

# The U.S. can help end the global learning crisis

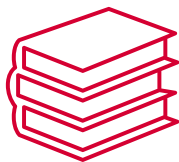
## COVID-19-era learning loss requires urgent global action

Over the past twenty years, many low-income countries have made incredible strides in education. Governments have abolished school fees, built infrastructure, improved gender equity, trained teachers, and partnered with donors to reduce the number of children who were out of school. The results of this commitment were clear—more kids than ever before were in school. But unfortunately for many students, access to school alone does not equal learning.

COVID-19 related school closures and disruptions interrupted learning for nearly all of the world's 1.5 billion school-aged children. But at all education levels, the most impoverished and marginalized children, including girls and youth with disabilities, face the greatest barriers to accessing quality education—and will face more barriers to returning to school and maintaining learning.

Before the pandemic, 57 percent of children in low- and middle-income countries did not have access to the quality schooling they needed to gain basic literacy skills, like the ability to read simple stories. This rate includes students who are not in school and those who are in school but are not reaching minimum standards of literacy for their age.

Sadly, the COVID-19 learning disruptions have deepened these learning gaps. Now, the global rate of students without support to acquire basic literacy is up to 70 percent. But this burden is not shared equally.



**In low-income countries, as many as 86 percent of students are not meeting literacy benchmarks.**

Quality basic education is a human right with benefits that go far beyond learning. When children can learn, they have the keys to a more just, prosperous, and equal future. Collectively, we must act now to address the global learning loss crisis.

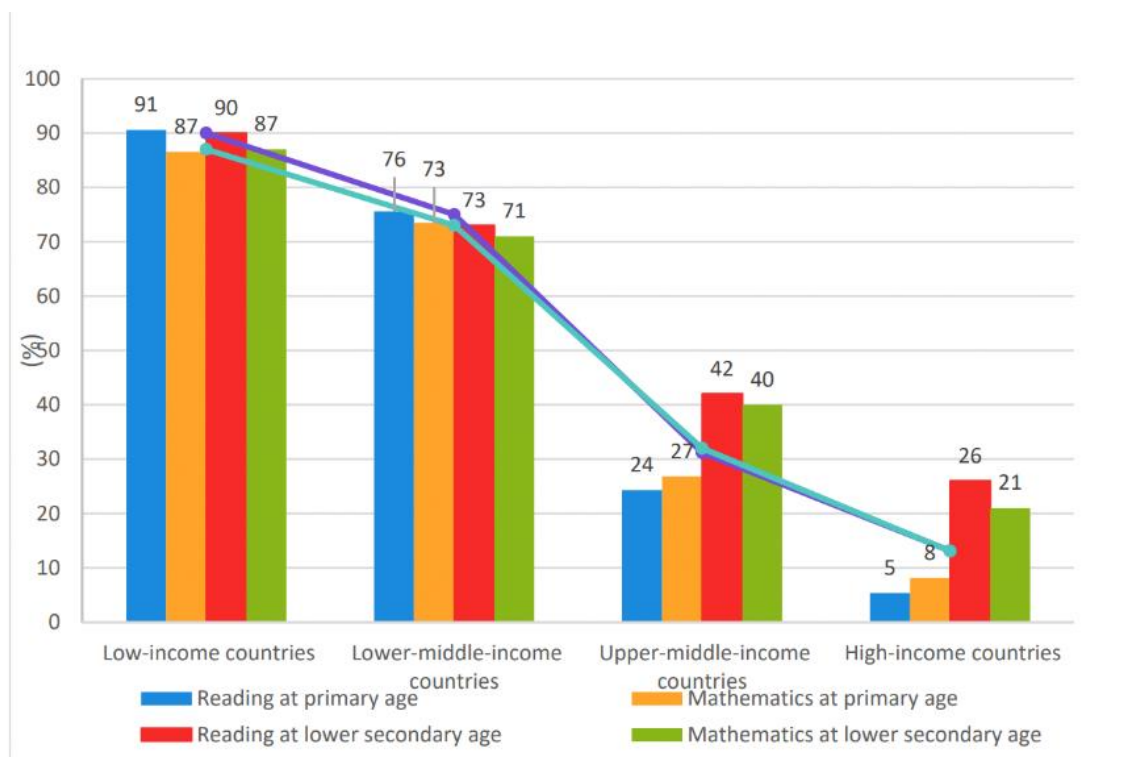
## Quality Education is a Global Public Good

Education is a critical factor in a country's economic development. Basic reading and math skills are the bedrock of education. These foundational skills ensure that young people can contribute to their communities as leaders, scholars, citizens, and workers.

Research shows that as students' basic literacy attainment increases, so does the annual growth rate for their country. Learning losses that occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic alone could result in this generation of students losing \$17 trillion in lifetime earnings, or the equivalent of 14 percent of global Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

Poverty directly impacts children's access to learning foundational literacy skills. As shown below, as country level income increases, the proportion of children who reach minimum proficiency in reading and math increases significantly.

### Proportion of children and adolescents not achieving minimum proficiency levels



Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics

Many low-income countries do prioritize education in their national budgets, but systemic barriers like poverty, conflict, malnutrition, and teacher shortages make school expensive and difficult to access. Because the costs to attend school are above what the government spends on education, households end up taking on an additional financial burden for their children to go to school. These expenses include school fees, educational materials, food, and transportation costs.

Studies have shown there are benefits to reducing the indirect cost of education to families' Supplemental programs like free school meals and health and wellness interventions improve access to school and learning outcomes.

## Quality education alleviates poverty, increases equity

**Ensuring access to quality education and learning are essential to ending global poverty.** According to [UNESCO](#), the completion of primary and secondary school has a direct impact on lifting individuals and families out of poverty. Research has shown that universal primary and secondary education would help lift more than 420 million people out of poverty, reducing the number of people living in extreme poverty

Rich countries have already seen enormous benefits of educating generations of young people. Quality basic education is a right that all children should be able to access. Unfortunately, where a child is born is still a strong indicator of the type of education they will receive.

Children who live in countries that were formerly colonized are [more likely](#) to live in poverty and [lack access to quality education](#). In four countries, it is estimated that more than half of all children are out of school: Central African Republic (50%); Equatorial Guinea (55%); Eritrea (51%); and South Sudan (62%).



**Primary school aged children in Africa are five times less likely to have an educational experience that provides foundational literacy and numeracy skills.**

The legacy of colonialism has also impacted education because a large portion of children in African countries are taught in a language other than the language they learn at home. In Western Africa, nearly 15 percent of children speak a different language at home than the language of instruction; in Central and Eastern Africa, this number jumps to 21 percent. The use of a child's home language (or mother tongue) as a language of instruction is an important strategy for supporting their foundational literacy skills.

Investing in education has important ripple effects, benefiting individual children as well as their families, communities, countries, and the planet. From a human development perspective, foundational learning is an essential building block for a child's future learning goals. Access to quality basic education also helps ensure better health outcomes for individuals. In developing countries, a child whose mother can read is 50 percent more likely to be immunized, twice as likely to attend school, and 50 percent more likely to live past the age of five. Education also provides essential life skills and psycho-social support for youth who are coping with the negative impacts of environmental disasters, conflict, or other forms of societal violence.

Evidence shows that quality education is linked to other broader social benefits—[gender equality](#), [economic development](#), and more. For example, a girl with access to quality

education can earn more income over her lifetime. She will be more likely to vote in elections. Her household is more likely to be healthier, with more nutritious food on the table and access to quality healthcare. And her children are more likely to go to school—paying the benefits of education forward to future generations.



*Students attending class in a school in Moussoro, in the center of Chad. [Source: UNICEF](#)*

## Prioritizing Gender Equity and Inclusion in Foundational Learning

The COVID-19 pandemic laid bare inequalities in education systems. Around the world, students from lower socioeconomic status (SES) families were impacted more than higher income families. For example, at least [463 million children](#) could not access digital remote learning programs when their schools closed; 75 percent of those children came from rural and/or low-income households.

Students with disabilities were disproportionately excluded from distance learning. Schools lacked modalities and inclusive formats (e.g., sign language, braille) to reach these students. One survey showed that only one in three low-income countries had measures in place to address the needs of learners with disabilities during the height of the pandemic. The international community must do more to help make foundational literacy and numeracy accessible and inclusive to all learners.

Sadly, gender is another significant barrier to quality education. In many societies, girls and women face additional barriers to education including gender-specific practices such as child/forced marriage, gender-based violence, harassment, female genital cutting, marginalization due to menstruation, and a disproportionate share of household and

unpaid work. Fortunately, the U.S. and the international community have prioritized gender equity in education and are taking bold steps to ensure that girls not only have access to foundational learning, but that adolescent girls receive the support needed to stay in school to complete secondary education.

According to a [new study](#), girls and marginalized groups are also disproportionately affected by climate and environmental change due to existing gender and other inequalities. Climate shocks reduce incomes, thus compounding existing barriers to education, particularly for low-income communities.

## Learning in Rural Eritrea

### Meet Rekia



Rekia is 10-year-old student in Asheti, Gash-Barka region, Eritrea. Now children living in rural and nomadic communities have better opportunities to learn in an environment that supports their educational needs. She shares “I’m very happy to finally be learning. I know I’m young, but if given the chance, I’d like to take up teaching or nursing as a career to help my community.”

*Image: GPE*

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## Literacy in Kenya

### Meet Rashid Ngala



Rashid was a student in the Tusome Early Grade Reading program. The goal of Tusome is to improve the literacy skills of 5.4 million children who are in the foundational years of primary school in Kenya. Building on prior programming, and funded by USAID, Tusome reached 1.1 million Kenyan children, half of whom are girls, to build basic reading skills across 23,000 public schools, and distributed 24 million English and Kiswahili textbooks, workbooks and supplemental readers in 2019.

*Image: Eric Onyiego, USAID Kenya*

## U.S. Leadership in International Basic Education

The United States has a long history of partnering with other countries to advance global educational goals. U.S. investment in bilateral programs through the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and multilateral programs at the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) have driven incredible progress in educational development in some of the hardest hit countries. Access to inclusive, quality basic education provides an essential foundation for shared international goals and values including poverty reduction, economic growth, sustainable development, and gender equality.

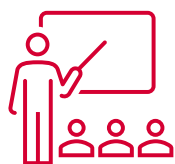
Recently, at the September 2022 United Nations Transforming Education Summit, many countries, including the United States, pledged to address the global learning crisis by endorsing the [Commitment to Action on Foundational Learning](#). Through this shared commitment, USAID, low-income countries, and partners like GPE aim to **cut the global share of children unable to read and understand a simple text by age ten in half by the year 2030.**

With a (proposed) annual U.S. International Basic Education budget of \$1.2 billion, including \$200 million for GPE, and a plan set out by the READ Act Reauthorization Act to ensure that funding has the greatest possible impact, the U.S. and partner countries could have a transformative impact on combatting the learning crisis globally.

## USAID

As an established global leader in supporting foundational learning, USAID plays a critical role in supporting locally-led education sector reforms, adapting to critical educational demands, preventing a dangerous reversal of progress toward global education goals, and strengthening education sector planning for the future.

Backed by strong bipartisan Congressional support, USAID leads the U.S. government's [foundational learning efforts](#) in over 82 priority countries. Their programs support countries to strengthen and transform their educational system so that all children can improve learning outcomes, particularly foundational literacy and numeracy. strengthen and transform their educational system so that all children can improve learning outcomes, particularly foundational literacy and numeracy.



USAID reached more than **24 million children at the primary and secondary level** in 2020 to provide them with access to education.



The U.S. Government recognizes that sustained investment in education is a “force multiplier” for all its work in international development. USAID basic education programs thus bridge the divide from humanitarian assistance to longer term social and economic development for children around the world.

## Global Partnership for Education (GPE)

USAID bilateral and multilateral partners like GPE bring together technical expertise, political support, policy guidance, and financing to assist partner countries and governments in prioritizing access, equity, and impact in foundational learning. GPE has a successful track record. Since their creation, 160 million more children, over half of them girls, are in schools, and 67 million more children have access to quality teachers. Sustained U.S. support for [GPE's strategic plan](#) will serve as a multiplier for these efforts.

At the 2022 U.N. Transforming Education Summit, the U.S. pledged to address the global learning crisis by endorsing the [Commitment to Action on Foundational Learning](#) developed by the World Bank, U.N. agencies, and others. Through this shared commitment, USAID, low-income countries, and partners like GPE aim to cut the global share of children unable to read and understand a simple text by age ten in half by the year 2030.

## What will a fully funded International Basic Education budget buy?

**U.S. leadership in global education is urgently needed, now more than ever.** USAID and their bilateral and multilateral partners bring together technical expertise, political support, policy guidance, and financing to assist partner countries and governments in prioritizing greater access, equity, and impact in foundational learning.



*Student with textbook,  
Kasakola Primary School,  
Mpanda, Katavi, Tanzania.  
Credit: GPE/Kelley Lynch*

### With a fully funded International Basic Education program in FY24, USAID could:

- Support local governments, teachers, and school leaders to develop and implement programs that effectively enable children to achieve greater learning outcomes.
- Expand its list of priority countries, helping even more national governments deploy needed educational resources to address the learning crisis.
- Expand access to pre-primary early childhood development and learning programs.
- Address urgent teacher shortages so that rural communities, particularly those in low-income countries, can ensure that all students have access to qualified teachers.

### With a fully funded FY24, GPE would support its 5 year strategy to:

- Enable 175 million girls and boys to learn in its 90 partner countries.
- Reach 140 million students with professional trained teachers.
- Get 88 million more children, including 45 million more girls in school and learning.
- Support all partner countries in prioritizing learning outcomes in their system transformation goals.

U.S. investment in international basic education would have a transformative impact on educational systems and learning outcomes globally.

## RESULTS' FY24 request and funding history

	FY20 Enacted	FY21 Enacted	FY22 Enacted	FY23 House bill	FY23 Senate bill	FY23 Enacted	RESULTS FY24 Request
<b>USAID Basic Education</b>	\$875 million	\$950 million	\$950 million	\$985 million	\$693.5 million	\$970 million	\$1.2 billion
<b>Global Partnership for Education (GPE)</b>	\$100 million	\$125 million	\$125 million	\$140 million	\$140 million	\$130 million	\$200 million

## How can we ensure that USAID uses this funding effectively?

In addition to increasing annual funding for USAID's International Basic Education programs, we need to make sure that the money is used effectively. The passage of the



READ Act of 2017 was a great step towards ensuring that U.S. dollars go to work in the countries that need the most help, particularly those who have been most impacted by the triple crises of COVID, climate, and conflict.

## **READ Act Reauthorization: Impact and Accountability**

Introduced by Representatives Chris Smith (R-NJ) and Grace Meng (D-NY) and Senators Dick Durbin (D-IL) and Marco Rubio (R-FL), the READ Act Reauthorization Act of 2023 would reauthorize the original 2017 READ Act for an additional five years.

The READ Act Reauthorization ensures that the U.S. government updates their strategy to improve foundational literacy and numeracy in basic education. It also requires rigorous monitoring and evaluation efforts and a yearly report to Congress and the public. Specifically, the legislation calls for:

- Developing a comprehensive U.S. strategy that improves educational opportunities and addresses key barriers to children's school attendance, retention and completion, especially for girls;
- Ensuring education services for children affected by conflict and other emergencies;
- Coordinating U.S. government efforts to efficiently and effectively manage resources;
- Working with countries to strengthen systems in order to build long-term sustainability;
- Evaluating the performance and the focus on learning outcomes of International Basic Education and FLN;
- Engaging with key partners including other donors, civil society and multilateral initiatives, including GPE, to leverage U.S. contributions to achieve a greater overall impact;
- Requiring specific indicators and objectives with which to measure progress; and
- Improving the transparency and accountability of our basic education programs, ensuring taxpayer dollars have the most impact for children worldwide.

During the 117<sup>th</sup> Congress, the reauthorization bill received strong bipartisan support and passed the full House of Representatives as well as passing out of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. This year, the updated legislation was reintroduced by bicameral, bipartisan leaders. We aim to pass the bill quickly through both chambers so it can go into effect as soon as possible.

Addressing foundational learning is a challenge, but it is also critical to achieving higher levels of learning and school completion which contribute to important social outcomes such as health, stability, and economic growth. Ultimately, achieving our goal of foundational learning for all children is a necessary step in our advocacy to end poverty.