

THE POST-COVID RECOVERY IMPERATIVE:

Five Essential Leadership Lessons
for Closing the Learning Gap



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Introduction

CONTEXT & PURPOSE

The COVID-19 pandemic has triggered an unprecedented global education crisis and increased the demand to help students catch up through accelerated learning. The good news: Leaders can take concrete actions to strengthen accelerated learning for the hardest-to-reach children and youth. Drawing on lessons from country-level evidence and consultations, this guidance document recommends contextually relevant priorities and actions.

School closures forced by COVID-19 resulted in about 1.5 billion children and youth out of school in spring 2020, from pre-primary to tertiary age. At the time of writing, [our live data](#) story about COVID-19 and schools shows that nearly a fourth of the world's children have only partially returned to school. The pandemic exacerbated the already very high numbers of out-of-school children and youth (OOSCY) and drastically impacted student learning, with research estimating more than [a year of learning loss](#) after only a three-month school closure.

“Sirens are ringing loudly, especially on behalf of the most vulnerable. Even though it is a bleak picture, there is hope: If we act now and take new evidence-informed approaches with proven impact for accelerated education, we can make a difference!”

As governments face mounting pressure to tackle this urgent challenge with constrained budgets, understanding how other education leaders navigate these same challenges can help. The moral imperative to reach the most marginalised makes the sharing and use of this knowledge even more compelling and can contribute to strengthening education system resilience. As decision-makers consider whether to embark on accelerated education programs (AEPs), strengthen the impact of existing AEPs, or exercise greater oversight over AEPs, this evidence synthesis offers five lessons to help guide policy and implementation.

FIVE LESSONS FOR EDUCATION LEADERS TO STRENGTHEN ACCELERATED LEARNING POLICIES AND GUIDELINES

| 1 REVIEW | → 2 ASSESS | → 3 PLAN | → 4 ACT | → 5 ENGAGE |
|---|--|---|---|--|
| Review the most important AEP features as a basis for improving policies. | Conduct a national assessment for strengthening alignment with your formal education system. | Define a staged approach for strengthening alignment with your national system. | Design and roll out policy actions to strengthen alignment in stages. | Involve a broad range of actors to accelerate your goals throughout the process. |

This guidance is based on a global literature review, analyses of national policies, and a novel approach to rapidly crowdsource further published and unpublished evidence about AEPs. One hundred and thirty-six relevant sources were identified, 76% of which are [grey literature](#). Of those explored, eight countries in Sub-Saharan Africa were selected for deeper exploration: Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Liberia, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, South Sudan, and Uganda.

This paper is intended to share lessons learned from each of these countries' journeys, and not to promote AEPs or review the technical programming aspects of AEPs. Its lessons can be applied globally, and the data and research needs identified can help prioritise funding and research.

This Education.org High-Level Guidance Document is adapted from the full [report](#), which can be found on [Education.org](#) along with references and contributors.

Lesson #1

Review the most important AEP features as a basis for improving policies

Government AEP policies are best informed by understanding what makes AEPs most effective. While successful programmes share common features, only a few features are critical for impact.

Several actors, especially the [Accelerated Education Working Group \(AEWG\)](#), have already demonstrated this point. The best available evidence reveals that effective accelerated education efforts share key features across design and implementation. Furthermore, sharing these

experiences and knowledge can inform COVID-19 learning recovery. For example, it is critical to make special efforts for the hardest-to-reach learners, such as girls, refugees, and learners with disabilities or learning differences. While accelerated education attempts to reach learners who have either fallen out of or have never enrolled in the formal system, evidence shows that programmes often unintentionally reproduce barriers to learning, while government policies to ensure enrolment and completion are rare.

FEATURES OF EFFECTIVE ACCELERATED EDUCATION PROGRAMMES ARE AN IMPORTANT BASIS FOR POLICY ACTIONS



PROGRAMME GOALS

Goals focus on achieving fundamental competencies in an accelerated time frame and accessing future pathways of formal schooling, further training, or employment.



EQUITY & INCLUSION

Equity is promoted by design with strategies to remove barriers to enrolment and completion for the most marginalised. Inclusion is enhanced with engagement of local community and is responsive to local needs.



CURRICULUM & CALENDAR

Content is aligned with national curriculum, but focused on essential learning competencies, with minimised repetition and on an accelerated timeline. Pace is age-adjusted and supports social and emotional learning. Instruction calendar allows efficient access to pathways after certification.



ASSESSMENT & CERTIFICATION

Learner assessment approaches promote flexibility of progression. Programme completion is marked by Ministry of Education-sanctioned certification, and enables transition to formal school, additional training, or employment.



MONITORING, EVALUATION, & DATA COLLECTION (M&E & EMIS)

Programme data is collected and integrated systematically into an educational management information system (EMIS). Programme effectiveness is monitored, and data is used to assess and improve policies.



TEACHER SOURCING & DEVELOPMENT

Recruitment of teachers from the local community carries benefits, including closer family and community engagement. Teachers receive specialised AEP orientation, ongoing training and mentoring.



PEDAGOGY

Enrolment, retention and completion are heightened with learner-centred pedagogy, small classes in safe spaces, teaching at the right level, and high community engagement. Learner well-being is in focus.



TEACHER COMPENSATION

Timely and fair compensation reduces teacher turnover. Pay rates vary by funding source and local or national regulations.



FUNDING & BUDGETING

Ongoing funding, even if partial, supports programme continuity. The inclusion of AEPs in national budget advances sustainability.

Lesson #2

Conduct a national assessment for strengthening AEP alignment with your national education system

Historically, AEPs have existed often separately from government systems and thus have had varying levels of success in integrating students in formal school or producing sustainable access to education. However, the [AEWG 10 Principles for Effective Practice](#) advise that AEPs should be “aligned with the national education system and relevant humanitarian architecture. Such alignment with national ministries of education (MoEs) is recommended to ensure successful student transition from AEPs to formal schools, help improve quality and effectiveness, scale AEPs to reach more children, and help increase the long-term sustainability of AEPs. Often within MoEs, AEPs fall under non-formal education (NFE) or alternative education and have varying levels of oversight or recognition.

What is alignment and why is it important for education leaders?

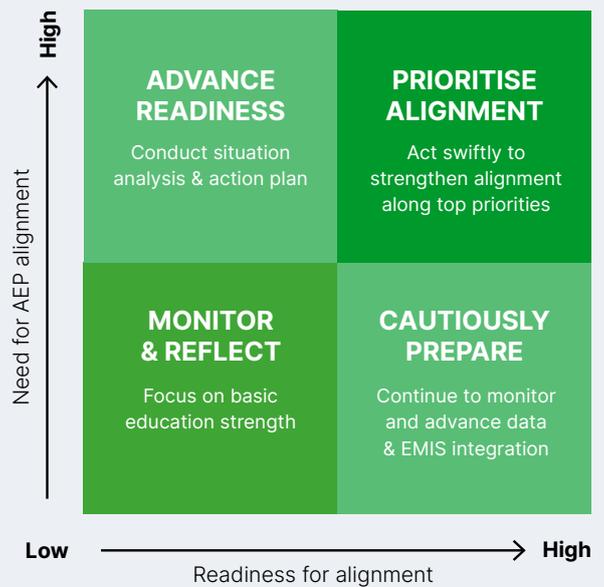
AEP alignment with government refers to how closely AEPs are aligned to the national education system, and existing goals, policies, and plans. At the lowest extreme, AEPs operate with few to no links to national policies, and with minimal guidance or oversight. At the highest extreme, AEPs are fully integrated into the national system, and may be directly implemented by governments on a national scale. Neither extreme is necessarily desirable, many countries typically fall somewhere in between.

This new AEP Alignment Action Matrix can help to guide national assessment and act as a basis for planning actions. To conduct this assessment, it may be helpful to form a task force to investigate the country experience to date with AEPs, their effectiveness, the scale and trajectory of OOSCY, the possible role of AEPs, the policy frameworks needed, and other nationally relevant factors. That review and planning process may elevate a country’s readiness, or it may help it determine that AEP alignment is not appropriate at this time.

NEED FOR GREATER ALIGNMENT IS DRIVEN BY:

- High OOSYC population
- High inequality index
- Multiple implementing partners and donors with wide variations in programmes which are ready to scale

GETTING STARTED WITH THE AEP ALIGNMENT ACTION MATRIX: ASSESSING URGENCY AND READINESS ARE IMPORTANT PREPARATORY STEPS



READINESS FOR ALIGNMENT IS INCREASED BY:

- Political, social and economic capacity
- Recognition or positioning of AEPs as national policy response to OOSCY
- Existing recognition of non-formal education or alternative education pathways

Lesson #3

Define a staged approach for strengthening alignment with your national system

Before developing national action plans for improving AEPs, it can be helpful to better understand low, medium, and high positions on the alignment spectrum. Based on a comprehensive review of country experiences with AEPs,

descriptions of low and high alignment along nine dimensions are provided below. Furthermore, the table below also shows how varying levels of alignment can help to support and strengthen AEPs.

NINE DIMENSIONS OF ALIGNMENT CAN GUIDE GOVERNMENT ACTIONS

| | LOW ALIGNMENT | HIGH ALIGNMENT |
|---|---|---|
|  | 1. AEP GOALS Each AEP determines goals; no consistency across AEPs or with national education system. No reference to AEPs as part of OOSCY strategy in national education sector plan or strategy. | Goals of AEPs standardised and enforced. Specific groups identified for targeting through AEPs. Pathways recognised and linkage of NFE to formal education made. |
|  | 2. EQUITY & INCLUSION No equity and inclusion strategy and low awareness of existing AEPs and their focus. | Ministry recognises AEPs as part of overall government strategy to reach marginalised groups. Government proactively supports AEPs. Government supports specific efforts to address and remove barriers, for example: pregnancy, transport, financial hardship, lack of school materials. |
|  | 3. CURRICULUM & CALENDAR Determined by programme, pace may be set by donors. Might not use government learning indicators to help identify level. | AEP curriculum is consistent with national basic education curriculum, government priorities, and linked with formal system. Strong focus on literacy and numeracy with socio-emotional learning are common. Degree of acceleration and pace agreed with ministry. Close links established to national learning indicators for each grade. |
|  | 4. ASSESSMENT & CERTIFICATION Determined by programme; not linked to country assessment systems, benchmarking standards, or grade-level equivalencies. No learner certification by government. Promotion not linked to government standards. Perhaps no monitoring of achievement of AEP. | Approaches are consistent with ministry's standards and benchmarks. Summative and formative assessments conducted. Certification and promotion requirements are formalised to allow for completion certificates and transition to formal system or other post-completion education options. |
|  | 5. MONITORING, EVALUATION & DATA COLLECTION (M&E & EMIS) M&E determined by programme and/or donors, tied to donor reporting needs and indicators, not linked to EMIS. Key data often missing. Little or no consultation with ministry or EMIS staff. | M&E design, priorities, and results feed into EMIS, other government systems, and OOSCY monitoring. Data on standard indicators such as enrolment, dropout, and learning outcomes are measured using EMIS definitions. Strong collaboration with government on learning agenda. Reflected in sector plans and reviews with AEP milestones part of overall national education plans. |
|  | 6. TEACHER SOURCING & DEVELOPMENT Teachers are volunteers from the community, with little to no prior experience, trained by AEP programme. | Teachers may be nationally certified teachers or community members. Ministry has guidelines for training facilitators or teachers, which may differ from formal schools. |
|  | 7. PEDAGOGY Home language. Learner-centred pedagogy and active learning techniques. | Instruction is in home language with plan to transition to national language to allow transition back to formal system. Lessons from learner-centred pedagogy and active learning techniques in small classes feed into formal system. |
|  | 8. TEACHER COMPENSATION Teachers are paid by the implementing or funding organisation based on implementer or donor guidelines. | Teachers may be at least partly paid by government. Efforts to define path to becoming certified are established or under consideration. |
|  | 9. FUNDING & BUDGETING Funded by donors and implementing organisations without ongoing commitment. | Clear plans for project continuation exist, along with donor commitment or government assumption of costs, and roles of implementing partners. |

**A POLICY ACTION PATHWAY
FOLLOWS ALIGNMENT PRIORITIES**



**TOP
PRIORITY**

- AEP Goals
- Equity & Inclusion
- Curriculum & Calendar
- Assessment & Certification



**NEXT
PRIORITY**

- M&E & EMIS
- Teaching Sourcing & Development
- Pedagogy



**AS OPPORTUNITY
ARISES**

- Teacher Compensation
- Funding & Budgeting

High alignment across all dimensions is not necessarily the goal for all contexts. Experiences indicate that the highest priorities for AEP alignment with national systems are programme goals, equity and inclusion policies, curriculum and calendar, and assessment and certification. These areas are critical to helping OOSCY learn and transition to formal schools or other pathways.

A second set of alignment policies helps to ensure AEP effectiveness and quality as related to monitoring and teaching. A third set of options, while also important, is related less directly to transition outcomes and can be more difficult to achieve. Consequently, they could be pursued in working towards longer-term sustainability when AEPs are not guided solely by donor or external funding cycles.

Country experiences show that alignment is not a one-size-fits-all solution. Such an approach risks leaving out more children and youth unintentionally by exacerbating existing barriers. While achieving stronger alignment of AEPs with national education objectives can seem like a significant challenge, evidence shows that countries with demonstrable progress in accelerated education have taken a staged approach based on tactical prioritisation. For example, Ethiopia and South Sudan increased the alignment of AEPs with government over two decades, as this figure illustrates.

When Ethiopia's Speed School programme was introduced, clear links to the public education system were made, using national curriculum and textbooks, school facilities, and district examinations. After six years, several regional governments began providing funding, and teacher education colleges collaborated with implementing partners to train facilitators. The formal integration of the programme in the sector plan and the MoE's institutional structure occurred more recently.

In South Sudan, alternative education was a deliberate response to the needs of demobilised soldiers and out-of-school children. Following independence, the government moved quickly in 2012 to recognise alternative education in its first Education Act. Practical guidance, policy and plans then followed. Recently, South Sudan started offering accelerated education at the secondary level.

**NATIONAL CONTEXT DRIVES
GOVERNMENT AEP IMPROVEMENTS:
EXAMPLES FROM ETHIOPIA
AND SOUTH SUDAN**



Lesson #4

Design and rollout policy actions to strengthen alignment in stages

Specific policy actions can be taken for each of the nine areas of alignment, starting with the top priority areas.

ALIGNMENT PRIORITIES AND COUNTRY EXAMPLES GUIDE POLICY ACTIONS TO STRENGTHEN AEPs

TOP PRIORITY

1. AEP GOALS

Example: [South Sudan](#)

- Work with programme implementers to agree on goals, including target groups and expected pathways post-completion.
- Agree who holds AEPs accountable and where accountability is reflected in national policies.
- Develop AEP framework and implementation guidelines.

2. EQUITY & INCLUSION

Example: [South Sudan](#)

- Review current policies affecting OOSCY.
- Develop/refine equity and inclusion policies with a clear role for alternative education, including AEPs.
- Ensure OOSCY policy is included in the education strategic plan, with milestones for progress and data disaggregated by categories of exclusion (gender, age, wealth, disability, etc.).

3. CURRICULUM & CALENDAR

Examples: [South Sudan](#), [Ethiopia](#), [Uganda](#)

- Design clear national learning competencies for level/cycle for formal and non-formal education.
- Work with AEP providers to align with national curriculum and learning competencies focusing on literacy, numeracy, and socio-emotional learning.
- Optimise alignment by ensuring the curriculum reflects AEP best practices in pedagogy and language of instruction.
- Work with AEP providers to align the curriculum with attention to the national calendar, so that AEP students can sit for national examinations. The pace is typically two years covered in one year.

4. ASSESSMENT & CERTIFICATION

Examples: [Liberia](#), [Burkina Faso](#), [Ethiopia](#), [South Sudan](#)

- Form technical working group to review AEP assessment practices alongside national assessment system, standards, benchmarks, tools, etc.
- Work with AEP providers to develop and implement a system for learners to gain qualifications and certifications.
- Embed in formal and non-formal education policy and practice, including a concrete, functional path and responsibilities for implementation.
- Develop guidance for learner transition from AEPs to other learning opportunities and employment.

NEXT PRIORITY

5. MONITORING, EVALUATION & DATA COLLECTION (M&E & EMIS)

Examples: [South Sudan](#), [Ethiopia](#), [Sierra Leone](#), [Uganda](#)

- Convene technical working group to familiarise both AEPs and EMIS with respective current measurement approaches.
- Plan for alignment and data architecture to support the inclusion of AEP data in EMIS; implement plan.
- Continue to work together to build and progress a learning agenda, including evaluation.
- Ensure education sector analysis includes a situation assessment to identify OOSCY and AEP needs.

6. TEACHER SOURCING & DEVELOPMENT

Examples: [Liberia](#), [Nigeria](#), [Sierra Leone](#)

- With AEP implementers and funders, determine minimum qualifications for AEP teachers, considering the needs and capacities in various contexts, especially when teachers are recruited from the community.
- Develop guidelines for training and mentoring AEP teachers, considering adaptations needed for teachers in non-formal education.
- Work with AEPs to develop pre-service and in-service training manual and programme for AEP teachers and facilitators.
- Work with AEPs on parameters for teacher qualifications and teacher career development pathways, e.g., certification.

7. PEDAGOGY

Examples: [Nigeria](#), [Liberia](#)

- Align curriculum to AEP best practices in pedagogy: student-centred and active pedagogy taught in the home language, at least in the early stages.
- Develop guidelines on student-to-teacher ratios.
- Ensure teacher training policies encourage teachers to learn student-centred pedagogy.

AS OPPORTUNITY ARISES

8. TEACHER COMPENSATION

Examples: [South Sudan](#), [Sierra Leone](#)

- Consider guidelines on fair and adequate compensation for AEP teachers based on skill, workload, and context.
- Consider paths toward the financial feasibility of government funding of AEP teachers.

9. FUNDING & BUDGETING

Examples: [Ethiopia](#), [Sierra Leone](#)

- Form a technical working group to establish a process for funding AEPs for the life of a given project and beyond. Include in discussions local partners and all donors funding AEPs.
- Consider a memorandum of understanding to specify roles and responsibilities.
- Integrate the funding arrangement in national budgeting and planning exercises.
- Ensure AEPs have an institutional home within government in formal or non-formal education departments.

Lesson #5

Involve a broad range of actors to accelerate your goals throughout the process

GOVERNMENTS ARE NOT ALONE: PARTNER CONTRIBUTIONS AND COLLABORATIONS TAKE MANY FORMS AND ARE ESSENTIAL FOR SUCCESS

PLEASE SEE EDUCATION.ORG FOR FULL REPORT AND REFERENCES.



NATIONAL & LOCAL MINISTRIES OF EDUCATION

- Conduct self-assessment and develop action plan along the dimensions described with the support of a working group.
- Integrate OOSCY data in EMIS and annual budgeting and planning processes.
- Invest in processes to embed best available evidence in guidelines and policies and share across relevant ministries.



ACADEMIC & RESEARCH ORGANISATIONS

- Prioritise further research in gap areas, such as learning differences, socio-emotional learning, costing data, financing models and progression to formal education, training, or employment.
- Capture COVID-19-related changes made to AEPs, and the subsequent effect on outcomes, to provide decision-makers with insights from other contexts.
- Amplify reports from forthcoming research. ⁽¹⁾



IMPLEMENTING COMMUNITY PARTNERS/NGOS

- Raise public awareness about the role of AEPs in reducing OOSCY.
- Adopt proven key features of effective programmes and share experiences to elevate programme learning with government and donors.
- Increase consistency of reporting through common data collection templates, as promoted by [AEWG toolkit](#).



TEACHERS, SCHOOL LEADERS & TEACHER ORGANISATIONS

- Consider innovative pathways between formal and non-formal teacher recruitment and development.
- Collaborate on AEP in-service and pre-service development for both teachers/facilitators and school leaders.
- Elevate frontline experiences to contribute insights from AEP classrooms and transfer as relevant to formal education.



DONORS INCLUDING PRIVATE FOUNDATIONS, MULTILATERALS, BILATERALS, AND BUSINESSES

- Amplify and leverage best-available evidence in organisational strategy and funding decisions.
- Generate funding incentives to encourage integration of key features in programme design and evidence sharing.
- Introduce incentives to foster more locally-led research.



PARENTS, COMMUNITY, & GENERAL PUBLIC

- Advocate for effective strategies to reach the most vulnerable through AEPs.
- Engage locally with AEP efforts for community children and youth.
- Heighten citizen-led assessment among AEPs to strengthen transparency and accountability for learning outcomes.

(1) These include but are not limited to: Project ACCESS political economy analyses and barriers to institutionalization of AEPs in Nigeria, Uganda, Jordan, Colombia, Pakistan; Study of impact of AEPs on adolescent trajectories in Northeast Nigeria; AEWG BRICE education situation analysis from South Sudan, Uganda, Tanzania and DRC; UNICEF/AEWG review of state of AEPs and other alternative education pathways post-COVID; Population Council GIRL Center report mapping initiatives and reviews policies on girls' education; Associates for Change comparative study of AE and girls' programs in Ghana, Nigeria and Sierra Leone.

This Education.org High-Level Guidance Document has been developed in support of our mission to advance evidence and improve education for every learner. It is adapted from the full report that can be found on [Education.org](#), along with a complete set of references, source material, contributors, and collaborators.

If you are interested in learning more about AEPs, or partnering to strengthen our Education Knowledge Bridge, please contact us at info@education.org

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