



**LINK**  
EDUCATION

## Link Education's Approach to Evidence-based School Improvement: Link's School Performance Review model



### About Link

Link Education is Scotland's leading international education charity, working to improve education for children and communities in some of the poorest rural areas of Ethiopia, Malawi and Uganda, and helping thousands of people escape the cycle of poverty. We focus on enhancing teaching and learning in schools, as well as building life-skills and promoting inclusion for the most marginalised. Our vision is one where all children have access to good quality education, giving them hope and a strong foundation for a brighter future. We take both a top-down and bottom-up approach to transform education, supporting broad system and school-wide improvements while recognising the need for more tailored, localised support to overcome specific challenges.

### Background

Access to accurate data empowers communities, schools and local government to improve the quality of education and the way schools' function. It is widely recognised that improving the capacity of Ministries of Education to collect, analyse and use data is key to improving learning outcomes.<sup>1</sup>

'Better data and indicators are crucial for accelerating the fight against learning poverty' - in *The State of Global Learning Poverty 2022 Update*<sup>2</sup> the World Bank, UNESCO, UNICEF, FCDO, USAID, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation emphasise that data on student learning is essential to enable policy-makers, school administrators and teachers to know whether the actions they take to improve learning are succeeding.

This priority is echoed by national governments. Malawi's Joint Sector Review of Education set 'evidence-informed decision and policy making' as one of its six key goals for 2022 and lists the priority to 'strengthen data and accountability system for mutual partner accountability on learning outcomes' as a 'game-changer'.<sup>3</sup> Uganda's Education and Sports Sector Strategic Plan 2020/21-2024/25 identifies strengthening the Education Management Information System (EMIS) to support evidence-based planning and decision making as one of the key emerging issues to be addressed in the next five years.<sup>4</sup>

As governments worldwide made efforts to reach Education for All goals by 2015, the value of working with communities, of sharing responsibility for reaching the goals, and of

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<sup>1</sup> *Facing Forward: Schooling for Learning in Africa* (2018) IIEP, World Bank [Facing Forward presentation - IIEP Strategic Debate- Overcoming Africa's learning crisis.pdf](#)

<sup>2</sup> *The State of Global Learning Poverty 2022 Update* World Bank, UNESCO, Unicef, FCDO, USAID, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation [Learning-poverty-report-2022-06-21-final-v7-0-conferenceEdition.pdf](#)

<sup>3</sup> 2022 JSR MoE Strategic Approach to Education Transformation PPT

<sup>4</sup> *Education and Sports Sector Strategic Plan 2020/21-2024/25* (2020) Uganda Ministry of Education and Sports [Education Sector Strategic Plan - Uganda.pdf](#)

increasing ownership was increasingly recognised. FCDO and the World Bank argue that providing information to parents on the benefits, cost, and quality of education is a low-cost way of improving attendance and learning. In order to be effective, the information must be specific, locally-relevant, of decent quality, and from a trusted source. The method of sharing the information must also be tailored to the country's specific needs.<sup>5</sup>

FCDO and World Bank further argue that community involvement in school management such as providing feedback to schools or collecting data on teacher or student performance, **can** be effective in improving education **if** communities have the capacity to hold schools accountable. As the Hewlett Foundation states, data on service delivery must be assembled, shared and collectively interpreted in order for citizens to hold governments accountable.<sup>6</sup> See also our [Community Engagement Approach Paper](#).

However, reliable information is not always available and management skills to make the required changes are often lacking. The lack of learning data is particularly acute in sub-Saharan Africa, where 24 countries lack any learning poverty estimates, and sometimes there are questions about the reliability of the available data.<sup>7</sup> In addition, data is often not shared with community members in a way which enables them to hold schools and governments accountable for the quality of education they provide. In a review of community-school management interventions, the International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie) found that only models which were 'comprehensive' i.e. included the development of school improvement plans, capacity-building, some decentralisation of financial decision-making, and reports on school performance shared with the community, were effective in improving school quality.<sup>8</sup>



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<sup>5</sup> *Cost Effective Approaches to Improve Global Learning* (2020) World Bank, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, and Building Evidence in Education [Cost-Effective-Approaches-to-Improve-Global-Learning-What-Does-Recent-Ev....pdf](#)

<sup>6</sup> Transparency, Participation, and Accountability Grant-Making Strategy (2015) The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation [Hewlett - GDP TransparencyParticipationandAccountabilityweb.pdf](#)

<sup>7</sup> *The State of Global Learning Poverty 2022 Update*

<sup>8</sup> *The impact of education programmes on learning and school participation in low- and middle-income countries: a systematic review summary report, 3ie Systematic Review Summary 7* (2016) 3ie [3iii - report on what works.srs7-education-report.2016.pdf](#)

## Overall Approach

The school performance review is Link's approach to supporting evidence-based school improvement and is one of our core activities. It measures individual school performance against national indicators of education quality, and supports schools to meet their annual planning obligations in order to receive government grants. Data is collected by stakeholders and transformed into an accessible format that community members understand. This empowers them to tailor their school improvement plans to address specific challenges, increases ownership, and enables efficient use of scarce resources. This approach has been successfully adapted and adopted in all our partner countries.

[Watch our video introduction to School Performance Review](#)



We work with Ministries of Education to **develop indicators of school performance and data collection tools** which are aligned with national policies and standards. We support governments to **refine their indicators** so they accurately capture all aspects which affect school performance, such as inclusive teaching for girls and children with disabilities, community engagement, and children's safety. We **train and support** district and national education staff to **collect data in schools** using these indicators and tools, to **input and analyse the data**, and to **develop school performance review reports** at different levels of the system, including schools and whole districts.

We facilitate **community social accountability monitoring in the form of a school performance appraisal meeting**, where community members, parents, learners and all stakeholders come together to discuss the school's strengths and weaknesses, and using the evidence-based reports, set the priorities for **school improvement plans**. School-level plans and data from schools across the district are used by officials in local government to inform their own **planning and allocation of resources**, enabling integrated district planning based

on evidence of schools' needs. Once the plans are signed off, sometimes in a formal process such as an annual planning meeting or **District Education Conference**, everyone works to **implement the plans and achieve the targets** they have set.

Within an agreed period, **the cycle begins again** to assess progress and set new improvement targets.

The cycle fits within government planning structures and is adaptable according to specific circumstances, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the climate emergency. During an emergency situation, the government can prioritise the use of certain performance indicators for affected schools, which enables schools, communities and the district government to focus on immediate challenges within an established education quality framework. For example, during a flood event, the school performance review could focus on indicators that relate to the school environment. The school performance appraisal meeting may prioritise an action that calls for tree planting. Funds from the school budget could then be assigned to this within the school improvement plan, while data from the affected school will be shared across other district departments, which might release further funds for natural resources and adaptation schemes. See also our [Climate Change Approach Paper](#).

## Experience

### MALAWI – Developing Indicators and Tools, analysing and using data

Using school performance review data we supported the development of Malawi's first ever National Education Standards – a set of minimum requirements for teaching, learning, school leadership, community participation and child protection. We provided technical assistance to government inspectors and advisors and built capacity in data management and analysis. A database and accompanying mobile app now assist the government in understanding how schools are performing against the National Education Standards, enabling targeted delivery of resources. This process is included in the Handbooks and Manuals for the Inspection and Advisory Services, and forms part of the training for school inspectors and advisors.

**“Link’s data collection system enables the ministry to make meaningful decisions to improve learning outcomes. We collect data, analyse and produce reports to show what’s happening at school level and see how they need to improve.”**  
- Ministry Director, Malawi

[Read about the long-term impact of school performance review in Malawi.](#)

### ETHIOPIA – Training District Officials

In Ethiopia, both “cluster supervisors” and “woreda education experts” at district level are playing a key role in the entire school improvement cycle. Link works closely with the zonal and regional education bureau to provide detailed guidance and training to district education staff. District staff then orient headteachers, school community structures, teachers and students on how to lead the school improvement process.



Once the school level stakeholders have developed and started to implement the plans, the cluster supervisor and woreda education experts regularly monitor the schools' accomplishments, and coach and mentor headteachers, teachers and others on the areas which need their attention and support. In doing so, they are working closely with the school leadership, the school teachers, the school community structures and other concerned bodies.

## UGANDA – Community Social Accountability Monitoring (School Performance Appraisal Meeting)



In 2019 we supported district education staff to undertake school reviews at 100 state primary schools. The results revealed that just 45.5% of schools met minimum national leadership standards; many schools struggled with low attendance and retention; and most of the Parent Teacher Associations or community-led School Management Committees lacked the agency or knowledge to hold duty bearers accountable. Frustration was common at all levels of the system.

Through this project, School Management Committees and Parent Teacher Associations gained a greater understanding of what was happening in their schools. We saw a number of these groups step up to meet critical school needs, often from their own pockets.

Following Link's intervention, more schools adopted a management model involving school improvement plans, resulting in increased accountability between school leaders and the community. Headteachers and government staff are more transparent about their use of funds and activities, whilst communities commit to supporting their school.

*"We monitor activities in terms of use of resources. If the headteacher says he or she needs counter books, we verify and approve the purchase. When [state] money comes, we allow the headteacher and his team to sit and plan for this money, and then share his workplan and budget with the management for approval. He then presents [these] before we approve the funds."* School Management Committee Chairperson

Parental groups in two project schools introduced feeding programmes to encourage learners back to classes after COVID-induced lockdowns, and to help with financial hardships experienced by many. Teachers also received meals so they could increase time spent with pupils.

To address the issue of girls being targeted by sexual violence when travelling to school, Kitana Primary School built a dormitory for girls, and parents erected a fence around the school to curb unauthorized access. In two other examples, school management committees demanded change from their district education office when their headteacher was performing poorly, and when there were no female teachers within the staff team.

[Find out more](#) about how this impacted the quality of education in Ugandan schools.