

# OUTSOURCING PRIMARY EDUCATION IN LIBERIA LEADS TO MIXED RESULTS

The long-lasting effects of a 14-year civil war, compounded by school closures caused by the 2014 Ebola outbreak, have had a huge impact on Liberia's education system. In early 2016, the Liberian Ministry of Education announced that it would contract the operation of some government primary schools out to private companies. Researchers working with Innovations for Poverty Action examined the effects of these new partnerships and looked at how the schools deliver (or fail to deliver) better outcomes.

## **THE CHALLENGE**

Liberia has one of the world's highest amounts of out-of-school children, with an estimated 15 to 20 per cent of 6-14-year-olds not attending school. Only 54 per cent of children complete primary education.

Faced with these statistics, in 2016, the Liberian government outsourced the management of 93 randomly selected state schools, covering 8.6 per cent of all state school students. These schools remain under public ownership, charge no fees, and are staffed by state school teachers, but each school is managed by one of eight private contractors (three for-profit companies and five charities). While originally prompted by the government's desire to improve test scores, the initiative has been dogged by the expulsion of students, an alleged cover-up of sexual abuse, and cost overruns.

## **THE RESEARCH**

Over three years, the project, [Partnership schools for Liberia: impact on accountability mechanisms and education outcomes](#) examined the effect of

the new Liberian Education Advancement Program (originally known as Partnership Schools for Liberia) by comparing the 93 schools whose management has been delegated to private operators to 92 control schools under government management. The randomised field experiment collected data at three points between 2016 and 2019, via student tests and in-depth surveys with teachers.

The research found that after three years, outsourcing the management of state schools to private providers raised test scores by 0.21 standard deviations in maths (equivalent to about 0.7 extra years of schooling) and 0.16 standard deviations in English (equivalent to four words per minute additional reading fluency for the cohort that started in first grade). Beyond learning gains, the programme reduced corporal punishment by 4.6 per cent, but it increased school drop-out rates by 3.3 per cent and failed to reduce self-reported sexual abuse at schools.

Crucially, the results varied by provider: some generated uniformly positive results, while in other cases, there were stark trade-offs between learning



Photo: Pupils in class in Liberia. Credit: Giacomo Pirozzi/Panos Pictures.

gains and extra-curricular outcomes, suggesting that the identity of private contractors matters for the performance of these public-private partnerships.

The research found that when government capacity to monitor performance and enforce contracts is weak – as in the case of Liberia – selecting private providers who are aligned with the public interest, and disinclined to exploit contractual incompleteness, may be important for the success of outsourcing.

## THE IMPACT

After one year, the preliminary results of the impact evaluation were presented to the then Liberian President, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, and her cabinet. As a result, provider contracts were amended to prevent some of the failures that had been identified early on during the 2016/17 academic year. Changes included setting standard contracts for all providers. However, even providers who had presided over serious failings were rewarded with contracts to manage more schools when the programme expanded in 2017 (e.g., Stella Maris, Bridge International Academies, and More than Me, respectively).

The results were discussed in March 2018 as part of the report on DFID's programme 'Leaving No One Behind in Education' produced by the UK's International Development Committee. The aim of this report was to inform DFID's work on education and, in particular, its work in Liberia and its investment in one of the contracted organisations: Bridge International Academies (a for-profit chain of low-cost private schools which rely on technology and scripted lessons). Lloyd Russell-Moyle MP told the Committee:

Bridge Academies added hundreds of dollars extra to educate each child from external money, meaning that no Government in the developing world would be able to sustain that level of investment if the schools returned to the Government... That study means that the Department for International Development needs to relook at its involvement with Bridge Academies and other providers and consider value for money.

Following the hearing, the Committee suggested DFID re-consider its working relationship with Bridge Academies, stating that the results of the pilot and the sustainability of Bridge's work in Liberia should be taken into consideration by the Department when assessing its support for Bridge elsewhere.

The results have been widely discussed in mainstream media such as Devex, The Economist and Quartz, with findings being used both by proponents of these types of partnerships, and by detractors. For example, Bridge International Academies has proclaimed the Liberia

experience to be a complete success, citing the results on learning gains. On the other hand, Action Aid and Education International contend that the results indicate failure, citing increased drop-out rates and the high cost of some providers.

Despite impressive results demonstrated by non-profit providers like Street Child (that produced positive learning gains similar to the other, better-known chains, but did so at much lower cost, and with no negative effects), for-profits seem to have generated the most interest from philanthropies and impact investors. Andrew G. Tehmeh, Country Director of Street Child of Liberia explained:

It sends a different message that as a local NGO striving to provide quality learning at very low-cost to the most vulnerable children in Liberia, for-profit organisations are being favoured by large philanthropic organisations. One would think the organisation that performs better would triumph in terms of funding support. Philanthropies need to give their unwavering support to institutions like us that are going to highs and lows to strengthen an education system that is already facing grave challenges.

In other countries where similar public-private partnership approaches are being considered (e.g., Sierra Leone), the results are being used to inform policy discussions.

Looking ahead, the research team hope the Ministry of Education will use the results to improve the programme so that providers which perform well in various dimensions – not just test scores, but also access to education, sustainability, and child safety – are rewarded with more contracts, while providers who underperform have their contracts terminated.

## FURTHER READING

Romero, M. and Sandefur, J. (2019) Beyond Short-Term Learning Gains The Impact of Outsourcing Schools in Liberia after Three Years, Working Paper 521, Washington, DC: Center for Global Development

Romero, M., Sandefur, J. and Sandholtz, W. (2020) 'Outsourcing Education: Experimental Evidence from Liberia', *American Economic Review* 110.2: 364-400

Romero, Mauricio, Sandefur, Justin and Sandholtz, Wayne (2018) 'Partnership Schools for Liberia', <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/5OPIYU>, Harvard Dataverse V4



### Partnership schools for Liberia: impact on accountability mechanisms and education outcomes.

The research team was funded by the ESRC-DFID Raising Learning Outcomes in Education Systems Research Programme led by Justin Sandefur (Center for Global Development). The research was carried out in partnership with Mauricio Romero (ITAM), Wayne Sandholtz (Nova SBE), and Innovations for Poverty Action.

## THE IMPACT INITIATIVE

### For International Development Research

The Impact Initiative seeks to connect policymakers and practitioners with the world-class social science research supported by the ESRC-DFID Strategic Partnership, maximising the uptake and impact of research from: (i) the Joint Fund for Poverty Alleviation Research, and (ii) the Raising Learning Outcomes in Education Systems Programme. We seek to identify synergies between these programmes and their grant holders, support them to exploit influencing and engagement opportunities, and facilitate mutual learning. The Impact Initiative is a collaboration between the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) and the University of Cambridge's Research for Equitable Access and Learning (REAL) Centre.

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## CREDITS

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