

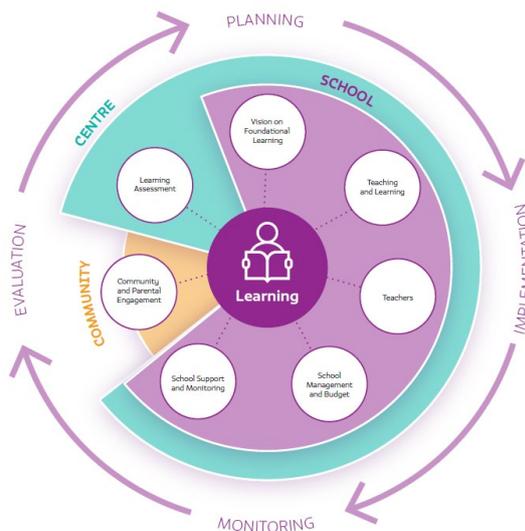
# All children in the Democratic Republic of the Congo are born to learn

Universal basic education completion and foundational learning are two steppingstones for more advanced skills that support economic and social development and lead to more equitable and inclusive societies.

However, today, one in five children of primary school age in Africa remain out of school, one in three children do not complete primary school on time and one in four never complete it. Only around one in two children in rural areas and one in three among the poorest complete primary school.

Data on learning are patchy. The best estimate is that, at most, about one in five primary school-age children achieve minimum proficiency in reading and mathematics and that progress over time is half as fast as in the rest of the world. Children in Africa are five times less likely to learn the basics than in the rest of the world.

## Analytical framework



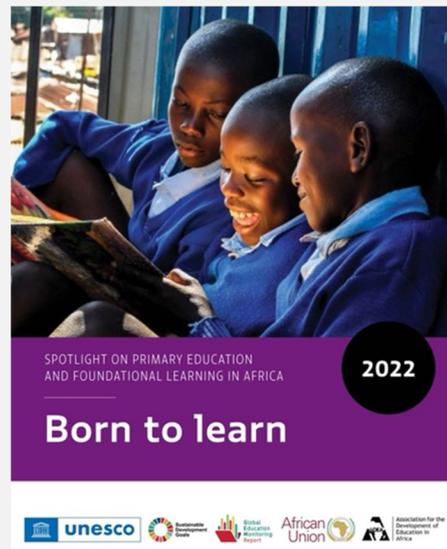
An analytical framework that addresses these challenges considers seven factors, each of which can play a key role in improving foundational learning outcomes – national vision, from the ministry to the learner; teaching and learning; teachers; school management; school support and monitoring; community and parental engagement; and learning assessment – and help remove a major barrier to basic education completion.

Adapted to the political economy context in which education system change occurs, this framework was used to identify the priorities for the Democratic Republic of the Congo report.

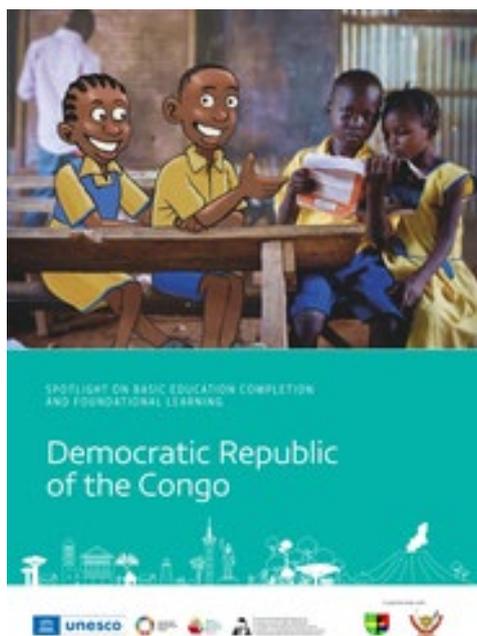
## Born to Learn

**Born to Learn** is the first continental report of the three-part Spotlight series on universal basic education completion and foundational learning in Africa, a collaboration between the Global Education Monitoring Report, the Association for the Development of Education in Africa and the African Union.

Launched in October 2022, it draws on five country reports: Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ghana, Mozambique, Rwanda and Senegal.



## Key evidence from the Democratic Republic of the Congo



The country report was based on a review of the literature, analysis of data on attendance, completion and learning, and fieldwork which provided valuable insights. The country report was developed by the University of Kisangani and produced in partnership with the Ministère de l'enseignement primaire, secondaire et technique (MEPST, Ministry of Primary, Secondary and Technical Education).

Drawing on inputs from stakeholders at the subnational (four provinces) and national levels, the report's relevance was ensured through stakeholder consultations. At the subnational level, perspectives were shared by teachers, parent associations, school leaders and provincial officials. At the national level, views were gathered from 16 participants including directorate and ministry representatives, the Secrétariat permanent d'appui et de coordination du secteur de l'éducation (SPACE, Permanent Secretariat for Education Sector Support and Coordination) and the Cellule indépendante d'évaluation des acquis scolaires (CIEAS, Independent School Performance Assessment Unit), provincial education authorities, and representatives of civil society, teacher unions, private schools and parents.

Analytical findings and recommendations from the Democratic Republic of the Congo report are summarized to inform actions by civil society organizations as they advocate for the prioritization of foundational

learning with policymakers and practitioners.

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*Key finding: Fee-free basic education has resulted in progress in school attendance, but basic learning outcomes remain low with multiple challenges persisting.*

**Enrolment and completion:** Since 2016, the Democratic Republic of the Congo has committed to ambitious reforms, especially with the introduction of free basic education (gratuité). Progress has been made in terms of primary school attendance: the primary gross enrolment ratio exceeds 100%. However, late entry and high repetition result in a primary net enrolment rate of 69% and 3.5 million children out of school. The primary education completion rate increased from 32% in 2000 to 47% in 2010 and 58% in 2020. Accounting for the large percentage of overage enrolment, one of the largest in the continent, 82% completed primary school in 2020. These projections are based on surveys carried out before the free basic education policy and the onset of COVID-19.

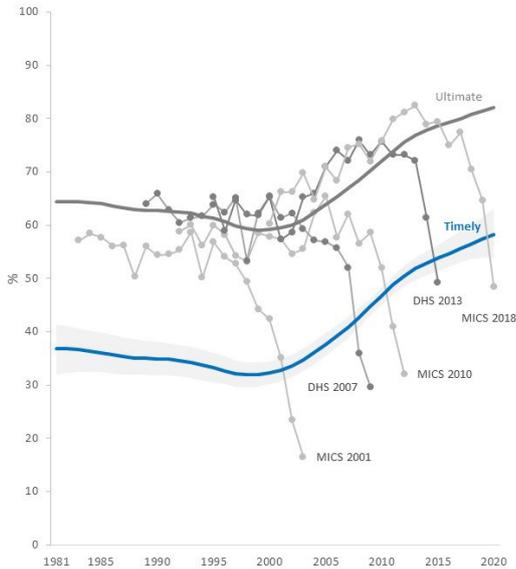
**Learning:** The overall quality of education remains very low. Multiple challenges persist, including insufficient funding, lack of equipment, dilapidated buildings, overcrowding due to increased enrolment, poor opportunities for teacher professional development, and low, often delayed or even unpaid teacher salaries. Language has become a major subject in the primary school curriculum, a national reading roadmap has been developed, and performance standards for reading in French and in the four national languages have been established. However, poor student skills at both the beginning and end of primary school have been observed. The 2019 PASEC learning assessment found that only 27% of students achieved the minimum level of proficiency at the end of primary school.

**Policy reforms:** With the development of the Stratégie sectorielle de l'éducation et de la formation (SSEF, Education and Training Sector Strategy) in 2016, the government showed willingness to transform the education system, which has been plagued by challenges since the 1970s. The budget allocated to education since SSEF implementation began increased. In addition to making education a national priority, the President, in his inauguration speech on 24 January 2019, stressed that, in accordance with the Constitution, basic education must be free. Free primary education was introduced in the 2019/20 school year. Despite the challenges it has posed, the policy enabled around 2.5 million more children to go to school in its first year of application. However, among 10 reforms recommended in the SSEF, free education is the one that has received most political attention.



**FIGURE 1**

**Primary completion rate, Democratic Republic of the Congo, 1981-2020**



Note: DHS = Demographic and Health Survey; MICS = Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey.

Source: UNESCO country completion rate estimates, <https://education-estimates.org/completion/country>.

**Two positive practices** were singled out during the research in the Democratic Republic of the Congo to inform peer learning with other countries:

- **Increased parental involvement** in school operations since the 1990s. This includes various different initiatives in schools to provide advice on school management issues, pastoral support to children, and community resource mobilization for repairs and construction of new classrooms.
- **Two approaches to professionalizing teacher training** including (i) streamlining of teaching programmes in upper secondary education by strengthening teaching practice; and (ii) setting up post-secondary teacher training institutes.

## LEARN

Marking the launch of the first Spotlight continental report, the **Leveraging Education Analysis for Results Network (LEARN)** was launched by the African Union in October 2022 to encourage African countries to share positive practices on foundational learning.

LEARN will work with three clusters of the Continental Education Strategy for Africa 2016-25 – curriculum, teacher development and planning – to catalyse cross-cluster collaboration to focus on foundational learning and basic education completion.





**Recommendation 4:** The Democratic Republic of the Congo Spotlight report calls for the government to produce and disseminate textbooks and other educational materials that are aligned with the curriculum and adapted to reflect local languages. The government needs to develop a clear plan for producing textbooks and disseminating them in schools for all subjects. Moreover, the financial and technical partners, in collaboration with the government, should ensure that reading textbooks are adapted to capture the variants of national languages.

Despite the support of the Accès, lecture, rétention et redevabilité (ACCELERE!, Access, Reading, Retention and Accountability) and Projet d'amélioration de la qualité de l'éducation (PAQUE, Education Quality Improvement Project) projects in strengthening the supply chain for teaching and learning materials, the literature review and fieldwork showed that textbooks and other teaching materials are almost non-existent, of poor quality and sometimes not aligned with the curriculum or adapted to the multiple variants of Congolese languages.

*"[M]any textbooks do not correspond to the national programme. This means that some subjects are not covered." Teacher*



### Links to resources

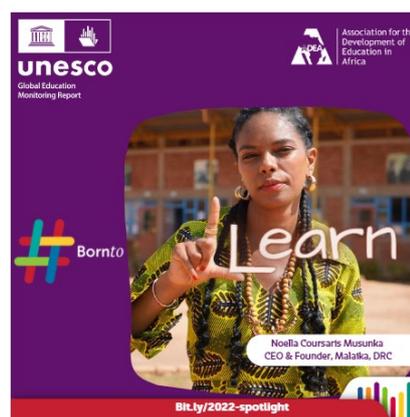
Spotlight national [report](#) on the Democratic Republic of the Congo

Democratic Republic of the Congo [social media resources](#)

Spotlight 2022 continental report [Born to Learn](#) and [video](#)

## Join the #BorntoLearn campaign

[Join our campaign](#) by preparing a photo of yourself signing up for learning by spelling out the letter 'L' with your thumb and forefinger. If you want to put it into a campaign template, [use this link](#), uploading your photo on the left hand menu and pulling it into the card. Or you can post your photo as it is.



# Spotlight recommendations for Africa

## **Recommendation 1: Give all children a textbook.**

*Ensure that all children have teaching materials that are research-based and locally developed.*

One of the most underappreciated challenges children face in Africa – and a strong sign that public policy has not accorded foundational learning sufficient priority – is the low availability of textbooks. No child can learn to read and do basic mathematics without a textbook, especially when most homes own few books. A panel of international experts recently classified textbooks as a ‘bad buy’, an ‘additional input’ that will not be effective alone if other issues are not addressed. But this misguided conclusion may hint at the inability of external assistance to help countries develop sustainable national textbook production and distribution policies. The fact is that bringing textbooks and supplementary reading materials into the hands of every child for free is the best buy education systems can make and must be done as a matter of urgency.

It is true that early grade textbooks in circulation in Africa are often not fit for the purpose of helping children acquire foundational learning skills. Burdened with unnecessary information, insufficiently researched and poorly illustrated, current textbooks tend to be poorly linked with pedagogical approaches associated with improved literacy and numeracy. They are not based on evidence. Given how little students are learning in most African countries, it is essential for early grade textbooks to be reviewed and revised so as to align with efforts to improve, simplify and refocus the curriculum and teacher training. They need not only to be based on cognitive science, but also to be developed locally, with substantive teacher participation. Their use should be evaluated regularly to enable continuing improvement. Although textbook development is strictly a national prerogative, there are potential benefits from closer collaboration among countries in early grade textbook research and development, especially in terms of pooling resources and expertise.

## **Recommendation 2: Teach all children in their home language.**

*Give all children the opportunity to first learn to read in a language they understand.*

Language issues are complex in every country, as they are intertwined with equity, inclusion, confidence, dignity and identity. In Africa, history has left an indelible mark on education development, as the vast majority of children are taught in a language they do not speak at home, which slows early acquisition of reading and writing proficiency or can even prevent it outright. The use of a child’s first or home language for up to six or eight years, alongside the introduction of a second one initially as a subject and later as a parallel medium of instruction, is widely considered the most effective policy, improving outcomes not only in the home language but also in the second language and other subjects.

In practice, there are considerable challenges in implementing such policies. Internal migration means urban populations are increasingly mixed, with linguistically homogeneous populations more likely to be limited to rural areas. Rural populations are often suspicious of home language policies, concerned that they deliberately try to exclude their group from economic opportunities, even if the policies are intended to strengthen children’s inclusion and sense of belonging. When home language policies are pursued, often uptake is limited, or schools partially or imperfectly implement them. Teachers may not be from the local community and thus not speak the local language. Even those who do may not have been trained appropriately, lack access to teaching and learning materials in the language or be sceptical about the value of the approach. Problems in implementation also make policymakers lose confidence and mistakenly blame the policy for a lack of results. None of these obstacles should dampen governments’ resolve to apply bilingual instruction for as long as possible. The policies need to be deployed flexibly and respond to context. Governments need to strongly support and actively communicate bilingual education policies to demonstrate their commitment to this foundation of education quality and equity.

## **Recommendation 3: Provide all children with a school meal.**

*Give all children the minimum conditions to learn at school.*

Minimum conditions that help children focus and make the most of their time in school are yet to be reached in many African countries. From derelict, hot and overcrowded classrooms to lack of safety, water and sanitation, the list of obstacles to learning across the continent is endless. But above all, children cannot learn if they are hungry. One in three children in Africa are too short for their age, a sign of malnutrition, disease and inadequate stimulation at home. Although the early years are crucial, the potential of school feeding to make up for some early disadvantage is considerable. Yet only one in three primary school students in Africa receive a school meal. Governments have relied extensively on external assistance for meal programmes over the years, with only a few turning them into nationally funded and owned programmes. Both governments and their development partners must continue to expand and institutionalize school canteens, preferably emphasizing homegrown and locally purchased meals, which are



sustainable, nutritious and engage communities. As climate change is likely to increasingly affect agriculture, governments need to design their school meal programmes to be ready to help regions vulnerable to natural disasters.

#### **Recommendation 4: Make a clear plan to improve learning.**

*Define learning standards, set targets and monitor outcomes to inform the national vision.*

Curriculum expectations of early grade reading are not well defined in many African education systems. Standards need to be developed for the skills children should master by each grade, and these standards should be the basis for teacher preparation, teaching practices and textbook design. Standards should be monitored through an integrated national assessment programme, from the classroom to the national level. The system needs to inform communities, teachers, and local and central administrators whether standards are met and, if not, what areas require attention. Monitoring of standards must enable progress to be measured over time.

The resulting data should be used to set national policy targets for the percentage of students who are to achieve proficiency levels, and to understand the characteristics of those who do not achieve them. Defining ambitious but realistic targets and communicating them at all levels, including to teachers and parents, is a crucial part of mobilizing actors to improve learning outcomes. Countries which have succeeded in improving learning outcomes have done so through strong political leadership guided by evidence-based targets. The national SDG 4 benchmarks are the starting point; many countries will need to revisit them as better information is collected. In that respect, national assessment systems, which are fragile in countries with low capacity, could benefit from participating in one of the two regional assessment programmes, PASEC and SACMEQ. Given the challenges both programmes have faced, the possibility of closer collaboration and pooling of resources between the two needs to be explored.

#### **Recommendation 5: Develop teacher capacity.**

*Ensure all teachers use classroom time effectively through training and teacher guides.*

The heart of the challenge of improving learning outcomes in Africa is teacher capacity to impart foundational skills, now too often inadequate. Such capacity is often underestimated: Teaching at lower grades is as complex as teaching at higher grades, if not more so. Yet preparation to teach in early grades is largely absent from initial teacher education programmes. Unsuitable pedagogical methodologies include excessive reliance on repetition and information recall. Inefficient use of classroom time compounds the perennial problem of limited contact hours, which the pandemic exacerbated.

Governments embarking on policies that improve curricula and textbooks need to invest heavily in teacher guides to make up for the fact that even the best initial teacher education reforms will take a long time to reach students. Teacher guides in most countries provide an inadequate basis of support for teachers whose initial training has been weak and who have limited professional development opportunities. The guides need to be upgraded to be aligned with new textbooks, provide a solid basis for lesson planning, steer teachers to assess learning in classrooms, encourage them to develop their own teaching and learning materials and help them not just follow instructions mechanically but adapt flexibly to diverse classroom circumstances.

#### **Recommendation 6: Prepare instructional leaders.**

*Restructure support mechanisms offered to teachers and schools.*

Arguably the most neglected education policy area is the selection and development of education leaders at the school and district levels. Governments that develop a vision focused on improving foundational learning need to communicate it to middle managers in the education system so that they become the instructional leaders who will implement the necessary pedagogical reforms. School leaders need to be selected on the basis of merit, associated with commitment to develop all children's potential and ability to inspire others to do so. They need to be able to coach struggling teachers, create an atmosphere in which teachers can learn from each other, be efficient at managing resource constraints and effectively communicate with the community. They also need to understand changes in curricula, textbooks and assessment methods.

The same expectations should hold for district education officers. This is often a bigger challenge, as they are more distant from the teaching and learning realities of schools. Yet they need to fulfil the sensitive role of being schools' channel of information on new developments. District education officers need to be assigned clear responsibilities, including a focus on learning outcomes. While some daring governance reforms are under way in Africa to increase district education officers' accountability for delivering better results, the policies needed most are those that would instil in these professionals a sense of purpose linked to the national vision.

#### **Recommendation 7: Learn from peers.**

*Reinvigorate mechanisms allowing countries to share experiences on foundational literacy and numeracy.*



Progress towards improved learning outcomes for young children in Africa requires continued civil society pressure to place the issue at the top of the political agenda. Until recently, governments have been reluctant to make this challenge a political priority. Data on learning tend to merely present a bleak picture without showing what governments can do and how fast their actions can lead to improved learning. Ultimately, there is a need for a positive narrative on what countries have done to prepare children for the future, which can create an incentive for governments to learn from each other's experiences.

A peer learning mechanism using a cluster-based approach has been developed in recent years to promote achievement of the African Union's Continental Education Strategy for Africa 2016–25. However, this mechanism has been under-resourced. Few clusters focus on primary education and, in the absence of monitoring, no agenda items related to foundational learning have been brought to the attention of African heads of state. By contrast, other policy areas, such as health and gender equality, have featured regularly on summit programmes. It is necessary to seize the opportunity to orient the education peer learning mechanism to foundational learning. Underpinned by evidence and supported by a dashboard of policies applied throughout the continent, this mechanism would strengthen countries' resolve for change.

### **Recommendation 8: Focus aid on institution building.**

*Shift from projects to provision of public goods that support foundational learning.*

While development assistance is declining as a source of financing for African countries in quantitative terms, it still exerts considerable influence as a source of ideas that can trigger change in education. However, this potential is often squandered. Increasing emphasis on short-term results and ill-conceived notions of value for money has moved funding towards discrete earmarked projects, resulting in increased setup costs and reduced coherence. This report has referred to examples of good practice in donor-supported reform programmes that are wide-ranging in scope, embedded in national policy and based on extensive consultation. At the same time, it has pointed out proponents of foundational learning who work outside government systems, reducing the scope for national solutions and undermining sustainability. Few donors have evaluated the overall success of their operations, rather than individual projects' impact, in relation to improving learning outcomes.

A review of donor-funded support to learning assessments shows continuing malaise in delivering results. Information on what assessments have been supported is lacking. Coordination of planning support to assessments has likewise been absent: Resources have not been directed to develop national institutions, encourage the use of results in policy or enable countries to report internationally comparable statistics. Instead, there has been a focus on short-term collection of data which often are not even shared with governments and the international community but remain with service providers. The precarious funding situation of the two major regional cross-national assessment programmes is a major cause for concern. Donors should review their programming, improve coherence and dedicate more of their efforts to institution building to deliver key building blocks for improved foundational learning outcomes: textbooks, teacher guides, teacher and education leader capacity development, and assessment – all geared towards pedagogical reform.

