achieving efficiency and effectiveness must insist on accountability. It supports the provision of high quality learning environments, opportunities, and experiences that recognize the need of individual students and work toward the attainment of high levels of achievement for all students. Fiscal accountability has a predetermined order of presentation that shows a logical connection between education activities, fund allotment and expenditure (Agabi, 2019).

THE IMPORTANCE OF FISCAL ACCOUNTABILITY IN THE EDUCATIONAL SECTOR

Fiscal accountability plays vital role in the achievement of educational goals. Some of its importance are discussed below:

Enhances Teaching and Learning in the School

Fiscal accountability in education enhances teaching and learning in the school system. The process of teaching and learning in the school are very important activities in the school. They help in the actualization of educational goals. Fiscal accountability makes every teacher to be accountable for every school resources in his/her custody. It inculcates that consciousness of accounting for stewardship and makes everyone to be committed to carrying out his/her teaching obligations in the school.

Prevents the Mismanagement and Misappropriation of Funds Allocated to the Educational sector

Mismanagement of funds can be seen as misuse or ineffective use of funds while misappropriation of funds is when funds approved for projects are not used for the projects it was approved for rather used for another thing. Fiscal accountability helps to prevents these since every administrator knows that he/she will be called upon to give account of the public funds disbursed for projects under his/her supervision. It makes the authorities to stick to the already stipulated plans without losing focus.

Enhances the Realization of Educational Objectives

The reason for establishing schools is to achieve educational goals. Educational goals are those things the government intends to achieve by establishing school. For example, eradication of illiteracy at all levels and building of infrastructure in the school etc. Objectives in an institution are the most important things to concentrate on. Once the focus on the objective is lost, the institution and its management loose direction and the reason for their existence cannot be achieved. Fiscal accountability brings about effectiveness and efficiency thereby contributes to the realization of educational goals and objectives.

It Brings about Discipline and Disciplinary Actions in the System

Discipline and disciplinary action are punishments for defaulter. It is through fiscal accountability that defaulters are known and are made to face disciplinary actions. It reveals if the funds were effectively and efficiently utilized.

It Serves as Checks and Balances

Checks and balances are control measure put in place to check and regulate activities in the school. They are used to ensure activities in the school are duly authorized and controlled. They regulate those in public offices and provide an avenue for stewardship.

THE CHALLENGES OF FISCAL ACCOUNTABILITY

Improper Documentation of Costs and Expenditure

Sarah (2013) explored that efficient management of financial resources is an important task for head teachers. Without adequate financial resources, institutions cannot carry out their defined tasks effectively. Funds must be available to execute the functions and activities of the different departments of the school. The available funds will be used to purchase the required teaching and learning materials such as chalks, textbooks, paying of the support staff, building and improvement of infrastructures. Financial management in education is concerned with the cost of education, sources of income to meet the educational costs and the spending of the income in an objective manner in order to achieve the educational objectives (Okumbe, 2001). However, educational managers are being challenged to justify their financial requests in terms of educational programs rather than the costs, if education has to compete equitably for public funds (Okumbe, 2001). It is very important to keep detailed records of the costs and expenditure on every project executed with public funds. Most times, the school authorities fail to keep proper documentation of all the financial involvement in a school project and programs, as a result of this, it becomes very difficult for them to render proper account of public funds.

Embezzlement and Misappropriation of Public Funds

Misappropriation is the diversion of fund meant for a particular school project to another while embezzlement of funds is using funds allocated to a particular school project for personal use. Funds disbursed for a particular project or program for the school should be used for that. There should not be misappropriation of funds or embezzlement of funds. Leaders must therefore be honest and trustworthy with high integrity which is one of the ethical values. According to Ololube (2016), misuse of public funds is mainly caused by the factors that hinder accountability and leads to corruption, insufficient resources and poor record-keeping. When funds are used for the purpose they were disbursed for, fiscal accountability becomes easier.

Irregular Auditing and Control System

Auditing is a periodic review of the financial records of an institution by an unbiased accountant which helps to put the people managing public funds in check. It helps to bring consciousness in the management of public funds. Having in place a system of accountability which clearly defines procedures in place as well as responsibilities of the managers of public funds makes the misuse of public funds minimal. The existence of auditing and control system makes fiscal accountability easy because it serves as a check to anyone managing public funds.

Lack of Clarity in Procedures

Here, clarity in the procedure is referred to as expressly and clearly stating the objectives of the projects and programs of the educational system. Without clarity, financial procedures may be misinterpreted and may direct funds to unintended objectives. Therefore, clarity is essential to avoid unnecessary misuse or diversion of the public funds from the main objectives which will be a hindrance to fiscal accountability.

THE REMEDIES TO THE CHALLENGES OF FISCAL ACCOUNTABILITY IN THE EDUCATIONAL SECTOR

Remedies to the challenges of fiscal accountability:

Proper and Accurate Documentation of Costs and Expenditure

Accuracy is one of the keys to proper fiscal accountability. It is the orderly and exact documentation of cost and disbursements carried out on a project. When records of cost and other expenditure are well and accurately documented, it facilitates accountability. The school authorities should ensure that there is accurate and detailed records for all the projects and programs executed by the school.

Selection of Competent Leaders with Integrity to Manage Public Funds

Integrity is one of the ethical values of a good leader and should be considered in the selection of leaders to manage public funds in the school system. Leaders with good track records of integrity should be in charge of school projects and programs to avoid misappropriation, diversion and embezzlement of public funds disbursed for school projects. Corruption in the school system should not be encouraged by leaders to build a healthy educational system.

Consistent Auditing of Records and Effective Control System

Regularly auditing the books and records of the school is a head-way to proper accountability. It will help to check the activities of the leaders who are in-charge of projects in the school. The control system detects frauds early, escalate them and this helps to control the rate at which fraudulent activities take place in the school projects.

Clarity in Procedures

The funding objectives, guidelines and operational procedures of the projects and programs of the educational system should be clearly documented and understood to make an institution focus on its operations. This helps for proper fiscal accountability and prevents misdirection of funds to unintended objectives.

CONCLUSION

Fiscal accountability is the act of showing in details how the public funds and resources are managed in order to show openness in all activity of the government. The importance of fiscal accountability were mentioned as enhancing teaching and learning in the school system, preventing mismanagement and misappropriation of funds, enhancing the realization of institutional objectives, bringing about discipline and disciplinary actions in the system, improving teaching and learning in the school system etc. The challenges of fiscal accountability include improper documentation of costs and expenditure, Embezzlement and misappropriation of public funds, Inadequate of auditing and control system, Lack of clarity in procedures. Some

remedies were discussed and they include accurate documentation of costs and expenditure, selection of competent leaders with integrity to manage public funds, consistent auditing of records and effective control system, clarity in procedures. Finally, the paper concludes that fiscal accountability is required for every fund disbursed for any educational project and programs as it serves as checks and balances and also shows transparency.

Suggestions

Fiscal accountability can be improved through the following ways as stated in Ball (2017):

Reduce tolerance of corruption through big data and analytics.

Big data and data analytics can greatly strengthen the fight against corruption. This means that substantive and accurate data are necessary in fiscal accountability. Such tools equip governments to identify these behaviors and fraudulent activities and cross-checks data across public sector education systems in order to identify conflicts of interest. To ensure that these kind of programs are adopted and implemented, there must be a greater appetite within political systems to reduce corruption.

Publish the Financial Statements of the Education Sector Regularly

In order to ensure there is fiscal accountability, the full financial statements should be regularly published. This gives the public opportunity to know how resources mapped out for the education system is utilized. This also serves as checks and balances.

Proper Planning

Proper planning ensures that governments have available the needed resources and the issue of facing challenges of updating existing laws and regulations, identifying and valuing all their assets and liabilities, developing IT systems will not be encountered. Governments must be aware of how to effectively achieve change over the period.

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