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Districts of Teaching Excellence: Sierra Leone

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Abbreviations and acronyms

DD	District Director
DEO	District Education Office
MBSSE	Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education
SQAO	School Quality Assurance Officer
TSC	Teaching Service Commission

Executive summary

Middle-tier district officials play a crucial role in translating Sierra Leone's education reforms into improved teaching and learning. Yet their role in strengthening foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN) has been historically underexplored. The Districts of Teaching Excellence project, led by EdTech Hub with EducAid and Rising Academies, tested how supporting School Quality Assurance Officers (SQAOs) with digital tools and closer collaboration with partners can enhance their role as instructional leaders.

The six-month project was co-designed with government stakeholders and implemented in Port Loko (EducAid) and Kono (Rising Academies). Using a rapid 'test-and-learn' cycle, districts trialled strategies including FLN instructional videos, practical coaching skills, and EdTech tools such as WhatsApp, dashboards, and a coaching app.

Key findings from the project

- **A shared vision of quality matters**: Codifying 'what good looks like' in FLN classrooms helped align teachers, leaders, and district officials around consistent practices.
- **SQAOs *can* be instructional leaders**: With training, mentorship, and digital support, they can move beyond compliance roles to actively coach and improve classroom practice.
- **Digital skills and EdTech are enablers**: Building SQAOs' digital literacy is essential; when combined with tools like WhatsApp, videos, and data dashboards, EdTech amplified best practices and strengthened coaching.

Key recommendations

- **Codify FLN excellence** with clear tools and models.
- **Empower SQAOs as leaders**, not just monitors.
- **Build SQAOs' digital skills** to use EdTech effectively.

This project shows that the middle tier of Sierra Leone's education system is not missing but underutilised. With the right support, SQAOs can become powerful drivers of foundational learning, bridging national policy ambitions with classroom realities.

1. Introduction and background

Middle-tier officials are essential actors in education service delivery around the world. They are subnational actors, such as regional, district, or sub-district education officials, who act as a crucial bridge for translating high-level education policy into classroom practice. Without strong middle-tier leadership, even well-designed reforms struggle to translate into improved teaching and learning in schools (↑UNESCO IIEP et al., 2023). Through supportive supervision, data use, and instructional leadership, middle-tier managers are well-positioned to ensure effective instructional practices are implemented consistently and at scale.

1.1 Unlocking the potential of the middle tier

Despite their potential to drive meaningful change, the role of middle-tier actors in strengthening foundational literacy and numeracy remains largely underexamined (↑Dintilhac et al., 2025). We know a lot about how children learn to read and acquire foundational numeracy (↑Akeyampong et al., 2023), and we have a good understanding of what effective coaching looks like (↑Pflepsen, 2018). However, there is a lack of research on how best to support and enable the middle tier of district and sub-district education officials to achieve a high impact on teaching and learning (↑Asim et al., 2023).

The Districts of Excellence Project, led by EdTech Hub in partnership with Rising Academies and EducAid, aims to contribute to the growing evidence base by focusing on eliciting and codifying implementation experiences and lessons learnt (↑Kaffenberger & Hwa, 2024).

1.2 Districts of Teaching Excellence Project

In Sierra Leone, significant investments and efforts to improve teaching have been underway for some time (↑Beoku-Betts & Leh Wi Lan, 2023). The *Education Sector Plan 2022–2026* outlines a national commitment to improving teaching quality through reforms aimed at introducing professional standards for teachers, implementing teacher deployment policies, and investing in continuous professional development (↑Government of Sierra Leone, 2022). Additionally, initiatives like the Sierra Leone Education Innovation Challenge (SLEIC) are supporting improvements in foundational learning outcomes through results-based

financing, incentivising effective teacher support and classroom practice in public (government) primary schools (↑UNESCO, no date).

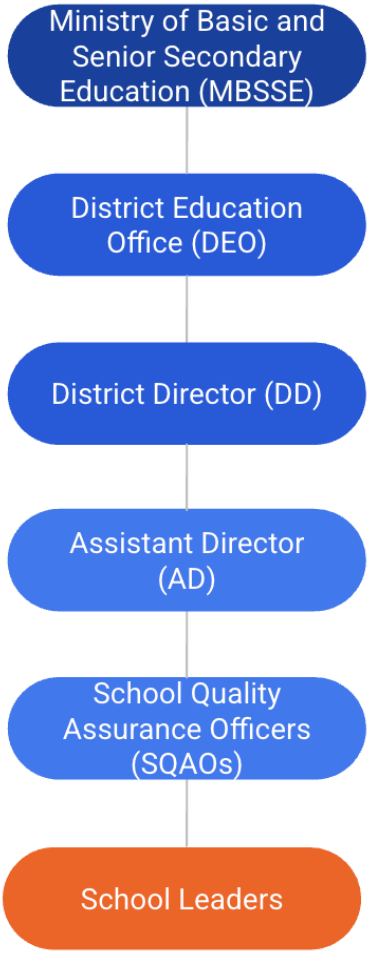
Against this backdrop, EdTech Hub, in partnership with the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education (MBSSE) and the Teaching Service Commission (TSC), saw an opportunity to strengthen ongoing foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN) efforts. The project emerged from shared conversations with government and implementing partners about the persistent gap between national policy ambitions and day-to-day instructional practice. All stakeholders recognised the importance of supporting these actors but lacked a clear, shared understanding of *how* and *where* to target that support most effectively.

Districts of Teaching Excellence was a six-month project. Our goal was to contribute to the growing evidence base on how to support middle-tier district actors and, specifically, to learn more about how School Quality Assurance Officers (SQAOs), supported by EdTech tools and innovations, could effectively support and improve instructional practice at the classroom level.

Our theory of change was that *if* middle-tier education officials and implementing partners collaborate more closely and are supported with accessible digital tools to plan, monitor, and reflect on instructional practice, *then* instructional leadership at the district level will improve, leading to higher-quality FLN teaching and learning outcomes.

1.3 Sierra Leonean district leadership

Figure 1. *Administrative structure of Sierra Leone's Education system*



Sierra Leone's education system is divided into 16 administrative districts within a decentralised structure. (↑Government of Sierra Leone, 2024).

Figure 1 illustrates how most districts are organised. Each District Education Office (DEO) is led by a District Director (DD) who is responsible for planning, coordinating, supervising, and reporting on education delivery and performance. SQAOs report to the Assistant Director (AD) or, in smaller districts, directly to the DD.

Typically, district-level staff have a teaching background, and some may have served as senior teachers or headteachers. Some have received training in instructional coaching. Several challenges to district leadership persist. In the past, district staff have reported that they feel like messengers of top-down policies rather than leaders who can adapt strategies to their local needs (↑Beoku-Betts & Leh Wi Lan, 2023).Moreover, frequent transfers can disrupt continuity in district-level initiatives.

Figure 2. *Profile of a School Quality Assurance Officer*

SQAOs in Sierra Leone serve as the primary link between the MBSSE and schools. Each SQAO is assigned a cluster of pre-primary, primary, junior secondary, and senior secondary schools in their allocated district. This allocation varies in number from district to district but is typically around

40 (↑Government of Sierra Leone, 2024). SQAOs are expected to conduct visits to eight schools each month. Visits are available to view on this dashboard.[1]

SQAOs play a critical role in both compliance and instructional support, working to monitor, uphold, and improve the quality of education at the school level. Their responsibilities include enforcing education policies, supporting school leaders and teachers in improving instruction, collecting and reporting data, and engaging with the community.

1.4 Implementing partners

In Sierra Leone, district government officials do not operate in isolation. Implementing partners also play a key role in supporting FLN programmes. We sought to understand more about how these different stakeholders work together to achieve teaching excellence. While DEOs and SQAOs are tasked with monitoring school performance and supporting teaching quality, and implementing partners often bring targeted resources, training, and coaching, their work is not always well aligned. In some cases, coordination mechanisms are informal or underdeveloped, which can lead to duplication, gaps in support, or mixed messaging at the school level. By examining these dynamics, we aimed to better understand how alignment and collaboration at the district level can strengthen instructional leadership and improve teaching practice in classrooms. Local actors often hold significant tacit and explicit knowledge about what makes such programmes effective. However, this practical knowledge rarely finds its way into formal research, leaving important insights undocumented (↑Kaffenberger & Hwa, 2024).

Two embedded implementing partners were part of the Districts of Excellence Project. Rising Academies in Kono and EducAid in Port Loko were selected for this project based on their active involvement in FLN programmes in Sierra Leone and their existing partnerships with the MBSSE and the TSC. Their established presence at the district level, experience in supporting instructional improvement, and willingness to co-design and test adaptive implementation strategies made them well-suited for participation in this demonstration project.

[1] See https://sl.education-os.org/reports/school-quality/quality-assurance. Retrieved 21 October 2025.

EducAid and Rising Academies have long-standing and respected relationships with district partners. This demonstration project was the first time they had come together to test and learn iteratively.

1.4.1 EducAid

EducAid[2] has been operating in Sierra Leone for 30 years. They run five free schools and a range of school improvement and research projects. EducAid aims to make a difference at both the individual level —for the students and local communities it serves —and the ecosystem level through sustainable school improvement projects, influencing policy, and sharing best practices and lessons learnt. EducAid is known for their value-led impact and role modelling at every level.

EducAid selected Port Loko for this project because it is home to three of their free schools and the focus of several school improvement and research efforts, including the Sierra Leone Education Innovation Challenge (SLEIC). Furthermore, MBSSE local leadership in Port Loko (i.e., the Deputy and Assistant Directors) was known to be enthusiastic, engaged and open-minded towards testing and learning. Figure 3 below provides some key context on Port Loko district, highlighting its strategic location, school landscape, and resources supporting foundational literacy and numeracy improvement.

Figure 3. *Focus district: Port Loko*

Port Loko is a district located in the Northern Province of Sierra Leone. It lies northwest of the capital, Freetown, and borders the Atlantic Ocean to the west. Its strategic location near Freetown and along major roads makes it a key transit and commercial hub in the Northern Province.

Port Loko has 853 schools, of which 552 are primary schools (↑Development Assistance Coordination Office (DACO) & Ministry of Planning and Economic Development (MoPED), 2024b). There are 14 SQAOs responsible for improving FLN quality across these schools. Port Loko is a strategic choice, partly because it hosts a major teacher training facility that provides a critical resource for improving teacher quality and capacity within the district.

[2] See https://www.educaid.org.uk/. Retrieved on 22 October 2025.

1.4.2 Rising Academies

Rising Academies[3] is a network of high-quality, affordable schools operating across West and East Africa. They operate more than 450 schools in Sierra Leone, through a combination of direct school operations (low-cost private schools) and partnerships with governments. Rising Academies take a comprehensive approach by providing structured curriculum materials, intensive teacher coaching, and actionable data to support effective instruction and monitor student progress.

Rising Academies have been actively working in 26 schools in Kono as part of the Sierra Leone Education Innovation Challenge (SLEIC), a results-based initiative aimed at improving learning outcomes nationwide. Figure 4 below provides some important context on Kono district, highlighting its demographics, education landscape, and trends in foundational learning.

Figure 4. *Focus district: Kono*

Kono is located in the Eastern Province. It is one of the most ethnically diverse districts in Sierra Leone and is widely recognised for its diamond mining activities. The majority of the population lives in rural areas. Kono has 823 schools, of which 511 are primary schools (↑Development Assistance Coordination Office (DACO) & Ministry of Planning and Economic Development (MoPED), 2024a). Historically, secondary pupils in Kono are above the national average in both English and maths, indicating strong foundational learning (↑MBSSE, 2019). There are 14 SQAOs responsible for improving FLN quality across these schools. While challenges remain, the concerted efforts by the government, educational institutions, and community organisations indicate a positive trajectory for education in Kono District.

The remainder of this report is organised as follows. Section 2 outlines the demonstration project's methodology, including the co-design process, test-and-learn cycles, and data-collection approach taken by implementing partners. Section 3 presents key findings and insights from across the two focus districts, organised around instructional improvement and the role of SQAOs. Section 4 sets out recommendations for the government and partners interested in strengthening district-level instructional leadership. Finally, Section 5 concludes with reflections on the potential of the middle tier to drive sustained improvements in teaching and learning.

[3] See https://www.risingacademies.com/. Retrieved on 22 October 2025.

2. Methodology

With investment and efforts underway to target teaching specifically, there was an opportunity to complement the FLN work directed at teachers undertaken by the MBSSE and TSC, with the support of the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) and the World Bank, by using evidence and approaches to catalyse greater impact.

Districts of Teaching Excellence was a demonstration project designed to examine and showcase the methodologies, technologies, and approaches needed to deliver quality, evidence-based FLN programmes at scale with the support of middle-tier officials. This approach drew on innovation methodologies, including experimentation, iteration, and real-time adaptation, as well as implementation research. This allowed us to test and learn in real time, ensuring that solutions are effective in real-world settings and the local context. Existing evidence indicates that when middle-tier officials and implementing partners collaborate, learning outcomes can improve, but less is known about how to implement this effectively in practice.

The Districts of Teaching Excellence project progressed through three phases (see Table 1 below), each designed to foster district-led instructional improvement and provide space to elicit experiences and lessons learnt from implementing partners and local government alike.

Table 1. *Phases of the Districts of Teaching Excellence Project*

Phase 1	**Co-Design and Kick Off** Focused on district selection, stakeholder alignment, and collaborative planning to shape the project's direction and decide on research questions.
Phase 2	**Test and Learn** A structured period of experimentation, iteration, and real-time adaptation in district settings alongside data collection to track early signals of change.
Phase 3	**Synthesis and Evidence Generation** Dedicated to reflection, insight sharing, and developing actionable learning to inform future district-led instructional improvement.

EdTech Hub selected two implementing partners already working closely with the district. We worked alongside them to design the project's scope of work, its success criteria, research questions, and sample size. Based on their goals and specific approaches, we then drew on the most appropriate data-collection methods to capture early signals of change (e.g., interviews, surveys, observations, and outcome harvesting). Table 2 below presents the four co-designed research questions alongside the range of data-collection methods used by EducAid (Port Loko) and Rising Academies (Kono).

Table 2. *Summary of research questions and data-collection methods co-designed with implementing partners*

Four co-created research questions	Data collection methods used to address all RQs
1. How can School Quality Assurance Officers (SQAOs) and implementing partners foster a shared understanding of key strategies essential for FLN instruction? **2.** How can SQAOs be empowered to lead frontline action towards improving FLN teaching practices at the classroom level? **3.** How can district stakeholders work together to improve FLN instructional coaching district-wide and ensure a holistic approach? **4.** In what ways can EdTech be leveraged to strengthen instructional coaching across a district?	**EducAid (Port Loko)** ■ Baseline Google Form survey (22 MBSSE staff) on awareness of EducAid's top ten strategies and digital tool skills. ■ Outcome harvesting to capture early behaviour/relationship/policy changes. ■ Triangulated with observation notes, interviews, and photos. **Rising Academies (Kono)** ■ Rapid feedback loops to spot implementation gaps (e.g., digital support needs) and adjust in real time. ■ Continuous field monitoring: structured notes, observations, interviews, photos, and videos. ■ Rising Academies dashboard tracking of SQAOs' maths/English implementation and Communities of Practice sessions. ■ Kobo surveys (8 MBSSE staff) to capture additional implementation feedback. ■ Phone interviews with school leaders (4/5) and teachers (14/22) to deepen qualitative insights.

2.1 Co-design and kick off

This project used a collaborative, systems-focused approach to engage district stakeholders and implementing partners as equal co-designers. EdTech Hub facilitated a two-day co-design workshop in Freetown, with participation from both implementing partners, EducAid and Rising Academies, as well as district stakeholders from Port Loko and Kono. The workshop brought together approximately 20 participants, including representatives from the TSC and MBSSE. The approach was grounded in systems thinking and aimed to build on existing momentum by working through, not around, district actors. The workshop created a shared space for reflection and design.

On Day 1, district teams moved from a shared diagnosis towards a strategic focus on strengthening instructional leadership to improve coaching systems.

Using structured activities, district teams reflected on teaching and learning across the 2023–24 school year, with a specific focus on FLN instruction. Participants identified key enablers and constraints, and grouped these into thematic priorities. The co-creation process supported districts in diagnosing where change was most needed and feasible. After Day 1, a shared strategic focus emerged: strengthening the instructional leadership of both district officials and school leaders to improve coaching systems.

By the end of the first day of the workshop, teams had identified the research questions outlined in Table 2.

On Day 2, district teams designed adaptive, context-driven learning plans focused on continuous improvement.
With an emphasis on adaptive implementation, the workshop guided district teams to move from idea generation to early-stage planning. Teams worked through assumptions behind their selected strategies, defined success metrics, and identified practical steps for implementation.

- **EducAid** planned to develop a package of FLN instructional videos and led a two-day training for district staff, including a focus on digital literacy.
- **Rising Academies** planned in-person training to support SQAOs with practical skills, from classroom observations and feedback to managing Communities of Practice and WhatsApp groups. These

were reinforced through EdTech tools for coaching, data collection, progress tracking, and remote support.

Each district developed an initial action plan for a September to December test-and-learn window, grounded in existing resources and delivery systems. This approach not only ensured that interventions were contextually relevant but also laid the groundwork for continuous learning and iteration. These are essential conditions for scaling promising models of district-led instructional improvement. Figure 5 below highlights one stand-out reflection from the two-day workshop, centring on the challenge of translating theoretical agreement to practical understanding.

Figure 5. *Reflection from the two-day kick-off workshop*

Understanding what FLN excellence looks like in practice remains a challenge, and a shared language for describing it is sometimes missing. While stakeholders generally agree that foundational literacy and numeracy skills are essential, and that evidence-based teaching practices should underpin instruction, this project revealed a gap between conceptual agreement and practical clarity.

When it comes to classroom observation, stakeholders standing at the back of a room to assess teaching quality often lack a shared vision. For example, implementing partners might say, 'teachers should circulate', assuming a shared understanding of what that looks like in practice. But for some district officials, that phrase may be unfamiliar or interpreted differently. In reality, 'circulate' means walking around the classroom to check for understanding by reviewing learners' work. This seemingly simple practice can be powerful, but only if it is clearly defined and consistently understood.

Without a common instructional language, it becomes difficult to align coaching, observation, and feedback. The project sought to bridge that gap, creating opportunities for district stakeholders and partners to build a shared vision of effective FLN instruction, grounded in observable classroom behaviours that can be supported, measured, and improved over time.

2.2 Test and learn

Over a single school term, we adopted a rapid test-and-learn approach, enabling partners to trial strategies, gather real-time feedback, and adapt

quickly within short learning cycles. This way of working reduced risk, captured early lessons, and ensured strategies could be refined before larger-scale investment. In Port Loko, EducAid created FLN instructional videos and targeted digital literacy. While in Kono, Rising Academies focused on strengthening SQAOs' coaching skills and using EdTech tools to support ongoing teacher development. Together, their efforts provide complementary approaches to empower district actors and harness technology to improve FLN teaching quality district-wide.

2.2.1 Port Loko

EducAid developed a package of FLN instructional videos and led a two-day training for district staff, including a focus on digital literacy.

As part of the project's *test-and-learn approach*, EducAid developed a package of 29 FLN instructional videos, aligned with their *Top Ten Strategies for Teaching and Learning*. The goal was to codify 'what good looks like' in FLN classrooms, and to provide district officials, coaches, and teachers with a shared reference point. A two-day training for district staff accompanied the videos, with a strong emphasis on digital literacy.

Each video included:

- A scripted introduction to explain each strategy clearly, with captions provided.
- Staged examples of FLN strategy filmed in a school to show the models in a realistic environment.

Iterative development
The videos were not produced in a single pass but developed and refined in cycles. After each round of filming and editing, district staff and teachers reviewed the drafts, offering feedback on clarity, realism, and usability. This feedback informed revisions to scripting, staging, and captions, ensuring the final versions were both accurate and accessible for novice and experienced teachers. Figure 6 below outlines EducAid's approach to developing and filming the instructional videos.

Figure 6. *Approach to filming FLN instructional videos*

EducAid developed 29 videos to model their *Top Ten Strategies for Teaching and Learning*. The process was iterative, with each stage reviewed and refined to make the final videos practical and easy to use.

Pre-production

- **Recruited a videographer** with ICT skills and prior experience coaching teachers in the strategies.
- **Codified the models** by breaking down the top ten strategies into 29 smaller segments to reduce cognitive load for teachers.
- **Scripted introductions** to clearly explain each strategy, especially for novice teachers.
- **Selected locations** in partner schools to capture authentic classroom practice.

Production

- Filmed in live classrooms to ensure realism.
- Staged examples where live filming wasn't feasible.
- Recorded scripted introductions for all 29 strategies.

Post-production

- Iteratively reviewed and edited each video.
- Added captions to reinforce clarity and accessibility.

By embedding iteration and feedback into the production process, EducAid not only generated a library of instructional resources but also insights into how best to present pedagogical models in ways that district officials and teachers could readily understand and apply.

EducAid also provided training to the SQAOs and their supervisors—the Deputy Director and Assistant Directors— on the following techniques through two in-person sessions:

- Explaining the top ten FLN strategies;
- Completing a lesson observation;
- Creating a schedule for the SQAOs to visit schools to train leaders in the implementation of strategies;
- Using a Google Workspace to enhance executive functioning.

Throughout the project, efforts were centred on increasing collaboration at the district level in order to have a holistic approach to rolling out the videos. The team implemented daily informal meetings, monthly planning meetings and an education sector engagement event.

2.2.2 Kono

Rising Academies worked directly with district officials in Kono, focusing on building the capacity of five SQAOs to improve classroom coaching and teacher support.

Rising Academies delivered two in-person training sessions that taught SQAOs practical skills, including:

- Conducting classroom observations;
- Giving high-quality feedback to teachers;
- Collecting and submitting lesson observation data;
- Supporting Communities of Practice;
- Managing WhatsApp groups to motivate school leaders.

These techniques were facilitated through the use of EdTech Tools in the following way:

- Targeted coaching supported by a coaching app;
- Efficient data collection through the CommCare app, a mobile data-collection tool;
- Centralised dashboards for tracking progress;
- Remote coaching of school leaders via WhatsApp groups;
- Sharing of videos and photos of Communities of Practice via WhatsApp groups.

2.3 Monitoring and data collection

EdTech Hub supported the implementing partners in creating light-touch methods to notice changes related to each of the four focus research questions, enabling them to learn and adapt in real time.

Both EducAid and Rising Academies tracked implementation progress and gathered evidence to understand how far SQAOs were shifting from compliance-oriented roles towards instructional leadership. Despite differences in their tools and techniques, both implementing partners emphasised real-time learning, documentation of classroom practice, and capturing early indicators of change. Table 3 below summarises the

monitoring and data-collection approaches used by EducAid (Port Loko) and Rising Academies (Kono), highlighting how each implementing partner gathered feedback and triangulated evidence to inform ongoing improvement.

Table 3. *Monitoring and data collection*

	EducAid (Port Loko)	Rising (Kono)
Overall approach	Outcome harvesting is used to identify early changes. This approach helps to focus on identifying and analysing changes in behaviour, relationships, actions, or policies that have occurred as a result of an intervention. Outcomes were substantiated through triangulation with observation notes, interviews, and photos.	Rapid feedback loops were used to identify implementation gaps and respond in real time (e.g., identifying digital support needs early and making adjustments accordingly).
Ongoing monitoring	Weekly leadership meetings provided space for joint planning and informal coaching. Notes, observations, interviews, photos and videos collected throughout. WhatsApp groups used to share videos, photos, reminders and motivation.	Rising Academies' dashboard was used to track data submitted by SQAOs (on maths/English implementation and Communities of Practice sessions). Photo submissions served as visit verification. WhatsApp groups were used for regular communication and submission of media from school visits.
Additional surveys	Google Form surveys at baseline completed by 22 MBSSE staff (14 SQAOs, 7 officers, 1 DD). Questions focused on knowledge of EducAid's Top Ten Strategies and digital tool skills.	Kobo-based surveys completed by 8 MBSSE staff (5 SQAOs, 1 DD, 1 TSC DD, 1 Free Quality School Education DD). Phone interviews were held with 4 of 5 school leaders and 14 of 22 teachers.

Monitoring was designed to support adaptive learning within a short test-and-learn window. This included regular school co-visits and tracking of lesson observations and conversations. Both implementing partners

also conducted stakeholder surveys and interviews to assess perceptions of the project.

Together, these efforts generated valuable insight into how SQAOs were taking up new responsibilities and where support was most needed. Monitoring became part of the support itself, helping implementing partners and district teams learn together as they went.

3. Findings

This section presents insights drawn from the two implementing partners in Port Loko and Kono. focusing on key actors and mechanisms to improve FLN instruction at the district level.

The findings emphasise the importance of a precise and shared understanding of 'what good looks like' in practice, empowerment of SQAOs as instructional leaders, coordinated district-wide collaboration, and the strategic use of EdTech to enhance instructional coaching.

3.1 A clear, shared language is a foundation for instructional improvement

Agreeing on a common language and best practice helps district staff, SQAOs, implementing partners and school leaders align specifically on what to look for in the classroom and how to talk about 'what good looks like.' When best practices are clearly articulated and accessible, they serve as a shared reference point for all actors in the system. EducAid's top ten strategies and accompanying videos provide a concrete framework for effective teaching and learning. Similarly, Rising Academies' coaching app, with embedded videos of FLN classroom strategies, supports SQAOs in visualising and applying those approaches. In this way, codification turns abstract ideas into practical tools, helping SQAOs not only understand good instruction but also coach others consistently and more confidently.

Without this clarity, feedback and support risk becoming inconsistent or misaligned. At the start of the project in Port Loko, 57% of SQAOs reported being "very uncomfortable" with their understanding of key FLN strategies. By December, SQAOs reported their confidence in FLN strategies had improved. EducAid also began to observe a common language appearing in a shared WhatsApp group between the data officer, the SQAOs, and the teachers in target schools. This signal of emerging shared terminology is a foundational step towards building mutual understanding and coordinated action across different actors in the FLN support system. A stakeholder from Port Loko reflected on how the project's FLN videos helped strengthen the support that district teams can provide to teachers:

> *"There has always been a gap in establishing a common language among MBSSE district stakeholders regarding 'what good looks like'. The videos have significantly narrowed that gap, as the MBSSE*

> *team is now starting to share a common understanding of what high-quality teaching and learning look like. This, in turn, has enhanced the level of teacher support provided by the MBSSE district team."* (Stakeholder in Port Loko)

3.2 Joint classroom observations strengthen SQAOs' coaching skills and help to build shared understanding

Observing classrooms together helped SQAOs, implementing partners, and school leaders align expectations and provide clear, consistent feedback. This collaboration also allowed partners to model coaching techniques, improving SQAOs' observation and feedback skills. Joint visits built trust and offered a fuller view of classroom realities, enabling more targeted support to improve teaching quality.

This project was the first time that implementing partners conducted joint lesson observations with SQAOs. In Kono, the Deputy Director noted that "joint coaching, giving corrective feedback, and strengthening continuous professional development for teachers" had become a key practice after this project. While a significant start, further inter-rater training is needed in both Port Loko and Kono before data quality supports confident decision-making.

3.3 SQAOs *can* act as instructional leaders with structured guidance and logistical support

SQAOs needed clear guidance and targeted capacity-building support to step into an active role in school-level instructional improvement. In both districts, implementing partners observed that SQAOs are more accustomed to performing monitoring and compliance tasks than supporting instructional improvement. Where lesson observation tools do exist, they have not been widely adopted, and SQAOs have not always been supported with training. As a result, SQAOs' work remains loosely standardised and largely compliance-driven, with limited focus on improving pedagogy.

In this project, both implementing partners designed interventions recognising that the shift from monitoring to instructional leadership would require more than just tools or EdTech. EducAid and Rising

Academies provided structured training and ongoing accompaniment to help SQAOs become more effective FLN instructional leaders. Rising Academies delivered training focused on practical classroom-level leadership: conducting observations, giving high-quality feedback to teachers, supporting peer learning, collecting and submitting data, and encouraging school leaders via WhatsApp. Following the training, staff from Rising Academies co-visited schools to provide SQAOs on-site support. This assistance helped reinforce the skills learnt during the training and addressed any challenges faced during data collection.

Similarly, EducAid held regular joint meetings with the district team to plan activities, model new practices, and build shared commitment. These meetings also provided opportunities for coaching and mentorship. Importantly, EducAid also provided modest financial support to increase the district team's logistical capacity, a key enabler in a context where a lack of transport and resources often limit school visits. These layers of support helped create the conditions for SQAOs to take initiative and lead from the front.

3.4 Strengthening digital confidence is essential for SQAOs to carry out new responsibilities effectively

To play a more active role in data collection and school-level support, SQAOs needed a baseline level of digital confidence. Both implementing partners sought to build digital capacity because, without it, school-level tasks such as submitting observation data are impossible. EducAid started by introducing the MBSSE district team to tools such as Google Meet, Zoom, Google Forms, and Google Calendar, helping to streamline scheduling, communication and reporting. With these executive functioning tools, the district team could operate more efficiently and independently.

During this project, both implementing partners were surprised by how low digital literacy levels were. Rising Academies responded by adapting mid-implementation, adding an additional digital skills training session when it became clear that SQAOs needed support with tasks such as turning on smartphones, opening apps, and managing simple data entries. One participant shared the observation that "Data collection and how to manage WhatsApp groups [was challenging]." This support was crucial to ensuring that digital tools like CommCare could support, rather than hinder, SQAOs in their expanded roles.

Given that SQAOs could typically visit each school only once a week, WhatsApp offered a practical solution for maintaining ongoing contact. In this project, SQAOs need targeted support to turn WhatsApp into a tool for community-building and instructional coaching. Its impact depended not just on usage, but on intentional community building. When managed well, WhatsApp groups became dynamic hubs for remote coaching—spaces where SQAOs, school leaders, and teachers could ask questions, share teaching materials, post photos and videos from classrooms, and engage in real-time dialogue. This fostered a culture of continuous professional development and peer support between visits. More than a messaging app, WhatsApp became a tool for building community, reinforcing expectations, and sustaining motivation across schools. However, this required digital fluency and active facilitation. Rising Academies found that many SQAOs needed support in managing these groups effectively—logging in regularly, prompting discussion, and creating engagement. Training was delivered to boost these skills, but building a truly interactive and data-informed professional community remains an ongoing effort that requires time, modelling, and consistency.

3.5 Digital tools are most effective when there is existing pedagogical clarity

This project surfaced how EdTech can amplify and accelerate a shared understanding of FLN strategies across a district, but it cannot substitute for deep understanding. Platforms like digital dashboards and WhatsApp become powerful when users *already* have clarity on what effective teaching looks like. In these cases, EdTech helps make coaching more consistent, responsive, and scalable. In this way, mutual reinforcement between a shared understanding of FLN strategies and EdTech drives stronger FLN instructional coaching

When foundational strategies are not well understood, EdTech can just as easily spread confusion. Without alignment, digital tools may amplify knowledge gaps rather than close them. One team noted that “data collection and how to manage WhatsApp groups was challenging,” particularly because not all SQAOs were confident in using the tools to support teacher growth.

Rising Academies responded by providing additional training on both digital tools and instructional strategies, recognising that both are needed. In this sense, EdTech and pedagogical understanding must evolve

together. A solid foundation of shared instructional vision allows EdTech to deliver on its promise; conversely, EdTech can help embed and sustain that vision when implemented well.

3.6 High SQAO turnover has the potential to undermine the impact of district-level initiatives

In Kono, Rising Academies faced the additional challenge of SQAO reallocation. Sixty per cent of the SQAOs they were supporting in the Districts of Excellence project were transferred to other districts. This disruption meant they had to retrain new incoming SQAOs and rebuild relationships. This experience highlights a broader challenge: without greater stability in SQAO assignments, efforts to build instructional leadership at the district level are continually reset.

4. Recommendations

The final section of this report provides recommendations for the MBSSE and its partners on how to move forward, based on the findings discussed above.

4.1 Make FLN excellence visible to build consistency

An overall finding from both implementing partners was a lack of common understanding within districts of 'what good looks like'. By convening district stakeholders, they can be supported in reaching a common understanding. When doing this, it will be necessary to consider which artefacts make FLN strategies explicit and visible. This could be a video that models a specific teacher action, codified descriptions in a coaching app, or lesson observation tools where every adult is aligned and asks the same questions of the classroom. These tools can facilitate more precise conversations between SQAOs, school leaders, coaches, and teachers so that efforts are more closely aligned.

4.2 Position SQAOs as FLN instructional leaders

Putting SQAOs at the centre of collaboration efforts has shown signs of improving teaching methods and aligning a district behind a common approach. To strengthen foundational learning, SQAOs should be supported as instructional leaders rather than as solely compliance monitors. Instructional leadership creates trust, as teachers can see SQAOs as partners in professional growth rather than just supervisors.

4.3 Invest in SQAOs' digital skills development so that they can become effective instructional leaders

Digital tools have shown promise for enhancing SQAOs' ability to improve FLN outcomes across their assigned schools by improving their efficiency. In order to get the best out of this technology, consider offering basic digital literacy training so that SQAOs can:

- Use WhatsApp to send and receive messages, and support a Community of Practice.
- Use tools such as Google Workspace to improve efficiency, data management, and communication.
- Use data dashboards to collect and interpret district data.

4.4 Enhance the impact of best-practice videos by implementing them in different ways

Video models show how a specific teaching strategy is implemented by a teacher. This can be helpful because words alone are often unsuited to conveying the complexity of a classroom environment.

Giving SQAOs access to devices with video content is worth consideration. This will enable them to:

- Develop their own understanding of 'what good looks like' by watching the videos and discussing the elements with peers.
- Show teachers video models during 1-2-1 coaching conversations in a school to enhance the quality of the feedback and increase the likelihood that teachers can implement the action step.

Implementation of these videos does not require each teacher to have a device.

4.5 Explore the potential of WhatsApp to offer remote support

When managed effectively, WhatsApp groups can facilitate real-time engagement, resource-sharing, and continuous professional development for school leaders and teachers. It also allows SQAOs to provide support to schools within their cluster, even when they are unable to visit them in person. However, the technology alone is not enough, SQAOs need support and guidance on how to lead a WhatsApp community, such as:

- How to set up a group and be a group administrator.
- How to send and receive messages.
- How to foster a sense of community through motivation and encouragement.
- How to use WhatsApp for community building, not just as a tool for compliance.

4.6 Leverage EdTech to help SQAOs to collect high-quality data then, show the pathway of how it can be used

Where SQAOs have access to a device, tools such as Google Forms, CommCare, or bespoke data dashboards have streamlined data collection. However, collecting data alone is not enough; SQAOs will need guidance and support to interpret the data and translate it into actionable steps. Offer guidance on how the data collected can translate into action. For example, not only can SQAOs use observation data from a lesson to identify the next action step for a teacher, they can subsequently use the same data to notice any improvements during their next school visit. SQAOs are more likely to collect and engage with data when they can see how it could be leveraged to inform their decisions and actions.

5. Conclusion

The Districts of Teaching Excellence project has shown that middle-tier officials, particularly School Quality Assurance Officers, have untapped potential to play a transformative role in strengthening foundational literacy and numeracy in Sierra Leone. By positioning SQAOs as instructional leaders, providing them with clear models of effective FLN practice, and equipping them with the digital skills and tools to act on evidence, district-level education systems can move beyond compliance and towards sustained improvements in teaching and learning.

A central insight from this project is the importance of creating a shared vision of what high-quality instruction looks like in practice. Tools such as EducAid's FLN strategy videos and Rising Academies' coaching app helped make best practices visible and actionable, creating a common language for teachers, school leaders, and district officials. At the same time, the experience highlighted that digital tools enhance coaching and collaboration only when paired with capacity building and intentional facilitation.

Perhaps most significantly, the project underscored that instructional improvement is not achieved by individual actors working in isolation, but through collaboration across the district ecosystem. When SQAOs, school leaders, implementing partners, and government counterparts collaborate and use evidence to adapt in real time, they can create conditions for teaching excellence at scale.

The recommendations in this report point to a clear path forward: codify and make effective FLN practices visible; strengthen the role of SQAOs as instructional leaders; invest in their digital literacy; and use EdTech to enable coaching, collaboration, and data-informed action. By taking these steps, Sierra Leone can build on early lessons to design a stronger, more coherent system of district-led instructional improvement.

Ultimately, the project demonstrates that the 'missing middle' is not missing at all, but rather waiting to be unlocked. With the right support, district actors can become powerful drivers of national ambitions for foundational learning, ensuring that every child has the opportunity to learn to read, write, and count with confidence.

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