



Gambia School Support

The GSS Proposition

October 2026

Introduction

GSS was founded by Josh Dale-Harris and registered as a UK charity on 6 December 2017. The triggers were a holiday in The Gambia and approaching retirement from property investment management at CBRE Global Investors. After 3 years of making mistakes and learning from them, GSS's 'model' came into being at the start of 2021. The catalyst was finding good local people to implement our project.

GSS's purpose

This is 'to make a significant and sustainable contribution to the quality and quantity of ECD [Early Child Development] provision in The Gambia'. In this way we are contributing to the attainment of the UN Sustainability Development Goal 4.2 "by 2030, all girls and boys should have access to quality pre-primary education, care, and early childhood development".

The Gambia's challenges

The country is one of the poorest (GDP per capita rank 178, HDI 170 of the 193 countries measured). It is small, 30 miles wide by 280 miles long. A former British colony with English the official language though it is the first language of under 1% of the population (circa 2.9m). About 95% of the population are Muslim with devout adherence to the tenets of Islam and social discipline tends to be strong. After the peaceful ousting of the long-time dictator in Dec 2016, The Gambia has been stable under a coalition led by President Adama Barrow.

The lack of early years education

This is regulated by MoBSE [Ministry of Basic & Secondary Education] who operate 25% of the ECD schools, 15% more are Madrassas and the rest are either 'for profit' private schools or community schools which tend to be underfunded.

The need for good early years education is acute. Only about 50% of children attend a school before primary (this starts at age 7 in The Gambia). A study by IIEP-UNICEF (2022) found that only 4% of their sample of ECD leavers were deemed 'ready' for primary level.

GSS recognises the particular disadvantages the girls face within the local culture, not least that most girls under the age of 6, have undergone FGM/C [female genital mutilation/cutting)]. There is strong evidence that higher levels of female education is resulting in a lower incidence of FGM/C (UNICEF).

GSS's approach is now tried and tested

GSS assists (not operates) community owned pre-primary schools, the age range is 2-7. Over the past 5 years GSS has grown the number of schools in its network from 1 to 15, with pupil numbers rising from 120 to 2,200. The girl/boy ratio is close to 50:50.

Of the 15 schools we now assist, 5 were on the point of failing, 9 were at risk of failing and the other we founded in a JV with MoBSE. All the schools are registered with MoBSE. In order to join the GSS network, a school must adhere to best practice e.g. 35 to a class, each led by a qualified teacher who must attend our training program and work with our coach/inspectors. The schools must demonstrate they undertake proper safeguarding and good administration and governance.

They must charge fees (they range from £5 to £11 depending on the prosperity of the area), though 20% of places must be offered free to pupils from hardship backgrounds or with disability.

In return we maintain and equip the schools and train the teachers. Currently there are 90 teachers/trainees, we invest in their careers and ensure they are properly remunerated. Our teacher training program is reckoned to be one of the best in The Gambia and comprises regular workshops and follow up 'on the job' coaching in the classroom. We also fund our best trainees to gain their ECD qualification at UEG [University for Education, the Gambia].

The schools are doing well and our approach is to steer them step-by-step towards becoming good pre-primary schools with the focus on the full development of the children i.e. their education, psychosocial well-being and health. We are nudging the schools towards becoming more self-reliant by coaching them to employ good governance, administration and accounting. At present the fee income pays about 15% of the running cost (e.g. fees £1,300, running cost £8,000), so, at the moment they are a long way from being self-financing. Education is often undervalued which makes it difficult to raise fees even though they are usually affordable.

GSS's excellent implementing partner

GSS established the Good Schools Project Charity (GSP), registered under the Gambian Companies Act 2013 in Aug 24. It has an 8 member 'Board' and is led by one of the most experienced and well respected ECD educators in The Gambia. He holds master's degrees in education and public administration and worked for MoBSE for 18 years (8 as head teacher). He is hardworking, capable, scrupulously honest and a joy to work with. His track record to date has been exemplary, leading the transformation of these schools while engaging with the local communities and demonstrating sensitivity and good judgement when managing the, often complicated, local politics.

GSS and the GSP work together side-by-side with almost daily contact between the two organisations. We delegate to the GSP judiciously, seeking the right balance between control and fostering its development and independence.

Teacher training is at the core of our project

In Mar 21 we held our first 'all teacher' 2-day workshop and since then we have steadily improved and grown the program.

This is now well established and regarded as a national leader at the ECD level. It has 4 strands:

- i) developing the leadership skills of the head teachers
- ii) improving the capabilities of the qualified teachers
- iii) enhancing the nursery level day care and child socialisation
- iv) bringing forward our best trainees and pays for them to qualify at the UEG

At present, our program of workshops combined with follow up 'on the job' coaching, is improving the skills of 15 Head Teachers, 50 qualified teachers and 25 trainees. Each term there is a one-day workshop for the HT's and a 2-day workshop for all 90 teachers. We selected a team of our three most capable teachers to back up the project leader and travel from classroom to classroom to coach and embed the lessons learned at the workshops.

In August 2026 we signed an MoU launching a link up with the University for Education, The Gambia which will provide classroom experience to those students who do not yet have placements at pre-primary schools. Initially this will involve 20 classroom assistant places in 2026-27, 20 in 2027-28 and 10 in 2028-29 (total cost £70k). GSS is prepared to pay their course fees and a monthly stipend. We expect to be able to offer permanent posts to the best candidates.

Providing food

GSS helps pay for a breakfast 'porridge' at 9 of the 15 schools. Four of the other schools are in relatively prosperous areas where we think there isn't a pressing need to supplement their diet. The two other schools have food provided by other sponsors.

The 'porridge' recipe varies from school to school, though it is nutritious e.g. rice, milk powder, Moringa powder, cornflour, banana essence, peanut powder and peanut butter. It is served to all staff and pupils though they must arrive before 9.00 am. This is a big incentive for everyone to turn up on time and gets the school day started promptly. We think that this is a worthwhile expense (£10k 2026-27), as it enables the children to concentrate throughout the morning (schools are open only in the mornings due to the heat).

Measuring GSS's impact

We do this in two ways:

Measuring the capability of the teachers

This appraisal is undertaken after the end of each term by our project leader and an independent consultant. They score each teacher with a simple rating system; 2-poor, 4-below average, 6-above average and 8-excellent. Though subjective, we find it a useful process and we provide the headline details in each termly reports we send to our supporters.

Measuring pupil development

In November 2020, UNICEF launched the ECDI2030 indicator SDG 4.2.1 "Proportion of children aged 24-59 months who are developmentally on track in health, learning and psychosocial well-being, by sex."

In March 2024 GSS decided to adopt this assessment method and set up a process where the pupils are assessed 3 times at the ages of 40, 52.5 and 62.5 months. We have trained the teachers to carry out the 20 question assessments and the results analysed by GSS trustee Dr Nick Stevenson (formerly Head of Equity Research at SG Warburg and then at Mirabaud). The accuracy of the assessments are uneven at present and several of the teachers are being trained to understand how to make better judgements on a child's attainments.

We have selected the early results we have confidence in to set the baseline which is showing, unsurprisingly, that Gambian children developmental scores are, on average, below the UNICEF 'norm' score for their age. We want to see the trendline for the development of our pupils rise faster than the line for the UNICEF 'norm' i.e. the developmental deficit narrowing over their time at our schools.

Furthermore, UNICEF analysis suggests that a child attaining an ECDI score of 17/20 or higher at 62.5 months is deemed 'ready' for primary level education. Though this would not prove that GSS's intervention has been successful, measuring this will show how many of the children leaving GSS assisted schools will be 'ready' for their next school.

The data gathering, analysis and dissemination is being led by Dr Stevenson who is being assisted by members of the IT team at BPL (a global credit and political risk insurer based in the City of London). BPL have been major backers of the GSS project) and recently introduced us to OutSystems whose social impact team are providing free access to enable GSS to operate a cloud-based platform which our stakeholders will be able to access via a GSS app.



GSS spends its investors' money wisely

Total cost of the project is estimated at £174k for academic year 2026-27:

UK administration (funded by Palca Stevenson Giving)	£8.5k
Supporting the GSP (implementing partner)	£20.5k
Contribution to staff pay/tax/social security	£95k
Teacher Training Program	£10k
Maintenance & equipping the schools	£25k
Food	£10k
Other items	£5k

The cost per child £79 per year ($£174k/2,200$). Though we have not yet found data to provide context.

Annual pay of a qualified teacher is £1,000 (work mornings only during term) plus their income tax £40 and social security £150.

Typical cost of assisting a struggling school: restoration work £20k, equipping £4k then £8k per year support cost.

Estimated cost of boosting the project in 2026-27 is £68k (UEG project, new classrooms, assisting more schools, increasing GSP resource).

GSS's financial security

GSS's policy is to hold £100k in reserve (in high interest bonds). At 31 July 2026 the balance at CAF Bank was £45k with a further £20k in the GSP's Trust Bank account.

GSS's income has risen from £76k in 2020-21 to £200k in 2025-26.

We have worked to build a reliable income and today we have regular donations totalling £30k per year from 40 individuals, £101k from multi-year awards from 9 charitable trusts/corporate benevolent funds and £35k from regular supporters, particularly via the Christmas BigGive event.

We have been awarded 300 ECD reading books by BookAid which have recently arrived in The Gambia. Books at the ECD level are rare, our challenge is to integrate them into the curriculum.

NB GSS's trustees work pro bono and pay all their travel etc. The UK administration cost includes the services of a 'virtual assistant' for 10 hours a month (£4,464 per year). UK charitable trust, Palca Stevenson Giving, has awarded GSS £6k a year to help build the project's resilience.

Risks to the project

The principal risks are that Josh Dale-Harris and/or the project leader in The Gambia become incapacitated. Three other GSS trustees have visited The Gambia and take active roles in running GSS. GSS has centralised the GSS administrative systems so that they can be readily operated by whoever the GSS trustees appoint to do this.

In The Gambia our project leader is charged with finding a deputy as part of his succession plan (candidates are being interviewed). At present he has 4 capable assistants who are learning quickly and taking on new responsibilities.

West Africa is often politically and financially turbulent and has harsh weather. We do what can to reduce risks from these factors.

