PRACTICE BRIEF: READ SMART CINYANJA!
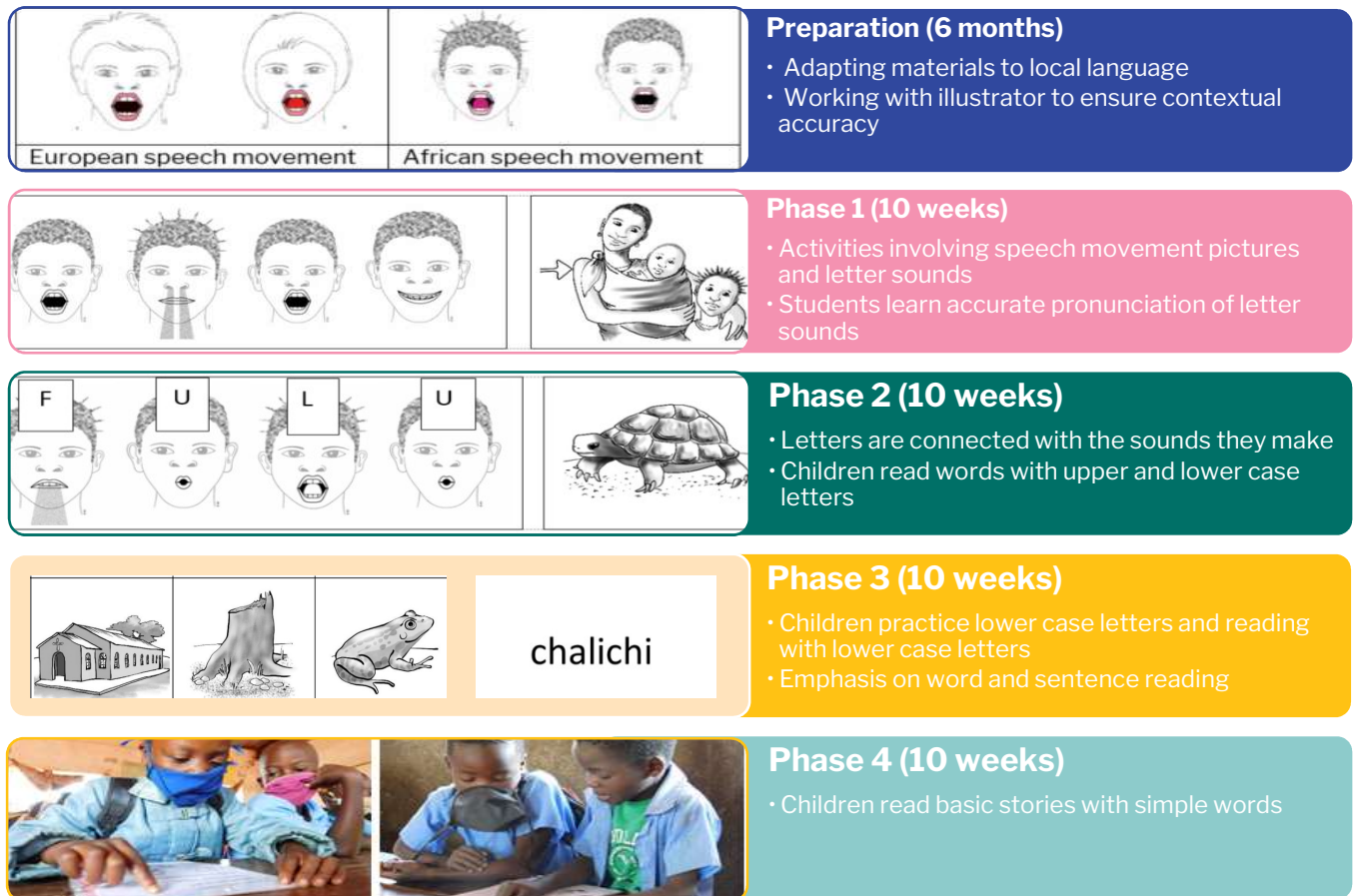**A Phonics Program to Teach Early Literacy**

OVERVIEW

During COVID-19, Impact Network piloted an innovative project to improve early literacy outcomes called "*Read Smart Cinyanja*". This program is a literacy intervention for early grade learning based on the use of phonetic charts – essentially speech movement pictures that show the way the mouth moves to make certain sounds (see Figure 1 below).

This pilot was conducted in partnership with Ursula Rickli who has proven results and experience building local language phonics approaches in a variety of contexts. We are the only ones we know using this method in Zambia to teach children how to read – the majority of Zambian children are taught how to read by memorization.

Figure 1: *Read Smart Cinyanja* Project Phases & Descriptions

Preparation (6 months)
- Adapting materials to local language
- Working with illustrator to ensure contextual accuracy

Phase 1 (10 weeks)
- Activities involving speech movement pictures and letter sounds
- Students learn accurate pronunciation of letter sounds

Phase 2 (10 weeks)
- Letters are connected with the sounds they make
- Children read words with upper and lower case letters

Phase 3 (10 weeks)
- Children practice lower case letters and reading with lower case letters
- Emphasis on word and sentence reading

Phase 4 (10 weeks)
- Children read basic stories with simple words

The pilot was conducted in 2021 at two schools in Eastern Province of Zambia, targeted at Grade 1-2 students, and scaled up to eight schools in 2022.

Importantly, standardized assessment data from the USAID-funded Let's Read Zambia project allows us to compare pilot schools with a national dataset. Across the nation, the proportion of entering third grade students below minimum literacy standards was 30%, **compared to just 3% for Read Smart students.**

WHY EARLY LITERACY?

Education quality in rural Zambia has been dismal, especially in regards to literacy. A recent assessment by the USAID-funded Let's Read Zambia project shows that over 25% of Grade 1-3 students are below minimum levels of proficiency and only 28% are at minimum levels of proficiency on literacy.[1] Delays in the age and grade at which students attain functional literacy skills make future primary years that much more challenging.

Critically, the current literacy approach lacks a systematic approach to teaching in local languages. Students are expected to use their cumulative exposure to print and oral language to infer the correspondence between various letters and sounds. This is challenging in rural Zambia, where children do not have early exposure to print or see literacy in action in their daily lives.
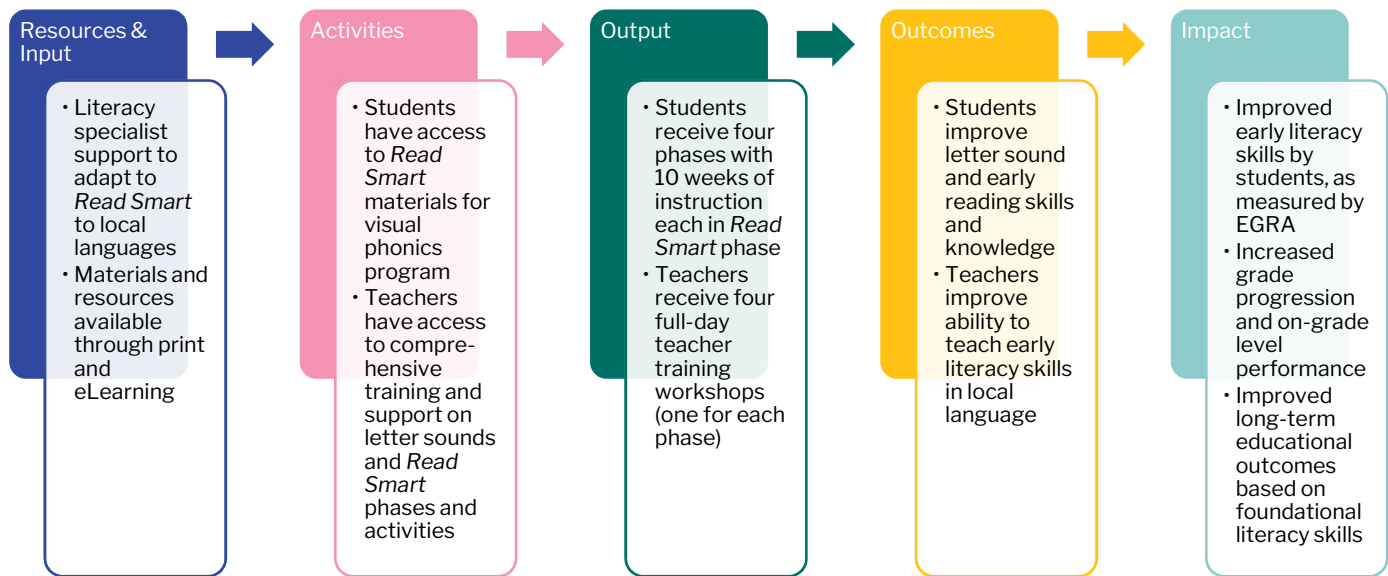
INTRODUCING: READ SMART!

Read Smart is an explicit phonics program where sound-spelling relationships are clearly and directly taught in phases. This method of teaching phonics has been used in Switzerland, Cameroon and now Zambia. Our phonics mouth chart approach is based on the "leseschlau" method for teaching reading developed by Ursula Rickli when she was a Professor of Didactics at University of Applied Sciences Northwestern Switzerland, and was carefully scrutinized by the Swiss Education Directors Conference. Figure 2 shows a Theory of Change for the project.

Impact Network began exploring the pilot with Ricki in 2020 and spent the first six months adapting materials for use in Cinyanja. In 2021, we selected two schools to run a pilot program in Grades 1-2. The **2021 Pilot Program** had 135 students, four classes, and six teachers, covering a variety of teacher experience, class sizes and performance. The remaining six schools in the cluster used the Zambian government's curriculum, supplemented with Impact Network resources and activities (but <u>not</u> related to *Read Smart*). The pilot phase of the project covered two

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[1] https://usaidzambia-letsread-project.edc.org/, accessed April 25, 2023.

academic terms in 2021. In 2022, the *Read Smart* project was expanded to include all eight schools in the cluster and currently serves 935 students in Grades 1 and 2, including 18 teachers and 23 classes (the **2022 Scale-Up Program**).

Figure 2: Theory of Change Summary for *Read Smart* Project

Resources & Input	Activities	Output	Outcomes	Impact
• Literacy specialist support to adapt to *Read Smart* to local languages • Materials and resources available through print and eLearning	• Students have access to *Read Smart* materials for visual phonics program • Teachers have access to comprehensive training and support on letter sounds and *Read Smart* phases and activities	• Students receive four phases with 10 weeks of instruction each in *Read Smart* phase • Teachers receive four full-day teacher training workshops (one for each phase)	• Students improve letter sound and early reading skills and knowledge • Teachers improve ability to teach early literacy skills in local language	• Improved early literacy skills by students, as measured by EGRA • Increased grade progression and on-grade level performance • Improved long-term educational outcomes based on foundational literacy skills

Impact Network schools are located in rural areas of the Eastern Province of Zambia, in villages with no running water, limited electricity, and little infrastructure. An external evaluation by [American Institutes for Research](#) found that only 1% of our students come from families that do not consider themselves poor. Only 1% of our student population has access to regular power from a power grid at home, and more than 4 in 10 students do not wear shoes to school.

HOW WELL DOES READ SMART WORK?

Impact Network has a strong commitment to evidence-based research and conduct both internal and external evaluations of our work. Internally, monitoring and evaluation play a critical role in our decision-making and goal-setting process. Externally, we have a proven history of engaging independent, unbiased researchers to evaluate our programs, as evidenced by our RCT with American Institutes for Research.

Spotlight Student: John Banda, Kalowe Community School

According to Zambian education policies, the expected age for students to enter Grade 1 is seven years. In practice, many students delay enrollment until after age seven, sometimes by a number of years. The reasons for this are varied and complex – the distance required to walk to school, challenges in the terrain such as creek crossings, a lack of funds for school including clothes or supplies, and work responsibilities including household chores, farming, or cattle herding.

John Banda is one of these students who enrolled later than the recommended age. He began his school career at Kalowe Community School in 2021 as a 12 year old – five years older than the recommended start age. While we happily enroll any learners in Grade 1 at the start of their education, the reality is that the success rate of highly overage students is very low. While there are a few who succeed in this endeavor, it is rare for students to stay in primary school into their adult years.

But John Banda came to school eager to learn. Through lucky coincidence, he enrolled at Kalowe at the same time it had been selected as pilot school for the *Read Smart* program. Before the pilot began, John had a good attitude and tried hard. But when the Read Smart program began, John truly began to flourish. He was one of the first in the class to learn the sounds for each of the mouth charts and was quickly able to put the charts together to make words. He became so quick to finish tasks that the teacher and the pilot team looked for extension activities. The combination of his strong skills and older age led him to be a leader in the class and take on a teacher helper role in distributing materials and assisting students who struggled.


After one term in the Read Smart program, John had progressed enough to progress to Grade 2 mid-year. John was very proud and excited, despite being warned he would have to work very hard to catch up. He worked hard and ended the school year literate in Cinyanja, with a goal of completing Grade 3 and 4 the following year, so he could catch up with kids who are more similar in age to him. In Term 1 of 2022, his attendance was near-perfect, and he was ranked fourth in his Grade 3 class. He is excited to now be learning to read in English, which is currently his favorite subject!

Internal Data: 2021 Pilot Program Results

Internally, we used adapted EGRA assessments to evaluate the program across the two pilot schools and six Impact schools that served as a control group. In May 2021 (pre-program), Grade 1 and 2 students were evaluated across all schools. This assessment included typical early literacy subskills, and each was scored to arrive at an overall composite score for each student. Pre-program results indicate similar overall literacy performance at the schools, though pilot school students were slightly more proficient than control students at baseline (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Data from Impact Network Literacy Assessments for May & December 2021 – Internal Data
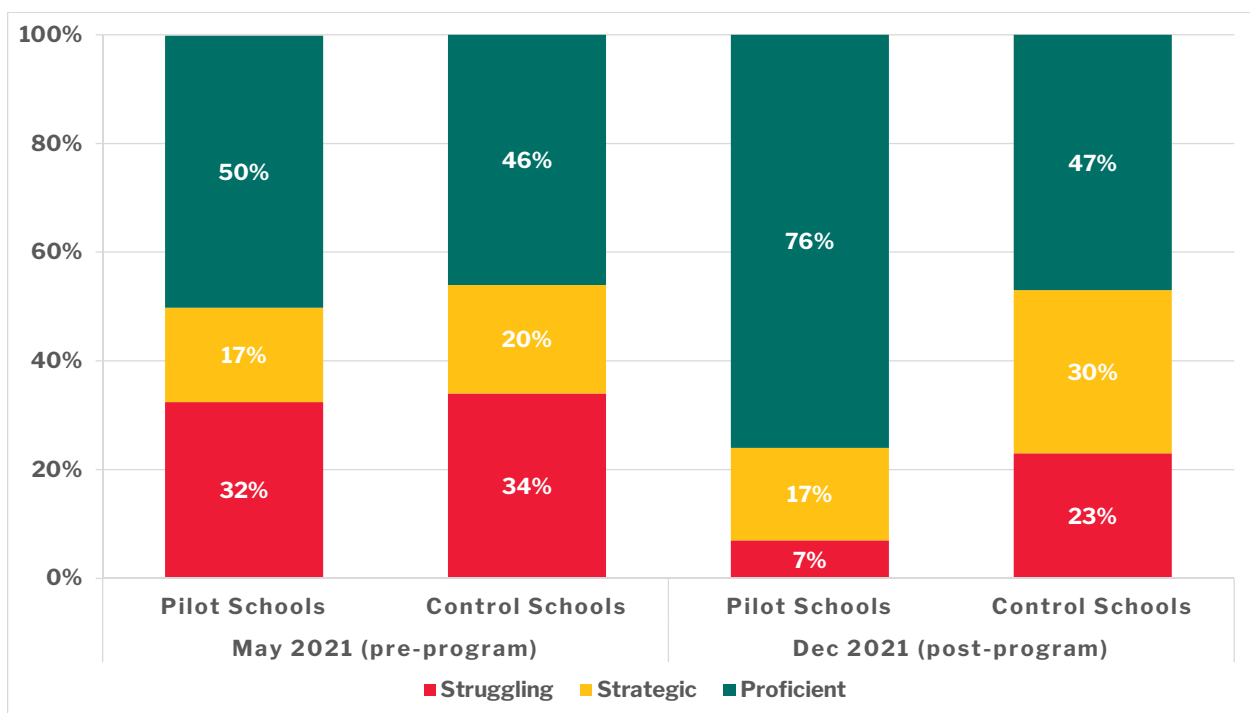

After conducting the pilot program in December of 2021, we administered the same assessment to Grade 1 and 2 students. Post-program results show a significant increase in the performance of pilot schools compared to control schools. Students at pilot schools were 76% proficient compared to 47% for students at control schools (see Figure 3).

External Data: 2021 Pilot Program Results

In addition to assessments conducted by Impact Network, the pilot program happened to operate during a time where USAID's *Let's Read Zambia* Project was

also being conducted. As part of this, standard assessments were conducted at all government and community schools across five different provinces. These data were then shared on a public dashboard.[2] While the program is still somewhat new, a reasonably-sized sample of data was available from schools in Term 3 of 2021 (September to December) for Grade 1. We were able to compare the literacy scores of the pilot and control schools alongside the district, province, and nation.

Figure 4: Data from Let's Read Zambia Literacy Assessments for Grade 1, Term 3, 2021 – External Data
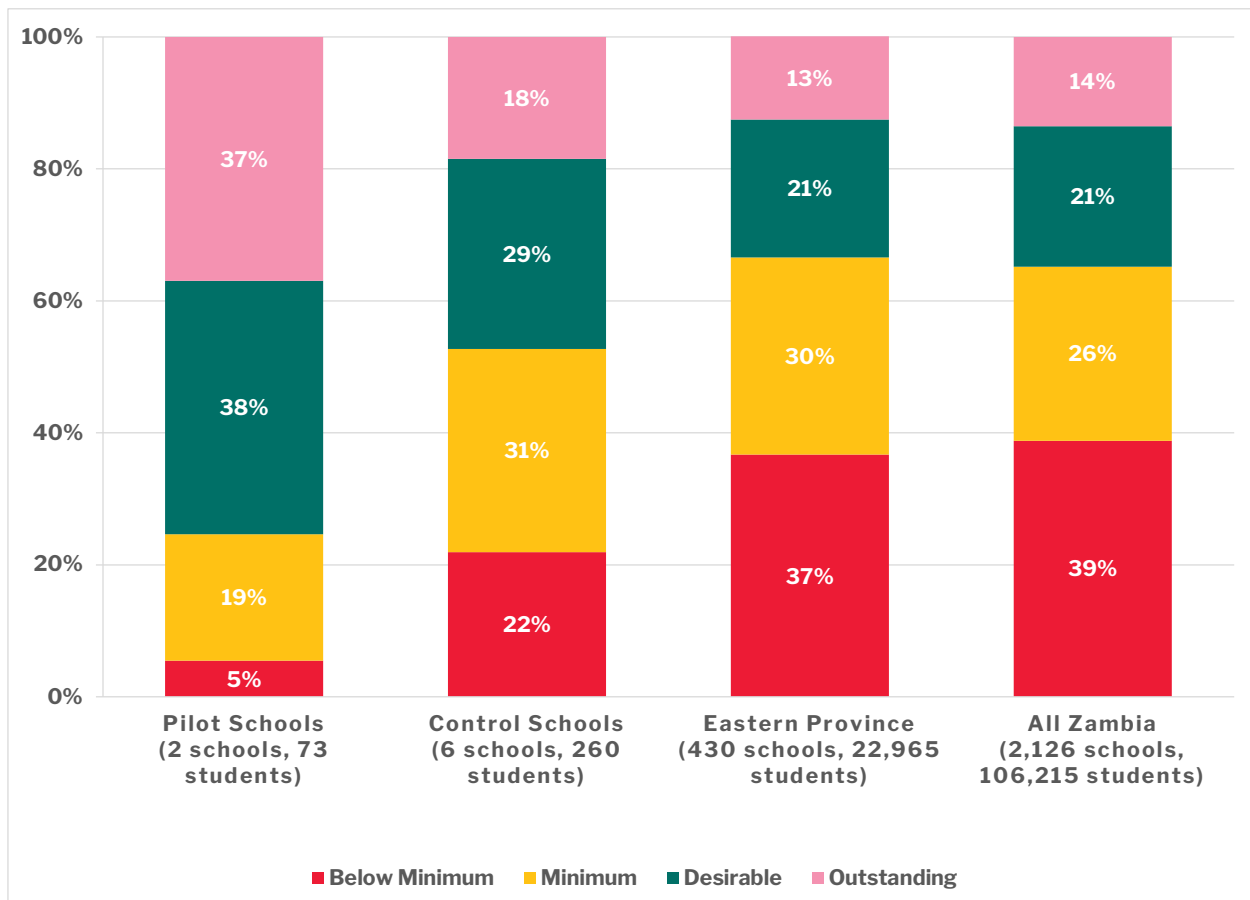
Overwhelmingly, data from this national dataset shows that the *Read Smart* project had remarkable impacts for students' early literacy skills. Results indicate that performance in schools across Eastern Province and Zambia were relatively similar. Results for the Impact Network control schools indicate that our standard approach to early literacy is still an improvement over other schools in the province and country. However, results for the *Read Smart* project are incredibly convincing. The percent of students scoring at "desirable" or "outstanding" levels for the province

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and national level is 32% to 34%. For Impact Network's control schools, it is 47% (a 15 percentage point increase). **For the pilot schools in the *Read Smart* project, it is a whopping 75% (a 43 percentage point increase)** (see Figure 4)**.**

External Data: 2022 Scaleup Results

Relying on the same Let's Read Zambia data collection efforts, we were able to further examine longer term results of the *Read Smart* project. Examining the beginning of 2023 school year data, we can separate out entering Grade 3 students who had two years of *Read Smart* (because they were in the 2021 Pilot Program) from students who had one year of *Read Smart* (because they were in the 2022 Scaleup Program). We can also compare these new third graders to their counterparts across the province and country.

Figure 5: Data from Let's Read Zambia Literacy Assessments for Grade 3, Term 1, 2023 – External Data
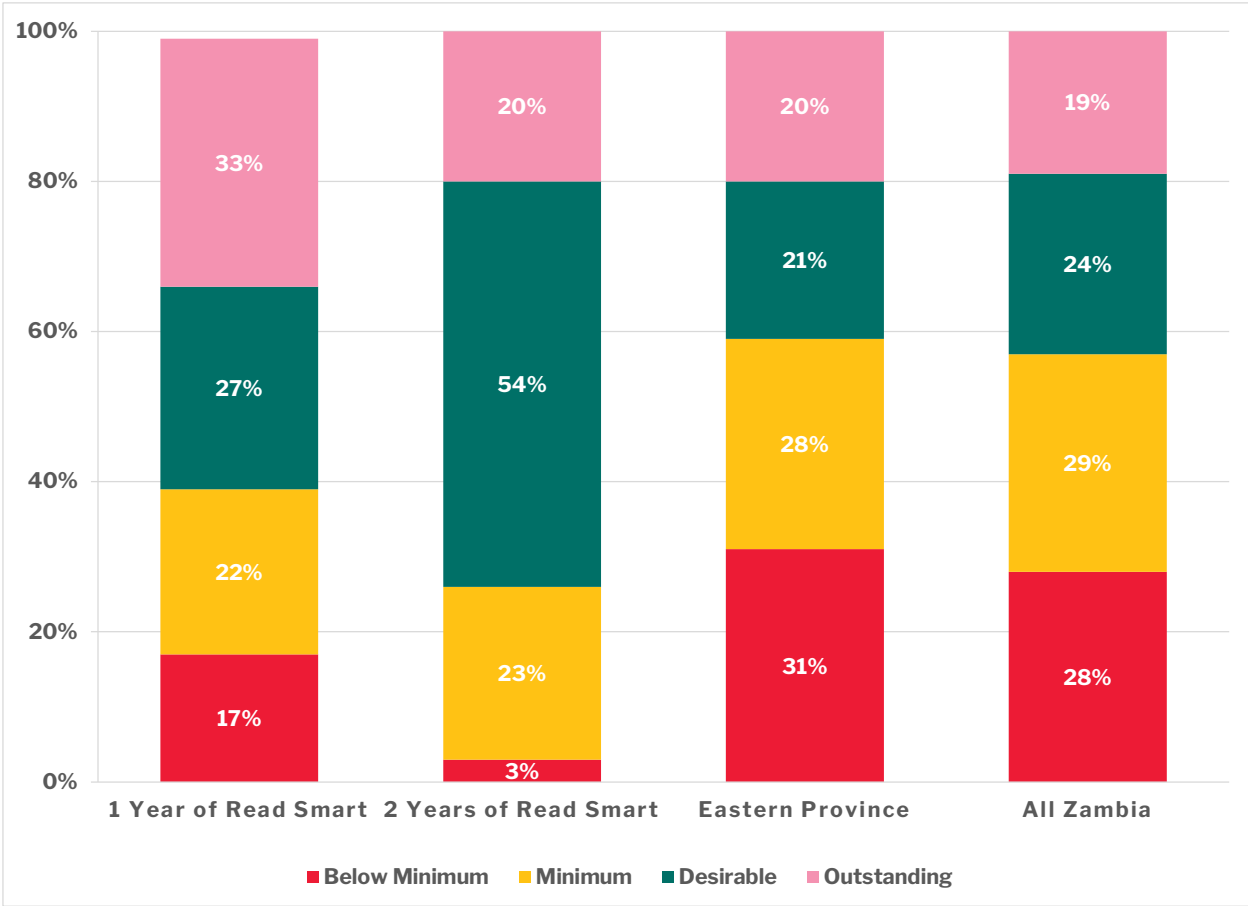
Students who received two years of *Read Smart* scored 14 percentage points higher than their peers with just one year in the program and 33 to 35 percentage points higher than the district and provincial averages. Significantly, only 3% of

students who received two years of the program scored in the below minimum category, compared to 28% across Zambia.

In summary, the results of assessments conducted both internally and externally indicate that the pilot schools implementing *Read Smart* performed significantly better than their counterparts in other schools.

What's Next?

To move the lever on early literacy scores, the country needs a targeted, intensive, phonics-based program that teaches early literacy skills fast and at a high-quality. Our data as well as externally collected, representative data, shows that *Read Smart* is that program.

To this end, we aim to work within Eastern Province to expand *Read Smart* to early childhood centers, community schools, and government schools. We also want to explore adapting to 1-2 other Zambian languages (e.g. Bemba or Tonga) within the next three years, allowing us a broader reach across Zambia.