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IMPROVING READING IN ETHIOPIA

“Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.” – *Nelson Mandela, Launch of Mindset Network, Johannesburg, South Africa, July 16, 2003*

In the past 10 years, Ethiopia has made tremendous progress to increase access to primary education. Today, almost 19 million children, or nearly one-fifth of Ethiopia’s population, are now enrolled in primary school (grades -8) — a 157 percent increase since 2000. Unfortunately, the positive achievement of getting more children into school has strained the capacity of the system, and student learning has suffered. Before we began national teacher training in 2014, most teachers had little experience with modern pedagogy or research-based reading instruction, and many classrooms had few high quality printed materials. In the past three years, in close partnership with the Ministry of Education and as a result of our leadership and influence with other donors, we have developed, printed and distributed more than 32 million textbooks written in the seven most common local languages and trained more than 150,000 teachers.

Still today, due to household and farm responsibilities, many students attend just half a day of school, greatly reducing their time in schools and with their teachers. Combined with a lack of school libraries and printed materials and insufficient support for teachers, many students do not have the chance to acquire the basic foundational skills to successfully advance through middle and upper grades. National learning assessments reveal that student learning at grades 4 and 8 does not meet national standards. Our own Early Grade Reading Assessments in 2014 suggests that just 29 percent of third grade students in Ethiopia can comprehend a short reading passage. As a result, the Ministry of Education, we and other donors have prioritized improving the quality of education as Ethiopia’s most pressing educational challenge.

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PROGRAM GOALS

Increasing early grade reading skills enables children to become better learners in higher grades and decreases school dropouts and repetition – thereby contributing to a more cost-effective system. Because Ethiopia has largely succeeded in providing universal access to primary school, we are focused on assisting the Government in its endeavors to improve student achievement. We help children gain improved reading fluency and comprehension by:

- Focusing on early grade reading and writing — the foundation for future learning — so students’ fluency and comprehension increases throughout primary school
- Address students’ diverse educational needs, especially those of girls and vulnerable
- Support youth workforce development, in collaboration with our agriculture and private sector development efforts, through community-based programs in literacy, numeracy, and life skills

Ethiopia’s social and economic development will not progress without an enhanced focus on girls’ education. We ensure that books and materials produced with U.S. taxpayer assistance are gender neutral and positively support girls and boys. Our education activities are inclusive and allow students with special needs to participate and learn alongside their peers.

ACTIVITIES

We, in collaboration with the Ministry of Education and regional state education bureaus, have revised the primary school reading curriculum and developed textbooks, supplementary reading materials, teacher’s guides and training manuals in seven local languages. Both pre-service and in-service teacher training uses these new textbooks and teacher training manuals. We also support:

- Supporting colleges of teacher education to improve the teaching of reading and English
- Developing research-based training to help teachers improve classroom instruction
- Involving parents and community members to promote reading and writing
- Developing and distributing several assessment tools for teachers and administrators to better track student progress and build institutional capacity
- Improving reading rooms and libraries while supporting extracurricular activities in communities

EXPECTED RESULTS

We are working to improve the reading skills of 15 million primary school learners. We support the Ministry of Education to conduct a biennial 3rd grade Early Grade Reading Assessment in seven local languages and English as well as 4th grade learning assessments to evaluate the impact of our interventions.