

Improving Children’s Reading in Liberia

The United States Agency for International Development (USAID)-funded Read Liberia Activity is a five-year (2017–2022) program that supports the Liberian Ministry of Education (MOE) to improve reading skills for grade 1 and 2 Liberian students in 640 public schools and to develop emergent literacy skills for Liberian students in 60 public kindergarten schools.

BACKGROUND

In 2011, free basic education for children in Liberia was enshrined in law through the Education Reform Act. Despite improved access to education, however, Liberian students’ reading performance remains below desired levels. Data from 2017 showed that 35% of grade 2 students were unable to read a single word from a grade-level paragraph. Additionally, on average, students were able to read only 14.6 words per minute, far below the level needed to comprehend what they were reading. Typically, girls’ reading performance has been lower than boys’, and rural students’ performance has been lower than their urban peers’. In addition, Liberia continues to struggle with large numbers of overage students, teacher and student absenteeism, and grade repetition.

In response to these challenges, since 2017, Read Liberia has provided technical assistance to the MOE to improve early grade reading skills in students in grades 1 and 2 and to develop and pilot a model for improving kindergarten students’ oral vocabulary.

APPROACH

The following are the main components of the Read Liberia Activity:

- **Teacher and principal training:** Each year, Read Liberia trains teachers during two rounds of trainings—each five days long—covering the use of Read Liberia materials and best teaching practices.
- **Student textbooks and supplementary materials:** Each year, Read Liberia provides all grade 1 and 2 students with a *Let’s Read* reading book and a student activity book. Read Liberia provides additional copies of these books to teachers and school leadership for their use and reference. During the kindergarten pilot, Read Liberia distributed a student activity book for each kindergarten student.
- **Teaching materials:** Read Liberia has provided a teacher instruction guide to each teacher, and each grade 1 and 2 classroom has received two alphabet posters, two sets of alphabet and syllable cards, and a set of 10 supplementary reading books. Read Liberia also prints



Suah is kind. He shares and helps others.
He runs fast. Soon, Suah has many friends.

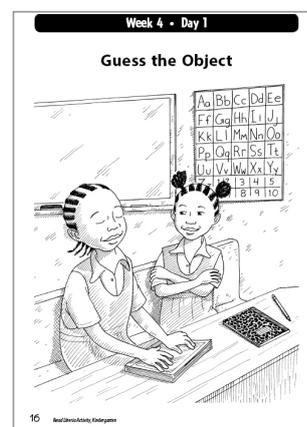
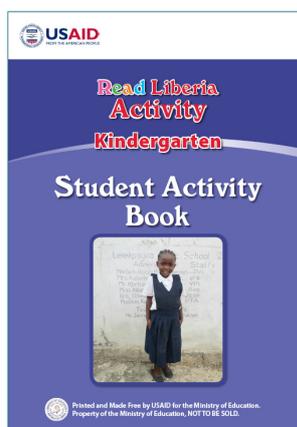


Photo (top): Teacher and students at Read Liberia supported School. (Middle) page from Read Liberia Let’s Read book. (Bottom) Pages from Read Liberia Kindergarten Student Activity Book. Photo credit. RTI.

a limited number of each of these materials each year to replace lost or damaged copies. During the kindergarten pilot, teachers also received teacher instruction guides, alphabet posters, and letter cards

- Coaching:** Read Liberia coaches deliver instructional support to grade 1 and 2 teachers to help them gain proficiency in using the Read Liberia teaching and learning materials and pedagogical approach. During the kindergarten pilot, specially trained Read Liberia coaches supported kindergarten teachers. Read Liberia coaches visit schools monthly to observe classroom instruction, discuss instructional challenges with teachers, and monitor the quality of the classroom and school learning environments. Read Liberia works with school principals, vice principals, and head teachers to enable them to also observe teachers' instruction, and beginning in Read Liberia's fourth year, principals and vice principals of instruction began to officially assume this coaching role with support from Read Liberia.
- Student evaluation:** As part of the Read Liberia approach, Read Liberia has trained teachers to assess their students' oral reading fluency (ORF; the speed and accuracy with which they read a simple text out loud) three times a year. In addition, during regular coaching visits, Read Liberia coaches are encouraged to select a small sample

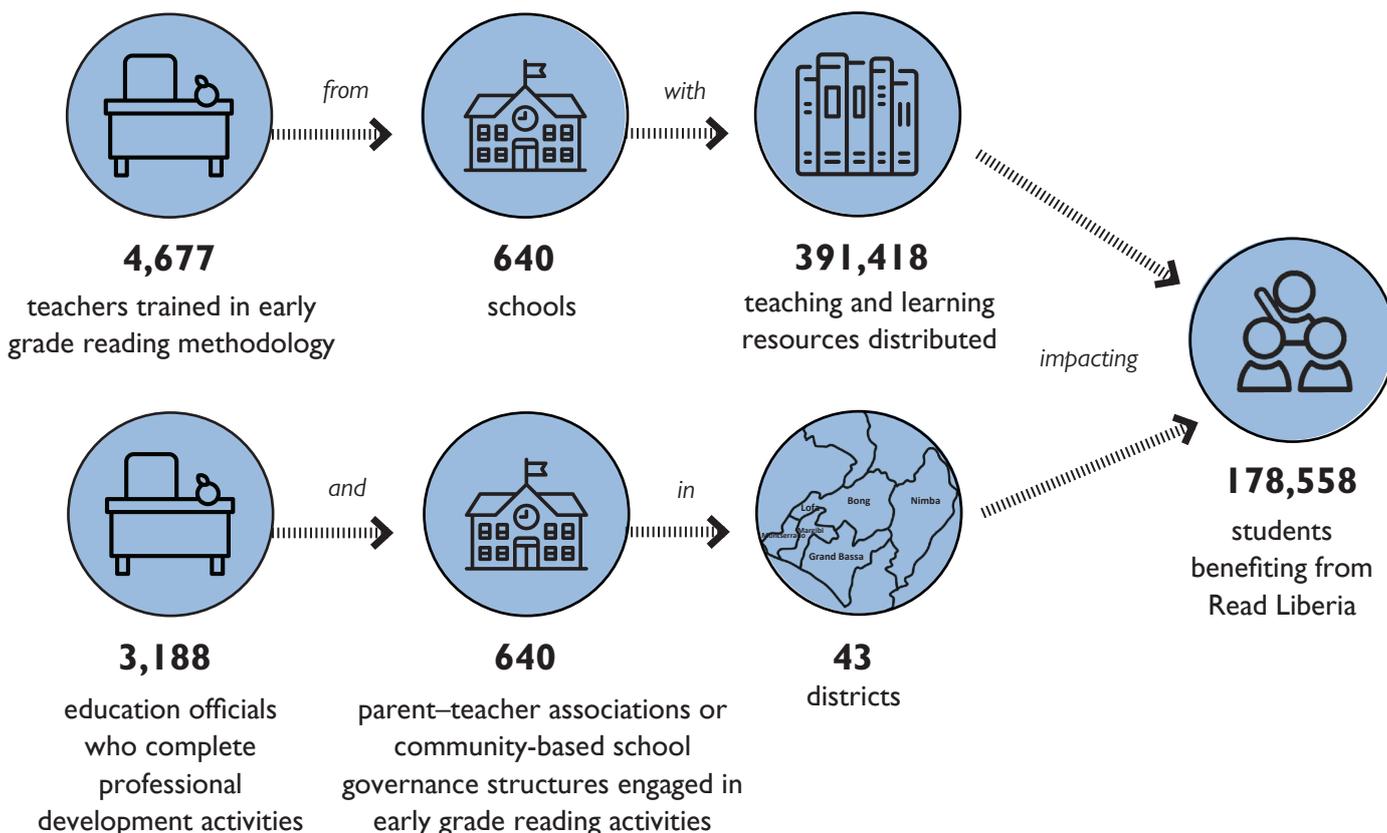
of students and observe their reading to help monitor overall student progress.

- Out-of-school reading activities with parents and caregivers:** Using a team of community mobilization officers and community volunteers engaged by Read Liberia partner Diversified Educators Empowerment Program (DEEP), Read Liberia helps parents to actively support their children's learning. These community engagement teams encourage parents and communities to set aside time and spaces for reading, encourage parents to partner with their children's teachers, and help communities identify ways they can help improve their local schools. During COVID-19 school closures, community mobilizers also helped inform communities of the MOE Teaching by Radio program and encouraged families to listen to educational broadcasts. Mobilizers also reported back to the MOE which communities had and did not have access to the programs.



Child and mother reading together at home. Photo credit. RTI.

KEY RESULTS 2017-2022



IMPACT EVALUATION

Between May 2017 and August 2021, NORC at the University of Chicago conducted an independent, USAID-funded evaluation to determine the impact of Read Liberia on student reading development. This evaluation showed that the Read Liberia model significantly improved students' reading abilities in key ways and contributed to a more productive learning environment.

ORAL READING FLUENCY

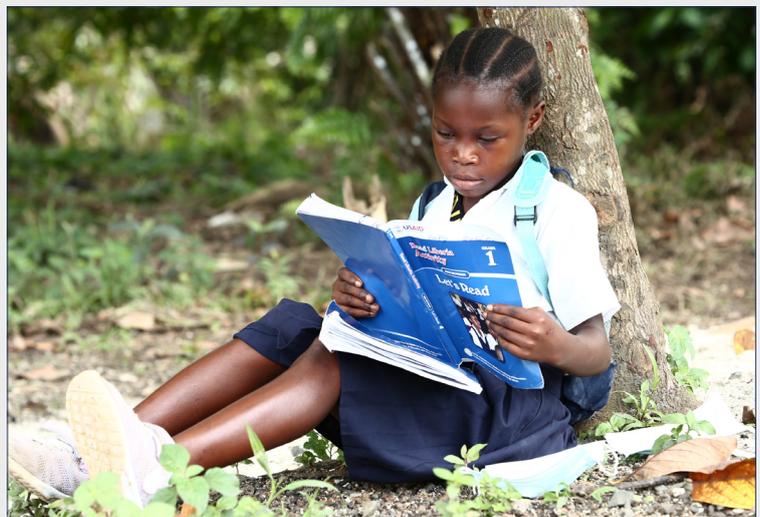
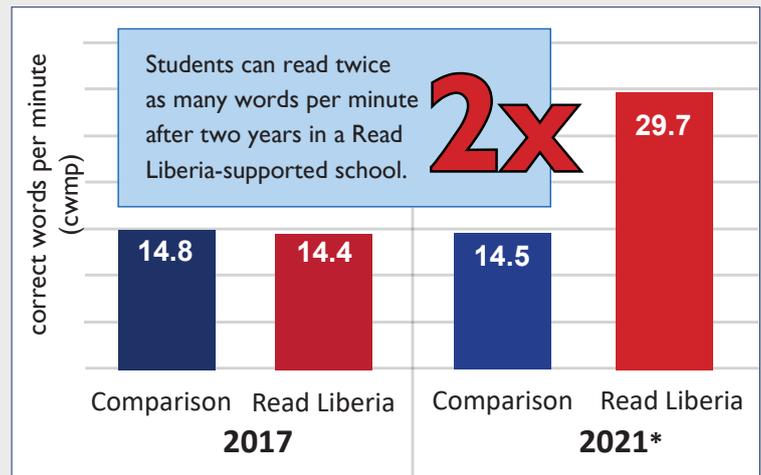
ORF is a common measure used to evaluate reading ability, because a child must be able to read both quickly and accurately to comprehend what they are reading. NORC used the Early Grade Reading Assessment's (EGRA's) ORF task to measure reading speed and accuracy; together, these are referred to as reading fluency. This task measures the number of correct words a student can read aloud from a short text in one minute (correct words per minute or cwpm).

Figure 1 shows average ORF scores in 2017 and 2021 for Read Liberia grade 2 students and students from comparison schools (schools not supported by Read Liberia). Over this period of time, the performance of students in comparison schools remained at a low level (14.8 and 14.5 cwpm in 2017 and 2021, respectively). However, students exposed to Read Liberia showed substantial improvements over time, with students tested in 2021 performing twice as well as those tested in 2017: grade 2 students in 2021 were able to correctly read nearly 30 cwpm, compared with the 2017 average of 14 cwpm.

Read Liberia also generated improved ORF scores among students with different reading abilities and reduced the number of students who could not read any words correctly. **Figure 2** shows that while nearly half of comparison school students (40.9%) were unable to correctly read even a single word, only 20.6% of Read Liberia students were unable to read a single word.

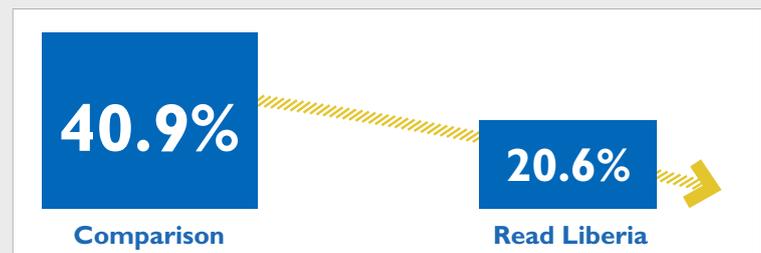
As another way to look at these results, the MOE guidelines indicate that at the end of grade 2, students should be able to read 35 cwpm. In 2017, approximately 13% of students in all schools

Figure 1: ORF (cwpm) at baseline and endline



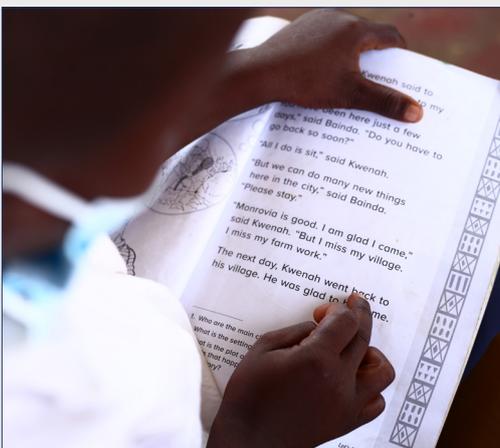
Child reading from Read Liberia Let's Read book. Photo credit. RTI.

Figure 2: Percentage of students unable to read a single word at endline



tested were able to read at this benchmark level. When students in comparison schools were tested in 2021, their average was very similar to what was seen in 2017: 13.8%. However, in 2021, 35.5% of students in Read Liberia schools were able to read at benchmark. While the ultimate goal is for all students to read at the MOE benchmark level, these results show that over the four years of Read Liberia implementation, substantial improvements have been made.

* Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2021 endline data collection was postponed and NORC assessed third graders in the first quarter of the 2021 academic year rather than assessing students at the end of their second grade. The grade 3 students were selected randomly among those that had been enrolled in the same school in the past year and had not repeated the grade. The data show these students are a very good proxy for grade 2 students at the end of the academic year.



Child Reading from Read Liberia Let's Read book. Photo credit. RTI.

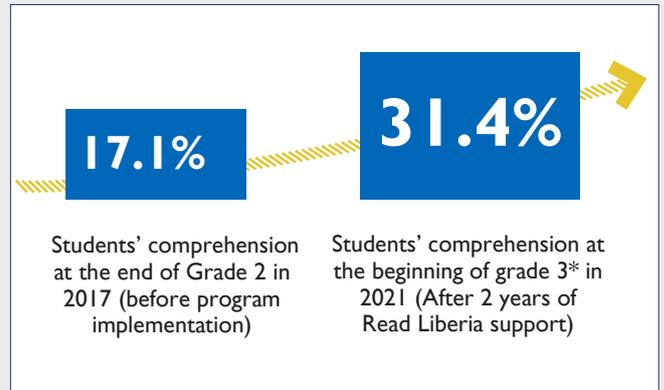
ORAL READING COMPREHENSION

The ability to understand, or comprehend, what is read is the goal of reading, and NORC also measured changes in comprehension using the EGRA oral reading comprehension task. In this task, students are asked questions about the paragraph they read for the ORF task.

As with ORF, Read Liberia had a positive impact on oral reading comprehension. In 2017, students in schools assigned to Read Liberia correctly answered on average 17.1% of the questions asked, while students in comparison schools answered on average 14.2% of the questions (Figure 3). In 2021, however, Read Liberia students were

able to correctly answer 31.4% of the questions. In contrast, students in comparison schools were only able to correctly answer 18% of the

Figure 3: Percentage of correctly answered questions by students



questions. Importantly, these program gains were observed for both girls and boys.



CONCLUSIONS

Read Liberia has achieved large and positive effects on Liberian students' reading performance.

The program has provided teachers and principals with training and coaching while also distributing teaching and learning materials to both teachers and students. In addition, Read Liberia's community engagement efforts have had a considerable impact on caregiver beliefs and behaviors. Together, these activities are contributing to impressive results in supporting Liberian students in learning to read, and with Read Liberia's support, the MOE is increasingly prepared to take over and sustain these efforts into the future.



Child with his Read Liberia Let's Read book. Photo credit. RTI.

More Information:

The USAID Read Liberia Activity is a five-year (September 2017–September 2022) program that aims at improving early grade reading skills for Liberian students in 640 public schools in grades 1 and 2. Read Liberia also pilot tested a program to develop emergent literacy skills for Liberian students in 60 public kindergarten schools. The Activity is implemented in six targeted counties—Lofa, Bong, Grand Bassa, Nimba, Margibi, and Montserrado. Read Liberia is funded by USAID and implemented by RTI International with subcontractors Another Option, Brattle Publishing Group, and DEEP through direct partnership with the Liberian MOE.

USAID/Liberia Read Liberia Activity Chief of Party: Trokon Wayne

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