



MIDTERM EVALUATION

MCGOVERN-DOLE INTERNATIONAL FOOD FOR EDUCATION AND CHILD NUTRITION PROGRAM



PROGRAM

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

EVALUATION LOCATION

Rivercess, River Gee, Grand Bassa, & Grand Gedeh

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

IMPAQ International, LLC. (IMPAQ)



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

School Feeding (SF) package across all counties

- Provide school meals for all, and take-home rations for girls (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

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 & reading material
- Promote community awareness on their children's schooling
- Promote community awareness on school-related gender-based violence (SRGBV) (all counties)

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 IMPAQ to design and conduct the project and impact evaluations of the LEARN project from 2018 to 2022. IMPAQ completed the baseline assessment in 2018 to benchmark key outcome indicators before implementation had started. For the midterm evaluation (2020-2021), IMPAQ measured the progress of LEARN implementation across all four targeted counties, determined whether the project is on track to meet its desired objectives, and provided lessons learned and recommendations to make mid-course corrections.

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 LEARN progress over time in 85 schools across the four counties.

Analysis

A comparison of baseline (2018) and midterm (2021) values, while triangulating the survey data with focus group discussions (FGDs) and key informant interviews (KIIs).

Limitations

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

Potential COVID-19 implications. COVID-19 created challenges for the implementation and effectiveness of the interventions as students lost an approximate 80 instructional days over the 2019-2020 academic year.



1,535
Students



85
Schools



258
Focus Groups
Participants



50
Key Informant
Interviews

Summary of Findings



In general, children were successful at recognizing the letters of the alphabet but struggled to recognize full words, especially invented words at midterm compared to baseline. Among the 17 percent of students identified as readers, the percentage of words read accurately improved greatly from 10 percent at baseline to 66 percent at midterm.

[Students] favorite is group reading because those whose parents are unable to help at home are helped in classes via group reading. Their least favorite...is individual reading because it exposed those who don't know how to read well and it can make them [feel] shame

-Teacher in Rivercess

“During school closures, some parents were reading to their children at home more, especially when SC brought books for the school. Some parents could not because they are uneducated and could not help read to their children but rather advised them to study on their own.

-Literacy Champion in River Gee

Except for seeing someone reading at home, all other home literacy activities decreased from baseline to midterm. Consistently, the qualitative findings indicated that the majority of parents want to help their children learn to read but see their main challenge to be their own illiteracy and the shifting of household priorities, especially during COVID-19.



Both qualitative and quantitative data show that students were largely aware that a code of conduct exists for how teachers should treat students at school, even though the level of awareness was less than at baseline. However, interviews with some students and parents show that existing reporting mechanisms are not effective or are feared to lead to retribution.

Handwashing knowledge and practice increased in all counties except for River Gee between baseline and midterm. Confirmed by the qualitative findings, school health clubs reported to be active and effective across all intervention communities in increasing attention to improved facilities for handwashing and emphasizing on a clean school environment.



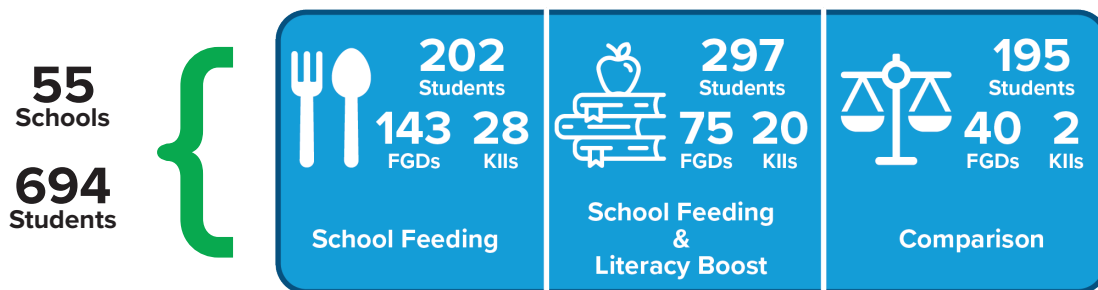
Providing school lunches has positively impacted student attendance and energy to learn; it has also alleviated parents' significant worry about finding money or food for their children's lunch. However, the knowledge of a balanced diet among students did not change from baseline to midterm.



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

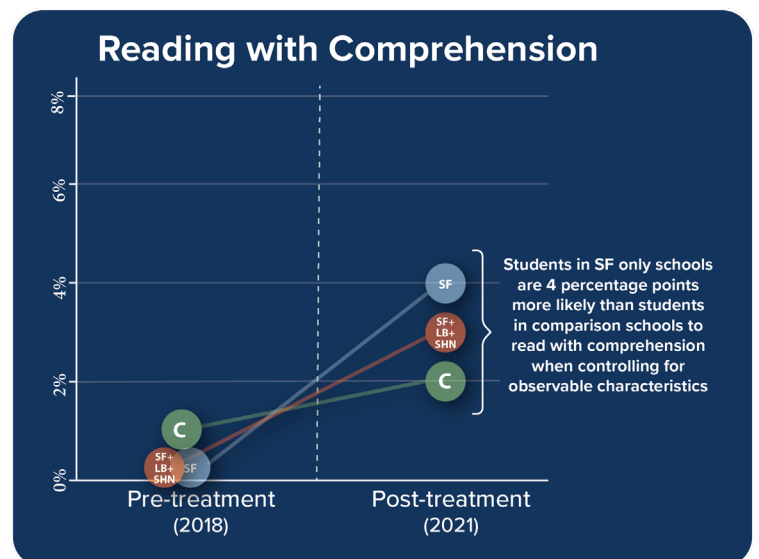
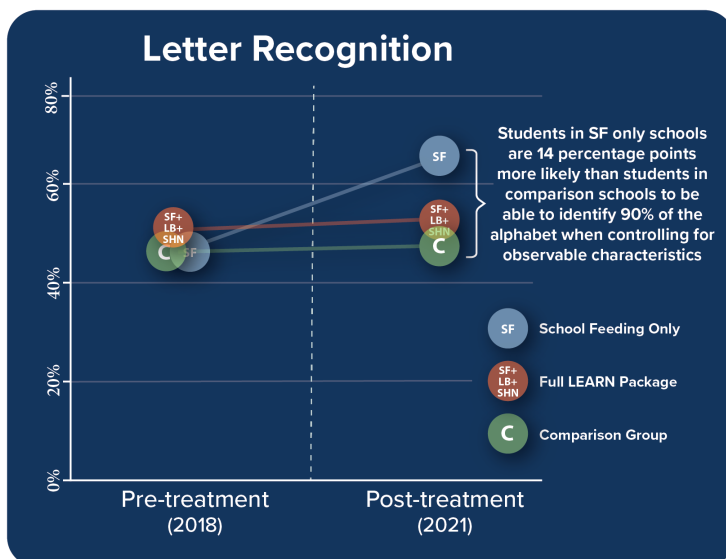
Assessment of the differing impacts of the SF package and SF+LB+SHN package, together and separately, before and after receiving the interventions, compared to a comparison group that did not receive any LEARN treatment.

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.

Findings

The SF treatment led to statistically significant improvements on letter knowledge and reading comprehension over comparison group students but there was no impact of the SF+LB+SHN treatment on either literacy outcome. Neither the SF or SF+LB+SHN treatments had any impact on health and nutrition outcomes.





“Sometimes, the smaller [children] ask on Saturday if they will go on campus because of the meal. It’s keeping them healthy and cooperative in school.”
-Parent in Grand Bassa

BEST PRACTICES AND RECOMMENDATIONS



Track fidelity of implementation and contextualize findings based on what has happened

The evaluation found inconsistent implementation of the various project components because of a number of internal (poor road conditions) and external (COVID-19) factors. LEARN should conduct a rapid needs assessment of LEARN communities to identify and fill implementation gaps, then implement a more robust monitoring system to closely track fidelity of implementation.

Continue the successful implementation of school meals, a hugely popular and productive activity, but monitor the degree to which there may be limitations that could affect its ongoing success and sustainability

The evaluation showed that school meal provision is LEARN’s most impactful intervention. To help protect the long-term sustainability of LEARN’s school feeding component, the project should 1) monitor the degree to which school meals are reliably offered; and 2) continue to work on PTA’s capacity building to develop better strategies for them to support school meal provisions.



Set work progress expectations related to caregiver and parent encouragement for literacy through clear communications with project stakeholders

PTA activity and its perceived effectiveness varied greatly. SC should work with PTA members to incorporate their existing ideas and strategies into formal PTA charters that dictate roles and responsibilities. LEARN should tailor their training and capacity building, particularly to provide additional support for new or low-functioning PTAs.

Review strategies for keeping literacy champions engaged in their communities to prevent turnover

High literacy champion turnover rate was one of the challenging factors that disrupted the implementation of the interventions. Given SC’s large investment in training and mobilizing the literacy champions in conducting a number of tasks for LB package, an in-depth review on their perspectives and needs may help the project learn how to keep them engaged, as well as identify suitable literacy champions who may be more likely to remain in their position for the remainder of the project.

