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THE PRACTICAL POLITICS OF

Public Private Partnerships in Education

Lessons from Edo State, Nigeria

Public Private Partnerships in education do not just involve technical decisions over financing, risk-sharing and service delivery in the pursuit of outcomes. They require careful consideration of how authority and control are divided between the state and private providers, and for how long. This is political. Education is typically a core state responsibility and shifts in control can easily generate resistance. Understanding and navigating this politics is critical to effective implementation and long-term sustainability. Nigeria's Edo State illustrates how and why.

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Practical insights

- **Public Private Partnerships (PPPs) in education are not just technical arrangements.** They reshape power relationships between state, private and other players in a major government-led sector. This makes the distribution of authority an important part of the design and monitoring of PPPs. This is political, not technical.
- **PPPs fall into three broad types depending on the role of the private sector.** Public-focused PPPs use private partners to strengthen government provision; partnership-focused PPPs bring both sectors together as one system; and private-focused PPPs expand the role of the private sector. Any player considering a PPP should reflect on which type fits their needs.
- **PPPs have both technical and political goals.** Improving learning or service delivery is one measure; creating the intended relationship between government and private providers is another. Sustainability depends on achieving both. Failure to achieve the latter can generate resistance, undermine implementation and make gains harder to sustain.
- **Edo State demonstrates this distinction.** Its public-focused PPP delivered measurable improvements, but the intended transfer of systems and capacity back to government was not fully achieved. The lesson is to define the intended relationship between government and private providers from the start (ie the political goals), and design and manage the partnership towards this at every stage, including clarity on who owns what when a contract ends.

Practical propositions

1. **Understand PPP politics and define the intended public-private relationship early.**
2. **Design for exit and sustainability in lower-income countries.** Where government ownership is the goal, put the transfer mechanisms into contracts from the start.
3. **Keep track of both technical and political goals.** Monitor where power lies in the partnership alongside technical performance, and correct course when necessary.
4. **Manage PPP implementation as a political process.** PPPs require continuous engagement with teachers, unions, bureaucrats and local actors.
5. **Avoid over-reliance on privately controlled systems.** Ensure governments can own, access or independently manage the systems needed to sustain reforms when contracts end.

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I. THE PROBLEM

Although access to education has substantially improved, most ten-year-olds in low- and middle-income countries are still unable to read.[1] Fewer parents are sending their children to government schools, opting instead to enrol them in low-fee private schools and children continue to drop out of schools altogether.[2] The Global South is still battling a learning crisis.

One tool that governments use to try to improve learning outcomes is Public Private Partnerships (PPPs). These arrangements have emerged as a middle-ground solution between the pro-market and pro-government 'camps' in education reform. The former argues that private providers, driven by profit and competition, are better able to deliver quality. The latter contends that privately operated schools worsen inequalities in both educational access and quality, especially when profit becomes the motive.[3] In theory, PPPs are supposed to combine the strengths of both sectors, allowing governments to retain regulatory oversight while drawing on private sector capacity to improve service delivery. In reality, the evidence on whether PPPs ultimately benefit learners remains inconclusive.[4]

Regardless, PPPs continue to spread – they are used to educate millions of children worldwide. In countries such as Chile, most pupils attend government-subsidised private schools, while in Pakistan almost half of all students are enrolled in private schools, many supported through large-scale PPP programmes.[5] Nigeria is now following a similar path. With one of the world's largest populations of out-of-school children and persistently high levels of learning poverty, pressure to improve education quality has made PPPs an increasingly attractive policy option.[6]

As governments continue to adopt PPPs, understanding how to make them work is becoming increasingly important.

What are PPPs in education?

PPPs in education are formal collaborations between the public and private sectors in either the financing or provision of education. Many models exist, but the most common are:

- **Contract schools:** a government contracts the private sector to deliver educational services, often outsourcing the management of public schools to private operators.
- **Voucher systems:** a government provides tuition-fee vouchers to parents, enabling children to attend a private or public school of their choice.
- **Subsidies:** a government partially funds private schools, often to bring in more students from disadvantaged backgrounds.[7]

Typically, these models are classified according to who funds and who delivers services. But this approach can be unhelpful for policymakers trying to decide which model to adopt, as it suggests that PPPs merely re-allocate functions. This is only part of the story. In reality, PPPs also re-allocate authority and influence, fundamentally redistributing power between public and private actors operating within the public education system. As shown in Table 1, policymakers can better think of PPPs as falling into three distinct power-sharing categories along a public-private spectrum: public-focused, private-focused and partnership-focused.

Table 1. The three conceptual classifications of PPPs in education[8]

100 % Public-owned

PPP Type	Description	Typical Arrangements
Public-focused	Time-bound, usually short-term commitments intended to strengthen the government's capacity to deliver education as a financier, regulator, manager and/or provider. Services are contracted with a clear end point. The private sector develops or improves rather than provides services, focusing on capacity building.	Philanthropic donations Corporate social responsibility Private finance initiatives Contracting/technical assistance Consultancy services
Partnership-focused	Designed to create a hybrid system, where public and private actors jointly govern, manage and deliver education, with roles adapting over time according to their comparative strengths. Rather than one sector replacing the other, the distinction between public and private becomes increasingly blurred through shared decision-making, ongoing collaboration and mutual exchange of expertise and values.	Joint governance arrangements Integrated service delivery partnerships Relational contracting Shared financing and decision-making mechanisms[9]
Private-focused	Arrangements that expand the role of the private sector because it is seen as better placed to deliver education services. Government either transfers responsibilities to private providers or supports private provision. Over time, the state shifts away from delivering services and focuses instead on financing and regulating education. The three common types listed above – contract schools, voucher systems and subsidies – all fall under this type of PPP.	Vouchers Subsidies Contract schools

100 % Private-owned

This distinction is particularly important in education, a sector which is typically a core responsibility of the state. Reforms altering who makes decisions, controls resources or delivers services can generate resistance. As a result, the success of a PPP depends not only on whether it improves educational outcomes in the short-term, but also on whether the underlying distribution of power remains politically acceptable and sustainable over time.

Viewed through this lens, PPPs serve both technical and political purposes. They aim to improve educational outcomes while also defining how authority and responsibility are shared between the state and the market. The political dimension is often left unexamined, which is unfortunate as it can be critical to the long-term sustainability of reforms.

EDOBEST, a PPP that began in 2018 between the government of Edo State in Nigeria and NewGlobe (formerly Bridge International Academies), provides a useful example of this challenge.

The case of Edo State, Nigeria

Edo State is located in the oil-producing region of southern Nigeria. While most children in Edo State access primary schooling, like many parts of sub-Saharan Africa, the government has struggled to provide quality education.

To address this, the state government entered into a PPP with NewGlobe to deliver its flagship Edo State Basic Education Sector Transformation (EDOBEST) programme in over 1,000 primary schools. Both public and private sector partners described it as a systems-strengthening initiative to 'radically improve the learning outcomes of pupils'.[10]

The PPP introduced a technology-based model of service delivery built around teacher tablets, scripted lessons, classroom monitoring and real-time data systems. These digital tools enabled continuous monitoring of teaching practices, standardised lesson delivery across more than 1,000 schools, and provided policymakers with far greater visibility over classroom performance than had previously been possible. The contractor developed the lessons, trained teachers and education managers to use them, and oversaw the monitoring and accountability systems used across the programme.

After fully funding the first iteration of EDOBEST, the government secured a $75m loan from the World Bank in 2021 to launch EDOBEST 2.0. This expanded the programme into junior secondary schools. The new EDOBEST 2.0 contract also introduced a concrete, time-bound goal: to fully transition the management of EDOBEST from the private contractors to the government within the first 24 months. As such, it was, at least according to the contract documents and public messaging, a public-focused partnership.

Endline results in 2025 showed that EDOBEST was a success: significant gains were recorded in public school enrolment, teacher attendance and learning outcomes.[11] But the political goals of increased state capacity and transition away from the contractor were not fully met. Despite the public rhetoric around transitioning EDOBEST to full government ownership, NewGlobe retained ownership of the proprietary software needed to sustain the new teaching and monitoring services introduced across Edo State. By the end of the contract, the new government faced a choice: stay trapped in long-term dependency or lose what had been gained. It chose the latter.

PPPs, especially non-public-focused PPPs, can be highly contentious. But many of the state's initial decisions were politically savvy. For example, EDOBEST 1.0 was accepted by civil servants and teachers because it was promoted by the government as a temporary measure. EDOBEST 2.0 was sold as a way to reinstate the government as the primary provider. Yet it ended without the government's ability to sustain the intervention on its own. How did this happen?

The case of Edo State reflects a common problem that policymakers in low- and middle-income countries face: the sustainability of education reforms. However, within the context of PPPs, sustainability is about power. Exploring the politics of PPPs in education reveals the underlying contestations between public and commercial interests that continue beneath the cordially packaged premise of partnerships. These are not unique to Nigeria – they shape the way PPPs are introduced, designed and implemented around the world. Further unpacking the dynamics surrounding EDOBEST in Nigeria can help tackle issues that prevent PPPs from achieving their desired outcomes, both technically and politically.

II. THE PLAYERS

PPPs move forward when a workable balance is found between the interests of relevant state and non-state actors. To understand the politics of PPPs within the basic education sector, we must first identify who is involved and what they want. Examples of the most salient groups in Nigeria include:

The state executive

The provision of basic education is the responsibility of states in Nigeria. Each state is led by a democratically elected governor, who is supported by advisers, executive secretaries and commissioners. Together they set the direction of education reform. The governor plays a decisive role in whether PPPs in education are adopted and sustained, and no major intervention proceeds without their backing. The durability of PPPs depends heavily on executive ownership.

The decision to introduce PPPs in education is shaped by electoral incentives, political and economic ideologies, fiscal capabilities and broader governance goals. Partnerships with private actors may appeal to policymakers as they can signal reform, innovation and openness to investment, while also addressing perceived capacity gaps within the public system. In Edo State, the political commitment of Governor Godwin Obaseki was a key factor in sustaining the EDOBEST programme over several years.

State Universal Basic Education Board (SUBEB)

Each state in Nigeria has a State Universal Basic Education Board (SUBEB) that oversees and implements all basic education policies, including PPPs in education. This institution manages planning, procurement, teacher recruitment, training and deployment (particularly at the primary level), curriculum design and school supervision. It is the first port of call for external actors seeking to engage in PPPs.

SUBEB's institutional interest lies in retaining autonomy (especially from federal education agencies), budget control and administrative relevance. It is led by a governor-appointed executive chair, who presides over a board of politically appointed representatives from each senatorial district. These members ensure that the interests of their constituents are represented, especially when selecting schools for interventions. Ultimately, decision-making powers lie with the executive chair, who works closely with the governor to introduce and sustain reforms.

PPPs that appear to bypass SUBEB or reduce its discretion may face bureaucratic resistance from civil servants, even if formally approved by the governor. SUBEB has substantial power to enable or quietly undermine reforms. At the design stage, it influences contract terms, school selection, monitoring frameworks and reporting structures. During implementation, it controls payment flows, oversight and day-to-day coordination. SUBEB may support PPPs that bring additional funding, technical support or performance improvements, but resist those perceived as transferring control to private actors.

Local government education authorities (LGEAs)

Local government education authorities (LGEAs) are the administrative link between SUBEBs and schools. While PPP contracts are negotiated at the state level, the day-to-day coordination with schools often flows through LGEAs. They are headed by education secretaries, a politically appointed role that reports directly to the executive chair of SUBEB.

Education secretaries supervise schools, coordinate implementation and manage data reporting. Because they are appointed, their formal and informal authority varies across states and partially depends on the support they receive from SUBEB, the state executive and local political actors. Their primary interest is maintaining influence within local government and access to the executive chair. They will likely resist PPPs that lower them in the hierarchy of command.

In many contexts, including Edo State, LGEAs function largely as administrative extensions of SUBEB. In others, they may have more influence over local compliance and school-level engagement depending on their level of political power. Their cooperation (or lack thereof) can significantly affect how PPP arrangements operate in practice.

Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC)

Nigeria's Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC) is the federal agency responsible for Nigeria's Universal Basic Education Programme, the national framework guiding the implementation of basic education reforms in Nigeria. UBEC sets minimum standards and provides partial funding to states through matching grants. It does not control how PPPs are designed or implemented at state level. But it may influence a state's approach to PPPs through funding conditions, reporting requirements and compliance rules. Its main interest is ensuring that funds are used according to national priorities and that states meet agreed benchmarks.

Teacher unions

Teacher unions are among the most powerful actors in basic education reform. Not only are strikes disruptive to education systems, but teachers are a significant voting bloc in many countries, including Nigeria. Their interests include: job security, working conditions and professional autonomy. Because PPPs may increase private sector autonomy, affect staffing and introduce new accountability systems, unions scrutinise them closely. Unions are highly influential: they can shape the adoption (or non-adoption) of PPPs by influencing political decisions, negotiating terms during the design stage and supporting or resisting implementation.

Edo State has a strong teacher union. It has successfully blocked reforms that threatened job security in the past. Excluding unions from the PPP process can create substantial resistance, while effectively engaging them can help secure buy-in.

Private providers

Private providers are primarily responsible for delivering services under PPP arrangements. They include a mix of profit and non-profit local school operators, international education organisations and service contractors. Their interests are shaped by their organisational models. For-profit providers tend to prioritise predictable revenue, manageable risk and operational autonomy. Non-profit organisations may place greater emphasis on collaboration and system strengthening. Regardless of the model, providers depend on stable government payments and clear lines of authority.

The role of private providers varies across contexts. In Liberia's Partnership Schools programme, most contracted providers were international organisations. In contrast, service delivery in Pakistan's Foundation Assisted Schools Programme and South Africa's Western Cape district reforms remained largely in the hands of domestic actors. In Edo State, the government partnered with NewGlobe, an international organisation operating fee-paying schools in many countries, including Kenya, Uganda, India and Nigeria. This places Edo State within a broader pattern of international actors delivering education services in sub-Saharan Africa via PPPs.

Parents and students

Parents and students are the ultimate recipients of education services. In many Global South contexts, they tend to be more concerned about perceived quality than whether the service provider is government or private.[12] They are politically important but often indirect actors in PPPs. Their preferences can shape reform incentives, and in some cases parental support for PPPs has outweighed resistance from other actors, including teacher unions.[13] Policymakers can use PPPs to signal responsiveness to parents' concerns. Appealing to parents can help sustain political support for reforms, even where other actors are contesting them.

Development partners and donors

Development partners and donors influence PPPs primarily through agenda-setting and financing. As heavyweights in global development policy debates, they often shape how education problems are framed and which strategies are considered. They also provide sovereign loans, grants and programme funds, which can make PPPs more feasible and attractive in resource-constrained contexts.

International actors have many reasons to support PPPs. These include a desire to generate evidence for different approaches, find methods or models that scale across countries, and support progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals. For some actors, support is also rooted in their strong preference for market-based solutions in public service delivery. But their influence varies across contexts: they are likely to have greater say in more aid-dependent contexts than in fiscally independent states.

The World Bank supported the expansion of the EDOBEST programme in Nigeria. Other philanthropic actors, including the Gates Foundation, the Lemann Foundation and the UBS Optimus Foundation, have funded PPPs in countries such as Liberia and Brazil.

Policy advisors and consultancy firms

Policy advisors and consultancy firms generally exert influence through ideas, technical expertise and reform design rather than direct financing. They are often contracted by governments and/or supported by donor funding. In Edo State, the government has used local consultants to support aspects of civil service reform in education. More broadly, organisations such as the UK-based charity Absolute Return for Kids, through its former Education Partnerships Group, have helped spread PPPs from South Africa to Liberia.

These actors are primarily interested in promoting alternative approaches to service delivery and demonstrating that these models can work at scale. Their influence lies in how they frame problems and present PPPs as viable solutions, often drawing on internationally comparative experiences. For some actors, generating evidence that PPPs can deliver results also helps strengthen the case for a greater role for markets and private actors in education.

III. THE RULES OF THE GAME

PPPs are shaped not only by the interests of the actors involved, but also by the rules that structure their behaviour. Formal rules, such as laws, contracts and administrative procedures, sit alongside informal norms, relationships and expectations that influence how decisions are made in practice. Together, these rules shape the uptake, design and implementation of PPPs, helping to explain why similar models can evolve differently across contexts.

Formal rules

Formally, PPPs have three stages. **Adoption**, where governments decide whether PPPs could address their priorities. **Design**, where governments select the partnership type, conduct procurement, negotiate contracts and define responsibilities. And **implementation**, where private partners provide agreed services and monitoring tracks performance and compliance.

Adoption

The process begins with the development of an education sector plan. In Edo State, this plan is usually drafted by SUBEB and the state executive early on in a governor's tenure. It sets out the government's priorities, identifies key challenges (eg gaps in access, poor infrastructure or weak learning outcomes), and outlines broad strategies to address them. PPPs are rarely mentioned explicitly. Instead, once priorities are established, the state may eventually decide that a PPP is an appropriate tool to pursue certain objectives.

Design

Policymakers translate priorities into a specific design after taking the decision to adopt a PPP. Different priorities lead to different design choices. If a government seeks to expand access, it may adopt models that increase school places or infrastructure, such as voucher schemes or privately financed school construction. If quality is the priority, the model is likely to involve management support, performance monitoring or strengthening service delivery within existing public schools. In Edo State, limited government capacity to deliver quality instruction led to a PPP that contracted NewGlobe to deliver digital learning services while building government capacity for eventual handover.

Once the PPP is outlined, agencies such as SUBEB would typically assess the feasibility of the proposal against costs and alignment with existing policy. If deemed viable, the governor approves it. Procurement should then follow an open and competitive bidding process. Proposals are submitted, evaluated against predefined criteria and a partner is selected. Contract negotiations then formalise the partnership. Documents detail roles and responsibilities, performance targets, payment arrangements, reporting requirements and dispute resolution mechanisms. Legal clearance is obtained before agreement.

The design stage is expected to follow established legal and institutional processes. Some countries have dedicated PPP laws and regulatory frameworks, alongside public procurement laws.[14] There is also an expectation that key stakeholders, such as teachers, unions and communities, are consulted. Edo State did not have a dedicated PPP law during EDOBEST (although a dedicated PPP policy was in development). At the time, PPP arrangements were supposed to be governed by existing public procurement regulations.

Implementation

Implementation arrangements depend on the type of PPP adopted. In contracted service delivery models, SUBEB oversees implementation while private partners deliver agreed services. Monitoring, reporting and financial controls are managed by SUBEB, with payments often linked to agreed outputs or milestones. In other arrangements, such as philanthropic or corporate social responsibility-driven interventions where funding, technical support or specific programme inputs are provided rather than service delivery, SUBEB typically grants approval, selects participating schools and provides overall supervision. LGEAs, through education secretaries, coordinate implementation at the local level.

Periodic reviews and evaluations are conducted to assess progress and inform decisions on continuation, modification or scale-up. Where development partners are involved, additional reporting and compliance requirements may apply. In Edo State, the World Bank's introduction of disbursement-linked indicators for EDOBEST 2.0 required the establishment of a project implementation unit within government. This added new coordination and reporting responsibilities for civil servants.

Informal rules

The process detailed above is how PPPs in education are supposed to work. In reality, the process is less linear and influenced by political considerations. These are the informal rules of the game that shape each of the stages outlined above. Ignoring them substantially increases risks.

Rule 1. Policymakers actively manage public and private interests

The adoption, design and implementation stages are all arenas of contestation between public and private interests. Policymakers are not just designing reforms, but navigating a competition for control over education services. How power is negotiated shapes PPPs at each stage. This helps explain why only certain PPP models are acceptable in certain contexts, and why similar models produce different outcomes across contexts.

These contestations begin with the very act of defining the PPP. There is no universal definition of the term, meaning that public and private actors often conceptualise the same arrangement differently. Depending on their assumptions about the appropriate roles of the state and the market, actors may view a PPP as primarily public-focused, partnership-focused, or private-focused, even when referring to the same reform.[15] Discrepancies can create unseen problems during the design stage, when policymakers determine how much authority to retain or delegate.

At the same time, PPPs often draw on models and ideas promoted by external advisors and development partners. This creates a tension, as governments must present PPPs as state-led reforms to secure domestic legitimacy, even when their design is influenced by external actors. PPPs that fail to strike a workable balance risk immediate pushback from teacher unions, bureaucrats and other domestic and international actors capable of blocking reform. In some cases, resistance can derail reforms altogether.

These tensions do not disappear once a PPP is adopted, and the balance of power is tested during implementation. Challenges go beyond overt resistance. Power imbalances between public and private actors, information asymmetries around systems and data, and differences in capacity can shape how reforms unfold. Public officials, for example, may disengage or only minimally comply if they feel sidelined. PPPs that fail to manage these tensions across stages risk disruption or failure to achieve their contracted technical goals, such as improved education outcomes, or their political goals, such as sustainability.

Rule 2. Strategic opacity is used to manage the PPP process

PPPs in education are politically contentious. As such, policymakers actively manage information when undertaking PPPs. Formal procurement processes are expected to be open and competitive, but the selection process for private providers is not always understood by the public. This is sometimes by design, as this allows policymakers to move forward quickly and avoid early opposition. Doing so comes with risks though: this approach can backfire if key stakeholders feel excluded or blindsided by decisions that directly affect them.

In Liberia, for example, the initial decision to contract a single international provider under the Partnership Schools for Learning Programme was met with significant pushback from civil society organisations. This led the government to revise its approach and expand the programme to include multiple providers.[16] In Edo State, civil servants, education secretaries and headteachers reported not knowing how the private partner was selected.[17] In addition, the contractor's continued role under EDOBEST 2.0 was also not always clearly communicated to teachers and head teachers.[18] Unclear selection processes can fuel suspicion and weaken trust in the reform, with effects that can carry into implementation.

Rule 3. PPP adoption is often driven more by ideas than evidence

The effectiveness of PPPs in improving education quality remains contested, particularly in the Global South. In the absence of clear and consistent evidence, the decision to adopt a PPP often has more to do with the incumbent's beliefs about the state and the market, often shaped through the transnational spread of influential ideas, than with what has been shown to work.

This dynamic is apparent in many contexts and is often reinforced by international donors, philanthropies, consultancies and advocacy organisations. In South Africa, the Democratic Alliance's longstanding support for private sector participation made outsourcing provision under the banner of Collaboration Schools an attractive policy option.[19] The UK's academy school model, promoted by Absolute Return for Kids, has advanced PPP models in Liberia and Ghana. And a strong belief in private sector efficiency drove the introduction of private school subsidies and contract schools in Brazil.[20]

In Edo State, policymakers similarly interpreted the movement of students from public to private schools as evidence of declining public sector quality. Private provision became associated with better learning outcomes despite limited evidence to support this assumption. In this context, the PPP was designed not only to improve learning, but also to signal a particular vision of reform in which private sector practices could help restore confidence in public education. The adoption of the PPP therefore reflected not only technical considerations about improving performance, but also broader beliefs about the role that private actors should play in the education system.

The lack of clear evidence creates an important political opening. Where the effectiveness of PPPs is uncertain, debates become less about proving what works and more about competing ideas of how education should be organised. This gives influential actors greater scope to promote certain types of evidence, shape policy agendas, frame education challenges and promote particular PPP models. While external actors can provide valuable expertise and resources, their involvement can also generate tensions amongst civil servants, teacher unions and other civil society organisations over policy ownership, legitimacy and whether reforms reflect domestic priorities or externally driven preferences.

Rule 4. Exclusion threatens implementation

The exclusion of powerful stakeholder groups such as teacher unions can threaten the successful launch and implementation of PPPs. Teacher unions' frequent resistance to PPPs is rooted in longstanding disagreements over the role of non-state actors in education. In South Africa, trade unions and civil society organisations have vocally opposed PPPs as attempted privatisation.[21] In some cases, such as Ghana and parts of Brazil, opposition has been strong enough to halt PPP reforms.[22] In others, including South Africa, Liberia and Nigeria, PPPs have proceeded despite opposition. Differences in how governments manage the stakeholder engagement process partly explain the different outcomes.

Resistance often emerges where unions feel excluded from the design process, or perceive reforms as threatening job security, professional autonomy and working conditions. This does not always take the form of open opposition. It can also manifest as disengagement, delayed cooperation and limited compliance. Because PPPs often come with new management structures, accountability systems and standardisation, they directly affect teachers' roles within the system. The success of PPPs often depends on whether unions view them as attempting to take control away from the public sector.

Rule 5. Financing does not determine where power resides within PPPs

Financing alone does not determine power. A government may remain the primary funder, yet still depend on private actors' control over key systems, intellectual property or delivery functions. In such cases, authority is shaped less by who pays and more by who owns and operates the core components of the reform, such as operating systems and intellectual property.

In Edo State, the government financed the initial phase of EDOBEST, but relied on the contractor to deliver several core components of the programme. This created dependency, which the introduction of World Bank financing under EDOBEST 2.0 reinforced. Although the programme included objectives around transition and capacity-building, funding remained tied to areas led by the contractor, which limited the incentive to pursue a full handover.

This dynamic is more pronounced in aid-dependent contexts, where providers backed by international philanthropies and development finance institutions wield considerable influence. This limits government's ability to regulate or constrain their private partner's role. Financing does not automatically confer control. But it can significantly impact whether PPPs strengthen state capacity or entrench long-term dependency. In PPP contracts, the small print really matters.

IV. THE STATE OF PLAY

Policymakers navigate competing pressures during the adoption, design and implementation of education PPPs. The informal dynamics described above shape negotiations and outcomes at each stage. EDOBEST illustrates how good political management can enable reforms introduced through PPPs, but also how unresolved tensions can undermine long-term sustainability.

Adoption

To understand how PPPs unfold in practice, it is helpful to first understand the political context in which they are introduced. In Edo State, EDOBEST was part of a broader package of quality-oriented education reforms. The PPP was one mechanism through which reforms were delivered. The introduction of these reforms was driven by a governor who presided over a dominant political settlement. In political economy, 'political settlement' describes the distribution of power among elite groups and the institutions that sustain those arrangements.[23] Dominant settlements describe situations where incumbents possess the sufficient political authority to create space for reform, resist opposition and survive politically. Research suggests that these settlements are more frequently associated with the adoption of quality-oriented reforms, as incumbents have enough political capital to pursue long-term policy objectives.[24]

During his first term, then-Governor of Edo State Godwin Obaseki leveraged his political capital as a member of Nigeria's ruling party to pursue an ambitious programme of reforms. Education became a central pillar of his development agenda, with the early success of EDOBEST helping to build support for both its expansion and the governor's re-election campaign in 2020.

Like many of the administration's wider reforms, EDOBEST challenged entrenched systems of patronage and accountability, attracting resistance from political elites and other vested interests. While the administration had to navigate resistance to its broader reform agenda, choosing to pursue a PPP added another layer of political complexity. But the government of Edo State actively managed the risk.

For example, policymakers were aware that private sector involvement could provoke resistance from teacher unions, civil servants and other stakeholders concerned about the role of the state. As such, they positioned the reform as government-led and temporary, emphasising that the state would eventually take over from the private partner. This public-focused framing helped build political support for the partnership and reduce the likelihood of early opposition.[25] In addition, regular consultation meetings were held with teachers and union representatives. The executive chair of SUBEB also maintained direct communication channels, including WhatsApp groups with civil servants and teachers to respond to concerns in real time. As a result, the government introduced the PPP in a way that was broadly acceptable to a variety of players.

Political incentives tied to expanding and sustaining the programme, particularly during the governor's second term, further reinforced its acceptance. After being denied his party's nomination to seek a second term, Governor Obaseki successfully contested the election under a different political party. This suggests that his political support had become increasingly associated with his reform agenda, rather than with a particular party. Ultimately, although the decision to undertake the PPP was partly informed by the belief that private actors could improve quality, the success of adoption rested less on evidence and more on political strategy.

Design

Elements of the PPP design further reflected the government's political awareness. It is reported that the contractor initially suggested the typical contract-school arrangement, a private-focused model that would have transferred significant control of schools to the private sector. Edo State policymakers rejected this as too 'disruptive', opting instead for the more politically palatable model of a public-focused PPP.[26]

Nevertheless, tensions emerged during the design stage. Key aspects of the reform were not widely understood by civil servants and teachers, including how the contractor was selected, how the contract was negotiated and how involved the private sector would be. Public messaging emphasised a transition of roles and eventual government ownership, which helped build support. Yet the contractual arrangements did not fully align with this narrative.

Consultations were not fully transparent; they were perceived by some stakeholders as a tokenistic form of engagement, held after key decisions had already been made.[27] Civil servants and teachers were particularly concerned about their limited influence over design features, such as scripted lessons, that restricted teacher autonomy. As a result, these consultations did not always translate into meaningful participation in decision-making. In some cases, they generated frustration among those expected to implement the reform.

However, these consultations served an important political function. They provided a mechanism for communicating the reform, signalling inclusion and managing stakeholder concerns at a stage when excluding key groups could have generated stronger resistance. While they did not eliminate tensions, they helped contain them. This allowed the government to proceed with implementation despite continuing disagreements over aspects of the programme's design.

Policymakers also used the benefits of their dominant political settlement to move quickly and introduce swift reforms. For example, the executive chair of SUBEB was able to take unilateral decisions with the full backing of the governor. Salaries began to be paid more punctually, and civil service restructuring redeployed rather than removed staff. Younger and more motivated personnel were fast-tracked into positions to support implementation. These reforms helped maintain support among teachers and bureaucrats.

But one key vulnerability remained. The PPP was supposed to be public-focused, but the conditions required for eventual transfer of control were never fully secured. These unresolved tensions became more prominent once implementation began, and arguably caused the political goals of EDOBEST to remain unmet at the end of the governor's tenure.

Implementation

The government continued to manage resistance during implementation. Rather than imposing EDOBEST from above, participation was initially made voluntary. This was politically clever. It showed policymakers understood the risks of pushing change too quickly in a system where historically teacher training had been limited and often irregular. For the programme to work, teachers needed to learn to use tablets and deliver scripted lessons in the classroom. By making training voluntary, the government created space for early adopters to experience the programme's benefits, including access to new training, stipends and technology. As teachers shared these experiences informally, support grew by word of mouth. The government made participation mandatory only after sufficient buy-in had been secured, scaling the programme across all schools.

However, the tensions that emerged during the design process continued to grow as implementation progressed. The contractor reported directly to SUBEB's executive chair, bypassing civil servants and exacerbating information and power asymmetries. Public officials reported lacking full visibility into key systems and processes, and many remained unaware that the contractual arrangement did not support a full transition of responsibilities required for the state to sustain EDOBEST.[28]

This led to growing restlessness within the system. Civil servants and educators began to question why the promised transition had not occurred. At the same time, the structure of the programme reinforced dependence on the private partner. The contractor retained control over core elements of delivery, including technology systems and intellectual property, that were essential for operating the programme at scale. This limited the state's ability to internalise the reform.

World Bank financing under EDOBEST 2.0 further reinforced these dynamics. Disbursement-linked indicators tied funding to performance in areas largely delivered by the contractor, particularly the expansion of technology-enabled teaching and learning. While the World Bank sought to support the transition by helping the government develop data management systems, learning assessments and instructional content, the financing structure placed greater emphasis on sustaining the services delivered by the contractor. This limited the incentive for a full handover further.

EDOBEST highlights the central dilemma for PPPs in education. Edo State's government understood the politics of education reform and navigated it effectively during adoption and design. The programme received broad support and achieved measurable improvements in learning outcomes, attendance and system performance. But the failure to secure a full transition would have kept the state dependent on externally controlled systems and expertise.

EDOBEST ended after the newly elected administration decided not to renew its contract with NewGlobe. Changes in political leadership often place major reforms at risk of discontinuation, particularly when power shifts between parties.[29] However, the transition challenges and other tensions identified throughout this paper became an important part of the public case made for ending the partnership.[30] This highlights a broader lesson about PPPs: political goals deserve as much attention as technical ones. Public debate surrounding the termination of the EDOBEST partnership focused less on whether the programme had improved learning, and more on whether government had taken control of the systems, knowledge and capabilities needed to sustain those gains. For public-focused PPPs, transition is therefore not just a procedural step. It is a politically significant objective that reflects the underlying purpose of the arrangement – to strengthen the state's capacity to deliver education independently.

V. OUR PROPOSITIONS

1. Put the 'politics' in PPPs from the start

PPPs are political as well as technical reforms. Policymakers should deliberately decide which model to pursue (public-, private- or partnership-focused) and act accordingly. Different settings favour different approaches depending on needs and the balance of power between actors. But setting the goal early on clarifies expectations, guides design choices and partnership selection, and establishes a basis for introducing and tracking an additional set of important results.

One way of engaging with politics more confidently is to set out the political dynamics in a public document that can be read and discussed by all interested parties – such as this Open PEA product. This explicitly puts politics on the table. We contend that any PPP in education – whether ongoing or a future plan – would benefit from a careful and public articulation of the practical politics underpinning the technical intentions. This could be updated to reflect evolution, and to inform key review and decision points.

2. Design for exit and sustainability in lower-income countries

If a PPP is intended to be public-focused, priority should be placed on designing a clear pathway to transition and sustainability. This is especially important in low-income contexts, where governments cannot sustain long-term dependence on private actors. Public education systems remain the primary providers for the poorest populations and must ultimately be able to carry reforms at scale. Having clear exit strategies and ensuring that knowledge, systems and capabilities are transferred over time are critical. Development partners should also align funding to support transition, rather than perpetuating reliance through short-term project goals.

3. Keep track of technical and political goals simultaneously

Monitoring and evaluation should track how the relationship between government and private providers evolves alongside learning outcomes and service delivery. This includes whether roles, responsibilities and control are developing as intended under the chosen PPP model. Where they are not, tensions can emerge among government, civil servants, teacher unions and civil society organisations, leading to declining morale, resistance or minimal compliance even when technical indicators are positive. This is particularly important in education, where implementation spans multiple layers of governance. Tracking these dynamics can help policymakers identify where and why tensions are emerging and address them before they undermine implementation.

In any public contract, the devil is in the detail: policymakers and their advisors should be wary of information asymmetries, differences in contracting expertise and low transparency. In education, the stakes, including children's wellbeing and lifelong potential, are exceptionally high.

4. Manage PPP implementation as a continuous political process

Implementation should be treated as an ongoing process of negotiation rather than a purely technical endeavour. Policymakers still need to manage relationships between public officials and private partners. Building and maintaining buy-in is essential, particularly where reforms affect roles, responsibilities and authority over service delivery. Ignoring these dynamics can lead to subtle forms of resistance that weaken outcomes.

Managing PPPs as a political process also connects to making education more politically salient in general. By doing so, policymakers deliberately consider what aspects of education resonate with citizens as voters, and how these insights can be used to make education quality and outcomes more electorally salient.

5. Avoid over-reliance on privately controlled systems

The Edo State experience suggests a broader lesson for governments pursuing digital education reform. When the core elements of an education reform are embedded within systems that the state neither owns nor controls, sustainability becomes as much a political challenge as a technical one. Control over key systems, particularly data platforms, teaching tools and intellectual property, is central to long-term sustainability. Governments should ensure that these systems can be transferred or independently managed over time. Where private partners retain control over core functions, dependency is likely to persist regardless of who finances the programme. Designing for control, not just delivery, is critical.

This Open PEA product aims to help all stakeholders understand how to make PPPs work better as one means of addressing the ongoing learning crisis. The lessons from Edo State suggest that improving learning outcomes is only part of the challenge. Equally important is ensuring that governments develop the capacity to sustain those gains once partnerships mature. As fiscal pressures tighten and PPPs continue to be adopted across the Global South, understanding the practical politics that shapes these reforms becomes increasingly important. Additionally, as governments increasingly turn to PPPs to digitise education systems, questions of ownership and long-term control will become increasingly important. [31] These considerations are likely to become even more significant as education systems adopt AI-enabled technologies. Governments that understand these dynamics are more likely to build partnerships that not only deliver results, but leave the state stronger than before.

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