

System Supports for Effective Large-Scale Reading Interventions



FINDINGS FROM THE **LEARNING AT SCALE STUDY***

BRIEF 3 IN A SERIES

Introduction and Background

Learning outcomes are low and instruction is poor in many low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). These shortcomings are particularly concerning given the substantial learning loss due to COVID-19 from which many systems are suffering.

The Learning at Scale study identified eight of the most effective large-scale education programs in LMICs and now is examining what factors contribute to successful improvements in learning outcomes at scale (see list of programs on last page of this brief). These programs were selected based on their demonstrated gains in reading outcomes at-scale, from either midline or endline impact evaluations. The study addresses three overarching research questions, focused on understanding (1) the components of instructional practices (*Brief 1*), (2) instructional supports (*Brief 2*), and (3) system supports (*Brief 3*) that lead to effective instruction.

This brief focuses specifically on system supports. It addresses the following research question:



What system supports are required to deliver effective training and support to teachers and to promote effective classroom practices?

DATA AND METHODS

All data collection activities for this study were planned to be completed by September 2020. However, our efforts were severely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, and our planned data collection activities for four of the eight programs were put on hold.

The findings throughout this brief are derived from two main sources of data. The first source was descriptions of implementation approaches and program documentation, along with interviews with program leaders from all eight programs. The second was in-country primary data collected through semi-structured qualitative interviews with government officials. We completed these data collection activities for four programs prior to March 2020: Education Quality Improvement Program in Tanzania (EQUIP-T), Pakistan Reading Project (PRP), Scaling-up Early Reading Intervention (SERI) in India, and Tusome in Kenya.

* This brief highlights findings from the full Learning at Scale: Interim Report For background information on the study, please see page 8.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted by Learning at Scale team members. In each country, we interviewed education officials at the central and decentralized levels with responsibility for teacher training, school supervision, curriculum and materials development, and overall education management. We also interviewed representatives from the program staff and the funding agency. We conducted interviews with approximately 20 to 25 stakeholders for each program. Because programs were selected for inclusion in this study based on existing evidence of effectiveness, our data analysis focused on determining why and how the programs were effective at scale.

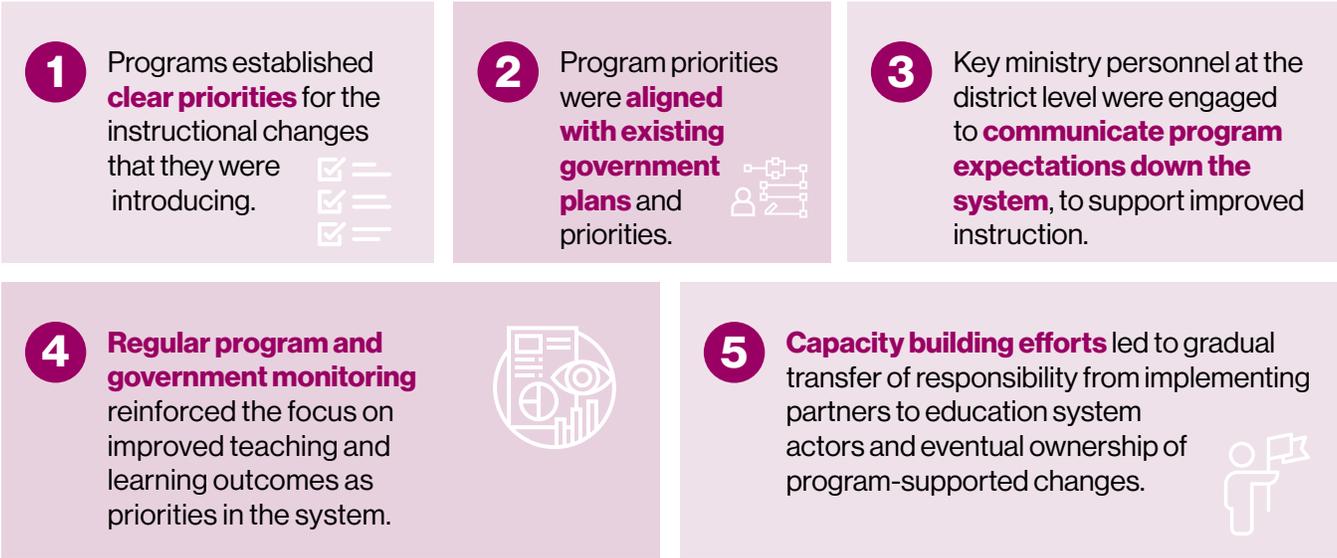
Key Findings

Education assistance programs have the potential to improve learning at significant scale. That goal can be accomplished if the programs are designed to support or align with the existing system in specific ways.

This brief, drawn from preliminary findings from the Learning at Scale study, describes how eight effective, large-scale instructional improvement interventions worked through and within government systems in order to implement their programs (see final page of this brief for a list of selected programs). Our analysis suggests substantial commonalities in how system supports should be structured to maximize program success. Our preliminary findings suggest five essential characteristics of system support for successful programs, drawn from descriptive survey analyses as well as from primary qualitative data collections (**Figure 1**). It is important to note that all eight of these programs worked with and through government systems but were led by non-governmental implementing organizations.

“[The Pakistan Reading Project (PRP)] did not create a curriculum but instead provided technical guidance to the Ministry of Education for curriculum design. Alignment with PRP methods was key.”
 — High-level government official, Pakistan

FIGURE 1
 Essential characteristics of system support



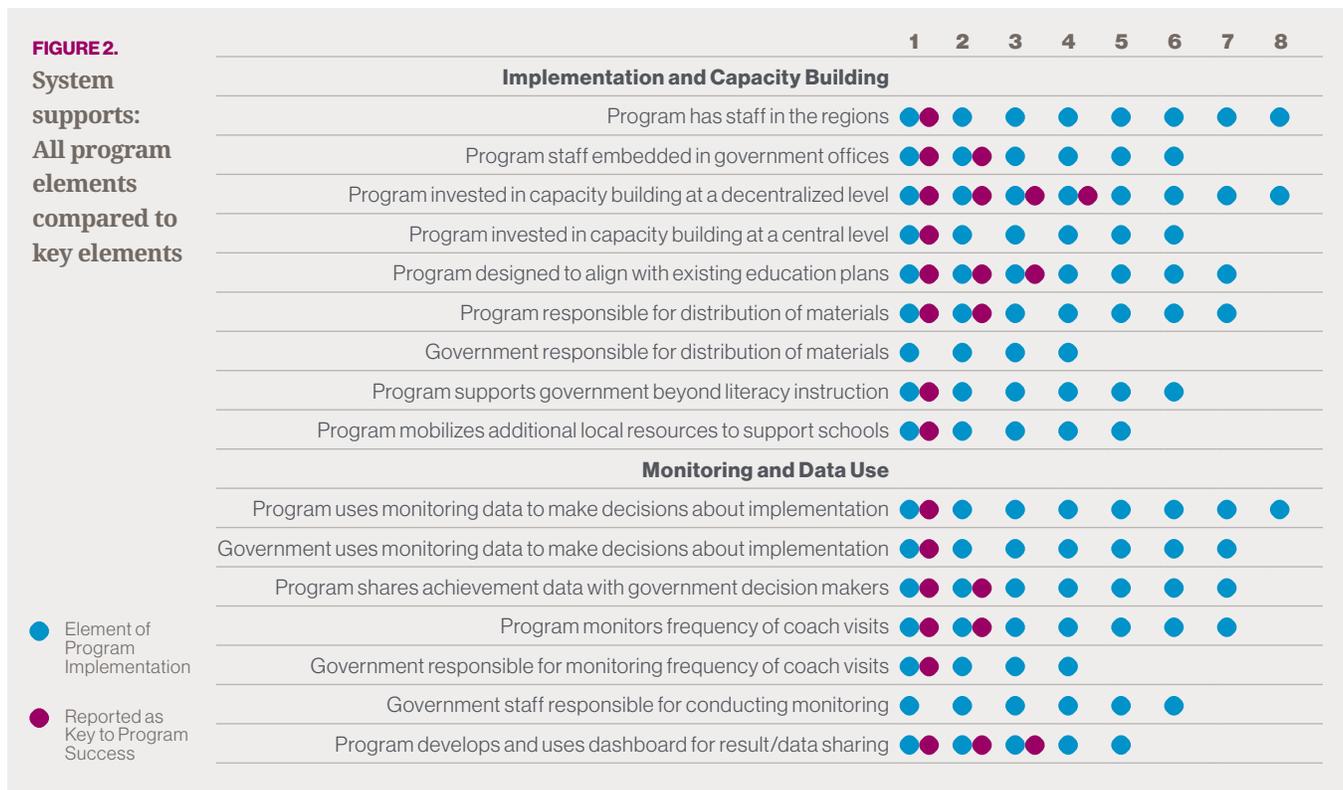
High-Level Findings Across Programs

In this section, we describe the design and implementation approaches of the systems components of these effective large-scale programs. We were interested in learning the answers to two questions: what program design elements were included in each of the eight programs, and which of these elements the programs themselves deemed to be key to their success. We identified all of the elements in each program and then asked each program to identify up to three elements per domain that were key to their program’s success.

A wide variety of elements were implemented across the eight programs, suggesting there are likely multiple paths to successful implementation at scale. Eight elements were found in at least seven of the programs, as shown by the blue dots in **Figure 2**. These included

- the use of data (most programs and governments used monitoring data to make decisions about implementation);
- working with government (including aligning with existing education plans, having regional staff work with government counterparts, and building capacity at the lower levels of government); and
- programs being responsible for distributing materials and for monitoring how often coaches made classroom visits (even if coaches were government officers).

Understanding these essential systems components of these effective programs can inform other programs designed to work at scale.



Given the variations in how each individual program worked with, inside of, or alongside the government, we found a wide variety of key elements in the systems domain (with little consistency across programs). Investing in decentralized capacity building was the only element that was cited as key for at least half of the programs (as shown by the purple dots in Figure 2). Three programs also saw alignment with existing education plans, as well as the development and use of dashboards to manage and visually present data, as key.

Many other program elements were identified by one or two programs. They should be seen as potential program design choices for future interventions, depending on how those programs intend to work with the system.

Qualitative Interview Results (EQUIP-T, PRP, SERI and Tusome)

To inform the semi-structured interview guides that we used for our in-country data collection activities, we reviewed the literature on system characteristics that support improvements in education. This section presents analyses of data from the four programs whose Learning at Scale data collection was completed before the pandemic: EQUIP-T, PRP, SERI, and Tusome.

KEY FINDINGS

Analysis of the information obtained during the interviews identified the following factors as important for an education system to effectively improve reading outcomes at scale.

Program is a government priority. If government actors see the program as a priority, they are more likely to support it. Programs were able to convince the government of the importance through evidence on the scale of the problem and the effectiveness of the proposed solution. In addition, these programs were effective at aligning the program goals with existing government priorities.

Expectations are set and communicated throughout the system. The priority given to the program

QUOTE 1.
Using evidence for priority setting

“We got many questions from government about ‘why reading?’. There are so many other subjects, why would we just focus on the one? We had [Early Grade Reading Assessment] baseline and other evidence to show the poor performance.”

— United States Agency for International Development/Pakistan

must be communicated throughout the system. In all the countries we studied, there was a strong hierarchy in government structure; thus, communication was most effective when emanating from the education ministry.

In most countries, education officials at the subnational level (districts, counties, etc.) are responsible for implementing and managing education. As such, district officials played a critical role in communicating expectations to teachers and convincing them to adopt the program. It was important to follow the usual

communication modalities of the government, but several programs reinforced these communications using informal methods, such as the WhatsApp mobile application, to reach teachers and coaches on the front lines of service delivery.

Program and officials monitor implementation. A key component of the interaction between district

QUOTE 2.

Aligning and sensitizing

“We did a lot of sensitization together with RTI. People are sensitive sometimes and don’t want to see this as coming from outside, from ‘muzungus’ [foreigners]. So, we also align it with the Constitution, with [the] Basic Education Act, and with the county’s own plans. We had to do a lot of alignment. Sensitization was also based on [a] pilot, based on evidence.”

— Central Government Official, Kenya

officials and schools was the monitoring of both implementation (e.g., teachers attending training) and changes in student outcomes. The process of monitoring may have been more significant to communicate the importance of the program to teachers than the actual evidence used to inform programmatic course corrections.

QUOTE 3.

Monitoring as accountability

“Once you monitor, people will implement. If you stop monitoring, people will stop.”

— State Pedagogy Coordinator, Chhattisgarh, India

QUOTE 4.

Holding people accountable

“...also, the issue of tracking of lesson observation was a big plus since it was digital and there was GPS [global positioning system coordinates were captured]. In Kenya, [Curriculum Support Officers] will tell you that they have gone to observe, but ‘from their homes.’ The issue of GPS to track is something that should be sustained.” — County Education Officer, Nyamira, Kenya

Capacity building leads to gradual transfer of responsibility. These programs made their capacity building more effective by directly engaging government counterparts in essential areas of program implementation. Our evidence suggests that capacity building made a difference in the development of teaching and learning materials, teacher professional development, coaching, reading pedagogy, evaluations, assessments, and use of data. EQUIP-T and SERI were both intentional in the way that responsibility and ownership were transferred gradually to the government. In both cases, the process ended with the government being able to take on some—but not all—of the program components themselves. Similarly, PRP was successful in supporting provincial governments to implement parts of the program. Through Tusome support, the Kenyan government was able to run some of the large components of the program somewhat independently, although they continued to rely on external financing.

Activities become institutionalized. All of the programs from which we collected data were

QUOTE 5.**Government implementation**

“PRP did not create a curriculum but instead provided technical guidance to the Ministry of Education for curriculum design. Alignment with PRP methods was key (including PRP materials being included in the curriculum and textbooks and item banks being provided to teachers for reading assessment).”

— High-level government official, Pakistan

successful in institutionalizing some activities, but none of them succeeded in achieving complete institutionalization. For example, EQUIP-T was successful in instituting school-based teacher communities of learning as a national policy in Tanzania. PRP was successful in revising the national curriculum for reading. Tusome in Kenya was successful in instituting a revised textbook procurement mechanism. EQUIP-T, SERI, and PRP influenced assessment and curriculum in areas that were not included in the original program. We did not find evidence that programs continued to increase the impact on learning after the program was institutionalized in the government system, but such institutionalization is likely to contribute to the sustainability of activities beyond the life of the program.

QUOTE 6.**Institutionalizing success**

“Due to The Pakistan Reading Project, [the] government now uses needs assessments to inform training (diagnostic assessment). They also helped include ethnic and gender inclusion in government materials. [The] government now uses steering committees that include people from all levels of the system (whereas they used to be just for senior officials).”

— High-level ministry official, Pakistan

Implications

What system supports are required to deliver effective training and support to teachers and to promote effective classroom practices? Our preliminary findings point less clearly to any single element of program design that matters most, but do suggest that the ways in which programs are implemented determines whether the education system can support improved teaching and learning.

We recommend that future programs consider the following adaptations to their work with government systems.



Invest in **building the capacity of ministry staff** (particularly at decentralized levels).



Consistently monitor teaching practices and program implementation through program and government staff—to reinforce program and system priorities.



Align programs with existing government education plans to improve uptake and mitigate parallel programming.



Enlist **ministry counterparts in delivering and managing inputs** needed to effect classroom change, beyond just trainings and workshops.



Work with decentralized ministry staff to **establish program instructional changes** as clear priorities in the system.

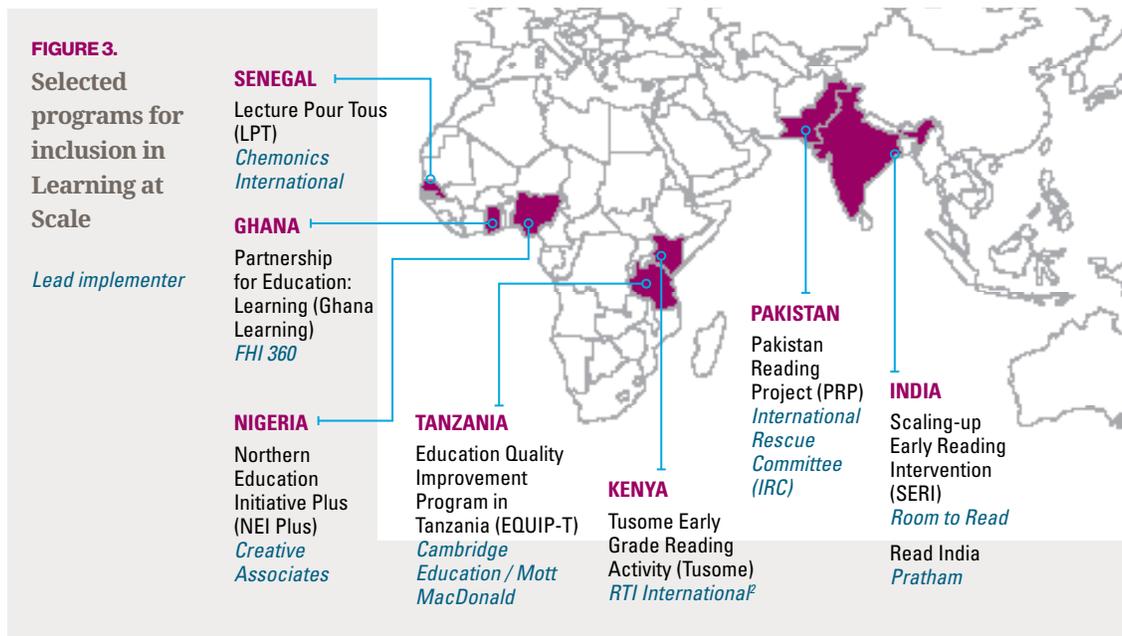


Clearly **map out transfer of responsibility** for key programmatic activities to education system actors.

Learning at Scale Study Background

Although the number of successful foundational literacy programs is growing, relatively few have demonstrated impact at large scale. The Learning at Scale study was designed to identify existing programs with demonstrated impact on basic skills at scale and to conduct in-depth investigations of these programs to determine what makes them successful.¹

After an extensive search, we identified eight of the most effective large-scale education programs in LMICs for inclusion in this study, as shown in **Figure 3**.



With demand for information about how to implement effective interventions at large scale at an all-time high, this brief is designed to provide preliminary findings from our study to date. Given that complete data could not be collected from all eight programs due to COVID-19 school closures, the findings and implications based on analyses of the initial primary data collected are preliminary and must be cautiously interpreted until the final data collections can occur, and the results can be analyzed for all programs.

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¹ This research is being led by RTI International and is part of the Center for Global Development (CGD) education research consortium, funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

² RTI International was the lead research implementer of Learning at Scale and one of the programs (Tusome) was implemented by RTI. Given this conflict of interest, final selection of the Learning at Scale programs was determined by an independent advisory committee. RTI established clear mitigation procedures that separated data collection, analysis, and writing of the Tusome results from the researchers involved in the program.