

Papua New Guinea

A strong reading foundation is key for children's learning

With support from the Global Partnership for Education (GPE), the government of Papua New Guinea (PNG) is helping all children acquire strong reading skills, which will help them increase their chances of academic success and lifelong learning.



Papua New Guinea is a diverse country with some 840 languages spoken among its 7 million people, which poses an array of challenges for the education system.

About one third of PNG's population is illiterate and mostly live in rural areas. What's more, according to the 2010 Early Grade Reading Assessment, only 3 out of 10 students were able to read a few sentences after three years of attending school.

To address this challenge, GPE played a key role in bringing education partners together to improve sector planning, identify key challenges, analyze the situation based on data and ensure external education funding for PNG focused on the priorities outlined in the country's education plan. By funding the plan's strategic elements, GPE helped ensure that investments in PNG's education sector delivered results.

Improving reading skills was identified as one of the key areas that needed to be addressed in the plan covering the years 2010-2019. The plan identifies the lack of reading materials and trained teachers as being among the main challenges diminishing the quality of education in PNG.

That's why GPE and the World Bank worked with the government to launch READ PNG in 2011, a program to promote better teaching and learning of reading skills in elementary

and primary education. Through the program, children have more opportunities to practice reading, teachers get the tools and knowledge to support them, and regularly test children's performance.

Classroom libraries help develop reading skills

To quickly increase the availability of literacy materials and give children continual exposure to books, more than 21,700 classroom libraries have been established in elementary and primary schools* in all 22 PNG provinces with support from READ PNG.



GPE partner: Since 2010
Challenges addressed: Low levels of literacy, inadequate data collection, shortage of books
Key interventions: Classroom libraries, teacher training, establishing a monitoring and evaluation system
GPE grants: US\$26.6 million
Grant agent: World Bank
Coordinating agency: UNICEF

* Elementary schools in PNG have a three-year program consisting of a preparatory year and grades 1 and 2. The local language is the language of instruction in elementary schools. Primary schools in PNG have a six-year program consisting of grades 3-8. Here, English is the language of instruction.

These libraries, which are managed by classroom teachers, provide a child-friendly environment where students can easily borrow books to stimulate reading beyond the classroom.

Because so many languages are spoken in PNG, books in local languages were delivered to some 15,000 classrooms in elementary schools nationwide. These books improve learning for children who do not speak the main languages and often come from the most disadvantaged groups, the main focus of GPE's support. All schools received books that were adapted to local languages and non-language-specific reading materials.

In addition, learning kits with small chalkboards, flashcards, beads, pattern blocks, and linking cubes and a set of wall charts were delivered to 22,200 elementary classrooms, giving more than 820,000 students access to these kits.

Supporting teachers to improve literacy

Although easy access to books is important for encouraging children to read, teachers are essential for helping students develop strong literacy skills. Therefore, GPE supported the training of 25,000 primary school teachers on how to use the classroom libraries and create their own learning materials. This helped tackle one of the most important shortfalls in the country's education system: the lack of reading materials in a diverse language environment.

In addition to the learning materials kits, teachers received guides on how to use the classroom libraries and samples of activities and games to encourage children to read. The teaching and learning kits developed under Read PNG were distributed to additional provinces with funding from other bilateral donors, which helped scale up the program.

According to a survey, more than 80 percent of teachers participated in the classroom library training program and most of them applied the new teaching strategies in their classrooms. This is an encouraging sign that shows that many teachers have found ways of using the classroom library books for instructional activities, and that the training has made a difference in teachers' classroom practices.

Measuring results

To ensure that teachers and education officials have the right tools to measure children's learning, GPE helped the government to launch an early grade reading assessment (EGRA). An international recognized system, EGRA is an effective tool to measure students' progress toward learning to read.

Initially conducted in four provinces, this system proved invaluable in identifying strengths and weaknesses in the teaching and learning of reading and spurring remedial action. The results of the early grade reading assessment led to a reading booster program which provided teachers with new resources and training to improve the way they teach reading.



Promising results were shown within just a year of implementing the reading booster program. In the province of Madang, the average number of grade 3 students who were unable to identify a single sound in a word dropped from 22 percent to 4 percent. In the Western Highlands, this dropped from 35 percent to 4 percent.

The EGRA findings also helped develop a new standard-based curriculum which is currently being rolled out. For the first time in PNG, education data was used in the development of a new curriculum, a major step in strengthening the country's education system.

A commitment to improve education

The government continues to show strong commitment to improving children's education which is reflected in an increased education spending from 20 percent in 2010 to almost 24 percent in 2017.

Since then, GPE also helped reactivate the local education group, a collaborative forum which is essential for joint planning, improved coordination, and information exchange between education partners such as donors, local CSOs, and international organizations.

In early 2019, PNG received a new GPE grant of US\$7.4 million. The funding builds on the progress made and will focus on improving early grade learning outcomes in math and science, with a special emphasis on low-performing provinces. The grant will also help strengthening teacher training, especially for female teachers, and providing textbooks for students. The grant amount includes US\$3.5 million from the GPE Multiplier**, which will mobilize US\$10.6 million in additional co-financing from the Government of Japan. Save the Children will be the grant agent.

** The GPE Multiplier is an innovative finance instrument that provides an incentive and the financial resources to catalyze more and better investment in education.