

What Works to Improve Learning at Scale?



KEY FINDINGS FROM **LEARNING AT SCALE** AND THE **GHANA LEARNING ACTIVITY**

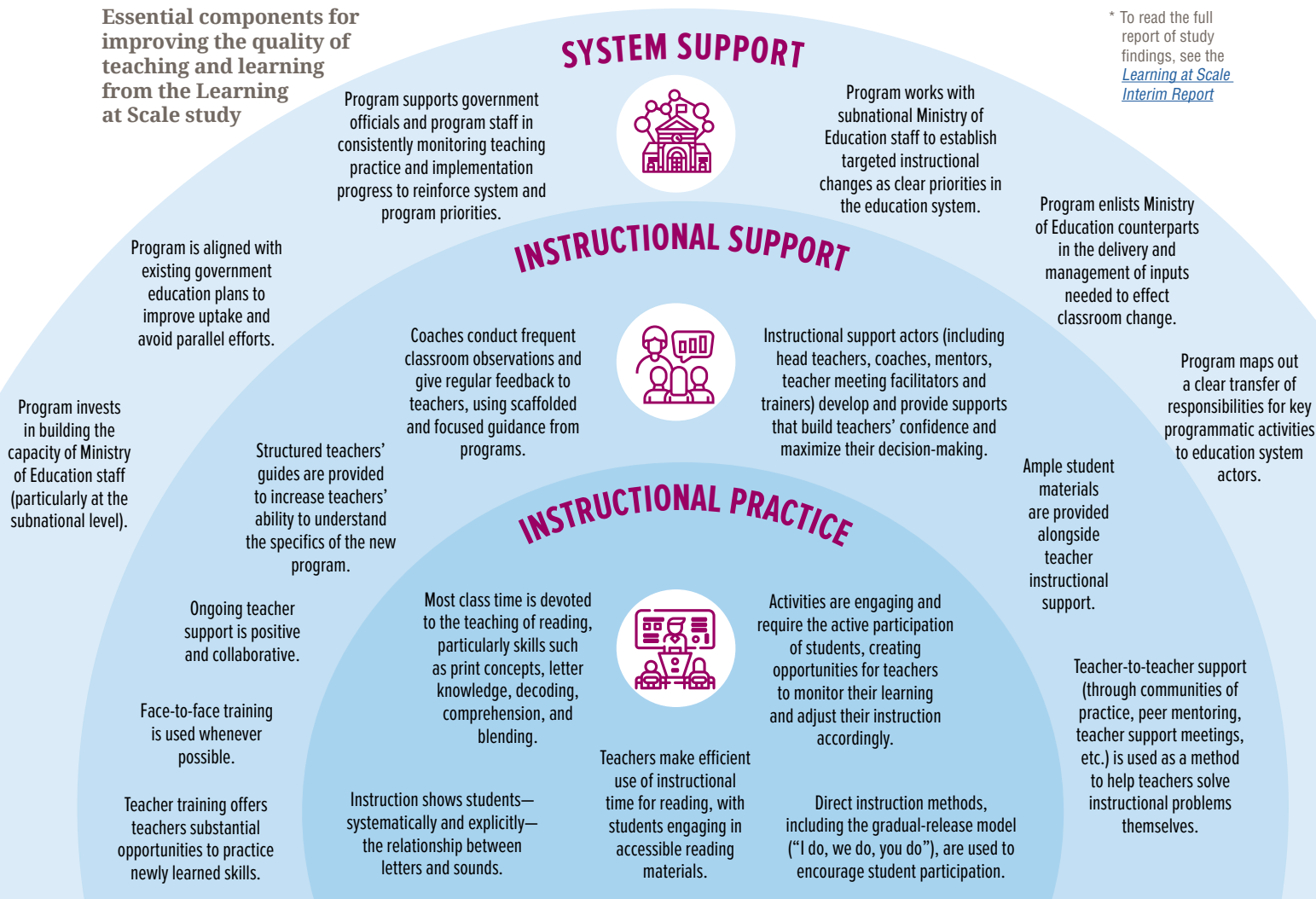
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This brief presents findings on what worked to improve learning outcomes at scale in eight successful early grade literacy programs, with a focus on the USAID Partnership for Education: Learning Activity in Ghana (Ghana Learning)¹. These findings were generated as part of the *Learning at Scale* study, conducted by RTI International with the Center for Global Development and funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. The study examined eight of the most effective large-scale education programs in low- and middle-income countries, including Ghana Learning.

The findings from *Learning at Scale* are organized into three categories: instructional practice, instructional support, and system support. The eight programs evaluated in this study shared commonalities in how they approached implementation to maximize program success. We identified five essential components for improving instructional practice, eight essential components for improving instructional support, and six essential components for system support (as shown in **FIGURE 1**).




FIGURE 1. Essential components for improving the quality of teaching and learning from the Learning at Scale study

* To read the full report of study findings, see the [Learning at Scale Interim Report](#)



Learning at Scale Study at a Glance

This research study examined eight of the most effective large-scale education programs in low- and middle-income countries, including the Ghana Learning activity. We asked three overarching questions:

-  What **classroom ingredients**² (e.g., teaching practices, classroom environment) lead to learning in programs that are effective at scale?
-  What **methods of training and support**³ lead to teachers adopting effective classroom practices?
-  What **system support**⁴ is required to deliver effective training and support to teachers and to promote effective classroom practices?

Due to COVID-19 disruptions, including school closures, the research team was forced to limit our work in Ghana to interviews with education officials (with no data collection at the primary school level). Therefore, this brief focuses only on the third research question, whose findings are based on data collected in December 2021, as outlined in **TABLE 1**.

TABLE 1. Data collection tools and respondent counts (Ghana)

INSTRUMENT	RESPONDENT COUNT
Central system interviews	6 interviews with high-level Ministry of Education and Ghana Education Service officials
District system interviews	1 interview with a district education officer
Program/donor interviews	1 interview with international donor representative Multiple interviews with program leadership

Criteria for programs to be considered for inclusion in the *Learning at Scale* study

Effectiveness: Evidence of causal impact at scale or at pilot with evidence of effective scale-up

Scale: Operating in most or all schools in at least two administrative subdivisions

Subject: Includes a literacy component

Geography: Located in a low- or middle-income country

Type of program: Program aims to improve classroom teachers' effectiveness

Data available for analysis: Impact evaluation data and raw data on cost

Time frame: Active through 2019

Sector: Public sector, civil society, or private sector

Ghana Learning at a Glance



5-year program (2014–2019)⁵



Implemented by FHI 360

GOAL:

To support Ghana's Ministry of Education and the Ghana Education Service, as well as a range of educational institutions, to improve reading performance for early grade students in public primary schools



Funded by USAID

REACH: **100 districts** across all 10 regions of Ghana

700,000+ students (kindergarten through grade 2)

51,000+ teachers

11 Ghanaian languages of instruction

The theory underpinning the Ghana Learning activity was that materials, training, and coaching, along with continuous monitoring, would lead to instructional changes and improved learning outcomes for students from the second level of kindergarten to grade 2. Broadly speaking, the activity included the following elements:

- 1. Instruction designed as a phonics-based “simple view of reading” approach**, with scripted lesson plans
- 2. Coaching in two parts:** district-level coaching from district teacher support teams⁶ and in-school coaching from head teachers or curriculum leads
- 3. Teacher meetings (led by head teachers) at the school level**, meant as an opportunity for teachers to discuss any issues they were having in the classroom
- 4. The provision of teachers' guides, student books, supplementary materials, and assessments in 11 Ghanaian languages of instruction**



What system supports did Ghana Learning draw on to deliver effective training and support to teachers and to promote effective classroom practices?

The eight programs evaluated in the *Learning at Scale* study shared commonalities in how they utilized system-level support to maximize their success. Drawing on findings from program document reviews, discussions with program leadership, and interviews with system-level actors, we identified six components essential to such success. **TABLE 2** outlines the extent to which each of these components was noted by key informants in Ghana and incorporated into the Learning activity.

TABLE 2. Essential components of system support for Ghana Learning

ESSENTIAL COMPONENT	EVIDENCE OF COMPONENT IN GHANA LEARNING
<p>Program invests in building the capacity of Ministry of Education staff (particularly at the subnational level).</p>	<p>The Learning activity focused on building the capacity of all stakeholders from the Ministry of Education (MOE) and Ghana Education Service (GES), including partners in the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, National Teaching Council, and National Inspectorate Board. It also provided national core trainers, circuit supervisors, and district teacher support teams with intensive capacity building in reading instruction to support their roles as trainers, monitors, and school-support providers.</p> <p>The Learning program held regular workshops to train staff, including high-level officials, and provide orientation for new activities. By engaging staff at different levels in the development and validation of learning materials, the program enhanced the education system's capacity to create and evaluate materials.</p> <p>One high-level GES official noted: <i>"At every level from the highest down to the schools, we had capacity building for all staff."</i></p> <p>A second one offered: <i>"If we have a very good literacy curriculum, we owe it to the Learning project. If we have good training teams; if we have good writing panels; if we have very authentic book validation process ... we owe it to the Learning project."</i></p>
<p>Program is aligned with existing government education plans to improve uptake and avoid parallel efforts.</p>	<p>Learning engaged MOE and GES officials and conducted a pilot project prior to the start of implementation. This work was essential for showing how the program was intending to address an essential issue (i.e., low reading scores nationally). One high-level GES official shared: <i>"They showed us videos. Children were reading. They were pointing to letters and words. We had the meeting at the GES conference room. We all marveled. It was a success story for us. We decided that we should scale it up to reach as many children as possible."</i></p> <p>Another official noted: <i>"We [at GES] felt that when Learning comes in, it would go a long way to fix a major problem which we were facing (i.e. just 2% of children were able to read and write). It was a felt need."</i></p> <p>Lastly, Learning worked closely with MOE and GES throughout its implementation in order to ensure that decisions were jointly made.</p>
<p>Program works with subnational Ministry of Education staff to establish targeted instructional changes as clear priorities in the education system.</p>	<p>The ministry had a good system to communicate expectations at decentralized levels. The director general would send letters and directives that would trickle down to regions, districts, and schools. The GES held orientation sessions and workshops in collaboration with the Learning program for district and regional leadership. Once these individuals understood the information, it was easier for them to disseminate this information to decentralized staff.</p> <p>For instance, one district-level director of education shared how she received communication and felt that this was addressing needs on the ground: <i>"Communication came from [the director general] of GES. It told us about new activities of Learning and what was involved (including roles/responsibilities for district directors) ... When communication came from GES, I was expecting that it would bring out change in education in a positive way. This was followed up by a workshop organized by USAID, giving us the details and modalities on how it was expected to go. Helping us to obtain buy-in."</i></p>

TABLE 2. (continued)

ESSENTIAL COMPONENT	EVIDENCE OF COMPONENT IN GHANA LEARNING
	<p>Learning also worked directly with regional- and district-level coordinators, as well as staff from the National Teaching Council, National Inspectorate Board, and National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. Ultimately, as one high-level MOE official put it:</p> <p><i>“I cannot see that there is anyone in the ministry who did not know about the project. It was a very successful project.”</i></p>
<p>Program supports government officials and program staff in consistently monitoring teaching practice and implementation progress to reinforce system and program priorities.</p>	<p>Although government officials regularly monitored schools (including project-specific visits), implementation oversight for Ghana Learning was ultimately a program responsibility. However, the program ensured that monitoring data were regularly available to ministry staff.</p> <p>More specifically, DTSTs were responsible for conducting two Learning-specific school visits per term. During their visits, DTSTs were expected to conduct classroom observations and to lead discussions with teachers and head teachers.</p> <p>In-school coaches were monitored by DTSTs, who were in turn overseen by regional program staff. Additionally, Circuit Supervisors (CSs; ministry staff responsible for visiting schools for monitoring and supervision) were monitored by Learning regional office staff. The regional and district directors were also equipped with tablets to use in visits to monitor schools, and they had access to an interactive data-visualization dashboard to review data on student and school reading performance.</p>
<p>Program enlists Ministry of Education counterparts in the delivery and management of inputs needed to effect classroom change.</p>	<p>By design, the majority of Learning’s activities were intended to be implemented by the MOE and GES, with technical direction from the Learning team. The main exception to this approach was the program’s use of Ghanaian vendors from the private sector to oversee the distribution of materials to schools.</p> <p>In order ensure consistent MOE and GES involvement, the program created a learning advisory committee that included representatives from all levels of the MOE and GES, as well as university representatives. This committee was responsible for formally approving books and materials. It also played a significant role in validating the materials being developed in local languages.</p> <p>Although the government was involved, much of the implementation was still seen as being led by Learning staff. As one high-level GES official noted:</p> <p><i>“I would say that about 20% of the work was done by GES, 20% by MOE and 60% by staff of Learning. This is so because they had implementation roadmaps. Any time they wanted to embark on these roadmaps, they would invite GES to come in and validate and determine whether or not their plan would benefit schools. After that validation, the program would get GES/MOE to get teachers and other stakeholders to get on board (e.g., training).”</i></p> <p>Lastly, while Learning provided the funding for activities, MOE and GES provided human resources and supported Learning in finding venues for training, as well as in monitoring and supporting teachers.</p>
<p>Program maps out a clear transfer of responsibilities for key programmatic activities to education system actors.</p>	<p>Ghana Learning's efforts led to systemic changes in monitoring and coaching. For example, the dashboard that was created under the program has been handed over to the GES. Additionally, the GES and MOE are now expanding the provision and use of tablets and the dashboard to 10,000 schools under the Ghana Accountability for Learning Outcomes Project.</p> <p>A district official shared:</p> <p><i>“The program has become part of our municipal/district action plan. It has been integrated into our routine monitoring. Therefore, each CS [circuit supervisor] has the program as part of his/her monitoring itinerary. When you go to a school, all the things that you monitor, this program is part of that. That is taken care of as normal, routine duties.”</i></p>



What major challenges did Ghana Learning Face?

Learning faced some initial implementation challenges due to the original design of the activity. Two years into its implementation, the program was redesigned to better align with MOE and GES plans and expectations. These shifts were essential for moving the program forward successfully.

Ghanaian language-of-instruction issues also initially impacted Learning activities. While some people in the government were strong supporters of the use of local languages of instruction, others remained skeptical about the overall feasibility of such an approach. Further, as noted by one high-level ministry official, with Learning (in local language) and Jolly Phonics (in English) running concurrently, it was sometimes difficult to coordinate and ensure alignment with government priorities.



What factors most contributed to the success of Ghana Learning, according to program stakeholders?

All respondents from the *Learning at Scale* study were asked about the biggest contributors to the success of each program. The most common responses pointed to good collaboration—and alignment of goals—between the program and the government; effective pedagogical approaches, including phonics; and training that made teachers' tasks simpler. More specifically for Ghana Learning, the biggest success factors were noted as follows:

- **Strong collaboration between Learning staff and officials from the MOE and GES:** Including government counterparts throughout the development and planning processes was essential for buy-in and continued support.
- **The development and distribution of engaging teaching and learning materials:** Appropriately leveled readers and easy-to-follow teachers' guides were important, especially paired with Learning's efficient distribution process, which ensured that all materials were available in schools, on time.
- **The use of a data dashboard** that provided stakeholders with access to the information they needed to monitor program performance and inform decisions on necessary inputs and program shifts.
- **A strong training model, combined with hands-on support** (though coaching and monitoring), for ensuring that teachers were comfortable and confident in the new phonics-based methodology.

Now—as education systems across the globe look for ways to recover from COVID-19 disruptions to schooling—using findings from the Learning at Scale study and programs such as Ghana Learning as a model for leveraging and investing in these elements is more important than ever.

This brief was authored by Dr. Jonathan Stern.

1 The eight programs examined are Education Quality Improvement Program in Tanzania (Cambridge Education/ Mott MacDonald), Ghana Partnership for Education: Learning (FHI 360), Senegal Lecture Pour Tous (Chemonics International), Nigerian Education Initiative Plus (Creative Associates), Pakistan Reading Program (International Rescue Committee), Read India (Pratham), India Scaling-up Early Reading Intervention (Room to Read), and the Kenya Tusome Early Grade Reading Activity (RTI International).

2 For more findings on instructional practice, see the brief [Instructional Practices for Effective Large-Scale Reading Interventions](#).

3 For more findings on instructional support, see the brief [Instructional Support for Effective Large-Scale Reading Interventions](#).

4 For more findings on systems support, see the brief [System Supports for Effective Large-Scale Reading Interventions](#).

5 The contract for this program was signed in 2014, but the program was redesigned in 2016, so the technical work and implementation of what is conventionally known as "Learning" ran from 2016 to 2019. The program was later extended to focus on Transition to English, but this brief focuses on the original phase through 2019.

6 These teams consist of Ghana Education Service staff who are mandated to visit schools as a part of their regular job function.