

Benin

Removing barriers to help the most disadvantaged girls enroll and stay in school

The The Global Partnership for Education is working with Benin to address one of the country's biggest education challenges: delivering quality education to children in deprived and remote areas with a strong focus on girls.



GPE/Chantal Rigaud

While overall primary school enrollment is high in Benin, there are stark differences between regions. In rural areas, children of poor families often have to help with agricultural activities (e.g. working in fields or with cattle) instead of going to school. In Alibori, one of the country's poorest provinces and about a 10-hour drive from Cotonou, Benin's largest city, only 35 percent of children were in primary school in 2015.

GPE has focused its support in Benin on the most vulnerable children in the poorest districts to help raise enrollment, especially for girls, as part of the country's overall strategy to improve its education system.

GPE has contributed three grants totaling US\$137 million to a joint/common fund along with other partners, such as Denmark, France, Germany and the Netherlands, in support of the government's budget. GPE's approach and model have been instrumental in bringing all partners together to respond to Benin's priorities for its education sector. This combined support is giving Benin the resources it needs to make a difference for the children most in need, ensuring that the external support is closely aligned with the government's education sector plan (ESP).

"GPE helped support the implementation of the [education] sector plan. GPE has contributed significantly to improving access, not only through the construction of classrooms, but also at the level of retention with the establishment of school canteens and school kits in disadvantaged municipalities."

—Ghislain Kouton, Project Coordinator, French Development Agency (AFD) Benin



GPE partner: Since 2007

Challenges addressed: Poor access and retention in deprived/remote areas, especially for girls, low quality of teaching

Key interventions: School feeding, school kits for girls, school construction, teacher training

Total grants: US\$137 million (2008-2023)

Grant agent: World Bank

Coordinating agency: UNICEF

Improving access and retention

To address inequalities in access and retention, GPE focused on three key interventions with the Benin government: kits for girls, school feeding and school infrastructure.

➤ Help for the most disadvantaged girls

With the support of the US\$42.3 million GPE grant between 2014 and 2018, the government distributed school kits to more than 323,000 girls in grades 1 and 2 in underserved areas. The kits contained a school uniform and essential supplies. The provision of kits was advertised on community radio stations to raise awareness of parents and communities on the importance of sending girls to school.

Having these supplies also ensured that girls were not turned away from school for lack of a uniform or learning materials in cases where families could not afford these, thereby removing an important barrier to accessing schooling.

➤ Children learn better on a full stomach

Ensuring that at least lunch is offered at school can make a vital difference to poor families struggling to put food on the table every day. Free school lunches in deprived districts were a key area of GPE's support. Community-run school canteens were set up (with mothers as cooks), serving free daily lunches to more than 318,000 children in primary schools over three years (2015-2018). Local nongovernmental organizations monitored the program, performing daily quality checks at schools in the targeted provinces. This set-up was praised by many in Benin: it meant that children received nutritious school lunches, prepared with products purchased locally. Districts participating in the program saw an increase in enrollment rates, particularly for girls.

➤ Ensuring there's a place to learn

Another area of GPE's support was improving the structural quality of schools in deprived areas. These schools are often small and built with materials that do not withstand the elements well. Under the GPE program, 530 new classrooms were built and equipped in primary and secondary schools, as well as more than 100 toilet blocks, separated for boys and girls.

The new classrooms are larger with higher ceilings, wider windows to let in light (important in schools not connected to the electricity grid) and better ventilation. These features, and the fact that the new classrooms will help to reduce overcrowding for future larger cohorts of students, improve children's learning experience.



Community-run school canteens have served **free daily lunches to more than 318,000 children** in primary schools over the three years of the program.

“After the program started, we saw an increase in the number of students.”

—Adissatou Bio Idrissou oversees school feeding at the Alibori District Education Office

Training teachers to improve the quality of learning

Complementing the various interventions that together helped to strengthen Benin's education system over several years was a focus on teacher training to improve learning results. With GPE's support, more than 67,000 teachers received training between 2008 and 2018.

Primary school teachers received training and ongoing support to improve their pedagogical skills and increase their time of instruction. Teachers at the lower secondary level received pre-service training on pedagogical skills and content knowledge.

Building on achievements

The government is committed to continuing support for these interventions: the 2018-2030 ESP includes support for teacher training, school canteens and school kits in 42 deprived districts (out of a total of 77) to reach children most in need, in particular girls.

The new sector plan was supported by a GPE grant and developed collaboratively by the government and the local education group. The plan expands the definition of basic education to include preschool and lower secondary for a total of 12 years of schooling, as recommended in SDG 4. It also includes non-formal education such as apprenticeship to help young people gain skills easily transferable to the job market.

The model developed under GPE support to identify “deprived districts” has been mainstreamed by the government to target more interventions to those children most in need.

“GPE is the ‘melting pot’ of dialogue between all the technical and financial partners in the education sector. It is around this that all donors meet.”

—Yacinthe Gbaye, Senior Economist, World Bank Benin