

Building on strong foundations

The U.S. role in tackling the global learning crisis



results

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Acronyms

BMGF	Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation
COVID-19	Coronavirus
CSO	Civil society organization
CUE	Center for Universal Education at the Brookings Institution
DAC	Development Assistance Committee
ECD	Early Childhood Development
ECW	Education Cannot Wait
EGMA	Early Grade Mathematics Assessment
EGRA	Early Grade Reading Assessment
FCDO	Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office
FLN	Foundational literacy and numeracy
GPE	Global Partnership for Education
LMIC	Low- and middle-income country
M & E	Monitoring and evaluation

MERL	Monitoring, Evaluation, Research, and Learning
NGO	Non-governmental organization
ODA	Official development assistance
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
RISE	Research on Improving Systems of Education
RTI	Research Triangle Institute
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
STEM	Science, technology, engineering, and math
TaRL	Teaching at the Right Level
TLM	Teaching and learning materials
TPD	Teacher professional development
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific & Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

Foreword

The cornerstone of RESULTS' work in global education advocacy is that education is a right, not a privilege. For over three decades, we have worked with our global partners to support free, quality education for all: strong, fully resourced public education systems that not only help get all children access to the classroom, but also ensure that they are learning.

We know that while the world has made significant progress on access to education, millions of children are still denied the quality learning that is their right, even if they make it to school. This begins with the most foundational pieces of an education—early childhood development (ECD), social and emotional learning, and the nutrition and other support that makes it possible to learn starting in the very earliest years.

This report in particular dives into foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN). A child must learn to add and subtract before doing algebra and must learn how to sound out letters before reading a book. These early literacy and numeracy skills, along with key social and emotional skills, are core to what a child will eventually need for their everyday lives—whether calculating correct change or reading a doctor's note—and they're a platform on which to build a future.

Before the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, an estimated 57 percent of children in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) lived in learning poverty—denied access to quality education including foundational reading and math skills that are the building blocks for future learning. Now that number is up to 70 percent, and, in some countries, it is higher than 90 percent.

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, and with conflict and climate crises further eroding previous gains in literacy and numeracy education, advocacy to curb learning loss and increase foundational learning outcomes is urgent.

In 2022, RESULTS UK published [Foundations First: Maximising the UK's Impact in Addressing the Learning Crisis](#). We now turn to the United States, which remains the single biggest bilateral donor to FLN and a global leader on education and foundational learning. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has played a key role supporting the work of communities, teachers, parents, education ministries, and children globally on education—and this report offers ideas to strengthen their partnerships and impact on foundational learning moving forward.

The good news is that, to a large degree, countries and communities have proven what works. We have strong evidence to support programs and tools like Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL), structured pedagogy, quality learning materials in every classroom, and effective training and coaching for literacy and numeracy teachers. All of these interventions have been shown to improve learning outcomes at scale!

But persistent barriers to learning remain: poverty, conflict, the lingering impact of pandemic-related school closures, and exclusion based on gender, disability, ethnicity, and more. Without targeted action, an unrelenting focus on equity, support for local leadership, and backing from agencies like USAID, hundreds of millions of children around the world will continue to be denied the foundational learning that they deserve. Now is the time to act, and this report sheds important light on steps USAID can take to strengthen the equity and impact of its investments in foundational learning.

Joanne Carter, Executive Director, RESULTS

Executive summary

This report, developed by RESULTS Educational Fund (RESULTS), presents analysis and policy recommendations for USAID FLN education work. It takes stock of the progress that has been made over the last decade in the area of free, public basic education (especially early grade literacy and numeracy) in U.S.-funded partner country programs. It identifies areas of excellence as well as gaps in implementation. Based on a review of evidence and interviews with key experts, it advances specific recommendations for the next phase of USAID's Education Strategy, with a sustained focus on improving foundational learning outcomes.

Over the past decade, the U.S. government, through USAID, has partnered with LMICs to strengthen early grade FLN. Country and global experts consulted for this report note that this effort has been best sustained in high-need countries and regions when partnerships are designed to strengthen essential public education systems, guided by best practices in early grade literacy and numeracy instruction, and responsive to the needs and challenges presented within local country contexts. Through these partnerships, USAID has become a de facto leader and the largest bilateral donor in the area of foundational learning. In particular, USAID's support for the structured-pedagogy approach to basic education has enabled complex instructional practices to become more readily implemented, which has in turn led to improved foundational learning outcomes. USAID's work thus serves as an example of best practice and a model for other governmental and non-governmental donors, shaping current approaches to early grade literacy and numeracy education around the world.

Yet in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, and amid increasing environmental crises, conflicts, and financial challenges, much work remains to be done to realize the U.S. government's goal "to achieve a world where education systems in partner countries enable all individuals to acquire the education and skills needed to be productive members of society."¹

This U.S. goal further aligns with the international agenda to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4) of realizing universal inclusive and equitable quality education by 2030, including literacy and numeracy skills by the end of primary grades.

According to the World Bank, in 2023, we are witnessing a global learning crisis in which over 70 percent of children in LMICs are experiencing “learning poverty”—meaning they have not been equipped with the skills needed to read and understand a basic text or demonstrate basic mathematical proficiency by age 10.² This high level of learning poverty violates children’s basic right to education and undermines the world’s vision and goals on education.

To address these global challenges and maintain its leadership role, USAID must build on its lessons learned to better support universal achievement of learning outcomes, particularly for the most marginalized and vulnerable populations in countries experiencing the highest rates of learning poverty.

After reviewing USAID’s significant work in early grade reading and math, and after speaking with U.S. and international experts on foundational learning, this report identifies four key lessons learned that serve as a basis for future work in FLN. It then advances three main “Results Tracks” that will enable USAID to build on these lessons to meet the current moment in addressing the global learning crisis. Within each Results Track, specific recommendations are indicated to achieve the proposed results. In the sections below, these recommendations are elaborated along with supporting evidence. Indicative case studies are presented to illustrate both lessons learned and evidence of effective programming on FLN. Finally, the report concludes with a discussion of the challenges ahead and a proposed strategy for engaging key stakeholders in implementation and advocacy to act on these recommendations, with the goal of delivering transformative foundational learning programs at scale in high learning poverty contexts.

Summary of lessons learned

Over a decade of USAID programming designed to improve learning outcomes and institutionalize FLN education, with a focus on early grade reading in low- to middle-income countries, has yielded four key lessons. The recommendations of this report are grounded in the following key lessons:

Lesson one - evidence shows that FLN can quickly improve learning outcomes through clearly structured pedagogies and instructional methods.^{3,4,5}

Lesson two - teachers are critical to the achievement of learning outcomes in FLN. Coaching and support for teachers strengthens the impact of FLN programs.⁶

Lesson three - improving accountability mechanisms across public education systems is key to sustaining programmatic results. Accountability is improved when school and government leadership are highly knowledgeable about content, measurement, planning, and reporting.⁷

Lesson four - sustainability of progress is critical to ensure impact and long-term improvement. To achieve this, partner country governments must be actively involved in model development and implementation. This increases consistent uptake of new FLN approaches.⁸

Results tracks

Based on these lessons learned, this report advances three overarching Results Tracks that provide a framework to guide USAID's FLN investments and strengthen its impact in the coming years. These three Results Tracks are briefly outlined below and summarized in Figure 1. More detailed information about the specific recommendations within each Results Track is presented in subsequent sections.

1

Results track one

Address the learning crisis through sustained support for quality public-sector foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN) in partner countries.

USAID should invest in public systems in countries with higher rates of learning poverty and maintain a leading role in supporting quality public foundational literacy, numeracy, and social-emotional learning, with an increased focus on partnering with local governments, civil society organizations (CSOs), and school leaders to improve learning outcomes in lower-income countries.

2

Results track two

Sustainably strengthen public systems by investing in local foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN) capacity-building.

USAID should apply a systems-focused approach that increases sustainability and accountability through local capacity development and locally led implementation strategies. When educational initiatives focus on only one element of the system, that element may temporarily improve whilst other elements do not. Without a more

systemic approach, long-term sustainability of successful learning improvements is unlikely to occur, particularly at scale. By localizing its approach to program work and adopting a wider systems perspective that is grounded in strong local partnerships, USAID can strengthen its impact and achieve more sustainable foundational learning outcomes.

3

Results track three

Strengthen partnerships, increase coordination, and leverage multilateral engagement to create greater foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN) policy alignment.

USAID should use its influence on multilateral boards to focus global attention on foundational learning, exert leadership to advance FLN goals, and use lessons learned to create measurable progress toward SDG4. This would ensure inclusive and equitable foundational education for all girls and boys, with a focus on reaching the most marginalized and vulnerable learners.

Summary of recommendations

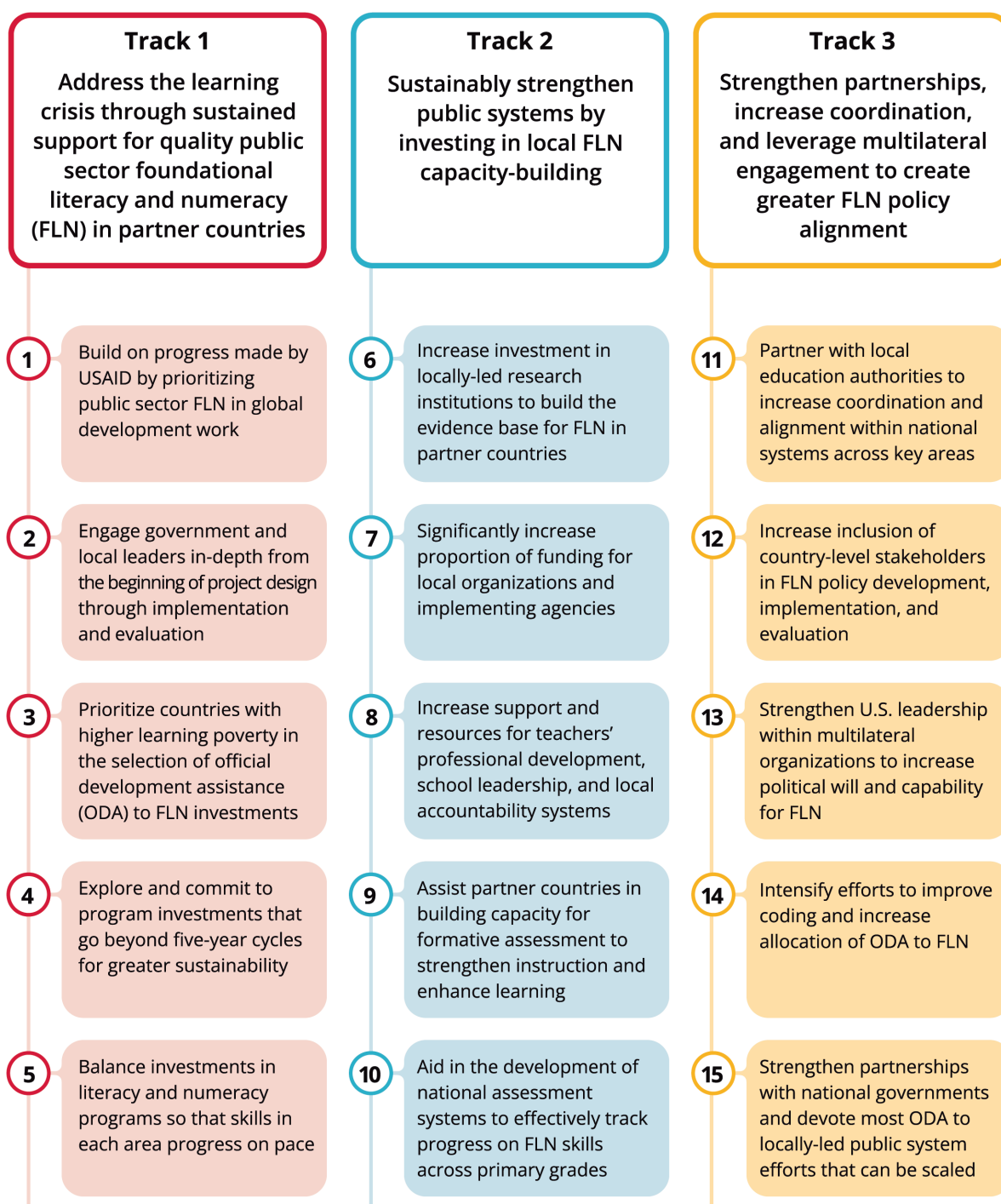


Figure 1. Summary of recommendations to guide United States Agency for International Development's (USAID) foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN) investments and strengthen its impact in the coming years.

Introduction

The 2018 USAID Education Policy set a primary goal of “achieving sustained, measurable improvements in learning outcomes and skills development.”⁹ The policy centers country ownership, concentrating on initiatives that show demonstrable results, build local capacity, use data for decision making, and enhance equity and inclusion.

The principles set forth in this policy continue to guide USAID’s important and ongoing work in FLN and localization by underscoring that “equal access to quality education is a foundational driver of a country’s journey to self-reliance.”¹⁰ Further, the policy’s four priorities continue to guide USAID’s work in the education sector: 1) increasing access to quality education, particularly for the most vulnerable and marginalized children; 2) improving literacy, numeracy, and social-emotional skills; 3) promoting skills needed for productive lives; and 4) building the capacity of higher education institutions to conduct and apply research that benefits local communities.

The U.S. Government Strategy on International Basic Education (2019-2023) builds on these priorities and advances USAID’s capacities to address the global learning crisis through effective FLN programming. This strategy emerged out of the passing of the bipartisan, bicameral READ Act (Reinforcing Education Accountability in Development Act¹¹) in 2017. The Strategy further advances the learning agenda, stating that “learning is a critical instrument for promoting shared prosperity and reducing poverty” because “achieving universal primary and secondary education would help lift more than 420 million people out of poverty” around the world.¹² Importantly, the Strategy mandates that USAID build on past progress in FLN education, learn from experience, and strengthen quality, transparency, accountability, and coordination to maximize the impact of U.S. taxpayer dollars.

In this report, we highlight those areas where USAID’s work in foundational learning has been most effective, and advance recommendations to strengthen and enhance USAID’s impact in key domains. It should be noted that USAID deserves praise for the program-level progress and policy leadership it has demonstrated so far in support of

its foundational learning priorities, and the intention of this report is to build on lessons learned and help foster new learning that will enable USAID to better deliver on its commitment to inclusive, locally-led education.

At the center of this work are the local communities, leaders, teachers, administrators, parents, and youth who are driving change within their education systems so that all children can claim their right to education. In recognition of these stakeholders, USAID is developing new policies, indicators, and approaches that will increasingly shift more funding and decision-making power to the people, organizations, and leaders in partner countries. For example, in 2021, Administrator Samantha Power announced two key localization goals: to direct one quarter of all funding to local partners, and, by 2030, to create space for local actors to exercise leadership over priority setting, activity design, implementation, and defining and measuring results.¹³

In 2022, Administrator Power noted that, “If we truly want to make aid inclusive, local voices need to be at the center of everything we do.”¹⁴ This report echoes the call for a more inclusive and locally-led development practice, particularly in the education sector, and advocates for increased funding for local actors to set their own learning agendas and develop locally-rooted educational strategies leading to measurable improvement of foundational learning outcomes.

USAID cannot effectively bring an end to the global learning crisis on its own. Supporting local communities and countries is the only path to success. USAID should also leverage its engagement in multilateral and bilateral partnerships, international organizations, and global funds to achieve progress toward the shared goal of universal quality education. In particular, through leadership roles with the Global Partnership for Education (GPE), Education Cannot Wait (ECW), and collaboration with the World Bank, the United Nations Education and Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), the UK Government’s Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF), USAID is

actively engaged in multilateral support for addressing learning poverty.¹⁵ Furthermore, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, USAID collaborated with these international partners to develop and disseminate a “RAPID” framework and an accompanying guide to assist countries in recovering lost learning progress.¹⁶

Ultimately, USAID has distinguished itself as a global leader in its technical and strategic support for foundational learning. Now, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and amid multiple challenges of the global learning crisis, environmental disasters, and the ongoing challenge of 222 million crisis-impacted children in need of educational support¹⁷, USAID must continue to evolve to be ready to meet the complex demands with approaches that are fit for purpose. From this forward-looking perspective, the recommendations in this report are intended to strengthen the position of USAID to improve its results on FLN in the countries of highest need in which FLN outcomes are especially dire.

Why foundational literacy and numeracy?

Literacy and numeracy skills are foundational to all future learning, creating a solid platform on which all other knowledge and skills are built. Foundational learning in the early grades has an outsized influence on a child's future learning pathway. The foundational years are when children learn how to learn. Research has demonstrated that learners' early grade reading and numeracy skills predict their success in future grades and their overall future academic performance.¹⁸ Strong early literacy and numeracy skills have also been shown to reduce drop-out rates in later grades.¹⁹ Effective early instruction in FLN also helps children gain self-confidence, persistence, and other cognitive and social-emotional skills that foster lifelong learning. Every child deserves this opportunity to get a strong start to their education, and failing to provide learners with the opportunity to master these foundational skills in the early grades can set children back for life.

Basic foundations of literacy and numeracy—along with social and emotional learning and other literacies important to democratic civic participation—are also key to people having access to information they can use to make decisions in their lives, to pursue future scientific and science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) inquiry, to participate fully in democratic societies, and to achieve economic opportunities including productive employment.

Beyond benefiting individual children, strong foundational learning systems create powerful ripple effects for communities and wider society (see Figure 2). Countries where children have the opportunity to master reading and math skills see increased economic growth and poverty reduction.²⁰ Foundational learning has a generational impact that extends beyond individual families, impacting the wider local, national, and global community, including to:

Meet SDGs and targets: Building strong foundational skills promotes active engagement in public service, strengthens economic development, and encourages participation in democratic governance.²¹ It has also been noted that each of the SDG4 goals depend on the achievement of FLN, and in this way, foundational learning is a “gateway skill.” Unless and until minimum proficiency in literacy and numeracy is achieved, other goals such as twelve years of schooling for all girls cannot be reached.²²

Improve health: Literacy skills increase access to health information and services, promoting healthier lifestyles, decreasing infant mortality rates, and increasing consistent participation in stable employment opportunities.²³ In particular, girls’ access to quality education has been shown to improve future maternal and child health. A child born to a mother who can read is 50 percent more likely to survive past age 5.²⁴

Strengthen economic development: Foundational skills increase the opportunity to participate in the formal economy and enable learners to create economic opportunities for themselves and their communities.²⁵ Children from lower socio-economic levels have been shown to benefit significantly from early learning and pre-primary education.²⁶ Today, many more of the lowest-income students have access to schooling than in decades past, but a disproportionate number of them drop out because schools fail them. Focusing on universalizing FLN strengthens efforts to reach the most marginalized children who are at risk from missing out on their right to education.²⁷

Promote gender equity and equality: Access to a quality basic education improves health for women, including reduced early marriages and maternal deaths. It increases independent economic opportunities for women and improves the lives of their extended family over multiple generations.²⁸ Because close to two thirds of the people who lack literacy skills are women, FLN has important gender equity dimensions.²⁹

Support climate resiliency: Children bear the greatest burden from climate shocks, with one billion children—nearly half of the world’s children—living in “extremely high risk” countries due to climate and environmental shock and stress.³⁰ FLN programs provide children with essential skills to interact with public safety information during climate emergencies and to be future problem-solvers for climate mitigation efforts. Because of the dire impact on children, UNICEF has referred to the climate crisis as a crisis of children’s rights.³¹ Increasingly, organizations such as GPE seek to leverage entry points and address gaps in education systems in order to strengthen the resilience and relevance of learning to address climate change.³²

Enhance social cohesion: Strengthening FLN systems contributes to strategies that aim to keep children safe through the provision of child-friendly spaces and structured educational activities.³³ Foundational learning programs with social and emotional dimensions also foster skills such as collaboration, cooperation, and problem-solving as 21st century skills that enhance social cohesion and democratic participation.³⁴ Ultimately, education, literacy, and skills development equip learners to better respond to social upheaval and conflict.³⁵

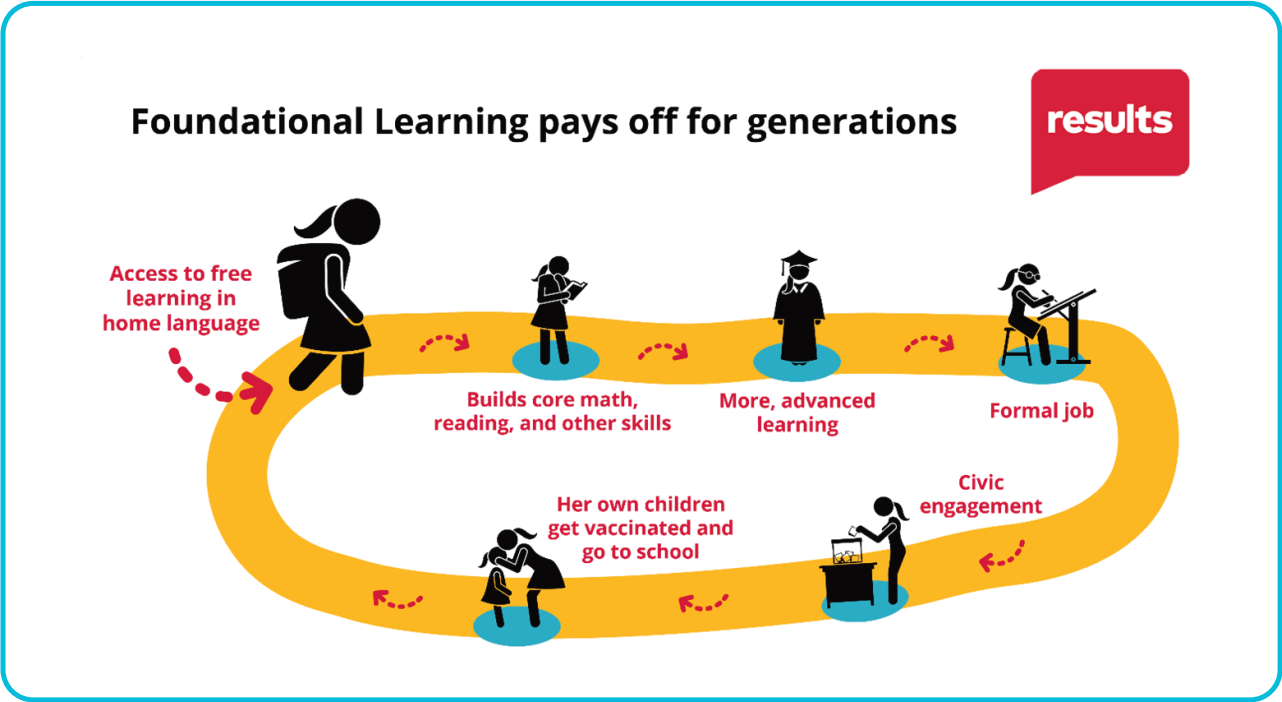


Figure 2: Foundational learning has a generational impact that extends beyond individual families, impacting the wider local, national, and global community.

Source: [Results](#)

Improving foundational learning outcomes: what works?

Over the last decade, USAID programs in early grade reading have supported an estimated 246 million children and youth as well as millions of teachers and administrators in 53 countries.³⁶ Based on a review of USAID's retrospective report and an analysis of interviews with key FLN experts and stakeholders, this report outlines a number of areas of effective global practice in FLN. These areas are summarized below.

Structured pedagogy

Structured pedagogy is an instructional framework that is highly systematic in nature and integrates multiple principles to promote student learning. Key facets of structured pedagogy include maximizing instructional time; using teaching routines; scaffolding instruction so that students have support for learning at different levels; making pedagogical decisions based on student learning assessment outcomes; and fostering social and emotional skills.³⁷ There is ample evidence to support the effectiveness of structured pedagogy as an approach to improving foundational learning outcomes in LMICs.³⁸

Teaching and learning materials (TLM)

TLM include developmentally and culturally appropriate³⁹ student materials for learning and well-organized teacher resources for instruction. Because so many LMICs have very limited access to resources for their classrooms, it is critical that high quality instructional models emphasize the importance of TLM and how to create them at the local level. One excellent example of the impact that TLM can make on foundational learning is the Tusome program in Kenya. In this program, 94 percent of grade two students had their own Tusome textbook, which was aligned to the teacher's instructional guides; during the program evaluation, 100 percent of these teachers indicated that they found student textbooks to be the most useful material provided to improve learning outcomes.⁴⁰

Integrated assessment

Supporting instruction with developmentally appropriate formative assessment tools assists teachers in determining student progress and continued learning needs.⁴¹ While instructional models should be highly structured and clearly supported, it is also important to train and empower teachers to make necessary intervention decisions for students based on immediate evidence of need. An example of effective utilization of integrated assessment for foundational learning is the TaRL approach that has improved literacy and numeracy outcomes in India and several countries in sub-Saharan Africa.⁴²

Training, coaching, and teacher professional development (TPD)

As the frontline leaders on education, ongoing support for teachers is essential to effective FLN programs. Coaching usually takes place at the school level and is a regularly occurring opportunity for teachers to be observed and receive targeted feedback focused on tangible skills, as well as to participate in short formal learning opportunities and planning for instruction in a supportive environment. A growing collection of evidence⁴³ as well as UNESCO's Spotlight Report on Basic Education Completion and Foundational Learning in Africa have shown that coaching is one effective approach to helping teachers gain skills to improve student learning outcomes in FLN.⁴⁴ The integration of technology as a source of support, for example using cell phones or program-provided tablets to access text or video messages with guidance and support for teachers, has also shown some promising results.⁴⁵

School leadership

The primary focus of most USAID FLN initiatives has been supporting stronger teacher practice. While results have been positive, in some settings, implementation has been inconsistent, with high implementation in some schools and low implementation in others. When examining progress reports for various USAID-funded FLN initiatives, it is possible to draw some conclusions about how high teacher implementation is achieved through measures such as relying on strong and knowledgeable school leadership. For example, in schools where leaders ensured that teachers drew on evidence-based FLN

instructional practices, and effectively implemented monitoring and accountability strategies, teachers demonstrated a strong commitment to the instructional model, more creativity in their instruction, and higher levels of model implementation.⁴⁶

Government engagement for scale-up and sustainability

Although the number of successful FLN programs is growing, there are few that have been able to demonstrate sustained impact at a national scale. One study, the Learning at Scale study led by Research Triangle Institute (RTI), provides important evidence on how FLN programming can be effectively taken to scale through public systems.⁴⁷ Research at the Brookings Institution on how government decision-makers adopt education innovations for scale also shows some promising insights on educational innovations in LMICs. For example, they found that very few innovations were adopted by national officials unless there was already buy-in from a senior level government official.⁴⁸ The Brookings Millions Learning project also focuses on the role of teachers, school leaders, government officials, and civil society partners as key stakeholders who drive the mechanisms and create the enabling conditions through which quality public education innovations scale.⁴⁹ As these models show, localized sustainability of program outcomes can only be achieved by strengthening system capacities in the local context and building strong relationships with program stakeholders.

Monitoring, evaluation, research, and learning (MERL)

Monitoring and evaluation (M & E) is well recognized as an important component of implementing education reform initiatives. Although it can be costly to implement, requires a specific set of expertise, and produces data that can be difficult to manage and use, M & E is nonetheless an integral part of any educational program implementation. This is because highly visible M & E results can drive instruction forward unlike any other program element.

By engaging local government, implementing partners, teachers, and school leaders in systematic and common monitoring of instructional quality, and using the results to further school improvement planning at local, district, and national levels, not only do teachers implement FLN programs with more fidelity, but student learning outcomes improve. As performance improves at the school level, research shows that national government partners will be more likely to take up key components of the model, learn more about how to implement high quality FLN programs, and strengthen their partnership with USAID in their respective countries.⁵⁰

Crisis response

All USAID FLN projects experienced delivery challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and each was required to heavily adapt their approach. Some projects, however, were able to adapt and respond more quickly to the COVID-19 pandemic due to their previous experience and/or reliance on distance communications. For example, in northeastern Nigeria, where a Hausa-language project took place amid an extended regional political crisis with many participants displaced in temporary refugee camps, the project was better able to adapt and respond during the COVID-19 pandemic to a large extent due to the fact of having a localized and well-trained staff and leadership already in place since the start of the project. In other parts of Nigeria, however, many students suffered barriers to education during the COVID-19 pandemic based on distance, gender, and disability status.⁵¹ Because students had different levels of access to remote learning during school closures, the return to “normality” brings students who continue to have a range of learning needs.⁵²

Regional crises have an impact on surrounding countries as refugees seeking safety, shelter, and basic needs, including education, flow across borders. In the case of Jordan, following a high intake of Syrian refugee children, the national government, schools and USAID-funded FLN projects responded with careful policy-making and planning to ensure the needs of refugees could be met without disruption to the normal schooling structure within the country. In both Nigeria and Jordan, local and national level implementers were supported by USAID in its partnership with ECW and the GPE—ensuring that refugee children had access to FLN skills.

Policy recommendations to strengthen USAID results on foundational learning and numeracy

Building on these effective approaches, the following recommendations are designed to inform USAID's strategic work in FLN, particularly through locally-led strategies developed with public school leaders, local and national governments, and communities in LMICs. Based on an analysis of USAID documents and reports related to early grade reading programs combined with stakeholder and expert interviews, the following section advances a framework of recommendations within three "Results Tracks" designed to build up and strengthen USAID's impact in the area of FLN. Below, the Results Tracks and their associated recommendations are discussed in more detail with supporting evidence.

1

Results track one

Address the learning crisis through sustained support for quality public-sector foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN) in partner countries.

As the lead international donor agency on foundational learning, USAID should be at the forefront of addressing the learning crisis. To do this, USAID must invest more in public education systems in countries with higher rates of learning poverty, maintaining a leading role in supporting country-led initiatives on FLN. By focusing funding, support, and programming in those countries and communities most in need, USAID will better ensure that quality public education leading to improved learning outcomes reaches all children and youth, particularly the most marginalized who face additional barriers

to educational attainment. While recognizing that USAID's approach to strengthening education systems is inclusive of a variety of service delivery modalities, particularly in conflict and crisis-affected areas, this report strongly advocates approaches that sustainably strengthen public-sector education systems to reach all children, including the most marginalized. Furthermore, based on the evidence in this report, we believe that increasing the integration of foundational learning within USAID's broader localization strategy will increase the value for investment in FLN and strengthen the local capacity to grow and sustain FLN programming at a national level. Specific recommendations for initiative targets follow.



Recommendation one

USAID should build on existing progress over the last decade by reaffirming the U.S. government's commitment to prioritizing public-sector FLN in its global development work with clear goals, objectives, and data.

As this report affirms, USAID's FLN programming has had a tremendous impact on the global discussion about the importance of foundational learning for all children, particularly as an avenue to support future learning across all disciplines including STEM. USAID-funded programs have set the standard for model development and testing, particularly through the development and implementation of the Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA). Though much progress has been made, this report urges USAID to increase the level of official development assistance (ODA) for FLN and expand investment in partner countries that have yet to achieve measurable results in foundational learning outcomes. Setting clear goals and objectives for FLN programs and creating mechanisms for sharing and reporting data on learning outcomes are important drivers for increased impact. Similarly, by continuing to refine and research the critical elements of effective FLN models (such as those highlighted in the [Improving foundational learning outcomes: what works?](#) section of this report), more partner countries can leverage the innovations and results of effective FLN programs. This prioritization of FLN is a crucial path forward to address low levels of learning in high-need partner countries.



Recommendation two

Engage government and local education leaders in-depth from the beginning of project design through implementation, in learning, as trainers and as partners, and in monitoring and evaluation of project work.

To move FLN work to a deeper level, more localized in nature and creating greater sustainability, it is crucial to engage government partners in all aspects of program work, including project design, planning, training, resource development, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. If FLN programs aren't aligned with country priorities, integrated into public systems, and designed based on local needs, they aren't set up for success. When key government stakeholders are fully engaged, learning outcomes are stronger, and with increased country-level ownership, high-quality program strategies become more institutionalized within the government system.

Along these lines, USAID recently launched frameworks and learning tools to improve evidence use in the design and implementation in educational projects. For example, the Evidence Cycle framework prioritizes engaging local stakeholders in activity design and implementation of projects.⁵³ The Early Grade Reading program retrospective report also recommends fostering relationships with ministry leadership and key stakeholders to “build buy-in and support for education reform efforts” as well as to ensure that USAID programs “align with country priorities and policies.”⁵⁴ However, as discussed earlier, USAID’s direct engagement with governments varies across countries and programs. This variation risks leaving USAID-funded FLN programs running parallel with government programs, connected through communications, but not fully integrated or strategically aligned with national goals, work products, and key messaging to schools about what matters. The case of FLN programming in Tanzania, described below, provides an important example of localized planning that showed promising results in foundational learning outcomes at a national scale.

The case of Tanzania

Early implementation of FLN programming in Tanzania drew on government staffing at high levels to collaborate in designing and conducting training, and in materials development. As a result, new approaches went viral within the government, and strong relationships—built around important work—were developed.

In Year 3 of implementation, USAID was asked to provide an implementation content specialist to support the government in conducting a full-scale overhaul of their early grades standards, curriculum, resource, and teacher training program. This specialist worked with the government for six months to reframe and update the national early grades FLN system.

The government went on to train all early grade teachers across the country, and the first year assessment of students demonstrated a 40 percent decrease in zero scores in a single year. This early success has been maintained, and local school response to the new programming has been highly motivated and positive in terms of their self-efficacy—to actually be able to improve student learning in substantive ways.



Recommendation three

Prioritize countries with higher learning poverty (LP) rates when selecting where to invest U.S. ODA in FLN.

USAID is the lead international development agency on official development assistance for foundational learning (ODA for FLN). A recent analysis by SEEK Development⁵⁵ shows that the U.S. is by far the top bilateral donor on FLN as of 2020 (see Figure 3). Their study also indicated that the top recipient countries for U.S. ODA to FLN (in 2020) included the following: Senegal (LP-69%), Nigeria (LP-83%), Jordan (LP-52%), Tanzania (LP-39%), and Ethiopia (LP-90%) (see Figure 4). Recognizing that there are many factors that contribute to the identification and selection of FLN investments to partner countries, and that USAID country-level demand are key factors in this consideration, the scope of the global learning crisis and low learning levels across the majority of LMICs necessitates greater investment in countries with high learning poverty.⁵⁶ While learning poverty does not replace other key indicators of the SDGs on education, it is adopted by the Global Coalition for Foundational Learning and enacted through the [Commitment to Action on Foundational Learning](#) which the U.S. government has endorsed.⁵⁷

Top 5 bilateral donors for FLN in primary education, 2020

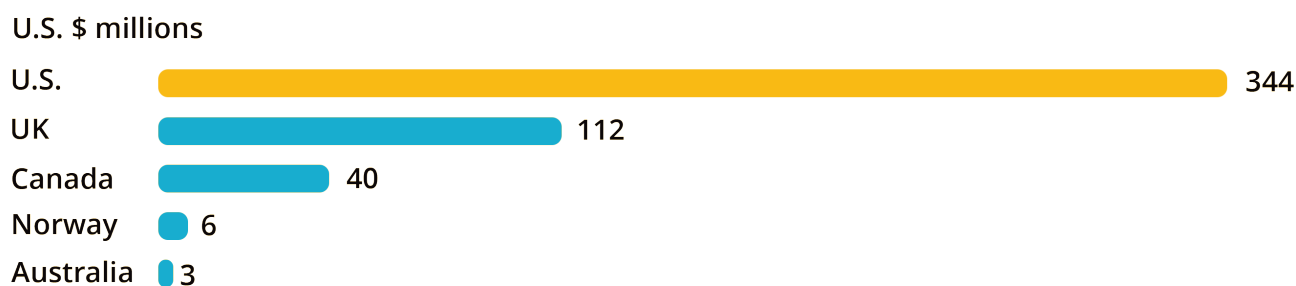


Figure 3: Top five bilateral donors for foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN) in primary education in 2020.

Source: SEEK Development analysis, based on OECD database (Data from 2020)

Top 5 partner countries of U.S.'s bilateral funding to FLN



Figure 4: Top five partner countries of the U.S.'s bilateral funding to foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN) 2020.

Source: SEEK Development analysis, based on OECD database (Data from 2020)

Table 1 (below) shows the top countries that received USAID investments to basic education in fiscal year 2022 (FY2022). While we celebrate the level of engagement at the country level for basic education programming, it is clear that the rate of learning poverty does not correspond to the level of ODA for FLN investment. For example, despite a relatively low learning poverty rate (52 percent), Jordan was a top recipient of U.S. bilateral assistance for FLN in 2020 and 2022. Conversely, countries with extremely high learning poverty rates, such as Central African Republic (LP-98%), Burundi (LP-96%), and Chad (LP-94%), received no USAID funding for basic education in FY2022. Other countries with higher rates of learning poverty, such as Mauritania (LP-95%), Madagascar (LP-95%), Ghana (LP-94%), Sierra Leone (LP-94%), Guinea-Bissau (LP-94%), South Sudan (no data), and Niger (LP-90%), received extremely low levels of ODA for basic education in FY2022 (under \$10 million U.S. dollars per country). To more effectively address low levels of learning, this report advocates increasing ODA to FLN in countries with the highest levels of learning poverty.

	USAID basic education FY2022**	Learning poverty rate*	Youth literacy rate* (15-24 ys)	Primary school completion rate*
Jordan	130 M	52%	99%	81%
Afghanistan	50 M	93%	55% (m) 29% (f)	84%
Burkina Faso	32 M	75%	65%	65%
Guatemala	30 M	79%	94%	87%
Mozambique	28 M	64%	72%	58%
Lebanon	27 M	No data	99%	No Data
Malawi	27 M	85%	76%	80%
Nepal	25 M	No data	78%	106%
DRC (Kinshasa)	21 M	97%	85%	75%
Zambia	20 M	98%	93%	80%
Liberia	19 M	No data	55%	61%
Senegal	19 M	69%	68%	63%
Laos/Lao PDR	17 M	98%	94% (m) 90% (f)	63%
Uganda	17 M	82%	91%	53%
Rwanda	16 M	44%	86%	91%
Honduras	15 M	67%	96%	77%
Pakistan	14 M	77%	79% (m) 65% (f)	91%
Haiti	14 M	No data	83%	No data
Yemen	14 M	95%	77%	72%
Sri Lanka	13 M	15%	99%	98%
Ethiopia	13 M	90%	73%	68%
Egypt	13 M	69%	92%	105%
Kenya	13 M	No data	89%	100%
Philippines	12 M	91%	98%	95%
Tanzania	12 M	39%	86%	69%
Uzbekistan	11 M	-----	100%	106%
Mali	11 M	90%	46%	50%
Somalia	9.6 M	No data	No data	No data
Cambodia	9.6 M	90%	92%	91%
Nigeria	8 M	83%	81% (m) 68% (f)	74%

Table 1. Top countries that received United States Agency for International Development (USAID) investments to basic education in fiscal year 2022 (FY2022). *Using the most recent data available from World Bank and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) sources.**FY2022 Basic Education Disbursements based on data from [ForeignAssistance.gov](https://www.foreignassistance.gov).



Photo credit: USAID-DRC

United States Agency for International Development (USAID) partners in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) ensure that the country's youth have access to high-quality education. On Education Day 2022, we celebrate the dedication of teachers, parents, and partners who also recognize education as a basic human right.



Photo Credit: Julie Polumbo

In September 2017, in a classroom in Goma, eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), students are using a United States Agency for International Development-UK Aid Direct (USAID-UKAID) supported learning material in a local language as part of an approach developed to improved basic education in the DRC.



Recommendation four

USAID should explore and commit to program investments that go beyond five-year cycles with less pressure on country partners to produce only immediate results. USAID should instead support them to achieve long-term sustainable progress.

Most USAID-funded FLN programs have been and continue to be funded for periods up to five years. While this may seem like an extended time for funding, it is important to recognize that one year of this time is spent in program start-up and close-out. Additionally, this time usually includes not just implementation but also design, data collection before and after, and reporting. Typically, this leaves insufficient time to adequately deliver crucial elements, such as providing training in the model for schools; creating and distributing the materials needed in classrooms; building the knowledge, skills, tools, and processes within the supporting system that can ensure fidelity of implementation; and supporting government actors in long-term ownership of the program model. Several stakeholders interviewed for this report noted this limitation as being a key barrier to USAID investments achieving sustained improvements to foundational learning outcomes at scale. Thus, a critical recommendation of this report is for USAID to develop ways to provide longer-term stable funding for the development, implementation, and evaluation of FLN programs. Expanding the funding window would also enable local partners to conduct more extensive independent research and evaluation across the duration of projects and programs from the initial design stage through implementation and evaluation cycles.



Recommendation five

Balance investment in literacy and numeracy programs so that skills development in each area progresses on pace.

While USAID has played a leadership role in their investment in early grade reading programs, there has been significantly less investment and attention to improving learning outcomes in early grade numeracy and mathematics. However, research in this area to enlarge the evidence base is growing, and USAID has an important role to play. Research conducted in higher-income contexts has shown that early achievement in foundational numeracy has implications for later school achievement and career-readiness.⁵⁸ Nonetheless, numeracy-focused implementation in LMICs has remained less prevalent than literacy programs, particularly in USAID-funded programs. Effective foundational learning approaches such as TaRL have shown effective results in both literacy and numeracy outcomes. For this reason, researchers and advocates concerned with the wide impact of the learning crisis are increasingly speaking up to advocate for greater donor investment in numeracy-focused basic education programs.⁵⁹

2

Results track two

Sustainably strengthen public systems by investing in local foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN) capacity-building.

USAID should apply a public systems-focused approach that increases sustainability and accountability through local capacity development and locally-led implementation strategies. When educational program initiatives focus on only one element of the system, that element may temporarily improve whilst other elements do not. Without a wider systems approach, changes can occur in isolated areas of the system, without achieving longer-term sustainability of the reform. It is critical that USAID localize its approach to



Photo Credit: Global Partnership for Education (GPE)/Mediabase
GPE visited Kenya, in February 2015, to see schools that piloted an early grade mathematics teaching methodology.

program work (a consistent theme across this report's tracks and recommendations). By supporting local expertise in both content and management, USAID will better ensure program sustainability over time. The following recommendations target specific elements of systems strengthening in which USAID should invest in the coming years.



Recommendation six

USAID should increase its investment in locally-led research institutions focused on building the evidence base for effective FLN programs in partner countries.

Generating localized research on effective foundational learning approaches is a critical element of improving learning outcomes in LMICs. For example, Research on Improving Systems of Education (RISE), a program which received funding from UK's FCDO and the BMGF among other donors, has produced a significant number of country-specific and cross-cutting studies on FLN.⁶⁰ The U.S.-based Brookings Institution's Center for Universal Education (CUE) has also engaged local and international researchers to produce a new report on TaRL in Botswana.⁶¹ However, more research is needed to independently examine what drives results in foundational learning programs. Several experts interviewed for this report indicated the need for more locally-led research teams to examine the pedagogical approaches of literacy and numeracy instruction, as well as other areas of research focused on conditions that improve student learning. Not only is it important to begin to conduct more long-term independent research on USAID-funded initiatives, it is also critical that this research be conducted with local institutions and organizations that are situated in the local context, who bring expert knowledge to the research, and who may be better poised to navigate local systems to access information. While the need to integrate local knowledge in development programming is recognized by USAID⁶² and many U.S.-based implementing partners, a more robust engagement with local experts and researchers would bring added benefits to education sector programming. Furthermore, USAID programs should work to cultivate local expertise and strengthen existing research infrastructure in partner countries for longer-term impact and sustainability.



Recommendation seven

To strengthen USAID localization efforts, a greater proportion of funding should go directly to local organizations focused on public education, including local governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs)/CSOs, while concurrently working to expand the capacity of local partners and implementers to successfully be awarded USAID basic education contracts.

Part of a localization agenda requires reducing and eliminating the barriers that local organizations in LMICs may face in accessing USAID resources and opportunities. Thus, it is important for USAID to not only recognize what types of local organizations exist that fill a specific FLN need, but also to create unique funding streams and contracting mechanisms to support them. This includes adapting to local operational realities and supporting local non-governmental groups to provide national leadership in future initiatives and partnerships.

Local organizations, teachers, school leaders, and governments have the strongest understanding of the history, context, and concrete barriers that have led to poor learning outcomes for their own children. Yet experts interviewed for this report noted that partner country engagement varied, and, in some cases, implementing organizations neglected to actively and meaningfully engage key government stakeholders in FLN program design and implementation. While recognizing that political considerations in-country can affect the level of government engagement, a lack of substantive inclusion in program design and implementation may impede efforts to move FLN programs to national scale-up and sustainability.

To make development partnerships more inclusive, it is important to actively enroll LMIC education leaders in high-level policy development and planning processes that set the agenda for the work. A more inclusive development approach to working with in-country stakeholders would also strengthen partner engagement in international initiatives, such as the Commitment to Action on Foundational Learning, which was largely donor-led in its development.

Enabling writers

The basic tools for learning to read are most effective when they reflect the language and environment of the child learning to read. Books are often scarce in the lowest-income settings—but the answer isn't just shipping them in from overseas.

In 2018, USAID acted on this realization by committing substantial funding toward a program designed to directly fund and train local organizations to create and distribute developmentally appropriate reading materials. Six publishing organizations in six different countries (all of which had received USAID FLN funds) received direct funding and were provided with a project management and materials development training team to support their work. In one year, more than 3,200 titles were produced in 15 local languages. In most cases, these titles were officially adopted by the government to provide to their schools and uploaded to the Global Digital Library with free access for teachers around the world.

In each country, this one-year initiative left behind teams of trained early grade text writers, between 10 and 35 people. These teams have gone on to train others in the writing process and collaborate with their governments to continue materials development. They have also received funding from new donors to support continued work and been selected to serve as local partners in larger scale initiatives.



Photo credit: USAID-Nigeria

In January 2021, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council jointly launched the new Igbo and Yoruba early grade reading materials entitled *Ka anyi gwo!* and *Jẹ ká káwé!* respectively. These resources expand the availability of quality local language teaching and learning materials (TLM) for reading in Nigeria, targeting all Igbo and Yoruba speaking primary grade one to three learners in the southern regions.



Recommendation eight

USAID should increase support for teachers' professional development, school leadership, and local accountability systems, and ensure that teachers have the resources needed to implement new instructional approaches effectively and consistently.

In all USAID-funded FLN programs, teachers receive substantial training to support them in new instructional approaches. However, not all programs provide ongoing professional development for teachers—through online engagement, district-level coaching, or even in-house coaching and study groups in schools. The same often goes for professional development for school leaders, who play a key role in

guiding program implementation to higher levels. It is important to provide ongoing professional development for both sets of stakeholders, through efficient means. This suggests that localization again is critical—identifying experts at the district- and school-level and enhancing their skills to support and lead others in the most effective instructional practices. In addition to this need for multi-dimensional professional development, it is also important to create accountability systems for implementation. Pairing accountability with local leadership better ensures full and sustained implementation, where teachers engage in new practices long enough for them to become habits of instruction.



Photo credit: Julie Polumbo

A United States Agency for International Development (USAID)-supported training session for teachers in Mbandaka, northern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). In fiscal year 2017, USAID trained over 15,000 teachers in grades one to four to promote evidence-based early grade reading instruction.



Recommendation nine

USAID should assist countries in building capacity around formative assessment so that the measurement of learning outcomes feeds back into a “virtuous cycle” of improving instructional practice and enhanced student learning.

Using effective direct models of instruction is critical, but of equal importance is understanding when this approach is insufficient to meet a child’s needs and what to do to close the gap. Identifying children’s learning needs and helping to fill this gap are the core functions of formative assessment. Formative, or continuous, assessment is a critical part of ensuring that the specific learning needs of children are adequately identified and addressed by classroom teachers.⁶³ Early FLN programming has emphasized the process of improving teacher knowledge and best practices. The process of learning how to effectively assess children’s literacy and numeracy knowledge and ability in the classroom requires a substantial level of pedagogical understanding to make informed instructional decisions. This work thus requires additional time and support for teachers to learn how best to use basic assessment tools and data to improve teaching practices within their classrooms.

In their analysis of three effective FLN case studies, the RISE program provided key evidence on the importance of formative assessment practice for impactful FLN programs. In the cases reviewed, a good learning assessment data tool was an essential element of the success story, ensuring that long-term goals were linked to intermediate curriculum-based and short-term instructional goals that track children’s progress in ways that are easy for teachers to understand and communicate.⁶⁴ Ultimately, USAID’s support for the development and application of common assessment tools (reflecting local country contexts) and their support for programming that equips teachers to effectively use formative assessment to guide instructional practice is crucial for improving sustainable and locally-led impact on learning outcomes.

Continuous professional development: The case of Ethiopia

In Ethiopia, several iterations of FLN programming have taken place, including READ I, READ Technical Assistance, and Ethiopia Reads. Phase 3 of the program—Ethiopia Reads—embraced the local expertise on FLN through a localized peer coaching approach.

First, they worked with school principals specifically on the value of in-house professional learning for teachers, and provided them with structures, schedules, and tools for monitoring in-house peer coaching activities. They then supported principals to select two lead teachers who the principals believed had the leadership skills and knowledge to conduct coaching sessions for their peers (one lower primary and one upper primary).

These lead teachers were then provided with a guidebook for coaching and additional training—to support them in a structured peer coaching and observation process for both individuals and groups of teachers.

The program then collaborated with government to have this peer coaching process approved as part of government-mandated professional development hours, thus enabling schools to present it as an integrated part of the teachers' responsibilities. This in-house peer coaching was conducted twice monthly, with individual coaching in all participating schools. This not only provided all teachers with support, but also built the skills of lead teachers to train and support others and developed school principals as instructional leaders.



Recommendation ten

Assist partner countries with the development of contextually appropriate national assessment systems to track progress on foundational learning outcomes across primary grades, with particular emphasis on assessing literacy and numeracy skills by the end of lower primary (grades three to four).

Currently most LMICs conduct a national assessment of student learning at the end of primary school, the equivalent of grades six to eight. According to discussions with experts interviewed for this report, many countries that do conduct earlier assessment traditionally use assessment strategies that, while appropriate for older students, are developmentally inappropriate for young learners—and thus are unable to accurately assess what students really know and are able to do in the foundational areas of literacy and numeracy. In part, early grades assessment is not formalized due to the difficult nature of developing such an assessment, or due to the cost of conducting this at a national level. Thus, limited data is available within high learning poverty countries, in particular, to either guide instruction based on formative assessment (discussed above) or track learning outcomes at the end of lower primary for all children. This data gap creates equity and learning problems for schools, as well as for educational leaders within the government, who are unable to determine when students, and which students, are not meeting goals in reading and math until it is too late to intervene effectively. While the use of Early Grade Reading and Mathematics Assessments (EGRA/EGMA) has shown promising results in helping to address data gaps in partner countries, these assessments are often limited in numbers and timeline, limiting the wider utility and sustainability of these assessment efforts.⁶⁵

Similarly, although many countries employ some form of national assessment, experts note that assessments often do not “measure what matters” in terms of specific skills for reading and math; they are not comparable over time making them irrelevant for robust system planning; and they are not comparable between countries, making learning outcomes at similar ages difficult to benchmark.⁶⁶ Furthermore, with the

publication of the 2022 World Bank Learning Poverty report, 24 countries in sub-Saharan Africa did not report data.⁶⁷ Without relevant, regular, and comparable data on learning outcomes, it is difficult to fully recognize the true scope of learning poverty or to identify progress on goals of universal literacy and numeracy. Thus, increased USAID investment and partnership on locally-led strategies for national-level assessment of foundational learning outcomes is greatly needed.

3

Results track three

Strengthen partnerships, increase coordination, and leverage multilateral engagement to create greater foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN) policy alignment.

USAID should use its global influence, including its role on the Boards of key multilateral organizations, to address low levels of foundational learning and drive urgent international action to restore progress toward SDG4—ensuring inclusive and equitable public education for all children, particularly those most marginalized and vulnerable. As a leader in international cooperation to address the learning crisis, USAID has a key role to play in guiding other donor agencies and implementing partners to identify priorities for foundational learning and ensuring that these priorities are addressed in substantive ways. The recommendations below include guiding principles and action steps that USAID should adopt to strengthen its role as lead development agency for FLN policy alignment, thought leadership, and effective program implementation on the global stage.



Recommendation eleven

USAID should actively partner with local education authorities to provide support for increased coordination and alignment within national public education systems, particularly across key areas of curriculum, teaching and instruction, textbook development, and assessment.

Because public education systems are complex, aligning policies and components of the system towards improving learning outcomes in the early primary grades must be a key focus of the system as a whole. Experts interviewed for this report discussed the need for greater alignment on goals and shared focus on learning outcomes across often compartmentalized areas of education systems such as curriculum, teacher training, instructional practice, textbook development, and assessment. Research has shown that without intentional alignment and shared goals, accountability is difficult to achieve. Figure 5, developed by the RISE program, illustrates pathways various stakeholders can take to maintain mutual accountability within education systems and governance.⁶⁸

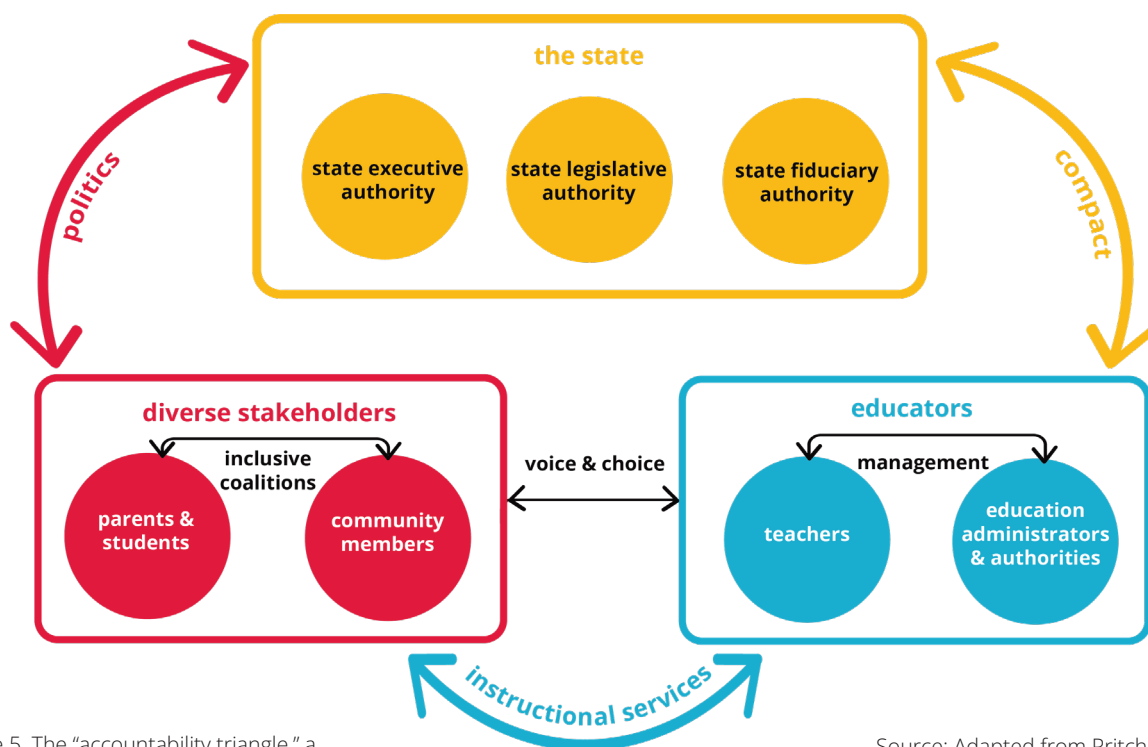


Figure 5. The “accountability triangle,” a graphical illustration of the relationships between the various elements of the system.

Source: Adapted from Pritchett, 2015

To increase USAID's impact on sustainable, locally-led approaches to foundational learning, this report advocates strengthening mechanisms for alignment across the various components of local education systems and working to improve coordination so that there is a consistent focus on shared FLN learning goals.



Recommendation twelve

Strengthen alignment for FLN policy implementation by ensuring that partner country stakeholders including education ministry officials, teachers, community organizations, textbook creators, and education service providers are included in policy development, implementation, and evaluation processes.

As discussed above, it is important to engage national governments directly in initiatives from start to finish. It is also important to engage the larger community of invested stakeholders, to ensure that all relevant voices are heard in building the map toward progress in early grade FLN, from community-based organizations to advocates, and families to teachers. Just as schools alone cannot create sustainable change, government alone cannot ensure programs move forward and become locally owned without wider stakeholder buy-in.

According to a recent report, establishing strong school-community-home partnerships was found to be a key element of success in foundational learning programs; the study noted that for many communities, "the traditional relationship between the school and home may not have a positive history."⁶⁹ To offset this negative legacy, it is important that school leaders welcome community members to the school and set up structures for parents to be informed and take an active role in understanding what children are learning in the classroom.

Parents, teachers, local civil society advocates, and public school leaders also have a wealth of knowledge, perspective, and experience to offer about what is important and how to accomplish key goals. To increase buy-in from community-level stakeholders, as well as from partner country government leaders, leading to more sustainable program-level outcomes, USAID should engage and prioritize the diverse perspectives of local leaders, parents, and advocates in setting the agenda for foundational learning goals from the onset of the planning process through program implementation.



Recommendation thirteen

Work closely with multilateral agencies including the GPE, ECW, the World Bank, and UNESCO to galvanize global political will and capability to better track and improve foundational learning outcomes, particularly in high learning poverty countries and among populations displaced by conflict.

A review of policy and implementation practices identified gaps in synchronization and coordination between multilateral and bilateral agencies working with partner countries. In some cases, financial resources were lost, and repetition of flawed program practices hampered progress towards intended goals in FLN. With fewer than 30 percent of ten-year-olds in LMICs attaining skills to reach minimum proficiency goals in reading and math, a coordinated global effort is now a pressing need.

To address this crisis, the U.S. should exercise strong and collaborative leadership in their engagement with key multilateral organizations such as GPE and ECW, ensuring that the agenda to advance foundational learning and reduce learning poverty remains a high priority for donors while also advancing USAID's localization strategy by ensuring that multilateral institutions follow the lead of national governments and local partners. With so many competing crises and related donor priorities in the education sector, USAID must consistently exert measured leadership to advance FLN goals.

As previously noted, in 2020, among Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development’s (OECD) Development Assistance Committee (DAC) countries, the U.S. devoted the greatest proportion of ODA to FLN. Thus, the U.S. has an enormous opportunity to continue to exert influence, contribute technical expertise, and build on important lessons learned to create measurable progress toward the global SDG4 goal of ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education for all children, eliminating gender disparities in education, and ensuring the attainment of foundational learning outcomes for all boys and girls, particularly the most marginalized and vulnerable children.

Building on alignment with the goals of GPE, USAID can explore ways to facilitate deeper coordination across multilateral organizations. GPE’s partnership model (Figure 6) offers numerous opportunities for donor agencies to collaborate with each other, as well as with partner country governments, CSOs, foundations, and other actors to ensure that coordinated steps are taken to advance educational goals and achieve shared commitments. The Global Coalition for Foundational Learning, a partnership

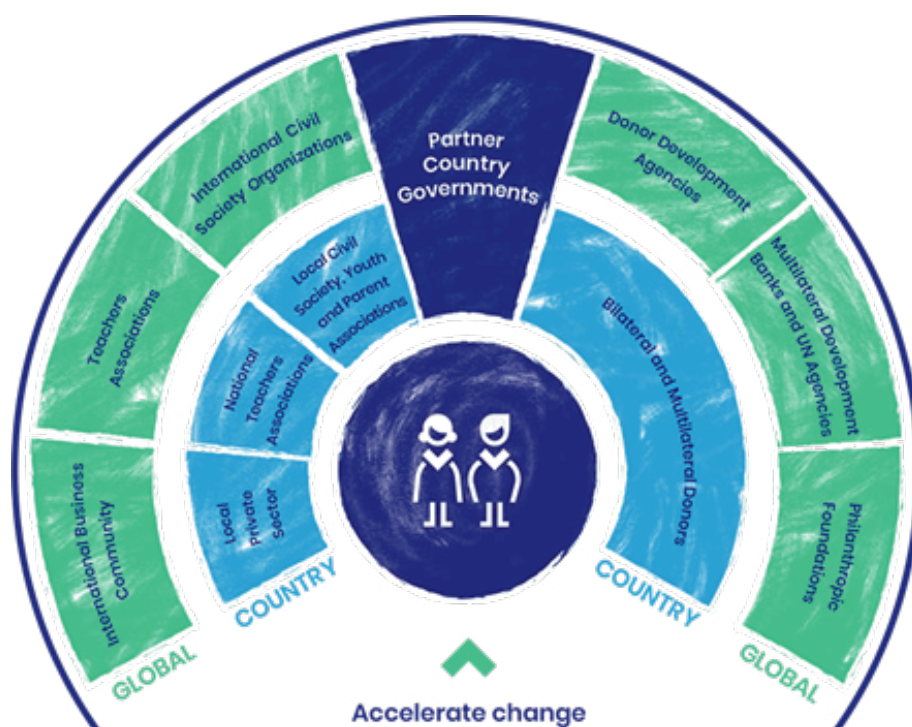


Figure 6: Global Partnership for Education (GPE) partnership model shows opportunities for collaboration.

Source: globalpartnership.org/partners

with FCDO, UNICEF, UNESCO, the World Bank, and the BMGF, is another such collective alliance for prioritizing FLN and working to coordinate and advance strategies for change across the education sector so that all children access their right to quality education.

Finally, as the U.S. recently re-joined UNESCO, USAID has an even greater opportunity to work closely with UNESCO, such as on the UNESCO-led SDG4 High-Level Steering Committee. Through greater global engagement, the U.S. can be a strong voice for the needs of high learning poverty country leaders to engage with bilateral and multilateral partners to ensure that the millions of children who are currently missing out on FLN skills, particularly those within vulnerable and marginalized groups including girls, children with disabilities, refugees, and youth displaced by conflict and crises, are soon able to attain their inalienable right to quality education and learning.



Recommendation fourteen

Intensify efforts to improve coding and increase allocation of ODA to FLN.

In a recent report on Understanding Funding for FLN by SEEK Development⁷⁰, a number of key recommendations emerged to improve data collection, tracking, monitoring, and reporting on ODA to FLN globally and within particular markets. Key recommendations included identifying a universally accepted definition of FLN to enable greater alignment for policies and FLN support; undertaking rigorous tracking of funding for FLN to increase accountability and address gaps; and, increasing transparency of FLN project-level data and using clear and consistent terminologies in project descriptions so as to enable more accurate content analysis of donor-funded FLN programs. As the top bilateral donor to FLN globally, USAID should adopt these recommendations in order to improve the ability to track their FLN investments. The analysis of ODA to FLN presented below is based on SEEK Development's research findings.⁷¹ In Figure 7, only 45 percent of U.S. ODA for basic education met the standard to be coded for FLN. Looking ahead, more accurate and transparent coding for FLN investments would greatly improve reporting, tracking, and advocacy on U.S.-led FLN work.

U.S. ODA benefiting FLN, within bilateral education spending

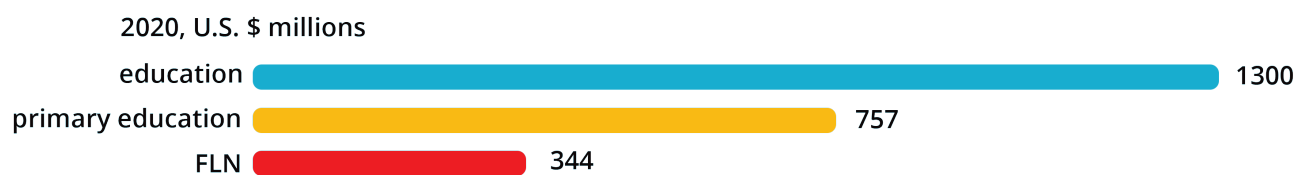


Figure 7. U.S. official development assistance (ODA) given to education, primary education, and foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN) in 2020.

Source: SEEK Development analysis, based on OECD database (Data from 2020)



Recommendation fifteen

Strengthen partnerships with national governments and devote most foreign aid investment to locally-led efforts that drive systemic and sustainable change that can be scaled up.

USAID, on behalf of U.S. taxpayers, has expended substantial funds to support FLN initiatives around the world. Though sustainability plans and strategies have been a part of all program implementations, it has often been a struggle to successfully turn over programs to local government and their local partners. These challenges arise, in part, because engagement strategies with local entities have been limited and late (discussed above). This is why rigorous implementation of USAID's localization strategy is so crucial. The combination of directly funding locally-based organizations, following the lead of local experts in program design, and creating strong partnerships with governments to support high-level leadership is necessary for greater impact and long-term sustainability. Ultimately, USAID must reduce its reliance on unsustainable shorter-term project-based interventions that favor external implementors.

Many of the recommendations advanced in this report are echoed in the recent comprehensive review of the Learning at Scale project conducted by RTI. A key finding

of the Learning at Scale report in the area of system support was prioritization and clear communication by the government.⁷² In the case of Tusome in Kenya, for example, the high-level endorsement by the president of Kenya at the national launch of the Tusome initiative signaled to all stakeholders that the program would be taken seriously. Subsequently, communication throughout the levels of the system, from high-level Ministry officials down to the school level through WhatsApp groups, allowed for direct communication and coordination. This national leadership also increased buy-in and local ownership leading to measurable results at scale. Yet even with these impressive results, Tusome was not without obstacles, such as a legal challenge over textbook procurement and some confusion over the concurrent roll-out of a new competency-based curriculum. While no program offers a complete solution, the lessons learned through analysis of Tusome and other programs implemented at scale should be seriously considered and used as a basis for strengthening USAID's approach to future foundational learning programming.

Conclusion

This report, developed by RESULTS, has presented analysis and policy recommendations for USAID's FLN education work. Based on rigorous desk research and in-depth interviews with key experts, this report advanced 15 recommendations within three central Results Tracks.

The first Results Track of forward-looking recommendations focused on urging USAID to invest in countries with higher rates of learning poverty and maintain its leadership role as the top bilateral donor to FLN programs. Within this track, recommendations also noted the need to increase local ownership through greater involvement of local governments, CSOs, and public school leaders from the inception of programming throughout all stages of implementation.

The second Results Track urges USAID to apply a systems-focused approach that increases sustainability and accountability through local capacity development and locally-led implementation strategies. Key recommendations included supporting local governments in the development of formative assessment approaches to inform instruction and improve literacy and numeracy learning outcomes. It also highlighted the need to support teachers and their professional development and locally-led research institutions to create a learning ecosystem and stronger evidence-base for effective FLN education in partner countries.

The third Results Track advanced a set of recommendations aimed at deepening USAID's global influence through substantive engagement on multilateral boards such as GPE and ECW, as well as through active engagement with the World Bank and UNESCO on FLN policy alignment. As a leader in international cooperation to address the learning crisis, USAID has a key role to play in helping guide and support other donor agencies and implementing partners to identify priorities for foundational learning and ensuring that these priorities are addressed in substantive ways. Recommendations in this track include guiding principles and action steps that USAID should adopt to strengthen its

role as lead development agency for FLN policy alignment, thought leadership, and effective program implementation on the global stage.

As the international community counts down to 2030, the date set for the achievement of the SDGs, the challenges ahead are significant. The COVID-19 pandemic deepened existing education and social inequities globally. While low levels of learning existed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, with millions of children facing persistent barriers to quality education access and learning, in the wake of pandemic-related school closures, the number of children experiencing learning poverty has grown to over 70 percent in LMICs.

With hundreds of millions of children missing out on the foundational literacy, numeracy, and social emotional skills that they deserve, the gains made over the last decades on getting children to school cannot be taken for granted. Improving access to quality education and improving learning outcomes within schools remain critical priorities that must drive policy action.

Failing to rise to this challenge would have a life-long impact on children, families, communities, and societies more broadly in both social and economic terms. The recommendations set forth in this report would go a long way towards further strengthening USAID's impact on foundational learning outcomes through localized, country-led development assistance for FLN. We urge USAID to examine, adopt, and implement these recommendations without delay.

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