



Save the Children®



**AIR**®

# BASELINE EVALUATION

MCGOVERN-DOLE INTERNATIONAL FOOD FOR EDUCATION AND CHILD NUTRITION PROGRAM



## PROGRAM

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

## EVALUATION LOCATION

Grand Bassa, Grand Gedeh, Rivercess, and River Gee

## TIMELINE

October 2021 - September 2026

## 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 II 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 234 schools.



## PROJECT ACTIVITIES

LEARN II is implementing 14 activities encompassing the LEARN base package, literacy and education activities, school, health, and nutrition (SHN) champions, school health clubs, school gardens, and local and regional procurement (LRP). The activities include:

- Providing school meals
- Strengthening local provisions of food for school meals
- Establishing school gardens
- Trainings of safe food preparation and storage
- Building/rehabilitating kitchens and storerooms
- Trainings on good health and nutrition practices
- Distributing de-worming medicine, vitamins, and minerals
- Building/rehabilitating school latrines, wells, and water stations
- Establishing activities to promote literacy via USAID's Read Liberia
- Training Grade 1 and Grade 2 teachers
- Training school administrators
- Training parent-teacher association members
- Raising community awareness on the importance of education
- Capacity building at the local, regional, and national levels



## INDEPENDENT EVALUATION

SC selected AIR to design and conduct the project and impact evaluations of the LEARN II project. AIR completed the baseline assessment in 2022 to benchmark key outcome indicators before implementation had started. In 2024, AIR will conduct the midline evaluation to measure the progress of LEARN II implementation across all four targeted counties and provide lessons learned and recommendations to make mid-course corrections. The endline evaluation will follow in 2026, to determine the impact of the project on the LEARN II communities since baseline.

A detailed explanation of the technical design, the findings, and recommendations are provided in the full report which is available upon request.

## PROJECT EVALUATION

### Methodology

A mixed methods approach to measure the progress of LEARN II over time in 57 schools across the four counties.

### Analysis

A measure of the state of LEARN II students' school, health, hygiene, and school-related gender-based violence (SRGBV) outcomes at baseline while triangulating the survey data with school observations, focus groups and key informant interviews.

### 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.



1,007  
Students



57  
Schools



48  
Focus Groups



63  
Key Informant  
Interviews

## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS



Less than half of students (46%) showed a good grasp of letter knowledge, defined as being able to identify at least 90% of the letters in the alphabet. Only 9% of the students in the sample were classified as readers, and just 4% could read with comprehension. There were regional and gender differences, with students in Grand Bassa and Rivercess outperforming their counterparts in Grand Gedeh and River Gee while boys generally outperformed girls on foundational literacy skills.



Students' home literacy environments appears supportive, but there is room for improvement. Over half of the students reported being helped with their studies by someone at home (68%), being read to by someone (64%), and/or seeing someone else reading (58%). Students lack age-appropriate, non-school books to read at home with just 34% reporting that they have any storybooks/comic books at home. Just 22% of students said that they read non-school books outside of school.

When you learn, you can be someone good in the future. I want to be nurse because we don't have nurse in our family, I want to treat people and have my own drugstore.

-Girl student in Grand Gedeh



Teachers and students share a perception that girls have a more positive experience at school. Teachers and students were aware of the codes of conduct. Most teachers were aware of the rules that govern their conduct in school and their interaction with students. Students were less knowledgeable about a specific code of conduct for teachers but were able to identify rules that teachers must follow. Both teachers and students said that girls' attendance at school should be prioritized and that girls receive more of the teachers' positive comments, while boys get the bulk of the negative comments and insults.



While almost all students reported washing their hands, just 22% could identify three critical handwashing moments and only 16% said they washed their hands at each of these moments. Most teachers (86%) reported that their schools have functioning handwashing stations.



A third of students reported eating three meals each school day compared to a quarter on non-school days. Students' meals lack dietary diversity. Interviews with cooks show that they cook the basic commodities given to them and supplementary protein or vegetables are rarely provided.



## IMPACT EVALUATION

### Methodology

The impact evaluation uses a quasi-experimental design with 35 treatment schools in Grand Gedeh and River Gee and 35 comparison schools in Grand Bassa. AIR will use a difference-in-differences estimation framework to analyze the student outcome data.

### Analysis

The evaluation will assess the differing impacts of students in treatment and comparison schools. Treatment schools will receive meals prepared with locally procured commodities (LRP) and school garden produce in addition to meals prepared with U.S. food commodities (USC). The comparison group will only receive meals prepared with USC. At baseline, the evaluation measures the equivalency of the two groups on a number of observable outcomes. Measuring these baseline equivalences helps to (1) assess the validity of the design and (2) identify any observed differences to control for in the final regression analysis to improve the precision of the estimated program impacts.

### Limitation

**Reliance on Self-Reported Data.** The quantitative approach relies on self-reported data from children for several socially and culturally sensitive subjects such as SRGBV. Although AIR adopts best practices in eliciting this information, the data could still have some degree of measurement error, like data collected in other contexts on sensitive topics.

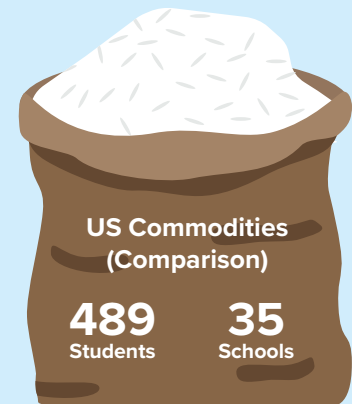
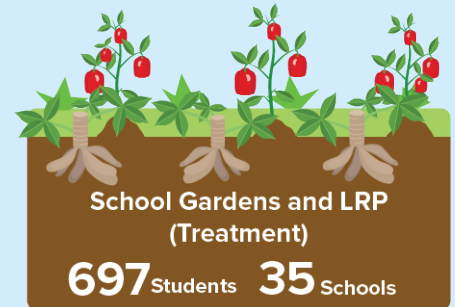
**Internal Validity.** Due to using county borders to determine treatment groups regional differences could be confounded with treatment effects. Further, due to low enrollment numbers, schools in the impact sample were selected purposefully to select larger schools rather than randomly. Therefore, impact findings will not be generalizable to all schools.

### Findings

The baseline equivalence analysis shows that:

- There are significant differences between the treatment and comparison groups, but the magnitude of the differences is small.
- Literacy levels are low in both groups but are consistently lower in the treatment schools relative to comparison schools.

## IMPACT SAMPLE





**“ I want to learn so that I can be big person in the country. I want to be a president; I’m going to school because I want to be a lawyer”**  
 - Boy student 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.

### Conduct a needs assessment focused on farming cooperatives in project areas.

Farming cooperatives (or other relevant cooperatives) may already exist in some of the LEARN II project communities. Conducting a needs assessment will aid in understanding the strengths of these cooperatives and uncovering areas where there is room for improvement. One result is that the partnerships with Kawadah Farms will be better able to leverage current assets and avoid duplication of effort or conflict with existing practices.

