

Increasing Caregiver and Community Support for Early Grade Reading



Photo Credit RTI.

Why Is Community Involvement Important in Schools?

When schools, caregivers, and communities work together to support children’s education, children tend to achieve higher academic results, have increased attendance and motivation, and be less likely to drop out of school.

The United States Agency for International Development (USAID)-funded Read Liberia recognizes that what occurs before and after the traditional school day is as impactful on the lives of learners as the teaching that occurs in the classroom.

School–community–family collaborations help improve student behavior and achievement and increase rates of literacy acquisition and progression to secondary education. In addition, these partnerships enhance schools’ understanding of family and community needs.

Read Liberia’s Social Behavior Change Campaign Design

In its first 2 years of programming, Read Liberia conducted analyses to identify caregiver, teacher, and community attitudes and behaviors toward early grade reading (EGR).



Data collector interviewing a parent to solicit feedback on his children’s reading skills and her contribution. Photo Credit RTI.

The findings revealed that many parents were unaware of how to help their children learn to read. Also, teachers and principals reported that parents were often not engaged in their children’s education, which negatively impacted children’s learning outcomes. Based on this information, Read Liberia

developed a Social Behavior Change (SBC) Communication Plan to address these issues.

Read Liberia created key messages to motivate caregivers, teachers, and community members to adopt positive behaviors that support children’s reading.

MESSAGES FOR PARENTS	MESSAGES FOR TEACHERS	MESSAGES FOR COMMUNITY LEADERS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Send your child to learn to read Make a quiet place in your home for your child to read Have your child read aloud each day for at least 10 minutes Talk to your child’s teacher about ways to help your child learn to read 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reach out to parents in a friendly, positive way Set goals with parents Share instructions on how children learn to read Give parents specific things they can do at home Maintain positive relationships with parents 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> An investment in a community’s children is an investment in the future The ability to read is a first step to a community’s growth and progress Early grade reading education contributes to a stronger work force, increased economic growth, and makes a secure community

Key Messages for Parents, Teachers, and Community Leaders in the SBC plan.

As part of the campaign, Read Liberia developed radio shows, posters, peer education cards, flyers, certificates, EGR checklists, and facilitator guides and used interpersonal communication and social mobilization strategies to engage communities.



Sample of Read Liberia SBC materials illustrated by local Liberian artists.

Community Mobilization Activities

With partner Diversified Educators Empowerment Program (DEEP), Read Liberia recruited and trained Community Mobilizers to engage caregivers, teachers, women's and youth groups, traditional leaders, and community leaders in supporting children's literacy. The Community Mobilizers encouraged parents to talk with teachers about their students' progress and to establish nurturing relationships with teachers.



Community training. Photo Credit RTI.

Read Liberia also encouraged community members to create reading spaces in their communities and to set aside at least 10 minutes a day for their children to read.

Following Community Mobilizers' face-to-face engagement with parents, 561 parents reported that they had established home reading spaces for their children. Parents Jartur Dunnor and Abraham Bawo's children attend Save the Children All-Girls School in Kakata, Margibi County. The Read Liberia Activity, Dunnor said, motivated her to get involved in the school's parent-teacher association (PTA). Now, she encourages other parents in her neighborhood to support their children to read.

"I like the Read Liberia Activity because they gave my children books that they bring home to read," Dunnor said. Though they themselves do not read, both Dunnor and Bawo said their children read to them. The couple's front porch is one of a dozen reading spaces created in Margibi County.

Parents credit the SBC campaign for promoting reading at home. Rev. Charles Kpehay is a Community Mobilizer and created a reading space in Montserrado County for close to 30 grade 1 and grade 2 learners. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, regular sessions were held every Monday and Wednesday for the children to read and be read to. When public gatherings were banned because of the pandemic, Rev. Kpehay began visiting homes in the community to encourage parents to read to their children and listen to the Ministry of Education (MOE) Teaching by Radio program. Rev. Kpehay shared "The parents are really happy about this... Before Read Liberia, most of them were sending their children to sell or work on the farm."



Testing peer education materials with parents of a Read Liberia school, Goba Town Public School in Todee District, Montserrado. Photo Credit RTI.

To expand the SBC campaign, Read Liberia conducted

a mapping exercise of community-based organizations (CBOs), civil society organizations, and nongovernmental organizations to identify additional opportunities to encourage and support EGR. As a result, community leaders and parents established even more reading spaces for after-school reading in town halls, palava (resolution) huts, churches, and other places.

For example, in Bassa Town, Kakata, Margibi County, the Community Commissioner donated a building to create a reading space where children can visit after school to practice reading, access books, and be mentored by volunteers.



Gifts provided to learners by private partners during a reading event. Photo Credit RTI.

As part of Read Liberia's Public-Private Partnerships program, 16 local businesses agreed to provide direct support to Read Liberia community-based EGR events. These public events showcased the reading skills of Read Liberia learners, and private businesses contributed prizes, spaces, and refreshments for participants.



A SCM supervisor engages with a local pharmacy manager about supporting EGR in Foya County. Photo Credit RTI.

In March 2020, in response to COVID-19, the Government of Liberia closed schools and restricted public gatherings. However, the work of the Community Mobilizers did not stop. Instead, they pivoted from

meeting face-to-face with community members to engaging virtually; in addition to continuing to promote reading activities in the home, they encouraged families to listen to the MOE Teaching by Radio programming. When schools reopened in December 2020, Community Mobilizers worked with communities, district leaders, and private businesses to support the return of children to school. They held virtual meetings with 990 community members in the 320 targeted school communities, and they worked with PTAs, District Education Officers, and school administrators to put in place flexible payment terms that would allow parents to meet their financial obligations to schools.



Children regularly listened to the MOE Teaching by Radio programs. Photo credit: Osei Tutu Gbasakollie.

As a result of these efforts, three school communities in Nimba County—Nanlah, Lepula, and Nyor Diaplay—participated in town hall meetings to facilitate reading activities for children whose parents lack the skills to help them practice reading or who do not have time to read with their children. Similarly, following extensive community engagement by Read Liberia in Barlorplay, Nimba County, learners gained a safe, practical space to sit and read after the PTA procured three office desks and 72 armchairs.

In Montserrado County, parents collaborated with other community members to construct a three-classroom annex structure at the Saye Gono Public School in Gono Town, levying a tax on themselves (L\$250, roughly US\$1.50, per parent). The amount raised was used to cover supplies and labor costs for construction.

What Lessons Can We Draw from the Community Mobilization Activities?

From December 2019 through July/August 2021,¹ Read Liberia conducted a study to determine the impact of these community mobilization activities on caregivers' and teachers' behaviors.

Caregiver Exposure to Messages, Knowledge of EGR, and EGR Support to Their Children

As a result of the SBC campaign, caregivers reported greater awareness of how to support their children's reading. More caregivers also reported providing different types of reading support to their children, including increased time to practice reading at home. In 2019, caregivers mentioned doing on average 1.5 things with their children to promote reading; by 2021, this had increased to 2.6 different things. It should be noted that this increase was found during and after COVID-19 restrictions on social gatherings.

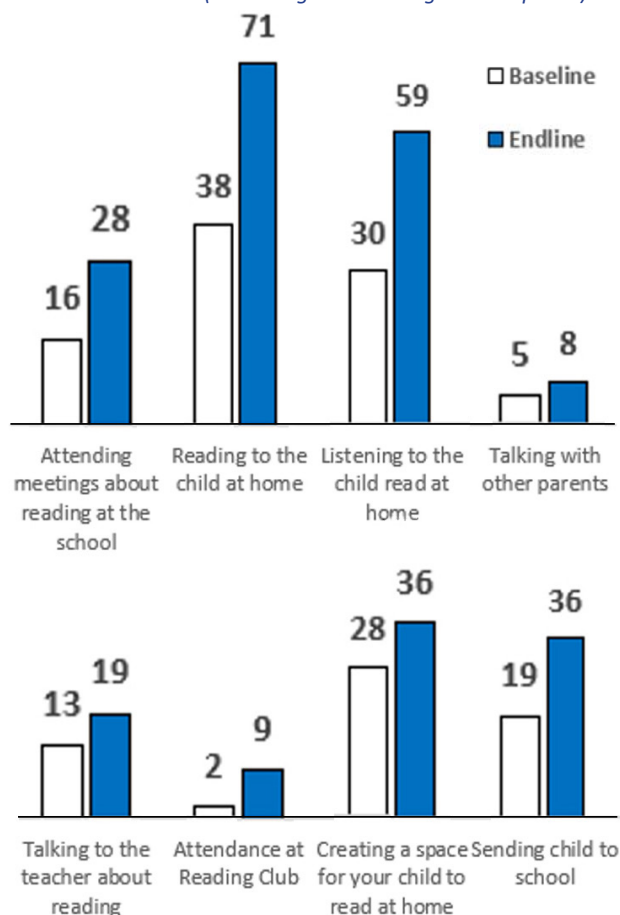
By endline, 71% of caregivers mentioned “reading to the child at home” —up from 38% at baseline

Positive behavior changes persisted among caregivers and were also found in schools that had stopped receiving community mobilization visits a year prior to data collection.



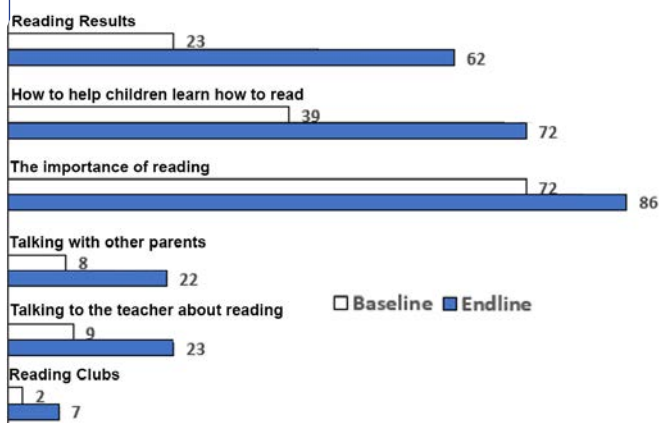
A mother helps her child with reading at her shop. Photo Credit RTI.

Figure 1: What are things one can do as a parent to help a child learn to read? (Percentage mentioning each response)



Read Liberia also saw an increase in the percentage of caregivers who reported attending a PTA or CBO meeting where reading was discussed and, in particular, where the Read Liberia EGR program was discussed.

Figure 2: Percentage of caregivers hearing reading messages at PTA meetings

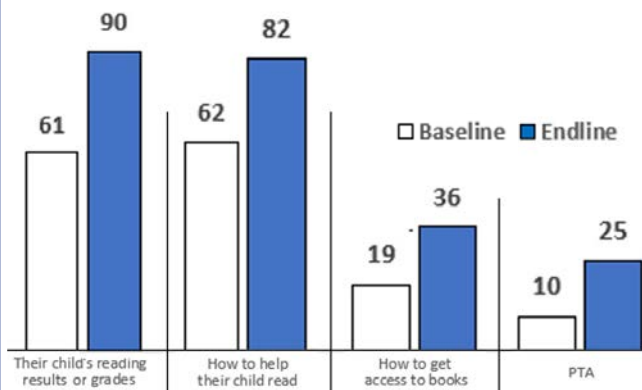


¹Data for this impact evaluation were collected at three points in time. Baseline data were collected from December 2019 through January 2020, midline data were collected in February 2021, and endline data were collected from July through August 2021.

Teacher Exposure To Messages And Their Perceptions About Caregiver Support For EGR

Teachers’ knowledge of how caregivers can support their children’s reading also increased over time, and teachers reported that caregivers were more likely to want to discuss reading-related topics during their meetings as a result of the SBC activities. For example, the percentage of teachers who reported that caregivers wanted to discuss “their child’s reading results or grades” increased from 61% in 2019 to 90% in 2021.

Figure 3: What (reading-related) topics did the parent want to talk to the teacher about? (Percentage of teachers reporting each topic)

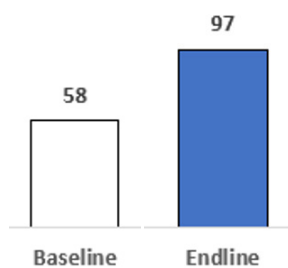


PTA And CBO Support for EGR

The Read Liberia SBC Communication Plan calls for strengthening the ability of PTAs and CBOs to support caregivers and communities, who will then be better able to support their children’s learning. Therefore, PTA and CBO representatives were interviewed about the support they provided to various caregivers and teachers.

Caregivers and PTA representatives were more likely to report attending a reading-related CBO event in 2021 compared to 2019. In addition, the PTA and CBO meetings that occurred as a result of Read Liberia activities seemed to be richer and included more discussion of crucial aspects of EGR (including reading results and how to help children learn to read).

Figure 4: Percentage of CBOs who conducted a community reading event in the past year



For example, in 2019, 58% of CBO representatives reported conducting an event in the community with caregivers and/or children about reading; in 2021, this figure had increased to 97%.

Conclusion

Caregiver and community support for early grade reading have increased in the districts where Read Liberia’s community mobilization activities have been taking place. There is substantial room for growth, but it is encouraging that even with the impact of a global pandemic Read Liberia’s community activities have had an impact on caregiver beliefs and behaviors, all of which are important in helping their children learn to read.



Mother congratulates son on reading. Photo Credit RTI.

More Information:

The USAID Read Liberia Activity is a five-year (September 2017–September 2022) program that aims at improving EGR skills for Liberian learners in 640 public schools in grades 1 and 2. Read Liberia also pilot tested a program to develop emergent literacy skills for Liberian learners 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 USAID and implemented by RTI International with subcontractors Another Option, Brattle Publishing Group, and DEEP through direct partnership with the Liberian MOE.

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

This report is made possible by the generous support of the American people through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) under the Read Liberia Activity. The contents are the responsibility of RTI International and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the United States Government.

