

ENDLINE EVALUATION

MCGOVERN-DOLE INTERNATIONAL FOOD FOR EDUCATION AND CHILD NUTRITION PROGRAM



PROGRAM
Liberia Empowerment through Attendance, Reading, and Nutrition (LEARN)

EVALUATION LOCATION
Grand Bassa, Grand Gedeh, Rivercess, and River Gee

TIMELINE
October 2017 - September 2022

FUNDER
United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) McGovern-Dole International Food for Education and Child Nutrition (McGovern-Dole) program

IMPLEMENTER
Save the Children (SC)

PARTNERS

- Mercy Corps
- Liberian Government Officials, including:
 - Ministry of Education
 - Ministry of Agriculture
 - Ministry of Health

INDEPENDENT EVALUATOR
American Institutes for Research (AIR)



PROGRAM GOAL

LEARN is a five-year program designed to improve the literacy, health, and dietary knowledge and practices of school-aged children, and to increase knowledge of gender norms and sexual and gender-based violence in the Rivercess, River Gee, Grand Bassa, and Grand Gedeh counties of Liberia in 220 schools.



PROJECT ACTIVITIES

Base Package (BP) package across all counties

- Provide school meals for all, and take-home rations for girls in Grades 4-6
- Distribute deworming medications, vitamins, and minerals
- Build/rehabilitate storerooms, kitchens, stoves, latrines
- Establish Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs), and train them on safe food preparation and storage
- Promote community awareness on school-related gender-based violence (SRGBV)

Literacy Boost (LB) package in Grand Gedeh and River Gee

- Establish activities to promote literacy such as training teachers to teach and lead reading camps
- Produce books and reading material
- Promote community awareness on children's schooling

School Health and Nutrition (SHN) package in Grand Gedeh and Rivercess

- Establish school gardens
- Improve health and nutrition practices by training teachers to lead school health clubs



INDEPENDENT EVALUATION

SC selected AIR to design and conduct the project and impact evaluations of the LEARN project from 2018 to 2022. AIR completed the baseline assessment in 2018 to benchmark key outcome indicators before implementation had started. For the endline evaluation (2022), AIR assessed the progress of LEARN implementation, examined the relevance and effectiveness of the interventions, determined whether the project met its goals, summarized lessons learned, and provided recommendations for LEARN II.



PROJECT EVALUATION

Methodology

A mixed methods approach to measure LEARN progress over time in 85 schools across the four counties.

Analysis

A comparison of baseline (2018) and endline (2022) values, while triangulating the survey data with focus group discussions (FGDs) and key informant interviews (KIIs).

Limitations

Reliance on self-reported data. Although AIR adopted best practices to develop the instruments, some measurement error is possible when collecting data from young children on sensitive topics such as SRGBV.

Student selection bias. The possibility of systemic student absences might induce a risk of sampling bias by selecting only present students potentially excluding students from vulnerable socio-economic backgrounds.



1,655
Students



85
Schools



48
Focus Groups



63
Key Informant
Interviews



SUMMARY OF FINDINGS



Overall, at endline 4% of students could read with comprehension compared to 1% at baseline. Students were mostly successful at identifying letters but struggled to identify full words. Improvements in literacy outcomes among readers compared with non-readers point to heterogeneous impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, the percentage of words read accurately by readers improved greatly from 10% at baseline to 51% at endline, and fluency doubled from 11 words per minute to 22, on average.

“It is good because we need to focus on our children so we can benefit from them tomorrow... I have used it by sending [the children to school] and focusing on their lessons.”

-Caregiver in River Gee



Overall, the home literacy environment improved from baseline to endline. Students were more likely to have reading materials at home and all caregiver groups reported trying to help their children as much as possible. However, parents often expressed a lack of empowerment to engage with their children’s literary education.



Students were largely aware that rules exist for how teachers should treat students at school, and this high level of awareness remained constant from baseline to endline. The proportion of students who had improved knowledge of SRGBV issues and a willingness to report increased significantly across all counties besides Grand Bassa, and differences were negligible by sex.



Handwashing knowledge increased slightly from baseline to endline, with knowledge levels varying by county. Self-reported handwashing behavior improved by six percentage points relative to baseline. Handwashing behavior improved by 21 percentage points in Grand Gedeh - the most of any county.

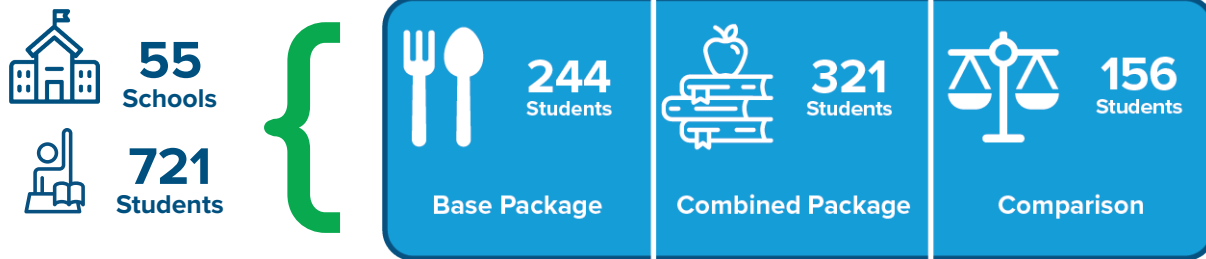


Respondents of all types across all communities were extremely positive about the school feeding program’s impact on attendance, learner focus and attentiveness, and relief for parents on food security. However, students’ nutritional knowledge remains low.

IMPACT EVALUATION

Methodology

A difference-in-differences framework to assess the causal effect of LEARN interventions on literacy, and health knowledge and practices in Grand Gedeh.



Analysis

Assessment of the differing impacts of the base and combined (BP+LB+SHN) packages, together and separately, before and after receiving the interventions, compared to a comparison group that did not receive any LEARN treatment.

Limitation

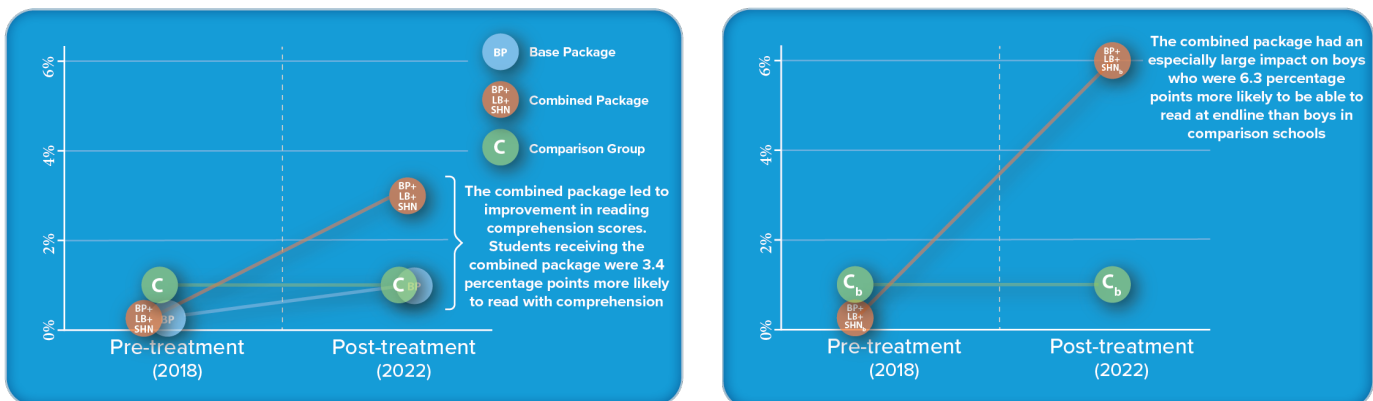
Small sample size due to low attendance. The impact evaluation sample size is lower than expected limiting the evaluation’s ability to detect small changes. In other words, with smaller sample sizes, only larger effects of the program could be estimated to be statistically significant.

Internal Validity. A key assumption for the reliability of the impact evaluation is that there is no contamination of schools in comparison groups. However, SC monitoring data from our midterm evaluation suggests that the 13 comparison schools in Grand Gedeh received some form of literacy or WASH intervention from another donor during the study period.

Findings

The combined package led to improvement in reading comprehension scores, particularly among boys. Boys in schools that received the combined package schools were 6 percentage points more likely than boys in comparison schools to read with comprehension while girls saw no significant change. Neither group saw significant changes in their letter knowledge.

Reading Comprehension





“The learning aspect is the best because right now 80-85% of the children in the summer reading club and in the school can read well. The books have helped the children to read. It boosts the children reading.”

- Literacy Champion in Grand Gedeh

BEST PRACTICES AND RECOMMENDATIONS



Enhance literacy among non-readers

Further explore which types of students work with literacy champions or engage in other literacy boost interventions (e.g., reading clubs and camps) to determine whether those who are already readers tend to seek this support more often. If non-readers are being supported with such activities but still do not improve, then providing customized instruction based on their skill level may better help these less advanced students to progress.

Work with the government to get its commitment to support institutionalizing school feeding across Liberia schools

Not only is school feeding popular, it increases the attendance and performance of students while alleviating many caregivers’ concerns about the well-being of their children. At the same time, a school garden and the PTA alone cannot sustain daily hot lunches; additional commodities are essential.



Separate WASH and nutrition components rather than grouping them as SHN and task different parties to manage each

School health clubs demonstrated willingness and capacity to engage in school cleaning activities, and some were active in teaching fellow students about handwashing. However, improving nutrition was rarely mentioned, likely because of the already difficult task school health clubs and SHN champions had in maintaining school cleanliness. Having separate individuals responsible for the nutrition component may help prevent the important issue of nutrition from being sidelined.

Strengthen PTAs to support schools in the longer term

Working with PTAs to ensure that they have their own system for making and carrying out plans and remaining active without outside encouragement such as through LEARN can be critical in helping schools sustain themselves in the face of limited or sporadic government support. PTAs could have a more systematic role in supporting teachers who are feeling forgotten by the government or boosting the morale of literacy champions who lament not being paid cash for their work.

