



Why Benchmarks Matter

Performance benchmarks are vital in measuring a student’s or teacher’s ability to reach a desired level of skill or ability.



Photo: RTI International

Child in Read Liberia-support school reading aloud to class

The focus of Liberian education has shifted from improving access to schools to ensuring that students are acquiring tangible skills and knowledge as a result of going to school.

Most importantly, emphasis is increasingly placed on ensuring that students learn to read in the first few years of primary school.¹

Setting benchmarks or standards that clearly state expectations about how well students or teachers should be performing on various skills at each stage of education and then collecting data to monitor these skills enables governments to see how individuals and education systems overall are progressing toward the goal of improved learning. This information allows governments to identify where improvements are needed and to chart progress year-to-year and against global standards.

COLLABORATIONS WITH THE LIBERIAN MINISTRY OF EDUCATION TO DEVELOP READING AND TEACHING BENCHMARKS

Since 2008, RTI International has partnered with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the Liberian Ministry of Education (MOE) to support early grade reading in Liberia, beginning with Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) Plus. This partnership continued with the Liberia Teacher Training Program (LTTP) and, most recently, with the Read Liberia (2017-2022) and Transforming the Education System for Teachers and Students in Liberia (TESTS, since 2021) Activities. These programs have supported improvements in students’ reading skills through targeted instructional intervention, improved community engagement, and increased provision of quality teaching and learning materials. For example, an independent evaluation showed that, on average, Grade 2 students who had benefited from 2 years of Read Liberia instruction dramatically outperformed their peers who did not attend Read Liberia–supported schools: Read Liberia Grade 2 students were able to read 30 correct words per minute (cwpm), whereas their peers at

comparison schools were able to read only 15 cwpm.

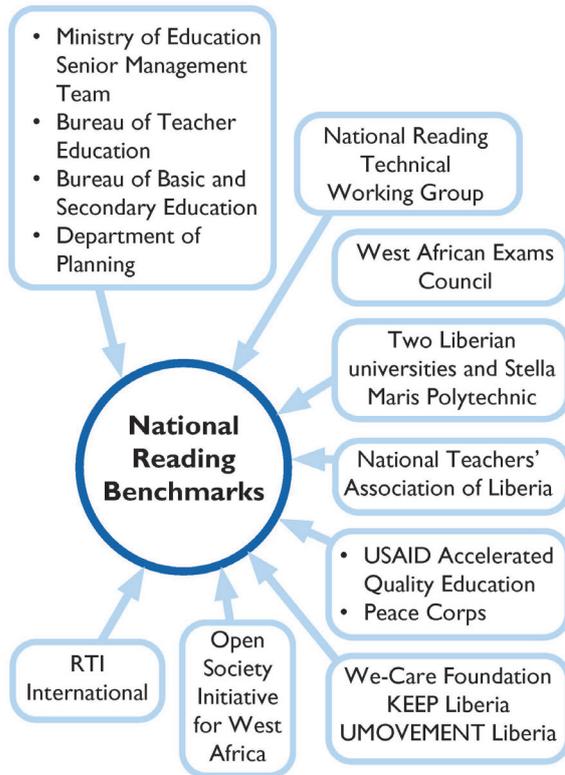
But how much is enough? How does a government like Liberia’s know if its students are reading at a high-enough level for their grade or if its teachers’ instruction is effective enough? What is an acceptable level, or benchmark, of reading achievement for Liberian students in the early grades of primary school, and what knowledge, skills, and attitudes must a teacher have to effectively teach in Liberian schools?

To help the Government of Liberia answer these questions, Read Liberia collaborated with the MOE through the National Reading Technical Working Group and other stakeholders over several years of policy development. These efforts resulted in the approval in 2020 of both the National Grade 1–6 Reading Benchmarks for students and the National Teacher Professional Performance Standards.

STUDENT READING BENCHMARKS

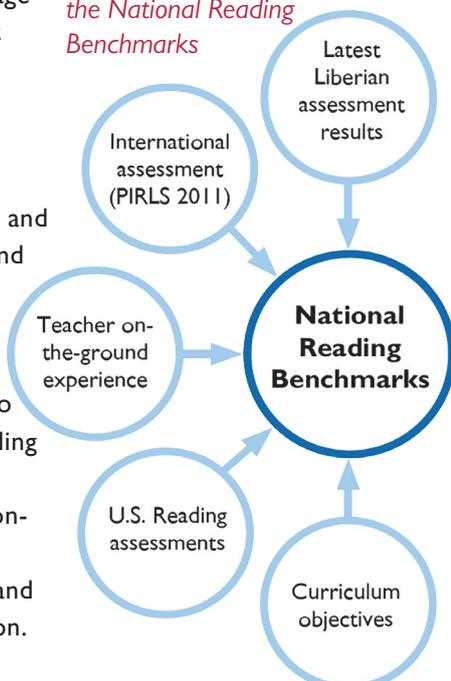
In 2014, MOE officials and a cross-section of stakeholders (Figure 1) came together in a workshop to define benchmarks for student performance in key areas of reading in Grades 1, 2 and 3.

Figure 1. Stakeholders involved in setting the National Reading Benchmarks



This benchmark-setting group referred to multiple sources of information and input to define these standards (Figure 2), including results from the LTTP midterm assessment and the EGRA Plus endline assessment, international PIRLS data (2011), and U.S. assessments of reading. In addition to providing points of comparison, these data helped prioritize the goal of reducing the percentage of students scoring at the lowest levels of performance.² Stakeholders also referenced MOE curriculum objectives and teachers on-the-ground experience.

Figure 2. Sources referenced in creating the National Reading Benchmarks



The benchmark-setting group opted to establish student reading benchmarks in three core reading skills: non-word reading fluency, oral reading fluency, and reading comprehension.

These skills were selected because they have not only been established as foundational skills important for achieving reading proficiency³ but are also commonly used and reliable indicators of reading proficiency.⁴ In addition, these skills are already being measured in Liberia in Grades 1 and 2 by the MOE and USAID implementing partners using three EGRA subtasks (Table 1).⁵

Table 1. EGRA Subtasks

Non-word fluency	This subtask evaluates a student's ability to decode, or sound out, unfamiliar words.
Oral reading fluency	This subtask evaluates how well a student reads aloud a short passage of text.
Reading Comprehension	This subtask evaluates a student's ability to understand the short passage by asking questions about that passage.

The process the benchmark-setting group went through involved defining three benchmark components:

- A benchmark value for each subtask's indicator
- The percentage of students who should reach that benchmark in 5 years
- The percentage of students who should score zero on each indicator in 5 years.

The National Liberian Grade 1–6 Reading Benchmarks are intended to provide a relatively easy measure of whether a student has achieved the desired level of reading ability.

The benchmark targets for Grades 1 and 2 are provided in Table 2.

Table 2. Reading Benchmark Targets for Grades 1 and 2

Grades	Reading Fluency Benchmark	Comprehension Benchmark
Grade 1	30cpm	40%
Grade 2	35cpm	50%

The student benchmarks include a plan for mapping annual targets with aims to increase the number of students achieving the benchmarks. For example, the MOE has set a goal of reaching a five-year target of 50% of students achieving reading benchmarks per grade by 2026/27. Because this benchmark-setting process was participatory and because a wide range of stakeholders were actively involved, the MOE was able to achieve widespread ownership of the resulting benchmarks.

The MOE announced the approved benchmarks in 2020, and the benchmarks were included in the 2020/21 national academic calendar - a first for Liberia and a clear demonstration of its commitment and intentions for the future.

PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS FOR LIBERIAN TEACHERS

The professional standards for Liberian teachers describe the knowledge, skills, and attitudes teachers should possess when teaching in Liberian schools. A number of education system actors are targeted by the Liberian Teacher Standards (**Figure 3**). Because these standards clearly communicate to teachers what is expected of them and for what they will be held accountable, setting and validating these standards are important steps in improving instruction in the classroom. These standards also help to guide pre-service training institutions as they prepare teachers to go into classrooms.

Figure 3. Education System Actors Targeted by the Liberian Teacher Standards



The National Teacher Professional Performance Standards document is meant for all teachers practicing in Liberia, in addition to other education actors in the system. These upgraded teacher standards will serve as a key reference for teacher assessment and evaluation, continued accreditation of teachers, continuous professional development, teacher education, and curriculum reform.

The approved 2020 standards for teachers are organized under five domains (**Figure 4**) that cover what teachers should know and do, their expected levels of competence, and what they should value and practice. These domains are as follows:

- Knowledge
- Teaching Skills

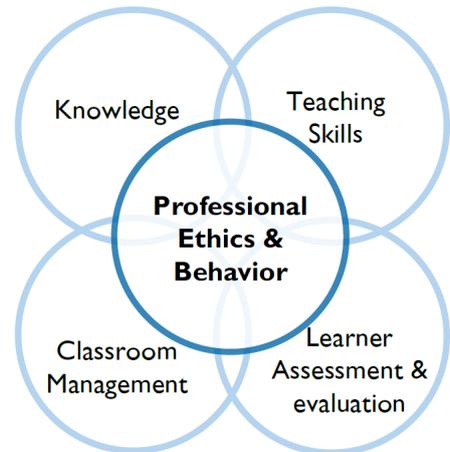
Figure 4. Snapshot of the First Domain Standards

Domain 1 Knowledge: Standards and Performance Indicators

Standards	Performance below standard	Performance according to the standard	Proficiency
1.1 has sound knowledge of the content taught and thorough knowledge of the subject matter they teach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • shows a lack of understanding of the core content of the subject they teach • gives incorrect or insufficient information; does not correct learner content errors; omits critical content from instruction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • displays deep and broad content knowledge in their subject area(s) • provides sufficient and correct information on content • teaches all content of the subject as per the curriculum and does not omit critical content from instruction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • demonstrates knowledge of their specialized teaching subjects and knows all the applicable topics and content prescribed by national curriculum for the subjects

- Classroom Management
- Learner Assessment and Evaluation
- Professional Ethics and Behavior

Figure 4. The Domains of Teacher Standards



Each of the five domains includes numerous performance indicators, or standards, against which a teacher is assessed.

As an example, **Figure 5** provides a snapshot of the first standard under the domain of 'Knowledge.' Assessment is split into three categories according to performance:

1. Performance falls below the standard.
2. Performance is demonstrated/proven according to the standard.
3. Performance is demonstrated/proven at a high proficiency level.

According to the National Teacher Professional Performance Standards, a teacher's performance can be assessed using multiple sources of data, including classroom observations, teacher training records, and students' progress. Data sources include the following examples:

	Teachers' lesson plans, classroom notes, and schemes of work		Students' progress and performance records and oral reading fluency scores
	Locally made instructional aids and classroom environment improvements		Continuous professional development certificates of achievement or participation; teaching degrees
	Coaches' reports and classroom observations; school principals' reports and reference letters		Training attendance records and school and classroom attendance records



IN SUMMARY

The completion and adoption of both the National Grade 1–6 Reading Benchmarks for students and the National Teacher Professional Performance Standards are pivotal accomplishments for the MOE. Not only do they showcase the MOE's commitment to strengthened instructional quality and student progress, they also provide critical tools for the MOE to track progress in meeting these goals.

As a result of Read Liberia's successful and sustained collaboration and coordination with the MOE, these two important policies have been validated and approved. In its final year of implementation, Read Liberia continues to support the MOE in establishing tools and capacity for the MOE to regularly review and reform these benchmarks as data from assessments inform future annual targets for student and teacher achievement.

- [1] Setting and Using Benchmarks for Reading Performance. Joseph DeStefano 2017. RTI <https://shared.rti.org/content/setting-and-using-benchmarks-reading-performance>
- [2] Proposing Benchmarks for Early Grade Reading in Liberia. USAID. RTI LTTP. <https://shared.rti.org/content/proposing-benchmarks-early-grade-reading-skills-liberia>
- [3] ERIC - ED531301 - The Early Grade Reading Assessment: Applications and Interventions to Improve Basic Literacy, RTI International, 2011
- [4] Oral Reading Fluency | Verbal Reading Proficiency | Council for Learning Disabilities (council-for-learning-disabilities.org)
- [5] ERIC - ED531301 - The Early Grade Reading Assessment: Applications and Interventions to Improve Basic Literacy, RTI International, 2011

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 one and two. 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 the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and implemented by RTI International with Another Option, Brattle Publishing Group, and DEEP subcontractors through direct partnership with the Liberian MOE.

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

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