

An Aligned Approach to Making Change at Scale in Djibouti

Global learning was in crisis even before the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted schooling for children across the world, hitting children in LMICs especially hard. Nearly 9 out of 10 children cannot read a simple text with comprehension by age 10 in Sub-Saharan Africa. Global learning poverty has consequences affecting development of other essential skills, the options for future opportunities, and promise of future economic growth. The inequity seen today will be exacerbated if we do not address this crisis with urgency. (The State of Global Learning Poverty, 2022). Small “band aid” projects may help to identify or test models for a particular context, but long-term change to turn around learning outcomes will require that entire systems adopt new practices in synergy as we have seen in Djibouti.

The RISE Programme and the What Works Hub for Global Education have been grappling with the question of systems strengthening. Hwa and colleagues (2020) outline four principles across successful education projects:

1. Set clear learning goals that are coherent with children’s current learning levels. In most developing country contexts, particularly for primary school-age children, this means focusing on foundational literacy and numeracy.
2. Make instruction coherent with children’s current learning levels and targeted learning progress.
3. Provide effective and coherent support to teachers. This is often delivered through practical, ongoing coaching rather than traditional teacher training.
4. Find contextually appropriate ways to implement the preceding principles.

USAID has recognized the importance of alignment of the different parts of the system that contribute to the provision of quality instruction in foundational skills and produced the ALIGN toolkit to help projects work with ministries of education to achieve that alignment (see [The ALIGN Kit: Resources for Developing Strategies to Improve Learner Performance in Reading and Math \(edu-links.org\)](https://edu-links.org/)). As Hwa and colleagues recommend, the ALIGN process focuses on 1. curriculum and standards; 2. teaching and learning resources; 3. teacher training; and 4. assessment.

In Djibouti, FHI 360 began implementing the five-year USAID-funded Djibouti Early Grade Reading Activity (DEGRA)¹ in 2019 in collaboration with the Ministry of Education and Vocational Training (MENFOP). The objective of the project is to improve reading outcomes for children in grades 1–5 in all public schools in Djibouti, taking a year-by-year approach at scale², meaning that DEGRA worked with grade 1 in year 1, grade 2 in year 2, and so on at scale in all schools across the country simultaneously. The design of this project allowed for intervention in all four of the components of the education system as described above (curriculum and standards, teaching and learning materials [TLMs], teacher training

¹ The Djibouti Early Grade Reading Activity is a five-year project funded by USAID and implemented by FHI 360. School-to-School International was a sub-contractor on the project and gradually phased out their role by transferring all responsibilities for planning, implementing, and analyzing the semi-annual early grade reading assessments (EGRAs) to the Service Evaluation over the course of the first three years.

² Djibouti is a small country, with a population of 1.1 million in 2022 ([Population, total - Djibouti | Data \(worldbank.org\)](https://data.worldbank.org/)). According to the Annuaire Statistique of 2022-2023 ([ANNUAIRE STATISTIQUE 2022-2023 \(gov.dj\)](https://www.gouv.dj/annuaire-statistique-2022-2023)), there were 224 primary schools and approximately 73,000 primary school students.

[TPD], and assessment). It turned out that DEGRA became a case study which informed the ALIGN process because the project, before ALIGN was designed, had already completed the steps that would later be recommended (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VBoIE8lsCs0>). With MENFOP, DEGRA held a series of workshops to ensure that the reading assessments, curriculum and benchmarks, TLMs, and TPD were all working toward the same goal.

Component	How Did We ALIGN?
Curriculum	Aligned first to Global Proficiency Framework (GPF) 2019 version then continuously aligned as GPF evolved.
TLMs	Aligned to curriculum and continuously piloted and revised as GPF changed and as feedback was gathered from teachers.
Teacher Training (In-service)	Aligned to curriculum and TLMs and revised as GPF changed and as observation and Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) data was collected.
Teacher Training (Pre-service)	Aligned to in-service training, curriculum, and TLMs.
Assessment	EGRAs first not fully aligned to GPF and the national curriculum but then aligned over the course of two years. <i>Recent changes to GPF require another alignment.</i>

DEGRA’s approach was to work through MENFOP and its associated directorates and centres including the National Center for Research, Information, and Reproduction (CRIPEN) for TLMs and curriculum, the National Teacher Training College (CFEEF) for teacher training, Service Evaluation for EGRA, the Inspectorate for observation and coaching of teachers, the Department of Primary Education for coordination across the project and for the engagement of communities and families. DEGRA project staff is a skeleton staff, providing technical support to counterparts from MENFOP and throughout the system. A committee of specialists from CRIPEN and the University of Djibouti developed the TLMs with technical assistance from the project (DEGRA hired a Djiboutian literacy expert who received on-demand support from FHI 360’s headquarters-based technical advisors). With project support, the CFEEF develops targeted teacher training modules and supports a “pool” of trainers from across the country (mostly pedagogical advisors) who provide ongoing coaching to teachers to ensure the effective use and uptake of the new curriculum and TLMs. As the project has become more established, the roles of FHI 360 and partner School-to-School International (STS) have diminished markedly with MENFOP/Service Evaluation gradually taking the lead planning, implementing, and analysing the EGRAs at the beginning and end of the school year.

DEGRA has served as an excellent example of a technical assistance project that has strengthened the capacity of system actors to plan, deliver, and monitor quality education programming through genuine collaboration. Feedback loops provided essential data for adaptive implementation. One feedback loop was project driven, and it was carried out by project staff alongside MENFOP counterparts. After each cohort of teachers received training on the new TLMs, materials writers and teacher trainers conducted classroom visits to observe how the materials were used by the teachers and students and to collect their feedback on the materials' usefulness, appropriateness, efficacy toward achieving learning goals, and ability to attract and hold student interest. Another feedback loop was set up within the education system through data collection. Pedagogical advisors went out to schools to conduct site visits and record classroom observations on tablets containing coaching guidelines with suggested feedback to provide to teachers. The data from these tablets would be uploaded to the database once they were connected to the network, and the data would then be visualized on a dashboard accessible to MENFOP officials at the national and district levels. A final feedback loop is the EGRA that is conducted at the beginning and end of each school year to measure student progress toward meeting the benchmarks for the component skills of reading for their grade level. By using these feedback loops, MENFOP can regularly review the coherence among the components of the system (curriculum/standards, TLMs, teacher training, and assessment) and make coordinated adjustments as necessary.

This approach appears to be successful, with students demonstrating significant gains within and between school years from 2020–21 through 2022–23. At the start of the 2020–21 school year, Grade 2 students averaged 17 letters identified per minute, about 5 words read correctly per minute, and reading comprehension at 2 percent correct. By the end of the same school year, the same students averaged 29.4 letters per minute, 12.4 words read correctly per minute, and 12.6 percent correct in terms of letter sound recognition, oral reading fluency, and reading comprehension, respectively. Year-on-year, Grade 2 students have demonstrated improvement in their letter identification, reading fluency, and reading comprehension in both the start and end of the school year. By 2022–23, students averaged 26 letters per minute at the start of the school year and gained 10.2 letters per minute by the end of the year. Similarly, students' reading fluency improved from 7.9 to 16.4 words per minute between the start and end of the year with their comprehension scores improving from 14.2 to 31.4 percent over the course of the school year.

Table 2. Average Early Grade Reading Assessment performance in Grade 2 in Djibouti, by school year

	Beg of year	End of year	Diff
Letter Identification			
2020–2021	17.0	29.4	+12.4
2021–2022	21.6	27.9	+6.3
2022–2023	26.0	36.2	+10.2
Oral Reading Fluency			
2020–2021	4.6	12.4	+7.8
2021–2022	5.7	10.9	+5.2
2022–2023	7.9	16.4	+8.5
Reading Comprehension			
2020–2021	1.8	12.6	+10.8
2021–2022	5.8	16.1	+10.3
2022–2023	14.2	31.4	+17.2

Note: Figures in the table are representative at the national level.

At the same time, we saw teachers increase their use of evidence-based practice from 37% to over 50% in the same period. We also saw parents' engagement in their children's reading increase; for example, at the start of DEGRA, 32% of children reported that someone read aloud to them at home compared to 62% in 2023 after we ramped up our support to Parent Associations. Although we do not have the data to prove a connection between improved teacher practice, new teaching and learning materials, and increased parental engagement in children's reading practices nor to tease out the relative contribution of each of these, we can see that bringing together the disparate directorates and units of the education system and bringing together the actors—MENFOP officials, frontline workers, and citizens—to focus on a shared goal through aligned tools and process has the potential to shift the outcomes of a system at scale.

Questions remain. We see that grade 2 students now come into grade 2 further ahead than they were completing grade 2 at the start of the project. We do not have multiple year data for grades 3, 4, or 5, so we do not know if we will continue to see improvement in learning outcomes in those grade levels as teachers continue to work with the new materials and methodologies. The grade 2 results prompt us to ask what the factors are that contribute to these scores over the years. Is it that it takes a few years for teachers to appropriate new methodologies and not just mechanically follow new procedures? This is what many teacher educators believe as a rule of thumb. If this is true, what are the implications of this for the traditional 5-year project cycle? Also, despite large learning gains, zero scores persist. How does the system address the persistent zero scores? Beyond these questions lie the existential questions. DEGRA will be ending in September of 2024 with no follow-on project yet expected. Will MENFOP be able to continue this work without at least financial support if not technical support? Are the new ways of working well-enough embedded into the fabric of how education is delivered to be an example of systems change at scale? We may have a system change success story, but the ending has not yet been written.

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