



Learning in Liberia: Mid-Year Gains in Literacy and Numeracy

A Pilot Study on Bridge Partnership Schools for Liberia (PSL)

Executive Summary





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With a foreword by George Werner, Minister of Education, Government of Liberia

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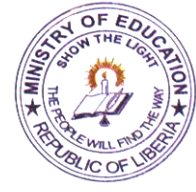
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REPUBLIC OF LIBERIA
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Dear Colleagues,

That the educational system in Liberia is faced with serious challenges, which threaten the country's drive to build a strong human capital base, is not an understatement. As Minister of Education, it is my responsibility to change the status quo, and innovate towards a better future for Liberia's children.

I had a vision for transformational public schools in every district across the country, providing access to every child. I started a rigorous review of all partners in our education sector in Liberia. While we have many leaders who have dedicated their lives to improving opportunity for children through learning, we did not have any organizations working in Liberia who had demonstrated that they could truly improve learning for children—and not at only one or two schools, but at dozens or hundreds. I was looking for solutions that could lead all 2,750 of our primary schools to “Get to Best.” In late 2015, I had the opportunity to visit many organizations working in East Africa, to learn from what was working on the other side of our great continent. I learned a great deal from the organizations I was privileged to spend time with, including Educate! and others.

One organization stood out for so obviously demonstrating that even under circumstances of limited budgets and in rural areas, children could have access to a school where learning happened every day. When I visited 5 schools managed by Bridge International Academies in Uganda, I was amazed by what I saw: kindergartners were reading and doing math far above their grade level; fifth graders were doing high quality reading and writing in rigorous lessons; and a whole school network composed of talented teachers were teaching consistent, high-quality lessons to students who were not very different from those for whom I work in Liberia. I was convinced that in Liberia our public schools could be doing more than we had thought, and more than we had yet done.

I returned home with a vision, which I shared with the President of Liberia and which she strongly endorsed: to create a program with the ambitious goal of dramatically improving the quality of free ECE and primary education across Liberia through strong partnerships with non-governmental providers. Just one short year ago, the Ministry of Education launched the pilot phase of what we named the “Partnership Schools for Liberia” program, and we invited eight operators to support 94 public primary schools across the country. Originally, we had invited Bridge to support 50 public ECE and primary schools. We then decided to engage a randomized control trial to provide the government with “gold standard” evidence of learning, and this limited the Bridge “treatment” support to 24 schools and retained other public schools under the Ministry's direct management as our “control.” Public demand for what they were observing in the free public schools supported by Bridge was so strong, that the MOE assigned a 25th school in November. Bridge Partnership Schools for Liberia now serves nearly 9,000 students in 25 free public schools across eight counties.

In an effort to provide early evidence of how government partnerships could advance children's learning, the Ministry partnered with Bridge, Pencils of Promise, and the University of Liberia to commission a study on the learning of children in 6 free public schools managed by Bridge in the Partnership Schools for Liberia program and 6 matched public schools not in the PSL program. The study compares student performance at a baseline in September-October and a midline in January. An end-line assessment will be held in June-July, with a final report released shortly thereafter. This study only included Bridge PSL public schools as Bridge was selected to work in the government partnership a few months before the other Partnership Schools for Liberia organizations were selected.

The findings of the midline report are both exciting and encouraging. They show that students in Bridge Partnership Schools performed better academically than their peers in traditional public schools, across nearly every literacy and numeracy metric tested, and over a short period of time. Full school days with more instructional time on core content, teacher training and monitoring, standards-aligned learning materials, a technology-enhanced teacher guide delivery system, and other elements of school organization appear to contribute to the positive results from these in these free public schools supported by Bridge PSL.

Perhaps most importantly, many of these aspects could be implemented in traditional public schools, providing us with plausible models for improving all public schools across the country. This also points to the benefits of continuing the Partnership Schools for Liberia program, and continuing to see how organizations can work with the MOE to strengthen individual schools, as well as our entire system.

It is my hope that you will find the report useful in your assessment of the progress that the Government of Liberia is making to provide quality, free education to all our children.

Sincerely,



George Kronnisanyon Werner
Minister of Education, Republic of Liberia

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Bridge International Academies opened 25 PSL public schools in 8 different counties across Liberia in September 2016. To better understand how Bridge PSL public schools can drive educational gains, the Ministry of Education, Pencils of Promise, University of Liberia, and Bridge embarked upon “The Bridge PSL Public School Pilot Study”. This study compares performance for students attending Bridge PSL public schools with those in comparable traditional public schools.

Even at this early date, we observe clear performance differences. After receiving just four months of instruction, Bridge students in the early grades show demonstrably superior reading and math skills compared to their counterparts in traditional public schools. Bridge students read faster and with greater accuracy. Bridge students also solve basic math problems faster.

It will be some time before we will know the full impact of a Bridge education, but these initial findings suggest that students in Bridge PSL public schools are learning better and faster than their peers. If this trend continues, it will mean that Bridge students will be much better equipped to face the increasing demands of secondary school and college than their traditional public school peers.

The full report provides all relevant technical details, but a brief overview of the study and its measures will be helpful. The study measured performance with standard, widely used reading and math tests, suitable for assessing progress in the earliest years of formal education. The analysis focuses on student learning growth and compares the gains made by students in Bridge PSL and traditional public schools. Bridge PSL public schools in this pilot study were randomly selected from those six counties in Liberia hosting both Bridge PSL and traditional public schools. Comparison schools were selected based on similarity and proximity to the Bridge PSL public schools. Students at all schools were randomly chosen to participate.

It is important to note that the goal of this study is to provide some indication of the relative benefits that accrue to Bridge students. This study is not meant to definitively determine the impact of Bridge schooling. An impact study of the PSL programme, led by Center for Global Development economist Justin Sandefur and Innovations for Poverty Action, is underway and will produce a mid-line report in late summer 2017. This pilot study, unlike an impact study, favors rapid response over precision and certainty. The tradeoffs that impair precision and certainty, such as its small sample size, the use of a nonrandom comparison group of schools, and a sizable student attrition rate, are also the features of this study that reduce time and cost and make possible to produce a rapid, if incomplete, performance comparison.

Despite these limitations, we are encouraged by this early positive signal of impact on learning outcomes. In June and July 2017, we will return to the same 12 schools to conduct our final round of assessments to measure the growth of students at Bridge PSL public schools vs. traditional public schools. The MOE and Bridge PSL public schools look forward to continuing this partnership in working to improve learning and the opportunity that brings for the students of Liberia.