

Transforming Foundational Learning in Mali: Research to Scale



Built through collaborative, iterative research-to-design, Mali's National Bilingual Education Strategy is transforming foundational learning for children in one of the world's most challenging educational environments. Learners, teachers, and communities are benefitting from research-based investments in literacy, numeracy, SEL, and science as the basis for social stability and economic growth.

Mali's National Bilingual Education Strategy has been building to scale since 2008, maintaining focus through interruptions caused by instability and resource gaps. Programming under the strategy has national reach, with special attention paid to conflict-affected Northern regions and the Bamanakan-speaking core regions of the country.

Progressive Expansion

Programming has expanded across regions and content areas over time, supporting a well-rounded foundational skills package for Malian learners.

- Strategy, framework and standards for bilingual literacy
- Conflict-adaptive foundational learning for out-of-school learners
- Strategy and framework for early mathematics
- Pilot framework for early science

REACH OVER TIME

- 10,500 schools
- 1,500 non-formal education centers
- 49,000 school staff
- 2,400 middle tier and higher education professionals
- 1.9 million learners
- 6,500 communities
- All regions, with 15 focal regions

Meeting Contextual Needs

RESEARCH TO DRIVE POLICY, DESIGN, DELIVERY, AND ADAPTATION

Research and data provide the foundation for the Bilingual Education Strategy. Support to the Ministry of National Education has facilitated essential studies on reading readiness; teacher mobility; sociolinguistic mapping; teacher knowledge, attitudes and practices; materials assessments; time on task; and tracking of student achievement over time. Findings from this research agenda supported the government's development of competency frameworks for literacy and numeracy; revision of the pre-service teacher training curriculum; adoption of national learning standards for literacy; issuance of a decree to protect instructional time; and establishment of a policy for ICT in education.

Sampled formal assessments, classroom observations and coaching data, and community-based assessments triangulate to provide data for accountability and continuous improvement as the Strategy moves forward. Formative assessment is emphasized to support adjustment of instruction to meet learner needs, within a framework of Universal Design for Learning that supports social-emotional development and engagement for all learners.

SUPPORTING SKILLS, PRACTICES, AND HABITS OF MIND

Bilingual education programming focuses on strong oral language development; systematic phonics instruction; purposeful, playful reading and writing; and critical thinking and problem solving. Pedagogy is structured but not scripted: it incorporates interactive audio instruction (IAI) to support and model instructional practices, while placing confidence in teachers' formative data-based knowledge of their

learners and their classrooms and their ability to adapt. Instruction is grounded in children's lived experiences, community challenges and opportunities, and relevant problem-solving activities.



Strategy Progression

PHARE/ROAD TO READING

PHARE began the foundational learning reform process in Mali. From 2009-2012, PHARE conducted research, informed policy changes, and delivered teacher training in literacy instruction and teaching and learning materials in French and national language in Grades 1-4 classrooms nationally. **The national reading standards and framework developed under PHARE set the stage for the Bilingual Education Strategy's long-term success.**

EDUCATION RECOVERY AND SUPPORT (ERSA)

From 2015-2020, the ERSA program supported Mali's commitment to increasing access to learning for out-of-school children in the conflict-affected northern regions of Gao and Menaka by strengthening non-formal learning and reintegrating more than 10,000 out-of-school children into the education system.

Although conflict in the targeted communities increased over the life of ERSA, 75% of cohort 1 enrollees completed. In communities that had a functioning primary school, 90% of Level 1 ERSA graduates transferred to school or to Level 2 centers as expected. **ERSA students who transferred to grade 4 demonstrated significantly higher literacy skills than those of their formal school counterparts.**

FOOD FOR EDUCATION 3 (FFE3) AND FOOD FOR EDUCATION 4 (FFE4)

From 2015-2025, the FFE3 and FFE4 programs provided in-service teacher training, teaching and learning materials, and particular attention to time-on-task in Grades 1-3 classrooms in French and national language. **By the end of the FFE programs, nearly 60% of Grade 2 students were meeting national proficiency standards in national language and 53% in French.**

SELECTIVE INTEGRATED READING ACTIVITY (SIRA)

From 2016-2022, SIRA provided teacher training in literacy instruction, teaching and learning materials, expanded research and policy support, middle-tier system strengthening, and added a strong community mobilization component to support national language literacy in Grades 1 and 2. Through political transitions, COVID-19, and security challenges, **the proportion of students meeting national proficiency standards in literacy increased by 15 points overall, and by 19 points for girls.**

DONIYA TAABOLO (DT)

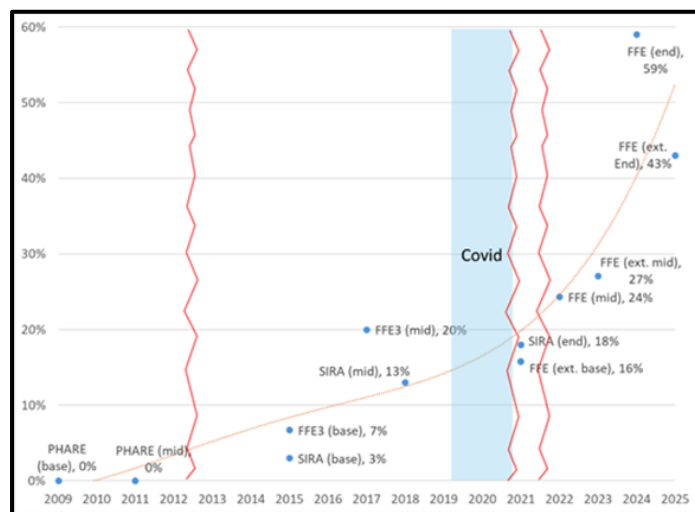
From 2023-2025, DT **laid the foundation for mathematics reform to complement progress in literacy.** Research and policy support developed a national competency framework for mathematics, initial math standards, and an understanding of challenges in early mathematics instruction. DT also provided teacher training in literacy & numeracy instruction, teaching and learning materials, community mobilization, and system strengthening support for national language instruction in Grades 1-4. New French and national language mathematics books aligned with the competency framework are now under development.

INSPIRING CLIMATE ACTION NOW (ICAN)

From 2023-2025, ICAN piloted a climate-focused primary science program that **integrated and leveraged literacy and numeracy** and reinforced critical thinking and problem solving in schools and communities.

Results

Between 2009 and 2025, the National Bilingual Strategy led to the share of learners meeting national literacy benchmarks **rising by 59 percentage points** — despite interruptions caused by political transitions, COVID-19, teacher strikes, and escalating conflict and volatility.



Education Development Center
contact@edc.org

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