



1. Project Data

Project ID

P154185

Project Name

Malawi Education Sector Improvement Proj

Country

Malawi

Practice Area(Lead)

Education

L/C/TF Number(s)

TF-A2913

Closing Date (Original)

31-Dec-2020

Total Project Cost (USD)

43,654,999.25

Bank Approval Date

31-Aug-2016

Closing Date (Actual)

30-Jul-2021

IBRD/IDA (USD)
Grants (USD)

Original Commitment

44,900,000.00

44,900,000.00

Revised Commitment

44,900,000.00

43,654,999.25

Actual

43,658,000.00

43,654,999.25

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2. Project Objectives and Components

a. Objectives

As stated in Schedule 1 (p. 5) of the Global Partnership for Education Fund Grant Agreement, dated September 22, 2016, between the Republic of Malawi and the International Development Association, acting as Administrator, the Project Development Objective (PDO) was "to improve the equity and quality of primary education service delivery in early grade levels, with an emphasis on improved accountability and functioning at the school level."



Following the mid-term review (March 2019), the PDO was slightly amended through a formal Level II restructuring, approved on October 3, 2019, and captured in an Amendment to the Grant Agreement dated October 9, 2019, reworded as follows: "to improve quality, equity and efficiency of primary education in selected districts and schools." Despite the revision of the PDO statement in 2019, a split rating is not warranted. The original PDO supported three objectives: improved quality, improved equity, and improved accountability and functioning at the primary school level. The ICR (pp. 5-6) notes that: (i) the project's original intent to improve accountability and functioning at the school level was ultimately about enhancing efficiency, and "the PDO was revised to make this focus more explicit"; (ii) changes to the results framework "were valid and consistent with the original scope of the project, fully in line with the original theory of change" and meant to provide better measures of intermediate results and outcomes; and (iii) "the components and subcomponents were not revised during project implementation."

b. Were the project objectives/key associated outcome targets revised during implementation?

Yes

Did the Board approve the revised objectives/key associated outcome targets?

No

c. Will a split evaluation be undertaken?

No

d. Components

Component 1: Performance-Based School Improvement Grants for Improving Promotion and Retention (ESIP-II reform theme 3: Learner Retention) (original estimate: \$10.24 million; actual cost: \$10.27 million, or 100 percent of estimate). A pilot in 800 schools was to test the effectiveness of various interventions and incentives to improve promotion and retention. Four groups of 200 schools each would pilot a different package of support and incentives, respectively: (a) base grant with instructions; (b) base grant with instructions and training/sensitization; (c) base grant with instruction and performance grant; and (d) base grant with instruction and performance grant with training/sensitization. Thus, half of the schools would be eligible for the performance grant based on their achievement of improved promotion rates, and half were slated to receive training and sensitization on the issues in line with best international practices. Schools were to use grants to develop and implement strategies to reduce repetition and dropout, with attention to girls' dropout rates. This design aimed to test whether incentives have an impact on performance or whether it is the provision of adequate resources that matters most, and was expected to influence the government's policy and strategy for improving retention and promotion. Reduction of repetition and dropout in Standards 1-4 was expected to lead to better retention and promotion rates, which, in turn, were expected to lead to improved learning and teaching resulting in higher achievement in the long run, enhancing learning outcomes.

Component 2: Improving Equity for the Most Disadvantaged, Including Girls (ESP-II reform theme 3: Learner Retention; and reform theme 6: Education Access and Infrastructure) (original estimate: \$9.60 million; actual cost: \$9.60 million, or 100 percent of estimate). The component aimed to help: (i) reduce pupil-classroom ratios in the eight most disadvantaged districts (Kasungu, Dedza, Lilongwe Rural West, Mzimba South, Thyolo, Mangochi, Machinga, and Chikwawa) to ensure smaller class sizes, enabling a better teaching-learning environment, and (ii) reduce teaching "under the sun"/ outside open-air classrooms, which undercut needed conditions for teaching and learning. It was also focused on improving



the retention of teenage girls by improving availability of sanitary facilities, identified as a constraint for girls. At appraisal, Malawi needed an estimated 27,000 new classrooms, including 350 schools destroyed during the 2015 flood. The component aimed to support construction of 500 classrooms; 300 latrine blocks, with attention to girls' sanitation needs; and 150 water points. All new school construction was to ensure proper access for physically disabled children. An estimated 150 communities/local artisans were to be trained and their skills upgraded for low-cost classroom construction, building, and management.

Component 3: Improving Learning Outcomes, Accountability, and Cost-Effectiveness at School level (ESP-II reform theme 1: Early Grade Learning; reform theme 2: Teacher Training and Infrastructure; and reform theme 3: Learner Retention) (original estimate: \$6.91 million; actual cost: \$6.87 million, or 99 percent of estimate). This component aimed to pilot cost-effective interventions supported by the above-cited themes by building on experiences of other donors and civil society organizations (CSOs)/non-governmental organizations, guiding teachers and headmasters at the school level on how to improve classroom management in a resource-constrained environment, including: (i) allocation of teachers in schools; (ii) improving accountability of teachers and pupils (empowering schools) by using management information systems (Education MIS and Human Resources MIS) more effectively and in a new manner (building on successful UNICEF/CSO pilots); and (iii) improving the retention of teenage girls in Standards 6-8 through communications/awareness programs targeting communities and mothers' groups.

Component 4: Variable Part/Disbursement-Linked Indicators (DLIs) (original estimate: \$13.47 million; actual cost: \$12.22 million, or 91 percent of estimate). This component aimed to support the development, endorsement, and operationalization of strategic policy frameworks to: (a) improve the learning environment in early grades, (b) improve retention of girls in upper primary grades, and (c) promote efficiency measures to reduce repetition in lower primary grades. The proposed areas of focus ultimately became the project's three DLIs, proposed by the government and reflecting priority areas in ESIP II, and considered "stretch" indicators, whose achievement would require institutional change. The DLIs, all focused on the eight most disadvantaged districts, were: (a) reduction in pupil-to-qualified-teacher ratio (PqTR) in Grades 1 and 2; (b) increase in female-to-male teacher ratio in grades 6-8; and (c) reduction in repetition rates in lower primary grades. Moreover, the DLIs were linked to key national policy or system-wide reforms on teacher deployment and distribution and enhanced gender equity; cost-effective measures at the school level to reduce repetition and dropout in lower primary school; and improved internal efficiencies at the school level.

Payments against the achievement of these "stretch" DLI indicators were to be made on a reimbursement basis, with government pre-financing of eligible expenditures and then application for reimbursement when a particular DLI was achieved. Year 2 targets were timed for verification to take place by March 30 to coincide with the budget cycle. Verification of Year 3 targets was to be done in July, after the completion of the academic year. Year 2 targets could be met early but not carried forward to the following year, while Year 3 targets could be met early or carried forward to next year. Partial achievement of Year 3 targets would receive partial disbursement, with the remaining balance rolled over to the next year for reassessment and disbursement if the target was met.

Component 5: Project Management, and Sector Program Support and Coordination (original estimate: \$4.68 million; actual cost: \$4.76 million, or 102 percent of estimate). This component aimed to finance activities, core consultant staff, technical assistance, and recurrent costs related to project management and sector program facilitation and coordination, including communication and monitoring and evaluation (M&E), and to fund an independent verification of attainment of Year 3 targets for three DLIs



under the variable part of funding. This component also aimed to finance the establishment and functioning of a Program Facilitation Team and capacity building of the Ministry of Education's (MOE's) financial management (FM), internal audit, and procurement units. It included support for capacity building at the national, district, and local (that is, school and community) levels to support project implementation, and development of a communications strategy and plan.

Revisions to Components

The project's two restructurings notwithstanding (see Section 2e, above), there were no revisions to the project components as originally designed.

e. Comments on Project Cost, Financing, Borrower Contribution, and Dates

Cost. Total actual cost at project closing was \$43.72 million. As itemized in the ICR's Annex 3 (p. 62) and captured in Section 2d of this ICRR, actual costs of each of the components were very close to the original estimates.

Financing and Borrower Contribution. The project was 100 percent financed by an Education for All Fast Track Initiative Grant (TF-A2913) in the amount of \$44.9 million, which was almost fully (97 percent) utilized. World Bank system data presented in the ICR (pp. ii and iii) shows an actual disbursement of Trust Funding in the amount of \$43.66 million, a slightly different amount than the total project cost presented in the ICR (p. 62) of \$43.72 million, likely attributable to exchange rate calculations. No Borrower contribution was planned or provided.

Restructuring. The project underwent two restructurings. The first one, following the March 2019 mid-term review and approved on October 3, 2019, revised the PDO and the results framework for purposes of clarity and better measurement. The second one, approved on December 23, 2020, introduced additional minor changes to the results framework, extended the closing date by seven months to July 30, 2021, and amended the implementation schedule as a consequence.

3. Relevance of Objectives

Rationale

The PDO is highly relevant to current country conditions, both in its original conception and in its revised form, post-restructuring. The Bank's Systematic Country Diagnosis (SCD), issued in 2018, identified the slow pace of human development outcomes as a binding constraint to Malawi's sustainable growth and development and, specific to the education sector, identified constraints to learning outcomes at the primary and secondary levels, including poor infrastructure, limited school finances, poor accountability and transparency in school management, inequitable access, and low quality. While the SCD noted that significant progress had been made on these fronts in preceding years, it also asserts that these challenges remain pervasive.



The PDO is highly relevant to the current development priorities of the country. Malawi's National Education Sector Investment Plan (NESIP) (2020-2030), as was the case with its predecessor, NESP (2007-2017), focused on three thematic areas across its education system, perfectly aligned with the PDO: (i) access and equity; (ii) relevance and quality; and (iii) governance and management. Moreover, the government's recently launched *Malawi 2063* articulates a set of prioritized policy and programmatic actions to improve human capital outcomes to realize the vision of Malawi as an "inclusively wealthy and self-reliant nation." Education sector targets set under its human capital development pillar include: well-equipped and staffed primary and secondary schools throughout the country; improved availability, accessibility, and quality education to improve learning outcomes; and expanded disability-friendly and gender-sensitive school infrastructure.

Moreover, the PDO is highly relevant to the Bank's Country Partnership Framework (CPF) for FY21-25. The PDO is directly aligned with the CPF's Focus Area 3, "strengthening human capital development," particularly the education-specific Objective 3.2: *Improving learning outcomes and skills*, with a special focus on girls' education and women. The CPF articulates the following interventions in support of this objective: (i) grow engagement in the sector, from early childhood through tertiary education to strengthen systems and improve learning outcomes; (ii) implement a programmatic approach to address system-wide inefficiencies in spending and provide targeted, needs-based financing to address low learning at the lower primary level and gaps between schools; and (iii) foster entrepreneurship skills through targeted vocational and technical training and apprenticeships. In short, the education-specific objective, together with intervention themes supporting its achievement, focus on improving quality, equity, and efficiency in Malawi's primary education system, with the goals of improving access and learning outcomes.

Rating

High

4. Achievement of Objectives (Efficacy)

OBJECTIVE 1

Objective

Improve the quality of primary education in selected districts and schools

Rationale

The project supported various interventions to improve the quality of education with a focus on Malawi's eight most disadvantaged school districts. These interventions included the construction/renovation of school infrastructure in order to improve the quality of the learning environment, as well as to provide adequate and appropriate sanitation facilities meeting the respective needs of boys and girls. The project provided school grants to 800 schools in these districts to help them implement their school improvement plans. Eligible school grant expenditures included: construction/rehabilitation of low-cost learning facilities; the recruitment and payment of auxiliary teachers; teaching and learning materials; motivation of teachers and learners; and school governance and management. The project also supported and nurtured the design and implementation of systematic learning assessments. Moreover, DLI1 provided payments in project Years 2



and 3 against the achievement of reductions in PqTR in Grades 1 and 2. This DLI was linked to and sought to incentivize national reform seeking to accelerate and increase teacher deployment and to achieve a more equitable distribution of teachers. Together, these investments in classrooms, teachers, learning materials, and other supports were expected to result in smaller classes and improved PqTR ratios in lower grades, creating an improved learning environment, which would, in turn, contribute to greater retention of students, a reduction in dropout rates, and improved learning outcomes.

Outputs and intermediate outcomes

Investments in infrastructure:

- A total of 500 standard **classrooms** were **built** in the eight most disadvantaged districts, **fully achieving the target** of 500. Some schools that previously had no permanent structures now have adequate teaching facilities, contributing to quality teaching and learning.
- A total of 1,345 low-cost learning facilities were built for lower primary schools in the eight most disadvantaged districts, by school communities using school grants and applying approved, low-cost infrastructure. This **exceeded the target** of 1,000 facilities. These facilities were built to reduce class sizes and overcrowding in schools and to prevent children from learning in open-air classrooms.
- Together the standard classrooms and low-cost learning facilities have accommodated more than 79,500 pupils in Standards 1-4, many of whom were previously learning in a low-quality outdoor space.

Grants for 800 schools:

- Over and above school improvement grants provided to all schools through the government's Primary School Improvement Plan, in support of a pilot to test the effectiveness of various interventions and incentives to improve promotion and retention, 800 schools in the eight disadvantaged districts received a base school grant and guidelines for the grants' use, and then were divided into four groups of 200 schools, receiving in addition to the base grant and guidelines, respectively: (Group 1) nothing additional; (Group 2) training; (Group 3) the eligibility to apply for a performance-based grant; and (4) both training and the eligibility to apply for a performance grant.
 - An amount of \$3.56 million in base grants was provided to these 800 schools in three tranches over three years, FY2016/17 – 2018/19.
 - An amount of \$754,303 was disbursed to 340 schools (or 85 percent of the 400 schools in the performance-based funding (PBF) treatment groups). While the original target was to provide performance-based grants to all 400 schools in the treatment group, the ICR notes that, in retrospect, the 100 percent target was not realistic, since eligible schools needed to apply for these grants and meet a set of requirements in order to qualify for them.
 - Of all the grant funding received by the 800 schools, almost 40 percent was spent on infrastructure; 18 percent on teaching and learning materials; 10 percent on learner and teacher motivation; 8 percent on continuous professional development; and 7 percent on governance and management. (The remaining 15 percent is reported as "other.") These patterns of spending were largely consistent across the four pilot groups.

Learning assessments:



- The project supported the design and administration of systematic learning assessments so that learning outcomes could be tracked, disseminated, and used to monitor and improve the effectiveness of quality improvement interventions. To this end, the following **targets were 100 percent achieved**:
 - A framework for conducting low-stake zonal tests was endorsed by the Local Education Group; and
 - Common zonal tests were conducted in Grades 3 and 4 in the eight disadvantaged districts, and their results disseminated.

Teachers:

- While not made fully explicit in the ICR, the task team informed IEG during their September 23, 2022 meeting that the project did indeed support the deployment of an increment of teachers, especially to the eight most disadvantaged districts. Supplemental information and data was sent to IEG in an email dated September 27, 2022 to substantiate this:
 - During project implementation, teacher deployment picked up substantially. From a pre-project (2015) baseline of 0 new teacher deployments and a pattern of highly inequitable distribution of new teacher deployments in previous years, between 2016 (the year of project effectiveness) and 2019, the government deployed a total of 18,657 new teachers to schools across the country: 4,645 in 2016, 4,518 in 2017, 5,927 in 2018, and 3,567 in 2019. Recruitments in 2018 covered two cohorts of graduates of formal teacher training institutions, decreasing the lag between graduation and deployment from two years (in pre-project and early project years) to one year. Of these 18,657 new recruits, 8,458 (or 45 percent) were deployed to the eight most disadvantaged districts, reversing the pre-project trend of over-deployment of new teachers to better-off/better-performing districts and to schools with more desirable locations. Although the project did not finance the costs of these new deployments, the task team noted to IEG that the project's DLI 1 (payment for improvements in PqTR in the eight most disadvantaged regions) incited the increased deployment and more equitable allocation of these new, qualified graduates.
 - Additionally, schools from these eight districts participating in the Component 1 pilot used a portion of their school grants (base grants and performance-based grants) to recruit 478 auxiliary teachers (from the pool of fully qualified graduates, who were waiting to be deployed) and assigned most of them to lower grades to meet the PqTR targets for Grades 1 and 2.
- A total of 1,598 head teachers and deputy head teachers received training in school leadership, management, and improving teaching behavior, **fully achieving the target** of 1,600.
- By the project's end, 84 percent of teachers in targeted schools were observed at least once a term by their head teachers, up from a baseline of 58 percent and **slightly exceeding the target** of 80 percent.
- By the project's end, the average teacher utilization rate for lower primary school was 52 percent. This is a measure of what proportion of teachers within a school are assigned to lower primary grades, which typically suffer from under-allocation of teachers. Not only did this fall **short of the target** of 62 percent, it also represents **a decline from the baseline level** of 56.8 percent. The task team, in its September 23, 2022 meeting with IEG, clarified that this measure's denominator was all schools in Malawi (as opposed to the PqTR measure, whose denominator was schools in the eight most disadvantaged districts). The majority of auxiliary teachers hired with project-funded school grants in the eight most disadvantaged districts were deployed to work in lower primary classes, but the rest of schools nationwide were asked (under Component 3.1) to redistribute their existing pool of teachers



(including those without an increment in staff), which is more difficult. Nationwide trends on this indicator thus hide the effect the project had on the eight most disadvantaged districts.

- The average learner attendance rate in targeted schools increased from a baseline of 62 percent to 69 percent by the end of the project, **falling short of the target** of 72 percent.

Outcomes

- The PqTR in grades 1-2 in the eight most disadvantaged districts decreased by 35 percent, from a baseline of 166:1 to 107.3:1, **exceeding the target** of a 20 percent reduction (or a ratio of 132:1). This was a DLI (DLI1) and also an intermediate results indicator.
- The average teacher attendance rate in targeted schools increased from a baseline of 82 percent to 89 percent, **substantially achieving the target** of 90 percent.
- While reported as a major outcome of efficiency gains (under Objective 3), the increase in promotion rates in lower primary grades in targeted districts (increasing from 65.4 to 68.0) **exceeded the target** of 67.4 by 23 percent, likely an outcome of investments in education quality and improvements in students' attendance rates.
- Learning outcomes of students in the eight disadvantaged districts targeted by the project **improved significantly**. The Malawi Longitudinal Schools Survey (MLSS), which conducted learning assessments with more than 10,000 Standard 4 students across Malawi in 2016 and retested more than 5,000 of them (randomly selected) in 2021, reveals that during the project's life students in the eight project districts achieved: a 28 percent improvement in English scores (from 476 to 609); a 27 percent increase in Math scores (from 473 to 600); and a 26 percent increase in Chichewa scores (from 482 to 606). Moreover, as detailed under Objective 2: (1) the gap in scores between these disadvantaged districts and the 22 (better off, better performing) districts not supported under this project was essentially closed; and (2) the gaps between male and female students in the disadvantaged districts were substantially reduced.
- Schools that constructed a learning shelter with base grants or performance-based grants, and were able to reduce their pupil-to-classroom ratio to below 90 as a consequence, earned learning scores at the project's end that were 9-12 points higher (on a mean-adjusted scale centered at 500, across English, Math, and Chichewa) than control schools in the same zones. This gain in learning is equivalent to around half a term's additional learning.

Rating

Substantial

OBJECTIVE 2

Objective

Improve the equity of primary education in selected districts and schools

Rationale

The project sought to address two dimensions of primary education inequities: (1) those between the most disadvantaged school districts and the better-performing/better-off ones; and (2) those among vulnerable



students, who encounter particular constraints to access, retention, and success in school, especially girls. To address the first dimension of inequities, the project targeted the eight most disadvantaged school districts in the country. Targeting criteria weighted the needs for additional classrooms, and large classroom sizes as measured by high pupil-classroom and PqTR ratios. Investments in quality improvements in the eight most disadvantaged school districts were expected to reduce gaps between these districts and the 22 better-off districts not supported under the project. To address the second dimension of inequalities, the project factored into the design of its interventions the constraints to access faced by vulnerable students, especially girls, with a view to lifting these constraints, improving vulnerable students' retention rates, and reducing their dropout rates. These design features included: guidelines for the use of school grants, which included strategies to support female learners; separate and appropriate sanitary facilities for girls and boys; efforts to improve female-to-male teacher ratios; ramps and other infrastructure design considerations for accommodating disabled students; and school construction to reduce travel time (and safety/security risks, especially for girls).

Outputs and intermediate outcomes:

Closing the gap between the most disadvantaged school districts and the rest:

- Beyond their contributions to improved quality and learning outcomes, the outputs and intermediate outcomes supporting education quality in the eight most disadvantaged school districts (itemized under Objective 1) also contributed to significant reductions in gaps in quality and learning between the eight disadvantaged project districts and the 22 non-project, better-off, better-performing school districts (as itemized in Outcomes below).

Lifting constraints of girls and other vulnerable students:

- Construction of low-cost learning facilities to improve access paid particular attention to girls' accessibility by reducing the distance they had to travel, cognizant of the particular (safety and security) challenges this posed for girls.
- Newly constructed schools under the project took steps to ensure accessibility for children with physical disabilities, including ramps and other accommodations.
- Construction of low-cost learning facilities included 542 change rooms for girls' sanitary needs to enhance retention rates in upper classes.
- A total of 330 sanitary facilities were constructed in target schools to respond to the needs of boys and girls, **exceeding the original target** of 300 and **substantially achieving the revised target** of 342. Of these:
 - 115 sanitary blocks were for boys, **fully achieving the target** of 114; and
 - 215 sanitary blocks were for girls, **substantially (94 percent) achieving the target** of 228. This addressed a significant and acknowledged constraint in Malawi to girls' retention in upper grades: access to adequate and appropriate sanitary facilities.
- The project supported mothers' groups to encourage female attendance and retention.
- Female-to-male teacher ratio in Grades 6-8 in the eight most disadvantaged districts increased from a baseline of 0.31:1 to 0.34:1, **fully achieving the DLI Year 2020 target** of 34:1. By 2021 (the project's extended year), the ratio increased to 0.37:1, exceeding the target of 0.34:1, even though the DLI reimbursements process was no longer in effect. Endline ratios range across the eight districts from a



low of 31.1 (Chikwawa and Dedza districts) to a high of 0.46 (Lilongwe R. West). Evidence indicates that gender-sensitive school environments benefit the participation of both genders, particularly girls. As such, this achievement contributes to Objective 1 (improved quality), as well as this Objective.

Outcomes

The project culminated in the closing of performance gaps between the most disadvantaged and better-off school districts and between girls and boys.

- Prior to the project (Education Management Information System [EMIS] 2015), the average school PqTR in the eight project districts (all grades) was 20 percent higher than in the non-project districts (87:1 versus 72:1). By the project's end (EMIS 2020), the PqTR in the eight districts was just 3 percentage points higher than in non-project districts (72:1 versus 69:1). While both project and non-project districts made progress on this front, regression results show that PqTRs for Standards 1 and 2 declined by 25 students per teacher more in project than non-project districts. Evidence suggests that these improved ratios are likely to have contributed to substantial improvements in test scores within project districts (reported below). Forthcoming analysis will assess the learning impact of these reductions.
- Not only did learning assessment scores of students in the eight disadvantaged districts improve significantly between 2016 and 2021 (see Objective 1), the differential between these scores and those of students residing in the 22 (better-off/better-performing) non-project districts was virtually eliminated. In 2016, students' baseline scores in the eight disadvantaged districts lagged behind those of students in the other districts by an average of 35 points: 36 in English, 39 in Math, and 31 in Chichewa. By the project's end, the gap was virtually eliminated, with only a 3-point average gap, with average scores in the disadvantaged districts slightly better than those in the 22 better-off districts.
- According to an email sent by the task team on September 27, 2022, a disaggregation of scores by gender reveals that between 2016 and 2021 girls in the eight most disadvantaged districts fully caught up to the level of students' scores in the 22 better-off, non-project districts, and boys in the eight most disadvantaged districts actually surpassed the scores achieved in the 22 non-project districts. Supplemental data sent by the task team on September 29, substantiate these findings. In the eight most disadvantaged districts supported by the project, female students' overall scores (across Math, English, and Chichewa) rose from an average of 391 in 2016 to 590 in 2021, and male students' scores rose from an average of 406 to 596. During this same timeframe, female students' scores in the 22 non-project better-off districts rose from an average of 422 to 587, and male students' scores rose from an average of 424 to 588.

The decline in girls' repetition and dropout rates slightly exceeded targets.

- Girls repetition rate in Grades 1-4 in the eight most disadvantaged districts declined from 23.20 to 20.77, ***slightly exceeding the target*** of 20.90, and also ***slightly exceeding the average achieved for boys and girls together*** of 20.97.



- Girls' dropout rate in Grades 5-7 in the eight most disadvantaged districts declined from 27.1 to 15.83 percent, ***slightly exceeding the DLI and intermediate results target*** of 16 percent (101 percent achieved).

Rating

Substantial

OBJECTIVE 3

Objective

Improve accountability and functioning at the school level / improve the efficiency of primary education in selected districts and schools

Rationale

The project supported the government's education sector priority of school empowerment through activities to strengthen governance, efficiency, and capacity at the school level, including the implementation of the Primary School Improvement Program. To this end, the project's provision of grants to be used at the discretion of schools was to contribute to the strengthening of school-based management capacity and autonomy. Project investments to support greater parental and community awareness and involvement in education activities was instrumental in leveraging: (i) their support and encouragement of students staying in school and succeeding, and (ii) their monitoring of school performance (e.g., teacher and student attendance rates) and accountability. Grants, training and guidelines, low-cost community-based constructions, and the conduct of student learning assessments were all expected to culminate in more rigor and transparency in school management and improved cost-effectiveness of additional classrooms, contributing to efficiency gains at the school and community levels, including reductions in repetition rates, increased promotion rates, and improved attendance of teachers and learners.

Outputs and intermediate outcomes

- Base grants and performance-based grants provided under the project (totaling \$4.3 million) helped address, at least in part, the low level of domestic spending on schools in Malawi. Furthermore, the project's disbursement directly to schools to enable them to manage and account for these funds and use them to implement school improvement plans was an important tool for developing and nurturing school management capacity and autonomy at the local level and learning-by-doing.
- Construction of low-cost learning facilities (also contributing to the quality objective) constitutes a large improvement in the efficiency of the education system by: (i) creating a new, innovative, and replicable design to reduce the cost of classroom construction in Malawi; and (ii) demonstrating the importance of trusting and empowering schools and communities, showing how they can work together more effectively and efficiently to improve school infrastructure.
- Training of head teachers and deputy head teachers (detailed under Objective 1) was an important output of the project's support to the government's School Leadership Program, which sought to strengthen school leadership and management capacity, and the management and oversight of teacher quality.



- From a baseline of 1.8, the number of meetings schools held with parents during a school year increased to 2.5, **falling short of the target** of 3.0.
- By the end of the project, a total of 4,824 unique community members sent messages through the Community Dialogue Platform, of which 3,035 communicated through SMS and 1,789 through voice mail. This **far exceeded the target** of a 20 percent increase over the Year 3 baseline of 721.

Outcomes

- The share of targeted schools meeting minimum standards of the National Education Standards in the eight project districts increased from a baseline of 62.7 percent to 71.1 percent, **falling short of the target** of 78.4 percent, or only 54 percent achieved. The minimum standards for this indicator were: (i) a school having an approved School Improvement Plan (SIP) in place; (ii) demonstrable implementation of SIP activities through verifiable monitoring documents; (iii) open display of key school information to ensure transparency; and (iv) the availability of mechanisms to monitor learner and teacher school attendance. Initial delays in the implementation of the school leadership program (including training of head and deputy head teachers), combined with prolonged disruption of schooling during COVID, cut the implementation period short, thus undermining the achievement of this outcome.
- The conduct of learning assessments (reported under Objective 1) has been an important tool for informing the strategic management of SIPs at the school and community levels.
- Grade-wise promotion rates in lower primary grades in targeted districts reached 68 percent, up from a baseline of 65.4 percent, and **exceeding the target** of a two-point increase (or 67.4 percent). This achievement indicates improved internal efficiency at the school level, through strengthened accountability and functioning, and enhanced parent involvement, resulting in more students advancing through the system and lower repetition and dropouts.
- Repetition rate in Grades 1-4 in the eight most disadvantaged districts declined from 23.7 percent to 21.40 in 2020, **not achieving the DLI 3 target** of 20.90 by Year 2020. However, in the project's extended year of 2021, the repetition rate declined further to 20.97 percent, **exceeding the adjusted intermediate results target** of 21.30.
- The dropout rate in project schools declined from 56 percent in 2015 to 49 percent in 2020.
- From a baseline of 55.4 in 2015, the survival rates in Grade 4 rose by 9.4 percentage points to 64.8 percent. This increase was greater than that achieved by neighboring schools, whose survival rate rose by 7.0 percentage points (baseline: 57.2 percent; endline: 64.2 percent) (ICR estimates based on Malawi EMIS 2015-2020 and project data).
- Substantial improvements in average teacher attendance rates in targeted schools (reported under Objective 1) were also an outcome of project interventions to strengthen school management and leadership, which included enhanced monitoring of teacher attendance.
- The average learner attendance rate in targeted schools rose from 62.20 to 69 percent, **almost achieving the target** of 72.2 percent (or about 70 percent achieved). This outcome is a result of ongoing community efforts to promote attendance.
- During the September 23, 2022 meeting with IEG, the task team noted that the impact evaluation is in the late stages of drafting, and confirmed its finding that the PBF piloted under Component 1 did not add any value or have any impact on repetition rates. The team is still exploring underlying reasons



why this was the case. In the meantime, and as a result of these findings, PBF is not included in the follow-on project design.

Rating
Substantial

OVERALL EFFICACY

Rationale

By the project's end, all three objectives were substantially achieved. The project improved the quality of education, as evidenced by enhanced student teacher ratios, improved and less crowded classrooms, and strong learning outcomes. It improved equity by closing the gaps in key quality measures between the eight most disadvantaged school districts targeted by the project and the 22 better-off/better-performing districts, and between girls and boys, and reduced girls' repetition and dropout rates. The project also improved school management and autonomy; enhanced monitoring and evaluation for a stronger results focus and evidence-based decision-making; achieved significant cost effectiveness in the expansion of low-cost classroom construction without compromising on quality; and improved transparency and accountability through the sharing of school performance data with communities and involving communities in school management. All of these contribute to improved efficiency at the school level.

During the September 23, 2022 meeting between the task team and IEG, the task team shared their views of the project's attribution and counterfactual as follows.

Attribution/Contribution. There are a number of development partners supporting education, both at the national level and in sets of targeted districts different than the Bank's focus on the eight most disadvantaged ones. The task team expressed confidence that the outcomes documented in the ICR, especially the substantial reduction of gaps in learning outcomes between the disadvantaged districts and the 22 districts not supported by the project, and between girls and boys, are directly attributable to the project. The project underpinned the Bank's policy dialogue with the government and with other development partners supporting education, serving as a catalyst for a more coordinated and concerted focus on pupils-to-classroom and pupils-to-qualified-teacher ratios, as means (and measures) of achieving quality improvements and better learning outcomes.

Counterfactual. In the absence of the project's development, implementation, and nationwide scale-up of a well-designed school leadership training program, schools' head teachers and deputy head teachers would not be equipped or supported, as they are now, to carry out regular in-classroom teacher observations, which are crucial for monitoring and improving teacher performance, and teachers would not likely receive systematic guidance and support to learn and improve on-the-job. Moreover, in the absence of that training program, criteria for selecting school head teachers would likely not have emphasized leadership qualities, as they do now. Additionally, in the absence of the project, the gaps in education quality and in learning outcomes between the eight most disadvantaged districts and the other (better-off, better-performing) districts, and between girls and boys, would have persisted, and Malawi's MOE and its partners would likely have been less focused and less advanced on measuring, addressing, and resolving cross-district and



gender inequities. Finally, without this project's successful demonstration of low-cost, community-based classroom construction and its nationwide scale-up, the continued reliance on expensive classroom construction would have severely curtailed Malawi's capacity to build classrooms to keep up with demand while also ensuring a reasonably reduced pupil-to-classroom ratio.

Overall Efficacy Rating

Substantial

5. Efficiency

Economic Analysis. The economic analysis undertaken at appraisal was limited to quantifiable economic impact and benefits comprising: (a) government savings achieved through improved efficiencies (internal efficiency gains); and (b) the impact of lower primary education completion probabilities on labor earnings over the course of a standard working life (external efficiency gains). The net present value (NPV, discounted at 10 percent) was estimated to be \$97.2 million for 2016-2065, in 2015 prices, based on total costs of \$36.1 million and total benefits of \$133.4 million, with an internal rate of return (IRR) of 17.9 percent, very close to the ICR's estimate.

The end-of-project cost-benefit analysis assessed beneficiaries' potential labor market gains (employment and wages) achieved as a result of higher levels of retention in primary school, which were assumed to lead to increased years of schooling. It acknowledged, but excluded from its analysis, the potential for additional labor market outcomes for beneficiaries due to improved learning outcomes achieved under the project, which were, in turn, assumed to lead to a higher level of cognitive skills. Based on Malawi EMIS 2015-2020 data and project data, and taking into account the full project cost of \$44.9 million and its total estimated benefits of \$203.7 million (in 2021 prices), the NPV of the project was estimated at \$158.8 million during 2021-26, with an estimated IRR of 17 percent. This represents a significant return for the project's investments. Moreover, the analysis revealed that target schools had caught up with, and even managed to outperform, their neighbors (schools located within 4 km of project schools) in terms of student retention.

Implementation efficiency was strong overall. Factors contributing to strong efficiency included: (i) clearly defined implementation arrangements, which laid a strong foundation for efficient project implementation; (ii) minimal differences between planned and actual spending; (iii) project restructuring and extension, permitting the almost-full (97 percent) utilization of project funds and the completion of all planned activities; and (iv) a small portion of undisbursed funds at closing (\$1.24 million, or 3 percent). Moreover, the new model of low-cost community-constructed classrooms provided a considerably lower cost alternative to the more expensive conventional classroom construction in Malawi, and enabled a more rapid and wider-scale construction of classrooms. Compared to the standard cost of a two-classroom block of more than \$40,000, the low-cost alternative for a two-classroom block under the project was \$15,000, over 60 percent cheaper.

There were also a few shortcomings in implementation efficiency, in particular initial delays in classroom construction, and in school leadership training for head teachers and deputy head teachers. Packaging of schools for construction activities grouping 3-5 schools together in the same geographic region made sense in some cases, but in certain instances grouped schools that were located far apart from one another caused difficulties and delays for contractors taking these on. The project's extension is likely to have increased



associated operational costs from the government's side. Nevertheless, the extension did enable fuller use of funds and the completion of all key activities. Moreover, the extension was further warranted in the context of disruptions to schooling caused by COVID-19.

Overall, the economic analysis results point to a sound investment and IRR, and implementation efficiency was strong, albeit with a few shortcomings, justifying a **substantial** rating.

Efficiency Rating

Substantial

a. If available, enter the Economic Rate of Return (ERR) and/or Financial Rate of Return (FRR) at appraisal and the re-estimated value at evaluation:

	Rate Available?	Point value (%)	*Coverage/Scope (%)
Appraisal	✓	17.90	100.00 <input type="checkbox"/> Not Applicable
ICR Estimate	✓	17.00	100.00 <input type="checkbox"/> Not Applicable

* Refers to percent of total project cost for which ERR/FRR was calculated.

6. Outcome

The relevance of the PDO is rated **high**. Achievement of each of the project's three objectives is rated **substantial**: Objective 1 (improved quality of primary education in selected districts and schools), 2 (improved equity of primary education in selected districts and schools) and Objective 3 (improved accountability and functioning at the school level/improved efficiency of primary education in selected districts and schools). Project efficiency is also rated substantial. These ratings indicate that there were only minor shortcomings in the project's preparation, implementation, and achievement, culminating in an overall Outcome rating of **Satisfactory**.

a. Outcome Rating

Satisfactory

7. Risk to Development Outcome

The ICR (pp 29-30 and 56-58) notes that the government is fully committed to continuing the project's efforts and sustaining the achievements made under the project. The project's focus on institutional capacity building and institutionalization of school-level funding has contributed significantly to sustainability. The government's own education policy and plan prioritize the objectives and approaches supported under this project: quality improvements, enhanced equity across districts and gender equity, continued capacity



building in management and evidence-based decision-making, especially at the school level, and the provision of direct financing to schools through school grants. The government has reported a number of positive changes resulting from the project. Among these are increased collaboration between schools and communities, more transparency within schools, and pledges by community chiefs to continue to discourage child marriages and promote girls education. Continuous efforts are needed, however, in order to further consolidate and scale up these gains.

The government faces two particular challenges in sustaining and scaling up gains made under the project: adequate financing; and the impact of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic on the education sector. On the financing front, the World Bank is continuously engaged in the education sector through the vehicles of three sector operations (P164223, P174329, P172627). These projects will ensure that this project's outcomes will be maintained in overlapping districts, scaled up to include other districts, and incorporating the lessons emanating from this project, particularly: targeting schools with the greatest needs; community-led construction for lower costs and greater efficiency; attending to girls' learning in lower primary; a results-based approach; the use of program facilitation teams for effective implementation; careful selection of an independent verification agency to verify achievements; and continued support and scale-up of the school leadership program and of common zonal testing and display of report cards.

The COVID-19 pandemic caused Malawian schools to close for a period of five months (March 2020–October 2020), and the establishment of strict, protective measures when students and teachers returned to school. Even more concerning than the consequent learning loss from distance learning and catch-up learning following the reopening of schools are the potential economic and social impacts of the pandemic itself, which are likely to have exacerbated existing inequalities, particularly across income levels and gender. The impact on the school feeding programs is also likely to have the deepest impact on disadvantaged, vulnerable students. The pandemic also had the effect of reducing resources allocated to the primary education sector to finance emergency mitigation measures. Increased dialogue with development partners is currently focused on mitigating the pandemic's impact and on seizing the opportunity to build back a better education system. Dialogue and continued support of development partners hold promise in building a more resilient system and in exploring more fully the use of technology to improve basic education service delivery. Government efforts, commitment, and financing, together with the World Bank and other partners' continued engagement in the sector, are expected to be mutually reinforcing in ensuring growing access to quality, equitable, and efficient primary education.

8. Assessment of Bank Performance

a. Quality-at-Entry

The Bank team provided technical and coordination support to the government to design a project that reflected national sector priorities as well as World Bank strategic priorities for Malawi. The project's objectives were clear and appropriate. Project design had a strong focus on the most vulnerable, disadvantaged populations, targeting the eight most disadvantaged school districts in the country and, within these districts, the lowest-performing schools and most vulnerable students, especially girls. The design was evidence-based, drawing on lessons and good practices, both global and particular to Malawi. Preparation involved extensive consultations with stakeholders (including dialogue with national and local actors), as well as coordination with development partners working in the country to avoid overlap and ensure complementarity. The appraisal involved detailed analysis and assessment of



technical, economic, fiduciary, environmental, and social-related issues and risks, all of which informed project design and implementation arrangements. Risks were assessed and rated as substantial, especially with regard to implementation arrangements, M&E design, fiduciary management, and safeguards, with appropriate mitigation measures identified to address them.

While the design was strong overall, there were some shortcomings in quality at entry. First, there were some gaps between the technical design for M&E and the project's interventions (see Section 9 on M&E). Second, while the project was comprehensive in its support of needed supply-side interventions, it did not address all the demand-side issues. Community advocacy supported under the project did promote the value of education for all and for girls in particular, and addressed an important constraint to their access: early childhood marriages. However, there were other constraints to access and retention that were not addressed, including high chronic malnutrition and the opportunity cost to families of lost labor.

Quality-at-Entry Rating Moderately Satisfactory

b. Quality of supervision

Throughout the project's four-year implementation period, the supervision and support provided by the Bank team was strong, enabling early resolution of bottlenecks and successful implementation of all planned activities. Several factors underpinned the quality of supervision. The task team had the appropriate skills and experience to support implementation, including specialists in education, procurement, FM, and environmental and social safeguards, and economists. The team was further strengthened through its increased presence in Malawi, with the hiring of an International Senior Education Specialist and the presence of at least one local consultant in the country office, from before effectiveness up until the COVID-19 closures, at which point support became remote. This enabled the provision of critical and timely implementation support. There were three task team leaders during the project implementation period. Thanks to the Bank's effective management of the team and of handovers, the project benefitted from continuity and consistency of support and dialogue. All of this resulted in a depth of knowledge provided by the task team that enhanced the quality of supervision. Through its regular supervisions, aides-memoire, and internal supervision reporting, the Bank team was proactive and candid in identifying and resolving issues, together with the government. Supervision was undertaken through joint implementation support missions, involving other development partners supporting schools in the same school districts.

The Bank's supervision was focused on development impact. The mid-term review, conducted in March 2019, was an in-depth exercise that identified key implementation challenges and culminated in a restructuring exercise that clarified the third objective (improved efficiency) and refined the results framework and indicators to improve its measurement. While there were a few issues with the payment of hired contractors, linked to their deliverables, these were properly resolved with the Bank's support. Implementation experienced some delays caused by exogenous factors, such as the presidential elections in 2019-20, teacher strikes, and the COVID-19 pandemic during which schools were closed for six months. Safeguards and procurement issues encountered during the project's early years, due in



significant part to delays in recruiting safeguards, procurement, and FM specialists, were adequately identified and corrected by the supervision team.

Quality of Supervision Rating

Satisfactory

Overall Bank Performance Rating

Moderately Satisfactory

9. M&E Design, Implementation, & Utilization

a. M&E Design

Both the original and the revised statements of PDOs were clear. Strong features of the M&E design included the following: clearly defined and measurable indicators, with some baselines and targets established; reliance on a combination of data sources (the independent Longitudinal Survey, the EMIS, and project-based M&E system, including information from inspection and FM reporting, among others cited in the ICR); three DLIs, also reflected as intermediate results indicators in the results framework, contributing to a results culture; an independent third party to monitor elements of the project and validate DLI achievements; and impact evaluations to assess PBF grants, the school leadership program, school report cards, and community mobilization. Moreover, the M&E design clearly defined roles and responsibilities of the various implementing agencies at national and local levels. Project monitoring was integrated into the government's existing M&E arrangements for the sector, rather than creating a dedicated, standalone system for the project.

However, there were some shortcomings. The original results framework outlined some inputs/activities, outputs, and outcomes, but neither the outputs nor the outcomes in the original results framework (cost-effective improvements in learning outcomes, and more conducive learning environment for lower primary grade learners, girls, and disabled students) fully aligned with the formal PDO. The restructured results framework was more closely aligned with the planned activities as described in the components, and with the outcome indicators and the three objectives of the project. However, the choice of indicators, for both the original and revised PDOs, fell short of needs. On the quality objective, there were no indicators to track the number of teachers recruited, whether through government deployment or through the recruitment of auxiliary teachers with school grants, to explain the project's (and others') contributions to improved PqTR. Also, the number of classrooms constructed was reflected in the results framework as an outcome indicator and not (more appropriately) as an output. On the equity objective, there were no indicators to track whether and to what extent gaps in key indicators between the eight most disadvantaged districts supported by the project and the 22 better-off/better-performing districts were reduced.

b. M&E Implementation

There were initial delays in securing a full-time M&E specialist to work on the program facilitation team. Given that some of project's activities were the same as those already carried out by MOE, the project opted to use and further strengthen existing M&E systems. To this end, the project developed



guidelines to capture project activities; clearly identified the methodology for monitoring specific activities; agreed on roles and responsibilities of project stakeholders; and agreed on frequency of data collection, analysis, reporting, and dissemination. Primary Education Advisors' skills on good records management provided regular and sustained support to schools.

Overall, the project's planned M&E activities were successfully implemented. However, the project encountered unforeseen challenges. Issues with data quality collected in the second-round survey made it difficult to calculate PBF grants and caused delays in schools' reception and timely use of these funds. Not all activities occurring on the ground were being sufficiently or systematically documented in the results framework to demonstrate progress towards targets. To address these issues, MOE established a task force that undertook: support of project monitoring activities, training of zonal education MIS officers, and collection of data from 800 schools to accelerate PBF disbursements. The government's deployment of a Director of Planning and Deputy Director in charge of M&E further strengthened the M&E task force, especially to harmonize data streams and regularly interface with the MLSS team. These interventions enabled disbursement of PBF grants to all qualifying schools, the updating of the results framework, and more regular reporting by schools and sharing of this information up through the system.

In project years 3 and 4, third party monitoring of DLIs was conducted by an independent verification agency, but with some delay owing to complications with identifying an appropriate, qualified agency, as well as the COVID-19 pandemic. The independent validation report on the project's achievement based on 2019/20 data recommended acceptance of the government's claim of completion of 2019/20 DLIs and informed the disbursement of the remaining funds for the variable tranche.

c. M&E Utilization

Updates were provided for almost all supervision missions and stakeholders. Relevant data and information conveyed updates to key education stakeholders about progress in achieving objectives. Reviews and discussions of these data raised issues and led to a mid-course correction, ultimately resulting in more accurate and reliable data and improvements in activities. Issues flagged at the mid-term review (mismatch between the interventions on the ground and results tracked in the results framework) and proposed recommendations (refining indicators through restructuring) were addressed in part, and implementation improved significantly post-mid-term review. Also, the (mostly) timely and accurate verification exercises of achievement of the project's DLIs facilitated the government's receipt of disbursements. The MLSS baseline, midline, and endline data were released later than planned, due to COVID-19, but these results nonetheless contributed helpful context to the mid-term review. Overall, data and information generated through M&E activities encouraged and continue to encourage increased utilization of data and evidence for decision-making in the primary education system and inform subsequent operations supported by the World Bank. Use of MOE's existing M&E system and staff bodes well for the sustainability of M&E activities under the project.

M&E Quality Rating

Substantial



10. Other Issues

a. Safeguards

The project was classified as Category B, Partial Assessment, since its activities were not expected to have any major adverse environmental or social impact. The Environmental Policy (OP/BP 4.01) and Involuntary Resettlement Policy (OP/BP 4.12) were triggered due to some civil works interventions, whose locations were not known at the design stage, to mitigate any possible social impacts. The PAD (pp. 38-39) noted that the government prepared an Environmental and Social Management Framework (ESMF), initially disclosed by MOE in Malawi and at the Bank's InfoShop on February 5, 2016, and disclosed again, after revisions during appraisal, in Malawi on April 29, 2016 and at the InfoShop on May 3, 2016. The ESMF provided specific guidance on environmental and social screening and disclosure processes of activities to guide the preparation of site-specific environmental and social management plans (ESMPs). In addition to the Environmental and Social Screening Form, the ESMF also provided a set of environmental and social clauses to be embedded in all contractors' contracts for consideration during implementation of civil works. The ESMF recommendations were captured in the Project Implementation Manual and the legal documents.

Early on, land acquisition delays posed substantial risks to the start of construction. There were also concerns regarding safeguards screening reports, and schools' action plans were not guided by the ESMF or by the Resettlement Policy Framework developed for the project. This resulted in a failure to capture all safeguards issues relevant for the project. To remedy these shortcomings, a Social and Environmental Focal Point for the program facilitation team was hired, but with delays, to undertake: (i) preparation of a code of conduct for larger-scale school construction; (ii) incorporation of all ESMPs for activities in Component 2 into contractor bidding documents; (iii) preparation of safeguards action plans for Component 1 construction; (iv) review of ESMPs for subprojects to capture ESMF/Resettlement Policy Framework requirements and resubmit to the Bank for review; (v) budget allocation of ESMPs implementation; (vi) processing and finalization of land acquisition plans for subprojects; (vii) development of a safeguards implementation and monitoring plan; and (viii) integration of environmental and social safeguards reports to the quarterly report.

There were no major environmental safeguards issues during most of the implementation period. A four-tiered grievance redress mechanism (GRM) was successfully developed at the school, zone, district, and national levels. A GRM registry tracked and recorded the status of all cases received and was shared with all committee members, who received adequate training on GRM case management. Some complaints were received from project-affected persons and were appropriately resolved. Most cases received were about non-payment of wages from construction sites, which were also resolved (see Section 10.b on fiduciary compliance).

b. Fiduciary Compliance

Financial management improved throughout implementation, with consistently satisfactory ratings from the project's mid-point until closing. There were several areas underpinning strong performance. First, FM implementation arrangements were aligned with the principles of a common fiduciary oversight arrangement, focusing on strengthening of government FM systems. In the wake of serious issues in 2013 with the Integrated FM information System, Malawi's education sector development partners proposed that



FM and procurement arrangements rest outside of government structures, to the extent possible. Based on its own assessment of FM capacity and risks, conducted at appraisal, the Bank opted to align fiduciary arrangements with the ongoing work of the Common Fund Mechanism designed by development partners in Malawi as a mechanism outside of government systems with a high degree of financial oversight and control. Second, an FM specialist was recruited for the project, albeit with some delay. This specialist, together with the additional FM staff assigned by MOE, helped ensure effective support to project implementation. Third, flow of funds was smooth for the most part, despite initial delays in establishing the Designated Account by the MoE. Finally, in most instances the interim financial reports were of good quality and submitted on time, though there were occasional delays. There were also challenges. Readiness to withdraw grant funds in the early phase of implementation was weak, and there were significant delays in the procurement of accounting software, due to delayed recruitment of the FM specialist.

External and internal audits were conducted bi-annually, providing valuable information for project FM. The main issues identified by external audits included errors in the draft financial statements provided to auditors, a missing project receipt book at the time of audit, and auditors' questioning of costs amounting to over \$7,000 due to invalid receipts and the use of incorrect rates. In one instance the audit report was qualified (year ending June 30, 2018) and reported several control and accountability issues for management attention (insurance of project assets and refund of questioned costs by external auditors). These issues were rectified.

Two fiduciary issues emerged during the project. The first was a complaint received by the Anti-Corruption Bureau (ACB) alleging that, for some construction under Component 2, contractors had been paid for incomplete or low-quality work. After an investigation by ACB and MOE, and the Bank's agreement with the findings, the contractors corrected identified defects. The second was a longstanding grievance of non-payment of workers by a contractor conducting construction under Component 2 at two sites. This led to conflicts between the workers and school communities centered on disagreements about construction quality. These issues were resolved when the contractor confirmed in a letter to the Bank that all overdue wages had been paid, backed up by proper evidence.

Procurement performance was rated moderately satisfactory during most of the implementation period. The Procurement and Supplies Unit at MOE was assessed at appraisal for its procurement capacity. Given the Unit's involvement in implementation of the previous education project, procurement staff were acknowledged for their knowledge and experience working on Bank-financed operations. Key procurement issues and risks identified centered on: (a) procurement decision delays; (b) insufficient human resources given the workload; (c) weak capacity of procurement staff, especially on donor-funded projects; (d) procurement planning; (e) procurement administration, including contract awards; (f) contract management; and (g) procurement oversight. Agreed corrective measures included: regular monitoring of the procurement process; recruitment of a fully dedicated procurement specialist; training; separate tracking systems for procurement plan implementation and payment processing; disclosure of procurement plans and contract awards in relevant systems; strengthening of complaint management; and strengthening of procurement oversight through internal and external procurement and financial audits (PAD, pp. 36-37).

Initiation of the procurement process was significantly delayed in the early phase of implementation. In particular, the recruitment of a FM specialist was delayed, along with the recruitment of safeguards and communication specialists, which meant that the team lacked such expertise for a while. Moreover, there were significant delays in the processing of other key procurements, including classroom construction in



target schools, printing of school registers, and acquisition of tablet smartphones for data collection and transmission. There was a need to “re-package” classroom construction contracts, due to the geographical dispersion of the schools and contractors’ difficulties in traveling between them. There were also delays in submissions of evaluation reports for the expressions of interest for consultancy services for the school leadership program and software development for school data collection and the SMS platform, an indication that the Systematic Tracking of Exchanges Procurement (STEP) Plan was not being used. There were also delays in the updating of the procurement plan to reflect changes in procurement processing, as well as in obtaining IDA clearance of changes, in compliance with established procedures. Other shortcomings included a failure to upload project procurement supporting documents in STEP and the expiration of contracts before the processing of extensions. These occurred despite the task team’s advise to the client to: (a) update documents so that these would be reflected in STEP as “completed,” and (b) follow the Excel contract monitoring sheets to enhance contract monitoring,

With the task team’s persistent observance and recommendations, and the government’s subsequent heeding of that advice, remedial action was initiated. Appropriate action was ultimately taken on every identified issue to mitigate negative impact on the project. “Next steps” were agreed by the task team and the government, and the task team provided intensive support to ensure their follow-up. Eventually, these actions had a positive impact on project implementation. At closing, procurement under the project was upgraded to satisfactory.

c. Unintended impacts (Positive or Negative)

None. All of the “Other Outcomes and Impacts” reported in the ICR were intended, as specifically designed under the project, and reported in Section 4 on Efficacy: (a) interventions to improve girls’ access to and participation in primary education, including the effort to increase the female-to-male teacher ratio; and (b) institutional strengthening and capacity building, including M&E capacity building, and strengthened school- and community-based management and autonomy.

d. Other

11. Ratings

Ratings	ICR	IEG	Reason for Disagreements/Comment
Outcome	Satisfactory	Satisfactory	
Bank Performance	Satisfactory	Moderately Satisfactory	Some shortcomings in quality at entry, including gaps between the technical design for M&E and the project’s interventions, and shortcomings in addressing demand-side interventions.
Quality of M&E	Substantial	Substantial	



Quality of ICR

Substantial

12. Lessons

The following lessons are drawn from some of the six lessons presented in the ICR, slightly reworded by IEG to be more succinct:

- **Low-cost construction is an efficient means of improving school infrastructure, through alliances between schools and communities, especially in low capacity contexts.** School- and community-led construction under the project effectively addressed the severe shortages of classrooms, achieved at a low cost and with high quality. Training received by communities, together with the classroom construction experience gained under the project, have equipped those communities to raise their own funds, build their own shelters, and pave the way for more community-based construction. Seeing the evidence of the capacity of communities to produce high-quality classrooms at low cost, the government has now agreed to a significant scale-up of this approach. Malawi's National Education Sector Investment Plan (2020-30) adopts community construction as the standard approach and targets construction of 44,000 such classrooms by 2030. The ongoing Education Reform Program currently being supported by the Bank targets the construction of 10,900 low-cost classrooms (at a cost of \$7,000 each), targeted to schools with pupil-to-classroom ratios above 90.
- **Communities can be highly effective in supporting changes in attitudes and practices that favor school attendance and retention of vulnerable, disadvantaged students.** With project support: mothers' groups have advocated for girls and disabled children to go to school and for the retention of teenage girls in Standards 6 to 8; community chiefs have pledged to discourage early marriage, which deters girls from attending school; girls have been encouraged to report any abuse, which triggered an increase in the number of incidences reported and in cases actually being addressed by the court, an indication of communities' willingness to take these incidences of abuse seriously and address them.
- **The effectiveness and efficiency of results-based financing approaches can be significantly enhanced with (i) the utilization of annual (versus one-time) targets; and (ii) the upstream consultation of potential independent verification entities and their methodologies.** The project's transition from one-time end-of-project DLI targets to annual DLI targets improved motivation and progress, demonstrating its potential to effectively ensure that all DLIs are achieved. Challenges experienced with the verification of Year 4 DLIs were the result of weak methodology underpinning the verification exercise, resulting in a loss of confidence of the Local Education Group in the validity of the results. This points to the need for a more careful selection of the independent verifier moving forward, with the close involvement of the LEG in approving the Terms of Reference, selecting the best candidate, and reviewing the proposed validation methodology.

IEG's review offers an additional lesson:

- **Equity objectives are most effectively assessed by tracking and comparing the progress of disadvantaged districts and disadvantaged students with their better-off, better performing counterparts who do not suffer from the same constraints and**



disadvantages. A number of equity indicators and targets under this project tracked improvements in the disadvantaged districts over their baselines, but did not systematically measure the extent to which gaps in key performance and outcome indicators between the disadvantaged districts/vulnerable populations and their better-off counterparts were reduced or closed.

13. Assessment Recommended?

No

14. Comments on Quality of ICR

Quality of Evidence. The ICR generated a rich set of data through a number of credible sources, including project data, impact evaluations, the government's EMIS, surveys, and learning assessments, presented in Annexes 4 and 6, with some of it reported in the Efficacy section (ICR, pp. 9-15).

There were two exceptions. First, The ICR did not report on where the increment of teachers came from to explain the substantial improvements in PqTR. The task team, during its September 23, 2022 meeting with IEG, was asked about this and provided insightful information and data, some of it in a follow-up email to IEG dated September 27, 2022, about the various actions that were taken inside and outside of the project to this end (detailed in Section 4, Objective 1 of this ICRR). Second, the ICR did not provide sufficient explanation of why DLI achievements and intermediate results achievements, reporting on the same indicator, were presented twice, some with different targets and achievements. In its September 23, 2022 meeting with IEG, the task team explained that the DLIs' end-date was 2020, when the DLI process was completed, while intermediate results indicator targets and achievements reported actuals at the end of the project's extended year (2021).

Quality of Analysis.

There were strong points on the quality of analysis. The efficacy section made a strong effort to assess the entire results chain and to use the data to weave a story of how project support culminated in the achievement of the PDOs. However, the assessment of the equity objective did not fully exploit the data provided in Annexes 4 and 6 to document more fully improvements in equity in the ICR's efficacy discussion. The ICR's assessment of equity documented quality and access improvements and outcomes in the disadvantaged districts, but achievements were documented against baselines only. An assessment of the extent to which these improvements reduced or closed the gap between these disadvantaged districts (and students), on the one hand, and the better-off/better-performing districts (or national averages), on the other, would have provided better confirmation of improved equity. Moreover, the task team, in a follow-up email of September 27, 2022, provided learning outcome data disaggregated by gender and comparing performance between the eight disadvantaged districts supported by the project and the 22 non-project districts, which shed more light on substantial gains in equity. There were data and information in the ICR's Annexes 4 and 6 that could have been used more systematically in the efficacy discussion of the ICR to this end. This ICRR reviewed and factored this data more systematically into its assessment of the equity objective. This issue is grounded in the inadequacy of the M&E framework (both the original and the revised frameworks), whose indicators were



not poised to measure trends in performance and outcome gaps between the most disadvantaged districts and others.

Quality of Lessons. The lessons were of good quality, grounded in the ICR's evidence, analysis, and findings. They were also relevant to other countries focusing their efforts on improving quality, equity, and efficiency of their primary education delivery systems.

Results Orientation. Overall, the ICR had a solid results orientation. Analysis, especially of efficacy, was well focused on, and organized around, the three project development objectives, and explored the links in the results chain to each of these three outcomes. As noted above, the quality of equity assessment was undermined somewhat by the inadequacy of the indicators.

Internal Consistency/Adherence to Guidelines. The various parts of the ICR were logically linked and integrated, with findings and results mutually reinforcing, albeit with some above-cited gaps in the results framework.

Despite the Level II revision of the PDO statement in 2019, the split rating methodology applied by the ICR was not necessary. The original PDO supported three objectives: improved quality, improved equity, and improved accountability and functioning at the school level. As explained in the ICR (pp. 5-6), the PDO was revised during restructuring to make explicit that the project's intention to improve accountability and functioning at the school level was always about enhancing efficiency, and the PDO was revised to make this more explicit. The ICR, in its option to undertake a split methodology, did not apply it in line with the Bank's guidelines. According to these guidelines, the split methodology must: (a) assess achievement **at project completion** of the original PDO and associated outcome targets; (b) assess achievement at project completion of the revised PDO and associated outcome targets; and then (c) weight outcome ratings of original and revised PDOs and targets in line with disbursement shares made before and after restructuring. Instead, the ICR assessed achievement (a) during the period prior to restructuring ("Phase 1"); and (b) during the period after restructuring ("Phase 2").

There was some repetition in the ICR's presentation. It could have been consolidated for a more succinct presentation, without detracting from the quality of its data and analysis.

a. Quality of ICR Rating
Substantial