

Beyond Short-Term Learning Gains

The Impact of Outsourcing Schools in Liberia after Three Years¹



PHOTO: DACKERMUE DOLO / IPA

After three years, outsourcing management of public schools to private providers raised test scores by 0.21 standard deviations in math and 0.16 standard deviations in English (equivalent to 4 words per minute additional reading fluency for the cohort that started in first grade). Looking beyond learning gains, the program reduced corporal punishment (by 4.6 percentage points from a base of 51%), but increased dropout (by 3.3 percentage points from a base of 15%) and failed to reduce sexual abuse. Results vary by provider: some produced uniformly positive results, while others present stark trade-offs between learning gains and other outcomes.

Researchers: Mauricio Romero (Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México), Justin Sandefur (Center for Global Development)

Country: Liberia

Sample: 3,624 students in 185 schools

Timeline: 2016-2019

The [Liberian Education Advancement Partnership \(LEAP\)](#), originally known as Partnership Schools for Liberia (PSL), began in 2016 with 93 public schools, and has since expanded to an additional 101 schools. The model is similar to charter schools in the United States or academies in the United Kingdom. LEAP schools remain public schools, charge no fees, and are staffed by public school teachers, but each school is managed by one of eight private contractors, including three for-profit companies and five charities which have taken responsibility for everything from teacher in-service training to fixing leaks in the roof.

While originally motivated by the government's desire to improve test scores, the initiative has been dogged by the [expulsion of students by private operators](#), an [alleged coverup of sexual abuse of minors](#), and [cost overruns](#).

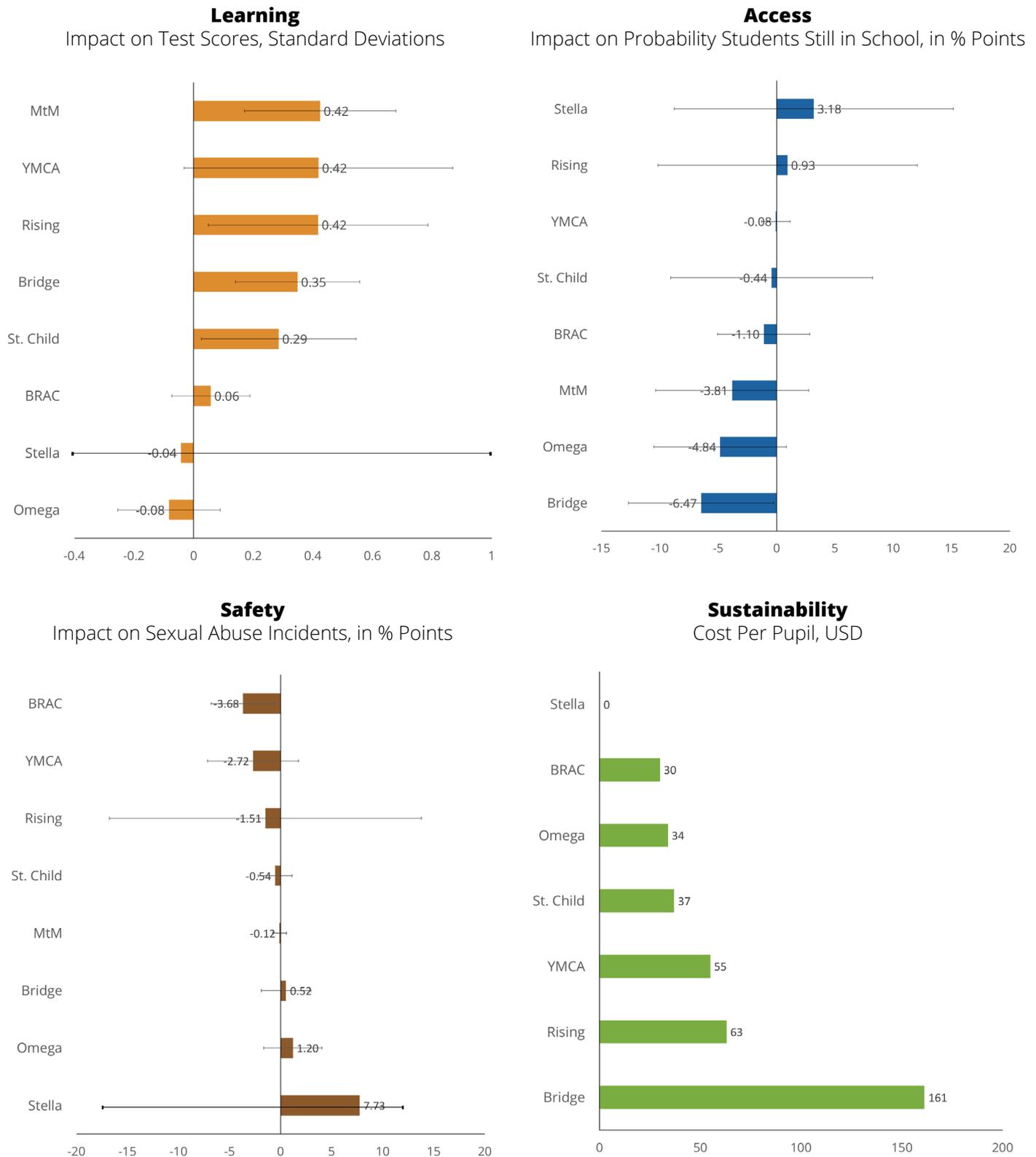
This brief summarizes the results of a three-year randomized control trial, comparing outcomes for children in LEAP schools to those in regular government schools through March-May 2019.² We highlight impacts on four dimensions: access, learning, sustainability, and child safety. Results vary enormously across operators, and the overall picture for some operators looks much better (or worse) than the average.

¹ [Click here for the latest draft of the full report](#), on which this summary is based.

² The randomized trial sampled students already enrolled before their schools were assigned to either become part of LEAP or remain as control schools and tracks those same students wherever they went through 2019 — so results are not driven by private operators admitting or expelling pupils selectively.

Figure: The impacts and cost of outsourcing schools in Liberia

Comparing 8 private providers across 4 dimensions



Note: Bars are sorted with the best performance at the top for each dimension. For learning, access, and safety, bars represent intention-to-treat effects. While the raw treatment effects for each individual provider are internally valid, some providers worked in more or less difficult contexts. Romero et al. (in press) find baseline differences in school quality or context do little to explain heterogeneity in treatment effects. Error bars represent 90% confidence intervals based on randomization inference, assuming normality. (Confidence intervals have been truncated in the Learning graph for Stella Maris, which did not operate its schools). For sustainability, bars represent unit costs per pupil in year 3, as reported by private providers themselves. The number of schools per operator is: Bridge International Academies, 23 schools; Omega Schools, 19 schools; BRAC, 20 schools; Street Child, 12 schools; More than Me, 6 schools; Rising Academies, 5 schools; Youth Movement for Collective Action, 4 schools; and Stella Maris, 4 schools. See full paper for details.

Key Results

Access to school declined as a result of the program

- » In year 1, the program made headlines when Bridge International Academies expelled many students en masse to reduce their class sizes, creating a negative impact on enrollment.
- » In year 3, there are negative impacts on the probability that children are still in school, and on transitions to secondary school. The share of the original cohort still in any school was 84.5% in control schools, and 3.3 percentage points lower in treatment schools. The problem is concentrated in Bridge schools, where dropout increased by 6.5 percentage points. This phenomenon appears unrelated to the expulsions in the first year and is driven in part by higher rates of drop-out attributed to pregnancy.

Learning outcomes improved in year 1, and have flattened off since

- » After one academic year, the program improved learning outcomes by roughly 0.18 standard deviations in both English and mathematics.
- » After three academic years, the program's positive impact on learning outcomes remains statistically significant, but essentially unchanged since year 1.
- » These gains are modest in absolute terms, lifting average reading fluency from roughly 11 words per minute up to 15 words per minute.
- » Learning gains vary starkly across operators, with 3 of 8 producing zero impact, and 5 of 8 producing somewhat larger, very similar results.
- » A possible explanation for why treatment effects on test scores plateau after the first year, is that the treatment effects on teacher behavior (such as reduced absenteeism) dissipated after the first year.

Corporal punishment declined but gender-based violence did not

- » The program reduced, but did not eradicate the use of corporal punishment in schools. The share of pupils who said teachers never hit students was 49% in control schools, and 4.6 percentage points higher in treatment schools.
- » The revelation of widespread sexual abuse in More than Me schools—known to the government prior to the launch of PSL/LEAP, before the organization was handed control of 18 public schools—has led to questions about child protection protocols under the program.
- » Survey results from 2019 show 3.6% of students reported sexual intercourse with a teacher, and 7.5% reported some form of sexual contact with a teacher.
- » Despite an influx of new resources and external oversight in partnership schools, sexual abuse did not decline.
- » While few of the operator-specific results are significant due to limited statistical power for this outcome, there were a few operators who effectively reduced reported sexual abuse to zero (e.g., BRAC, Rising Academies, and Street Child), while some others did not.

Costs remain higher than planned but have fallen considerably since year 1

- » At the launch of the program, the Liberian government spent roughly USD \$50 per pupil in public primary schools and aimed for PSL/LEAP to spend an additional \$50 per pupil.
- » In year 1, per-pupil expenditure by private operators was roughly \$300 on average, ranging from \$640 by Bridge, over \$250 by More than Me and Rising Academies, and closer to the \$50 target by BRAC, YMCA, Street Child, and Omega—as well as \$0 by Stella Maris which never began operations.
- » By year 3, spending reported by Bridge, More Than Me and Rising Academies had fallen dramatically (to roughly \$161, \$164, and \$63 respectively), bringing the overall average cost, on top of the government's normal \$50 expenditure, down to \$119 per pupil.



PHOTO: ERIK CLEVES KRISTENSEN / FLICKR

Policy lessons on outsourcing

- » Policymakers may be right to worry about the equity implications of outsourcing education, apart from any efficiency considerations. Private providers' preferences over where to work are sometimes in tension with equity concerns. Liberia's outsourcing pilot lavished additional resources on many of the schools with the best staffing and infrastructure in the country.
- » In practice, outsourcing is a bundled intervention, combining new management and additional resources. The sustainability of learning gains hinges in part on whether they stem from the former or the latter. We find evidence of both. Some of the advantages given to program schools in terms of staffing in the first year have had long-lasting effects and costs are still high. However, observable management practices are better in program schools, and the durability of this result is a positive signal of sustainability.
- » Clear procurement rules and willingness to sanction underperforming operators are key ingredients in outsourcing. In Liberia, negative unintended consequences of the outsourcing program which were identified in the first year persisted into the third year, and the Liberian government showed limited capacity to incentivize or sanction private providers who were reimbursed directly by third-party philanthropies.

Authors: Mauricio Romero and Justin Sandefur | Editor: Heidi McAnnally-Linz | Designer: John Branch

Evaluation Funders:



This project
is funded by
UBS Optimus
Foundation.

