



Practice Guide

 Inspiring Teachers

 GLOBAL
SCHOOLS
FORUM

Building a District-led Foundational Learning Partnership in Cape Coast, Ghana

Impact at Scale Labs: Foundational Literacy & Numeracy

2026

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Through the Impact at Scale Labs - Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN), Global Schools Forum supports seven grantee organisations across India and Sub-Saharan Africa for testing, iterating, and generating evidence towards scaling their FLN programmes in low-middle income contexts. Read more about the Labs, our grantees and their innovations [here](#)



Overview

This Practice Brief is co-developed by Inspiring Teachers and Global Schools Forum, as part of the Impact at Scale Labs for Foundational Literacy and Numeracy. The practices, insights and recommendations shared here are grounded in the implementation realities and reflect the lived experiences of organisations working to improve foundational learning outcomes.

These approaches were designed and delivered in specific contexts. Applying them elsewhere will mean adapting to different programme, systemic and delivery realities. We share them as a guiding point for that adaptation. We encourage you to explore these practices and consider how they might inform your own work.

Let's continue the conversation:

If you are exploring how to adapt any of these practices, whether within your organisation, your fund or a wider education system, we would love to learn more about your programmes, the challenges you are navigating and the opportunities for impact you see ahead.

To discuss adaptation or implementation, or to connect directly with the organisations that implemented and refined these practices, please reach out to

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Introduction



Improving foundational literacy at scale requires more than identifying effective instructional approaches. While some interventions show strong short-term learning gains under NGO-led delivery, lasting impact depends on whether government systems can deliver instructional support consistently across districts and schools and sustain it beyond programme cycles.

In Ghana, the 2022 Primary 2 National Standardised Test (NST) showed low performance across core reading skills, with reading comprehension outcomes highlighting the need to improve teaching and learning in classrooms. Promisingly, to close these gaps, Ghana has made national commitments to strengthen foundational learning. Lasting Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN) improvements require teachers to use evidence-informed techniques proficiently, consistently and at the right moments, supported by clear mechanisms for improving learning, paired with deliberate practice and feedback for refinement. A formal supervision structure already existed in Ghana; what was missing was the consistent use of roles within it to support instructional quality and the routines, motivation and cues that help good practice become habit.

Inspiring Teachers has engaged closely with the Ghana Education Service (GES) to support government-led foundational learning. Through this partnership, Inspiring Teachers has co-designed a district implementation model with GES and launched a pilot in Cape Coast Metro.

About the programme

Programme timelines
2025

Implemented by
Inspiring Teachers (IT)

Goal

To demonstrate and scale the Tools for Foundational Learning Improvement (TFLI) programme to improve foundational literacy through a district-led partnership

Reach



1

District - Cape Coast Metro



80

Schools



22,056

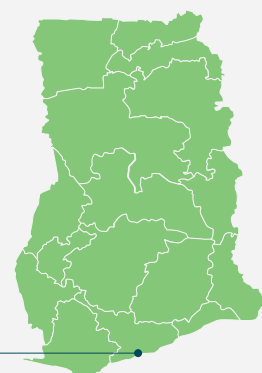
Students



856

Teachers

Cape Coast



The focus is on enabling middle-tier (SISOs) and headteachers to support teachers through guided tools, structured teaching materials, and regular coaching routines that scaffold implementation and simplify teacher support. Beyond instructional content and teacher training materials, Inspiring Teachers supports delivery by strengthening three core implementation functions: coaching, the use of assessment data, and district review processes. Sustainable change ultimately depends on the government carrying out these core functions itself. Embedding these functions within district systems helps ensure instructional support is delivered consistently and is far less vulnerable to changes in funding or NGO presence.

About the Practice Guide

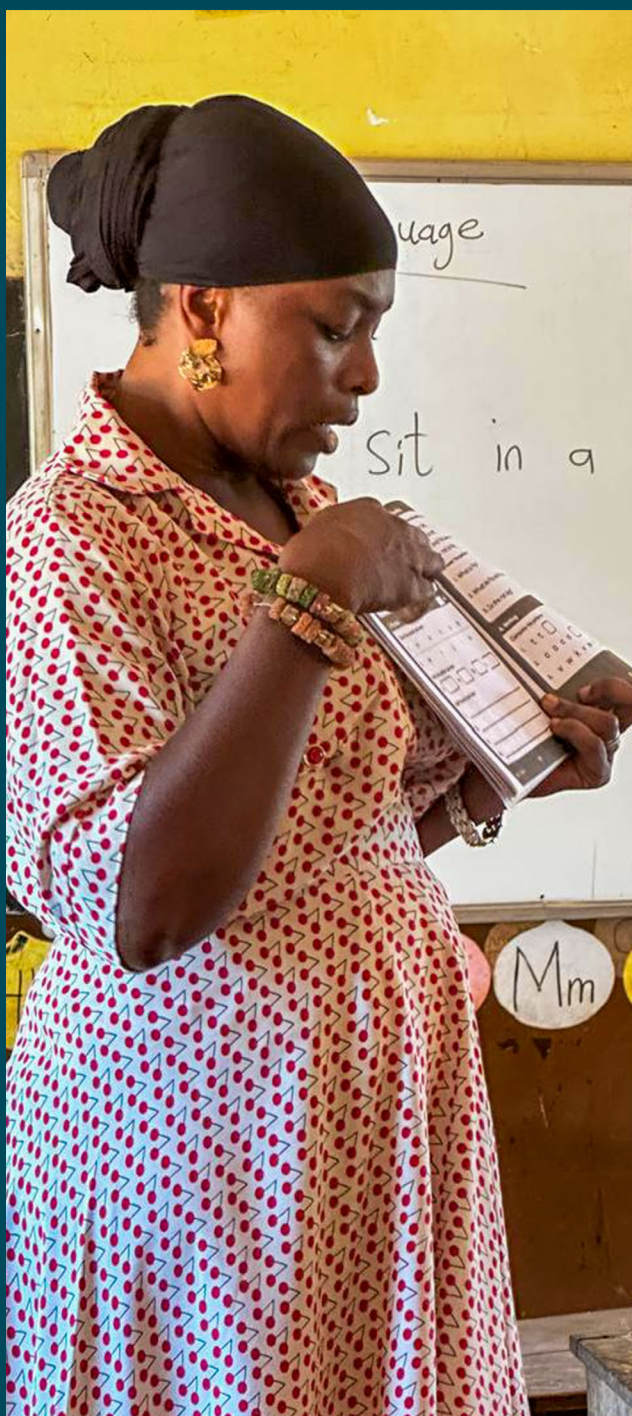
This guide documents how Inspiring Teachers partnered with the Ghana Education Service (GES) to design and deliver a district-led model for foundational learning. Rather than implementing directly, Inspiring Teachers worked to strengthen existing supervision and planning structures, positioning GES as the primary implementer.

The partnership was built through sustained engagement, formal agreements, and joint design of a delivery model aligned to district roles and routines, anchored by a minimum package of non-negotiable instructional and supervision practices.

Drawing on early implementation experience in Cape Coast Metro, this practice guide provides practical lessons for organisations seeking to partner with government systems to deliver foundational learning at scale.

02

Context and Challenge



Ghana has a nationwide supervision structure under the GES. A national headquarters overseeing 16 regional offices and 261 school districts across the country. Within districts, leadership teams include District Directors, training officers, curriculum coordinators, and School Improvement Support Officers (SISOs).

SISOs are the primary link between district leadership and schools.

They monitor teaching and learning, support curriculum implementation, coach teachers, and report to district leadership.

Training officers and other district staff support professional development planning and coordination, reinforcing implementation across schools.

The challenge... was not the absence of a structure. Rather, SISOs and district staff carry multiple responsibilities, which may limit the time available.

Learning data provides an opportunity to strengthen school and district planning and review. Creating stronger routines for using learning data can help connect assessment findings with instructional support.

Building on this existing system, Inspiring Teachers saw an opportunity to strengthen support for classroom teaching and learning. Inspiring Teachers has supported GES in two core areas:

- **Strengthening the middle tier:** equipping SISOs and headteachers to support instructional quality through coaching, observation, and data use.
- **Co-designing a district-led delivery model:** developing the model, tools, and processes with GES to enable district-led implementation.



03

Innovation Approach: From Better Materials to Ways of Working



Inspiring Teachers Ghana began by implementing three components of its **Tools for Foundational Learning Improvement (TFLI)** programme directly in low-fee private schools in Cape Coast: Inspiring Reading in Basic 1 classrooms, the Leading Teaching, and the SmartCoach app.



Inspiring Reading

Structured literacy programme, aligned with the national curriculum and informed by the Science of Reading



Inspiring Numeracy

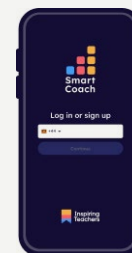
Curriculum-aligned mathematics programme for Basic 1–3 classrooms (in development).

TFLI brings together four components



Leading Teaching

School-leader training, with a structured Professional Learning Community (PLC) model



SmartCoach

Phone-based app for teacher-led assessments, lesson observations, curriculum support, and attendance tracking

 Inspiring Teachers

Tools for Foundational Learning Improvement

Training & Coaching



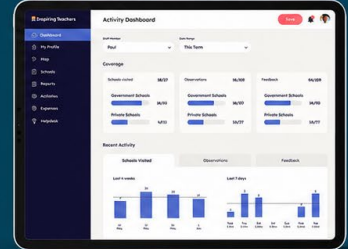
Teacher Guides



Assessment



Support Dashboard



In the private-school model, Inspiring Teachers staff conducted school visits, led all training, and served as the direct point of contact for each school. The approach generated strong early evidence of impact, including from a randomised controlled trial. However, reaching every school required Inspiring Teachers staff to deliver the programme directly. To reach more learners and support lasting improvements, the programme needed a system-embedded delivery model in which government partners led implementation through existing structures.

Could the programme function through the government's existing district implementation system?

This necessitated redefining who does what and shifting implementation responsibilities from Inspiring Teachers to government partners:

- Teachers would deliver daily literacy lessons.
- School leaders would coach teachers and lead professional learning communities.
- SISOs would conduct structured school visits and classroom observations.
- District leaders would facilitate regular planning and review meetings where implementation progress and learning data would be tracked closely.

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Building the Partnership

From the outset, the partnership was framed around a core principle: **GES implements, Inspiring Teachers supports**. Reaching this point took roughly a year of collaboration and ongoing engagement across the education system, reflecting the time needed to build strong government partnerships.



How the partnership developed

The partnership evolved through a combination of evidence generation and sharing, alignment around shared goals, and hands-on co-design.

Timeline	Key phases and activities
2023- 24	Testbed phase: TFLI was piloted in a 20-school testbed of low-fee private schools during the 2023–24 school year. A mini randomised controlled trial across 16 classrooms, conducted from March to June 2024, found that the programme improved learning outcomes.
2024-25	TFLI expanded to 56 low-fee private schools. An 80-school randomised controlled trial was launched, comprising 40 treatment schools and 40 control schools.
Early 2025	Initial engagement with the GES Director of Partnerships & Affiliations: Review of the TFLI design, results from initial testing, implications for supportive supervision, and costing for a government-led delivery model. Partnership formalisation: Following an internal assessment, GES issued a Letter of Intent to partner with Inspiring Teachers. A three-year research and implementation MoU was signed in June 2025, establishing implementation in one district (Central Region). Key agreements: Defined roles, responsibilities, and the delivery approach, beginning with research and data collection, followed by implementation of the TFLI model.
August 2025	Co-design of delivery specifications: Co-design workshops were held with GES Headquarters, the Regional Office, Cape Coast Metro, and SISO representatives. Agreement was reached on key specifications for the district delivery model, including visit frequency, observation protocols, role expectations, training schedules, and review meetings. Evidence sharing: Findings from the randomised controlled trial conducted in low-fee private schools were shared, generating interest and enthusiasm among GES officials.
September 2025	Implementation began for the 2025–26 school year, with GES officials participating in classroom observations and reviewing early monitoring data to assess implementation quality.
2025-26	Implementation of Inspiring Reading in Basic 1 classrooms, Leading Teaching PLCs, and the SmartCoach app began in government schools during the 2025–26 school year, with SISOs beginning routine school visits, implementation support, classroom observations, and early monitoring data review to assess implementation quality.

Building strong foundations for government partnership

Several practical lessons emerged from building the partnership with GES. These principles helped guide the engagement and the design of the district-led delivery model.

Principle	What it meant in practice with GES
Maintain senior leadership engagement on both sides	Decision-making authority remained with government, with approvals following established hierarchical processes. Regular engagement between senior leaders, with an emphasis on in-person meetings supported by phone and online communication, helped maintain alignment and momentum.
Align across all levels for system coherence and support	The programme's non-negotiables, including coaching visit frequency, observation expectations, and training calendars, were agreed with stakeholders at the national, regional, and district levels, recognising their distinct roles. Skipping any level risk misaligned expectations and could undermine programme delivery.
Keep SISOs at the centre while engaging with wider district stakeholders	SISOs, as the closest link to schools and the primary implementers, were consistently involved throughout the design process. Trust developed through repeated engagement and regular clarification of roles and responsibilities. At the same time, district leaders played an important role in coordinating with schools and teachers, making their support essential.
Move at the system's pace, formally and with structure	Informal discussions opened the door to the partnership, but formal letters and agreements through GES moved the work forward. Alignment often took several rounds, but this was necessary to build understanding and secure buy-in.
Expect to defend the design	GES initially raised questions about the practicality of the programme design as part of the alignment process. Through meetings and consistent follow-up, these questions were discussed and clarified, helping build understanding and credibility.
Build trust through consistent engagements and responsiveness	Trust with SISOs and district leaders developed gradually through repeated interactions across multiple terms and by seeing positive shifts in classroom practice. Regular updates on planned and completed activities, together with responsiveness to logistical and coordination challenges, also helped build trust.



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Designing the Delivery Model

The programme was consciously redesigned for district ownership, with roles defined in operational terms and expectations tested against real workloads, costs, and administrative constraints. This helped ensure the model could work within existing government structures.



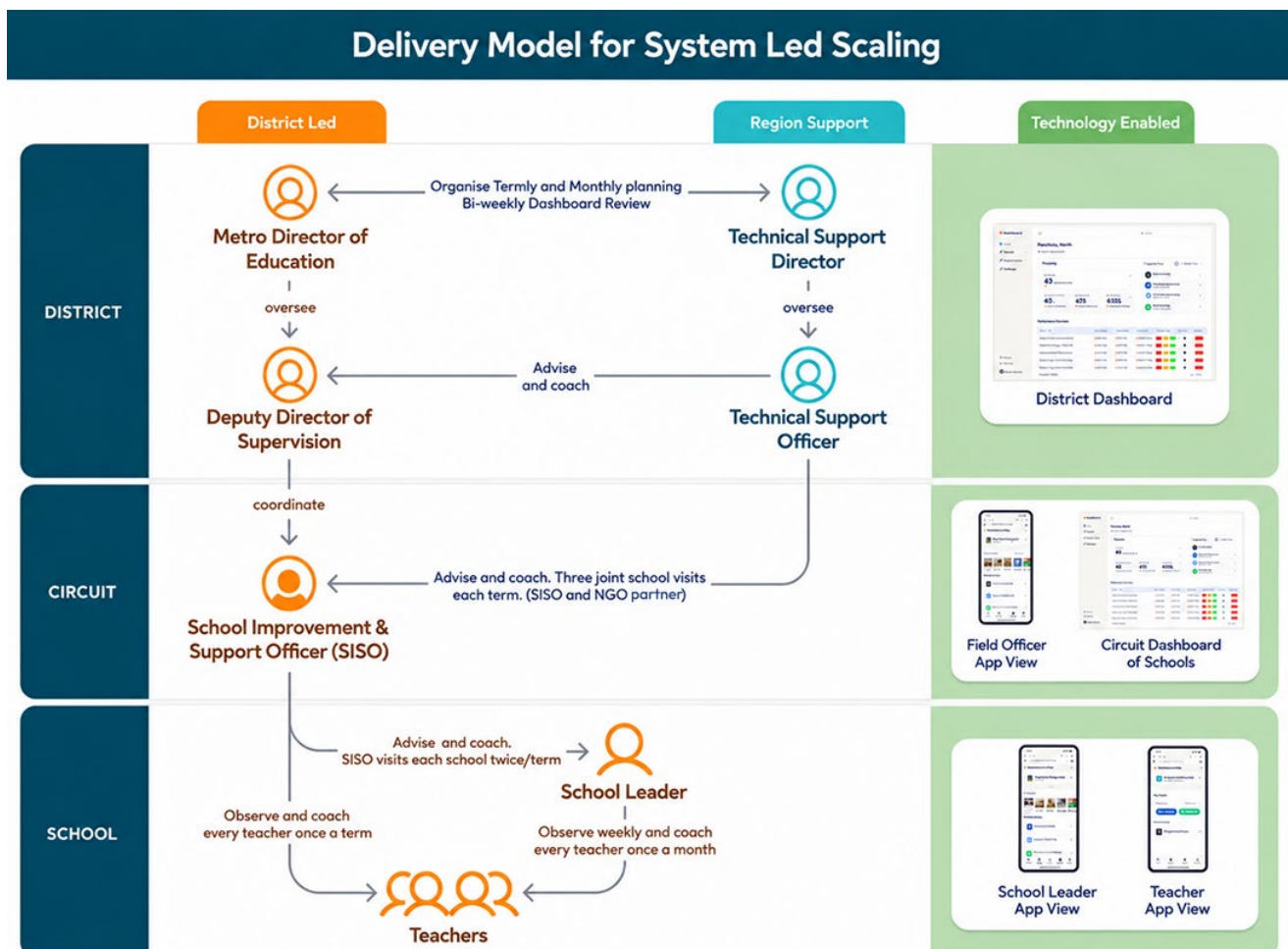
Who does what: GES and Inspiring Teachers

GES delivers	Inspiring Teachers supports
School supervision through existing roles, including two SISO visits per school per term	Defines and protects core instructional model, including daily lessons, assessments, and coaching cycles
Use SmartCoach App to document visits, observations and data	Provides and maintains SmartCoach app and data systems to support implementation and monitoring
Headteachers and SISOs carry out observations and professional learning communities (PLCs)	Establishes routines for observations, PLCs, and assessments
Participation in training and increasingly lead components over time	Trains teachers and SISOs, including ongoing refreshers – leveraging system’s avenues and resources
Monitoring assessment completion and school supervision	Tracks implementation, assessment completion and joint supervision activities
Providing feedback on instructional content design and feasibility considering teacher workload and alignment with curriculum	Adapts/creates materials based on feedback while maintaining core design principles
Interpreting and using data at school and circuit levels	Builds system capacity and routines for using data to improve instruction.
Operating within existing budgets, no additional financial incentives	Designs the model within realistic cost considerations

Roles in operational terms

Tools such as SmartCoach, structured training guides, SISO handbooks, dashboards, and standing meeting agendas were developed and refined to fit within existing government systems and help government actors carry out clearly defined roles more consistently.

Stakeholder	Core responsibilities
Teachers	Deliver daily literacy lessons; conduct termly assessments
Headteachers	Lead weekly PLC meetings; observe and coach teachers
SISOs	Conduct school visits; observe and coach teachers; review data
District leaders	Review implementation and learning data in regular meetings



Testing programme model feasibility through the SCHEME framework:

Roles and expectations of different stakeholders are stress-tested and refined using the SCHEME framework¹. This provides a practical check on whether the model can operate within existing government structures, staffing, and budgets.

Simple enough: Operable through the existing roles and routines of government stakeholders (teachers, headteachers, and SISOs). This includes video-based instructional nudges, facilitator guides and workbooks for training, and digital tools designed for ease of use.

Cheap enough: Affordable within government budgets by reducing the “Four Ps”: Paper (streamlined to one workbook per term), People (shift implementation support to SISOs), Per diems (share or replace with training points), and Petrol (shared transport and remote support).

Highly Effective: Focuses on Inspiring Reading as the entry package while maintaining coaching and assessment to support evidence-informed, targeted teaching.

Manageable: Strengthens feedback loops, optimises dashboards for district and regional review meetings, provides SmartCoach tools for key SISO activities, and focuses on practical instructional support through standing agendas and implementation guides.

Evidence-based: Anchors scaling in randomised controlled trial results and implementation data. Uses monitoring, evaluation, learning, and design to continually refine the programme for fidelity, cost, and impact.



¹ Adapted from Mulago: <https://www.mulagofoundation.org/resources/big-enough-simple-enough-cheap-enough>

Clarifying roles and financing through Doer–Payer framework

Alongside SCHEME, the [Doer–Payer framework](#)² was used to separate two questions that are often confused - who carries out each activity and who covers its cost. This provided a clear, sequenced pathway for shifting both delivery and financing from Inspiring Teachers to GES over time.

Activity	2025-2026 Co-delivery and shared responsibilities		2026-2027 System embedding, more GES ownership	
	Doer	Payer	Doer	Payer
Design & Development	Inspiring Teachers develops Basic 2 and 3 literacy materials		Inspiring Teachers continues material development with greater involvement from the GES curriculum team	
Printing	Inspiring Teachers prints Basic 1 teacher guides and workbooks; transitions to Government by 2027			
Training	GES provides staff to co-deliver training alongside Inspiring Teachers staff.	GES provides facilities for training.	GES commits staff to deliver training, with light-touch support from Inspiring Teachers staff.	GES provides facilities for training.
Implementation	GES commits SISOs to provide dedicated implementation time, school visits and review meetings, with logistical support including facilities and vehicles.	GES provides facilities, vehicles and visits Inspiring Teachers provides field staff to support joint school visits	GES leverages data to guide review meeting and plan school support. Inspiring Teachers continues to provide tools, dashboards, coaching, technical assistance, and capacity building.	GES provides logistical facilities for visits Inspiring Teachers’s field support tapers down as more trained GES staff take ownership

² Originally published by Stanford Social Innovation Review on August 21st, 2016 with the headline - The Doer and the Payer: A Simple Approach to Scale https://ssir.org/articles/entry/the_doer_and_the_payer_a_simple_approach_to_scale



06

Practical Adaptations on the Ground: Year 1

For the government-led model, a minimum package of non-negotiables was determined early on to protect instructional quality. Everything else was treated as flexible to fit school calendars, workloads and budgets. Being explicit about this distinction is what allowed the model to adapt without losing its core.

Protected (non-negotiable)	Adaptable
Daily lesson delivery aligned to structured materials	Number of lessons per term
Termly oral reading fluency assessment via SmartCoach	Sequencing around assessment weeks and school calendars
Documented observation and coaching cycles	Visit logistics within SISO role and budget
Routine district-level data review	Format and cadence of review beyond the core minimum

Early implementation revealed the gap between defined roles and consistent execution in practice. Expectations for supervision and coaching existed on paper, but SISOs and headteachers needed more structured support to carry them out consistently.

The adaptations below helped align the delivery model with the practical realities of system-led delivery.

01 Strengthening observation and coaching practice

Training for SISOs and school leaders was strengthened, with greater emphasis on how to conduct instructional observations, how to use coaching tools purposefully and how frequently these actions should occur. Additional frameworks, timelines, and expectations were clarified to support consistent follow-through.

02 Supporting delivery through practical tools

A SISO Handbook was developed and revised iteratively based on direct feedback from SISOs regarding what was practical within their workload. The goal was to clarify how existing responsibilities should be carried out within the programme model.

03 Adapting to dashboard limitations

The data dashboard, intended to support district-level monitoring of implementation data such as oral reading fluency assessment completion, was not yet fully integrated into district monitoring routines. Rather than delay supervision routines, interim reports were generated and shared with SISOs at key points during the term. For example, SISOs received reports on assessment completion rates before the end of Term 1 to support follow-up with schools.

04 Adjusting lesson pacing to school realities

Lesson pacing was revised to account for assessment weeks, remediation time and school calendar constraints. The number of instructional weeks per term was reduced from twelve to ten, with the final week designated for review. These changes preserved core instructional routines while aligning more closely with classroom realities.

05 Reinforcing expectations through joint engagement

GES representatives participated in alignment meetings, school visits and review sessions. Their presence reinforced expectations that SISOs use implementation and learning data within their circuits to guide implementation and share progress updates during district-level discussions.

07

Impact and Results so far

The 2025–26 school year is the first year of district-led implementation. While the results are still early, the initial findings are encouraging across both learning outcomes and implementation fidelity.



Category	Metric	Baseline	Term 1	Term 2
Inspiring Teachers' delivery commitments				
Training	% of teachers trained upfront (before Term 1)	NA	100%	NA
Joint visits	% of SISOs given 3 joint visits per term	NA	67%	72%
Government staff and teacher delivery				
Lesson delivery	Average lesson completed by B1 teacher	NA	38 of 40	39 of 40
	% of lesson completion by B1 teacher	NA	96%	97.5%
Assessments	# assessed 1-1 by B1 teacher (of 1,602)	1,347	1,466	1,424
	% assessed by Basic 1 teacher	84%	92%	89%
SISO Visits	% schools given 2 visits by their SISO	NA	47%	53%
In-School Coaching	% B1 teachers observed once per term by a school leader	NA	48%	83%
Shifts in Learner's outcomes:				
Reading Outcomes	% of learners at CWPM* Benchmark	NA	73%	63%
	% of learners that are 'non-readers' (zero score on ORF)	58%	9%	5%

The implementation data show how the district-led model operates in practice. Termly review meetings bring together SISOs with district, regional, and national GES representatives to review implementation and assessment data, while meetings with SISOs throughout the term support ongoing monitoring and follow-up. SISOs are expected to explain completion rates and learner performance trends within their circuits. Teacher observations and coaching are led by SISOs, who are taking on increasing responsibility for leading training. While Inspiring Teachers continues to provide materials and initial training, responsibility for supervision and training is designed to shift to GES over time.

Key Learnings

01 Co-design drives fidelity

Models developed jointly with the government are more likely to be implemented with fidelity than models handed over after development. The middle tier, particularly SISOs, is the engine of implementation; involving them early helps identify practical challenges before rollout. Strengthening SISOs and district leaders provides greater system-wide leverage than supporting teachers alone. Provide them with simple, practical tools, structured observation guides, and data they can interpret and explain.

02 Clarity enables execution

Clear expectations for reporting, communication, materials development, usage, and approval processes should be established early. The more clarity SISOs and headteachers have about upstream dependencies and timelines, the better they can plan and deliver.

03 Formal communication builds trust

Formal letters, advance notice, and adherence to protocols reinforce professionalism and trust within the system. Established ways of working take time to evolve, so align with existing processes and introduce changes gradually.

04 Protect non-negotiables

Core instructional elements, including lesson delivery, assessment completion, and coaching cycles, must be maintained, while secondary elements can adapt as per the needs of the system.

05 System alignment and coherence are critical

NGOs supporting government-led delivery must build the capacity of district-level stakeholders, including those coaching the middle tier, align with government priorities, plans, and vision, and reinforce accountability through data.

Points to consider for Practitioners attempting a similar adaptation

The first year of district-led implementation demonstrates early progress, but sustained improvement will depend on deepening government ownership across supervision, coaching, data use, and financing.

The table below illustrates an end-state for government-led delivery through the deliberate, sequenced transfer of delivery responsibilities and financing from NGO-led to government-led implementation.

Category	From NGO-Led		To Government-Led
Training	NGO staff trains	→	Middle-tier officials, coaches/mentors train, with co-designed training agenda, tools and guidance
Coaching	NGO staff coaches teachers	→	Coaches such as HT/SISOs coach teachers using pen-paper/digital apps
Oversight	NGO leads and manages	→	District managers use dashboards and have biweekly data reviews
Costs	NGO funds the programme	→	Government co-funds training, materials, and per-diems

For organisations seeking to deliver foundational learning through government systems, here are six practical recommendations:

01 Designing for government ownership from the outset is essential.

Clarify early who the long-term ‘doer’ will be and structure responsibilities accordingly. If district officers are expected to conduct school visits, lead training and use data dashboards, build the model around those roles from the start. Retrofitting ownership after a period of NGO-led delivery is far harder than designing for it from day one.

02 System-led implementation will typically move at a slower pace than fully NGO-led rollout.

Formal approvals, hierarchical communication, and protocol adherence require time. For example, invitations to meetings and workshops may require formal letters submitted through the appropriate

government offices before being distributed through official channels. Responses may take longer than informal coordination would allow. While this can feel slow, it builds institutional legitimacy and reduces friction during implementation.

03 Deliberate investment in middle-tier enablement is critical.

Strengthening SISOs and district leaders often produces greater system-wide leverage than direct teacher-facing support alone. In Inspiring Teachers' case, GES leadership emphasised that SISOs should not merely receive data but be able to clearly speak to trends in their circuits. Building this fluency required focused training and opportunities to interpret and discuss implementation data.

04 Be explicit about what is sacrosanct and what can be adapted.

Protect the instructional and supervision routines that drive learning outcomes, such as structured lesson delivery, termly assessments, and coaching cycles. At the same time, remain flexible on sequencing and secondary elements. For example, while school visit frequency was agreed at two visits per term, transport stipends for SISOs were not feasible within GES budget constraints. Recognising that school visits were already considered part of the SISO role shaped the final design.

05 Establish reporting and communication expectations early.

Government partners may request formal summaries of training activities, copies of instructional materials, implementation calendars, and clearly defined data points. Confirm proactively who must receive documentation, how updates should be shared and what approvals are required before engaging schools or districts.

06 Partnership itself should be treated as part of the intervention.

The clarity of roles, discipline of communication, respect for hierarchy, and responsiveness to feedback are not peripheral administrative details. They shape whether the delivery model can function within government systems and endure beyond the presence of an external organisation.

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