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EVALUATION

Final Performance Evaluation – USAID/JORDAN Learning Environment Technical Support (LETS)

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FINAL PERFORMANCE EVALUATION

USAID/JORDAN LEARNING ENVIRONMENT TECHNICAL SUPPORT PROGRAM

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ACRONYMS

ASK	ASK for Capacity Development
CAII (CA)	Creative Associates International Inc.
CB	Capacity Building
CIDA	Canadian International Development Agency
CISLE	Cultivating Inclusive and Supportive Learning Environments
CMP	Community Mobilization Program
COP	Chief of Party
DCU	Development Coordination Unit
EDY	Education and Youth Office
EGRA/EGMA	Early-Grade Reading Assessment/Early-Grade Mathematics Assessment
ERfKE	Education Reform for the Knowledge Economy
FD	Field Directorate
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
FIU	Field Implementation unit
FY	Fiscal Year
IR	Intermediate Result
ISP	Individual School Profile
KII	Key Informant Interview
LE	Learning Environment
LEI	Learning Environment Improvement
LEIIP	Learning Environment Infrastructure Improvement Project
LET	Learning Environment Team (school-based)
LETS	Learning Environment Technical Support (program)
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
MESP	Monitoring and Evaluation Support Project
MoE	Ministry of Education (central)
MoH	Ministry of Health
MoE TF	Ministry of Education Task Force
MSI	Management Systems International
PMP	Project Management Plan
PSRS	Professional Sharing and Reflecting Session
PTA	Parent-Teacher Association
PWS	Project Work Stream
QAS	Quality Assurance System
RBB	Results-Based Benchmarks
SDDP	School and Directorate Development Program
SCP	School Community Project
SOW	Scope of Work
SWOT	Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of this evaluation is to assess the performance of the Learning Environment Technical Support (LETS) program with regard to its implementation of learning environment activities and results-based benchmark monitoring and evaluation systems involving stakeholders both locally (i.e., individual schools) and nationally (i.e., the Ministry of Education [MoE]).

LETS is a USAID-funded, \$13.5 million learning environment support program that is implemented by Creative Associates International (CA) and its local subcontractor, ASK. The LETS project began as a three-year initiative on Aug. 8, 2010, with two additional “option” years that would allow the project to continue through 2016. However, USAID/Jordan elected to close the project in May 2014. Challenged by a number of internal and external factors, the project underwent several modifications. The final rescoping, which took place in January 2013, revised and condensed the program’s Scope of Work (SOW) into two components. The USAID/Jordan LETS project assists the Ministry of Education’s promotion of positive learning environments in 120 Jordanian K-12 schools in 10 of the nation’s 15 directorates. Its two components are:

Component 1: Building Capacities within Schools to Support Enabling Environments. The project provides direct and ongoing support to LETS schools and their communities through coaches as they engage in a variety of activities aimed at improving the school learning environment (LE) to make it Safe, Healthy, Caring and Engaging (domains of the LE) for all. Component 1 includes three essential and interrelated activities to support measurable changes in schools. The first two aim to improve school community access to and use of learning environment data through the joint use of a) Individual School Profiles (ISP) and b) Results-based Benchmarking (RBB). Together, these two instruments comprise the learning environment improvement (LEI) assessment tool and are used periodically to guide adjustments to interventions. The third activity is School and Community-based Projects (SCPs). LETS coaches help schools identify projects according to priorities informed by the RBB and school improvement plans.

Component 2: LETS builds the Ministry of Education’s capacity to sustain and institutionalize learning environment improvements and to prepare the LETS partner ASK to compete directly for USAID-funded projects. LETS training for the MoE includes recommended topics associated with sustaining improvement of LEs and change management.

Evaluation Methods and Limitations: This LETS performance evaluation employed a *qualitative* research methodology. Data collection instruments — the structured focus group discussion (FGD) guide, key informant interviews (KIIs) and a document checklist — were designed to respond to the evaluation questions. In each school, the school principal participated in a KII while one FGD gauged the experiences of teachers, with a second FGD measuring attitudes among parents and community members. The document checklist was applied to validate LETS project deliverables at the school level. The evaluation team also conducted interviews with the Ministry of Education at the national and field directorate levels, as well as with LETS project implementers, Creative Associates International staff and CA’s subcontractor, ASK. In total, the field evaluation visited 31 schools and collected data through interviews and focus group discussions with 469 individuals associated with the LETS project. A limitation of this evaluation is lack of a mixed methodology to capture the context, meaning and patterns due to the intervention, and to determine learning environment improvement (LEI) outcomes through quantitative data analysis, such as student scores and absentee and referral logs.

The LETS evaluation framework covers seven key questions designed to evaluate the process, outcomes and sustainability of LETS project interventions.

EVALUATION FINDINGS

I. LETS Systems and Structures: *To what extent has the LETS project established systems and structures for monitoring and improving learning environment in target schools? To what degree are LETS schools using the LEI system (LE teams, ISP, RBB, LEI plans, projects/initiatives) to identify and improve LE weaknesses and gaps?*

The evaluation results indicate that only 71 percent of the sampled schools had established all five LEI components for monitoring and improving the learning environment. All schools formed LE teams, which included at the minimum a principal and two teachers and organized subteams. These subteams often included students, and a few included parents. About three-fourths of the schools had completed an ISP, nearly all schools had conducted the RBB self-assessment at least once, and more than three-quarters of the school sample had developed LEI plans for either school initiatives or the SCP.

Most schools had difficulty differentiating between LE improvement initiatives that were implemented after the training sessions and the two required SCPs that should have resulted from the RBB assessment and subsequent LEI plans. Almost all schools had initiated activities related to LE domains (Safe, Healthy, Caring and Engaging) and LE improvement, but only 52 percent of the sampled schools have actually designed SCP projects based on the RBB assessment.

II. LETS Project Results: *Has the school learning environment improved as a result of the LETS project? If yes, how so?*

Almost all sampled schools reported a certain level of LE improvements, with more than half (65 percent) reporting a *satisfactory* level of LE improvements as a result of LETS. Perceptions of level of LE improvements varied across schools according to:

- a) *Gender and School Level:* Boys-only schools, especially at the secondary level, experienced the least change or improvement in school LE compared with girls-only or mixed-gender and elementary schools;
- b) *School Size and Grade Span:* School principals reported that the larger the student body, the greater a school's LE weaknesses and gaps and, hence, its level of perceived LE improvements;
- c) *Engagement:* The most influential factor to support higher levels of LE improvements was engagement, i.e., the extent to which school stakeholders and LETS coaches were committed to improving school LE; and
- d) *Percent of school staff engaged in LETS:* Findings indicate a relationship between LE improvements and the number of school teachers participating in LETS trainings and ensuing initiatives: the higher the number of teachers relative to the total teaching staff who actually engaged in LETS trainings, the higher the levels of reported school LE improvements.

Most Improved Domains: Caring and Engaging: Improvements in these areas were noted in factors such as: increased student leadership and engagement in academic and extracurricular activities; decreased violence; improved communication between teachers and students; increased communication with parents; improved physical aspect of the school; improved engagement of parents; and improved academic achievements.

Least Improved Domains: Safe and Healthy: The LE teams reported fewer achievements in the Healthy and Safe domains. This was mainly attributed to the schools' physical facilities and environment.

III. Capacity Building: *To what extent has the LETS project built the capacity of local counterparts to support learning environments in schools?*

The LETS project sought to institutionalize and sustain improved learning environments in schools through building

the capacity of key stakeholders at the school level and central level of the MoE. The evaluation results indicate that the project largely targeted teachers and principals, neglected to train parents and the wider community and provided limited trainings to the MoE and field directorates (FD). Hence, excluding capacity building at the school level, the extent of LETS capacity building of local counterparts was limited.

The majority of schools said the trainings were beneficial. LEI teams found the trainings useful in engaging schools in LEI improvements; LE teams confirmed the LE training that was provided to teachers was effective in helping teachers implement new classroom strategies; and the capacity building provided by the coaches was appreciated and effective though this was based on the quality and consistency of the coach.

At the central level (i.e., MoE and FD), the key finding was that the capacity building did not relate to LE improvements and institutionalization. At the field directorates, supervisors and staff were involved only in “informative meetings” instead of specific trainings on the LEI or RBB assessment. Evidence of capacity building at the district and central levels indicates it is insufficient to institutionalize LE efforts.

IV. Strengths and Weaknesses: *What are some of the strengths, achievements, gaps and weaknesses of the LETS project?*

LETS Strengths and Achievements:

- *School-Level Approach:* School-community stakeholders attributed LE improvements mostly to the LETS school-level approach and coaching interface.
- *Training Associated Practice:* The practice associated with the capacity-building plan was instrumental in improving learning environment, according to numerous school-community stakeholders.
- *Engaging Community and Government:* Engagement on school projects, particularly with the parents, resulted in amplified LE results.
- *RBB Self-Assessment:* 52 percent of sampled schools rated the RBB (as a self-assessment tool of school LE environments) as “greatly useful” and 29 percent as “average useful.” Principals and LE team leaders found the RBB to be useful as a roadmap or guideline for LE improvement.
- *Learning Environment is more than infrastructure:* The LETS project increased project stakeholders’ awareness of the ways LE extends beyond improvement of the physical environment.

LETS Weaknesses and Gaps:

- *RBB shortcomings:* The RBB tool presents some shortcomings to be addressed before it can be endorsed as a “best practice” for LE self-assessment in education programs.
- *Teacher Engagement:* Constrained by time and lack of motivation and incentives inhibited some teachers from engaging in the LETS program.
- *Coach turnover:* High turnover of coaches negatively impacted project performance, as some schools were unable to establish a rapport with the coach, and others found some coaches unqualified to train their teaching staff.
- *Procurement-in-kind support for LEI projects:* Almost all schools reported that LETS project material support (stationery, furniture, equipment and school materials) arrived late, were of poor quality, were overpriced and did not correspond to their needs.
- *Lack of project support for physical environment improvements:* LETS support to LE enhancements did not support physical environment improvements; thus, schools reported difficulty in addressing LE weaknesses and gaps in the Healthy and Safe domains.
- *Unclear role of the MoE:* LETS did not delineate a clear role for the MoE in the school learning environment, especially with reference to its sustainability.

V. Stakeholder Buy-In: *How do project stakeholders view the value of LEI practices in Jordanian schools, including the RBB, and how has this affected their participation in LE activities?*

The LETS project has managed a good level of stakeholder buy-in for LEI practices in Jordanian schools and with the Ministry of Education. The Results Based Benchmarking tool has been deemed useful and appropriate to the Jordanian context, though it needs to be reviewed and adjusted.

VI. Sustainability: *Which LEI elements, processes or components that have been instituted in schools by the LETS project will likely be sustained?*

The LE teams and activities are most likely to be sustained without further project support. This is mostly due to LE teams and LEI initiatives being instituted in schools from the onset of the project, being practiced for three semesters, and not requiring a high investment to be maintained or implemented. The RBB and associated tools need additional support to be sustained. This includes a longer timeframe of intervention to ensure the RBB is embedded in school culture, and improved training and explanation of the tool's interrelation and functions.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The most salient evaluation conclusions and recommendations are:

I.a. While the introduction of the LEI system effectively established LE teams and LEI activities, it was not effective at creating an understanding of an integrated system that is interrelated to serve a single purpose of LE improvement. The late introduction of the RBB and the project's short timeframe (due to rescoping) did not allow sufficient time to fully integrate the RBB assessment systems into schools.

I.b. USAID and project implementers must plan an adequate project timeframe to: 1) properly integrate and practice the structured approach of the RBB assessment and planning and implementation of LE improvement initiatives at the school level and 2) improve integration of project assistance in seed money to directly support implementation of LEI projects.

I.c. USAID must lobby the Ministry of Education to integrate learning environment improvements into the ministry's strategic plans, in addition to the RBB assessment tool.

I.d. USAID must continue its investment in supporting improvements in schools' learning environments by taking into account the lessons learned through the LETS project.

2.a. Project interventions instigate change in the Caring and Engaging domains but fall short on achieving significant results in the Safe and Caring domains of schools' learning environments. Factors that negatively affected the level of learning environment improvements, such as secondary and large boys' schools, were defused when all project stakeholders — LETS coach, school principal, LE teams, teachers, parents and community — engaged in improving school LE.

2.b. USAID and project implementers must assess the commitment level of principal and teachers before selecting schools, engage the original project-planned 80 percent of school staff¹ to generate higher levels of LE

¹ Refer to LETS Performance Management Plan – Indicator table. SIRI.2.b: % of Teachers attending "Towards Better Learning Environment" training sessions. Target: 80% of teachers. Target for this indicator was not achieved by LETS.

improvement, invest proportionately in the coaching interface for larger/boys/challenging schools, and institute a differentiated approach to target “difficult” schools appropriate to the type of challenge.²

3.a. LETS built schools’ capacity to monitor and improve LE, but failed to systematically and adequately build the capacity of all relevant stakeholders to institutionalize and sustain LE efforts at all levels (i.e., teachers, parents, FD and MoE central). Also, the project did not clearly delineate a role for the MoE and Field Directorates, so did not adequately address capacity-building needs and engagement in LEI accordingly.

3.b. USAID must systematically engage and adequately build the capacity of all relevant stakeholders required to institutionalize and sustain LE efforts. Capacity building of stakeholders, specifically the MoE and FD, should be designed according to their designated roles and responsibilities in LEI.

4.a. While the coaching interface was effective and widely valued in terms of LEI improvement results, the teacher training demands impeded high levels of engagement and commitment. This impacted the level of commitment seen in schools, particularly among teachers who were the primary leads for LE team composition and LEI activities.

4.b. USAID must continue the school-based approach and coaching interface to support LE improvement in schools and, with the MoE, explore ways to link training to incentives, enabling participants to add career value and differentiate themselves through their participation in the project.

5.a. The RBB tool, in its present form, is not measurable, user-friendly or consistent. Some indicators are too vague to be interpreted objectively across schools; thus, the tool may not yield the desired results if left to subjective interpretation. Moreover, it is unrealistic to expect that all community and school members will participate in activities.

5.b. USAID must review the RBB tool and address its shortcomings in collaboration with the MoE.

² The evaluation team observes that the premise for performance measures on % of teachers attending “towards better learning environment” training sessions is inconsistent. The indicator definition changed from “attending 80% of training sessions” to “attending 2 out of 32 hours of training”. The evaluation team found that the demands made on teachers to receive training were an impediment for high levels of training completion/attendance. Timing for attendance of the training posed significant challenges for attendance and many teachers in focus group discussions stated that they did not complete the training. According to LETS project documents, teacher training targets were met when using the reduced indicator definition (attending minimum of 2 or 32 training hours – 2121 out of 2521 teachers) but targets were not met if using the original indicator definition (attending 80% of training sessions – 706 staff members completing 80% of training).

INTRODUCTION

The USAID/Jordan Basic Education and Youth Office (EDY) requested that the Monitoring and Evaluation Support Project (MESP), implemented by Management Systems International (MSI), carry out a qualitative evaluation of the Learning Environment Technical Support (LETS) project. LETS is a USAID-funded, \$13.5 million learning environment support program that is implemented by Creative Associates International (CA) and its local subcontractor, ASK.

The USAID Education Office has requested a final performance evaluation of the LETS project implemented in Jordan since August 2010. The scope of work and framework of the LETS project's final performance evaluation was agreed upon with USAID/Jordan through the Project Performance Evaluation Concept Paper dated March 24, 2014, a copy of which is attached for reference in the annex section of this report.

This report presents the final performance evaluation findings and recommendations for future USAID Learning Environment programs in Jordan. The report first explains the evaluation's purpose and evaluation questions, followed by a brief summary of LETS objectives and project components. The evaluation methodology section details the evaluation approach, data-collection methods, analysis and limitations of the applied methodology. The main report describes the evaluation findings, conclusions and recommendations for each of the evaluation questions.

EVALUATION PURPOSE

The evaluation assesses the performance of the LETS program with regard to its implementation of learning environment activities and results-based benchmark monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems involving stakeholders locally (i.e., individual schools) and nationally (i.e., the MoE).

The LETS project began as a three-year initiative on Aug. 8, 2010, with two "option" years that would allow the project to continue through 2016. However, USAID/Jordan elected to close the project in May 2014. LETS was originally designed with an impact evaluation in mind, but the reduced project implementation period would make the lifespan of the program too short to measure its impact on children's academic outcomes. Due to the reduced timeframe of the LETS project and its revised scope of work (see the project summary), this final performance evaluation attempts to test the following hypothesis: If LETS activities, including improved learning environments and rubrics-based benchmarking, are implemented properly, involving both local and national stakeholders, then the Ministry of Education as well as individual schools will continue to implement these best learning environment (LE) practices.³

The evaluation will specifically assess the implementation of learning environment improvement activities and the rubrics-based benchmark M&E system, and provide recommendations for how to build upon LETS initiatives for continued improvements in the school learning environment. The evaluation findings, conclusions and recommendations will serve as a guide for future education projects. This report is prepared for USAID, the Jordanian Ministry of Education (MoE) partner and education stakeholders working toward education quality improvement in Jordanian schools.

³ USAID scope of work, "Background Information and Evaluation Questions for the Learning Environment Technical Support Evaluation," dated Feb. 13, 2014.

EVALUATION QUESTIONS

Table I depicts the evaluation question framework and its lines of inquiry. The seven evaluation questions that guided the final performance evaluation of the LETS program are listed by theme. Within this framework, the questions have been designed to evaluate the process, outcomes and sustainability of LETS project interventions. For example, Question 1 measures the extent to which systems and structures for monitoring Learning Environment Improvements have been established. Question 2 assesses the degree of LETS system and structure usage. Question 3 evaluates whether the project is producing expected (or unexpected) results. Question 4 identifies implementation challenges and factors that could have affected achievement of project results. Finally, with a view toward assessing sustainability of the Learning Environment Improvement (LEI) and Results Based Benchmarks (RBB) system, Questions 5, 6 and 7 explore the extent of capacity built within the system, level of stakeholder buy-in and degree of sustainability within the school, district education office and central ministry of education.

TABLE I: EVALUATION FRAMEWORK LINES OF INQUIRY

Theme	Evaluation Question
Established structures and systems	1. To what extent has the LETS project established systems and structures for monitoring and improving learning environments in target schools?
Use of the LEI system	2. To what degree are LETS schools using the LEI system (RBB, LE teams, etc.) to identify and improve LE weaknesses and gaps?
Results	3. Has the school learning environment improved as a result of the LETS project? If yes, how so?
Strengths and weaknesses	4. What are some of the strengths, achievements, gaps and weaknesses of the LETS project?
Capacity building	5. To what extent has the LETS project built the capacity of local counterparts to support learning environments in schools?
Stakeholder buy-in	6. How do project stakeholders view the value of LEI practices in Jordanian schools, including the RBB, and how has this affected their participation in LE activities?
Sustainability	7. Which LEI elements, processes or components that have been instituted in schools by the LETS project will likely be sustained?

PROJECT CONTEXT

The Learning Environment Technical Support (LETS) Program is a \$13.5 million initiative funded by USAID/Jordan and implemented by Creative Associates International (CA) and the local subcontractor ASK. The three-year initiative began in August 2010 and ends in May 2014. The USAID/Jordan LETS project assists the Ministry of Education to promote positive learning environments in 120 Jordanian K-12 schools working across 10 of Jordan’s 15 directorates.

The LETS project was designed to achieve results in USAID/Jordan’s Agreement for Investing in People through activities that improve the health, education and life skills of young Jordanians. Project activities align with USAID’s

2013–2017 Country Development Cooperation Strategy for Jordan and USAID’s Sub-IR 3.2.1: *Learning environment improved*. In addition, the project directly contributes to USAID’s priorities in education in that it:

- Supports the adoption of a decentralized “whole-school approach” and engages field directorates, school principals, teachers, administrators, parents and community partners in design and implementation;
- Engages the Ministry at an early stage, pushing accountability for results to the field directorates and schools, and encouraging MoE ownership; and
- Builds leadership skills at the MoE, with a focus on field directorates and, most importantly, school principals.

USAID has been active in Jordan’s education sector since 2003 and bases its education assistance on priorities outlined in the Jordanian government’s Education Reform for the Knowledge Economy (ERfKE) program, which is a sector-wide strategy for upgrading and transforming the way Jordanian children learn. USAID has supported Jordan’s education reform efforts through a number of initiatives, including ‘Early Grade Reading Assessment’ (EGRA) / ‘Early Grade Mathematics Assessment’ (EGMA) research; the Jordan National Survey Project (2011–2015); remedial education research; the Learning Environment Improved Infrastructure project (2013–2017); the Jordan School Construction and Rehabilitation Project (2006–2014), the Cultivating Inclusive and Supportive Learning Environments (CISLE) in Jordan’s Schools project (2013–2015); the Education Reform Support Program (2009–2014); Youth for the Future (2009–2014); and the Monitoring and Evaluation Partnership Program (2010–2014).

During the second phase of the ERFKE program, the Ministry of Education — with support from USAID — identified a critical need for improvement in the quality of learning environments with regard to physical factors, health conditions and practices, and social and emotional concerns. The LETS project was designed to promote a system for improving positive learning environments that addresses the nonphysical environmental and behavioral factors that impact student learning. To address the physical aspects, the project had planned to work alongside the USAID/Jordan Learning Environment: Improved Infrastructure Program, which would upgrade the physical environment of the 120 LETS target schools. Due to procurement delays of the infrastructure project, the two projects did not overlap.⁴

According to the LETS project’s Performance Management Plan (PMP), improvements in the learning environment are measured as a reduction in chronic absences, fewer negative behaviors by students and teachers and a higher level of participation in extracurricular activities by students. The LETS Program was designed to assist the Ministry of Education in improving the school learning environment and ultimately enhancing student engagement and performance in the targeted schools.

PROJECT SUMMARY

Project Rescoping: The LETS project was originally designed with three components:

- 1) Assessments as a Crosscutting Component;
- 2) Promoting School and Community-Based Decisions for Positive Behavior Change; and
- 3) Learning Environment Quality Assurance and Accreditation System.

⁴ The project was scheduled to begin the same time as LETS in 2009 and was postponed until 2013.

It was also designed with a quasi-experimental evaluation and a two-year option period. Challenged by a number of internal and external factors, the project underwent several modifications. The final rescoping took place in January 2013.

The prime contractor and client reached consensus on Jan. 7, 2013, regarding key aspects of a new orientation for LETS. In close collaboration with USAID, the team revised and condensed its SOW into two components (Component 1: Building Capacities within Schools to Support Enabling Environments and Component 2: Capacity Building of MOE and subcontractor ASK); dropped the quasi-experimental design (QED) and the quality assurance system (QAS) activities; added a school-based approach to LEI best practices as measured through the RBB; discontinued the communication campaign as a vehicle for change; and intensified direct support to project schools by adding more coaches (one per three schools⁵) to reduce the school-to-coach ratio. Moreover, the project management structure experienced a dramatic shift in the third quarter with: a new Chief of Party (COP); a realignment of the local subcontractor ASK's role in the project, per mission request to align to USAID Forward local capacity-building and partnering goals; and new management structures organized by Project Work Streams (PWS), which included ASK leading school training efforts under the LETS Field Implementation Unit (FIU).

For the purpose of the evaluation, the last project modification and the project Performance Management Plan updated June 13, 2013, as reviewed, amended and approved by USAID, will be the basis for analysis of evaluation findings against reported project results.

Project Description: According to the LETS project's Results Framework,⁶ the program goal is improved quality of the learning environment. This goal will be achieved through two intermediate results (IR):

- IR1: Improved school capacity to support enabling environments and
- IR2: Improved capacity of local counterparts to support learning environments.

IR1 is measured by the number of schools with improvement plans that include an LE component. IR2 is measured by the number of MoE units trained in supporting positive LE in schools. The project consists of two components reflecting these two IRs.

Component 1: Building Capacities within Schools to Support Enabling Environments: The project provides direct and ongoing support to LETS schools and school communities through coaching in a variety of activities aimed at making the school LE Safe, Healthy, Caring and Engaging for all. Component 1 implementation includes three essential and interrelated activities to support measurable changes in schools. The first two activities aim to improve school community access to and use of learning environment data through the joint use of a) Individual School Profiles and b) Results-based Benchmarking. Together, these two instruments comprise the LEI assessment tool; they are used periodically to guide adjustments to interventions.

- The ISP includes data on indicators of the school context (i.e., school population, staffing, school community demographics, attendance/dropout rates) and was to be presented in a simple form that can easily be understood and used by the whole community.
- The RBB encompasses five detailed rubrics for documenting progress achieved in the four domains identified by the LETS project (i.e., Safe, Healthy, Caring, and Engaging).

The third activity under this component is School and Community-based Projects.⁷ LETS coaches help schools identify school projects according to priorities informed by the ISP/ RBB and school improvement plans.

⁵ The original design was one coach per 10 schools.

⁶ See page 16 for LETS project results framework.

The LETS project was first introduced in target schools during a school–community meeting that invited each school or community to implement a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) analysis to identify school-specific learning environment issues. The school–community meeting also involved formation of Learning Environment Teams (LET) in each school to implement and coordinate learning environment improvement efforts.⁸ The LE team had to include the school principal, counselor (when the school has the post filled) and at least one teacher. The LE team core group helped form subgroups or subteams to work on improving the school learning environment. LE subteams usually included teachers and students who, depending on the LEI initiatives, coordinated activities with parents and the community.

With the objective of strengthening school capacity to support LEI, schools received training on school leadership, school management and other issues related to LEI. LETS coaches provided weekly one- to two-hour trainings, capacity building lectures to teachers in reflective practice, classroom management, pedagogy, learning environment improvement and school community engagement. The teachers then put the training subject matter into practice through either new classroom management methods or implementation of initiatives ultimately designed to improve school learning environment. LETS coaches also supported LE teams in drafting action plans/Learning Environment Improvement Initiatives and, for the most part, supervised implementation of the LE initiatives.

The RBB system (ISP, RBB tool and associated referral logs⁹) was introduced by the coaches in a trial run in May 2013 and established in LETS schools in October 2013. The RBB assessment was conducted again in December 2013 to evaluate LE progress in LETS schools.

The School Community Project (SCP): RBB-based LE improvement (LEI) plans are developed to address school LE weaknesses and gaps, identified through the RBB assessment tool. The SCP, drawn from the school’s RBB-based LEI plans, is intended to consist of a series of activities over the course of two months to one semester. SCPs are implemented by school teams according to systematic planning and correspond to one or more of the four LETS domains (Safe, Healthy, Caring, and Engaging). All LETS schools were to implement two school community projects designed to generate LE improvement.

LETS supported school learning environment improvement projects through allocation of seed money that was distributed through three procurements of either a standard package of school supplies or a differentiated list of school supplies selected by each school.

Component 2: Capacity building of MoE and subcontractor ASK: LETS builds the Ministry of Education’s capacity to sustain and institutionalize learning environment improvements and to prepare the LETS partner ASK to compete directly for USAID-funded projects. While LETS training for the MoE includes recommended topics associated with sustaining improvement of LEs and change management, the MoE will also identify its own capacity-building needs.

LETS schools were originally selected according to the following criteria:

- I. School consent to participate in the activity;

⁷ Per the Jan. 20, 2013 Statement of Work, Minimum School Community Project Criteria to be followed in selecting school and community-based project ideas are, but are not limited to the following: Involve a minimum of three classrooms and preferably the whole division/school; always involve students; involve at least one other education stakeholder, and preferably a variety of stakeholders; and span at least two months.

⁸ LETS was first introduced in schools in the fall of 2012.

⁹ Internal Recording Forms: This is a self-monitoring tool that each Learning Environment Team (LET) will use regularly to record information needed for M&E purposes. These simple data-tracking and reporting forms have been developed by LETS to help schools collect and record routine data that correspond to the prevalence of negative behavior within the schools.

2. Absence of other interventions at the school;
3. Size of the school (targeting larger schools);
4. The grade band of schools (i.e., number of grades); and
5. School poverty pocket.

However, due to modifications that were made to the original activity design and delays in implementation, some of the above selection criteria no longer apply to the final 120 schools. Other selection criteria that were originally required for target schools (such as “needy schools” and those with high rates of violence and dropouts) were also abandoned due to the LETS project’s modified scope of work.

LETS PROJECT RESULTS FRAMEWORK

Program Goal: Improved Quality of Learning Environment Indicator: Percentage change in student chronic non-attendance; percentage of students who practice positive behavior; percentage of schools that report a reduction in negative behavior prevalent at their schools.

IR 1: Improved school capacity to support enabling environments
Indicator: # of School with Improvement Plans that include an LE component

SIR 1.1: Improved school community access to and use of learning environment data.

Activities:

- a. Schools trained on developing individual school profiles
- b. Schools Implement LE RBBs

Indicators:

- a. # of schools that develop ISPs
- b. # of schools that integrate RBB use to Improve LE

SIR 1.2: Strengthened school capacity and support.

Activities:

- a. School Leadership Training
- b. Classroom Mgmt Training
- c. Learning Environment Team activities

Indicators:

- a. # of school staff successfully completing positive behavioral change trainings
- b. % of Teachers attending CM Training
- c. # of LE Teams formed

SIR 1.3: School and community-based projects implemented

Activity:

- a. Training on School project planning & implementation

Indicator:

- a. % of schools that have reached set project LE Improvement goals

IR 2: Improved capacity of local counterparts to support learning environments
Indicator: # of MoE Units trained in supporting Positive LE in schools

SIR 2.1: Improved MoE capacity to sustain and institutionalize improved learning environments.

Activities:

- a. Develop MoE Capacity Building Plan
- b. Implement MoE capacity building workshops
- c. Select and Train LE teams
- d. Select and Train Field Directorates Teams

Indicators:

- a. Capacity building plan developed from NA & approved
- b. # of MOE workshops conducted
- c. # of LE& FD team members completing training

SIR 2.2: Improved capacity of local subcontractor to conduct business with USAID.

Activities:

- a. Conduct organizational assessment
- b. Develop/implement capacity development plan

Indicators:

- a. Assessment completed
- b. Capacity development plan approved

EVALUATION FINDINGS

I. LETS SYSTEMS AND STRUCTURES: *To what extent have LETS established systems and structures for monitoring and improving learning environment in target schools? To what degree are LETS schools using the LEI system (LE teams, ISP, RBB, Learning Environment Improvement plans, projects/initiatives) to identify and improve LE weaknesses and gaps?*

The LETS project approach consisted of assistance and support to individual schools through regular coaching and intermittent in-kind assistance (seed money) for implementing projects to improve the school learning environment. LETS interventions sought to introduce and institutionalize systems and structures that would enhance the learning environment in target schools. The school learning environment improvement systems and structures included the LE team, ISP, RBB tool, LEI plans and the SCPs.

School-based interventions kicked off in February 2013 after USAID's approval of the school capacity-building plan (coaching and trainings) and "idea booklet," a menu of interventions to provide schools with project ideas to support positive behaviors. LETS project reports for the period state that "LE teams engaged in 480 school-based initiatives that involved students, teachers, parents and community members working together to update schools' Vision and Mission, better maintain school buildings, open up lines of communication between different community partners and promote local concern for students' health and safety in more caring and engaging learning environments. School activities successfully dealt with improvement of classroom discipline and engaged all 600 schools' LE teams and subteams in planning their school community projects."¹⁰ Moreover, the LETS project planned support to the "school-based initiatives" through procurement of a basic package of tools and equipment distributed to schools in semesters two and three of the school-based intervention period.

The ISP/RBB, introduced in year three of the project (October 2013), initiated a more structured and systematic assessment of school learning environment. The RBB system (ISP, RBB tool and associated referral logs) was introduced by the coaches in a trial run in May 2013, and an RBB assessment was conducted in October 2013 as a benchmark. A second RBB assessment was done two months later, in December, of 2013 to evaluate LE progress in LETS schools.

The RBB tool was implemented by LETS coaches to assess individual school weaknesses and gaps, and guide the development of LEI plans. These plans were meant to be integrated in the over-arching school improvement plan and to determine the selection and implementation of two priority projects that would illustrate LE improvement gains.

To answer the evaluation questions, the study endeavored to validate participants' responses through observation and review of LETS relevant documents in each school (ISP, RBB, LEI plans and SCP).

According to the LETS final project report dated April 2014, LE teams had been formed in almost all (99 percent) of LETS schools; all schools had developed an ISP; all schools had integrated RBB to improve the LE; and all schools had improvement plans that included an LE component. See Table 2.

¹⁰LETS FY13 Quarter 2 report, April 15, 2013.

TABLE 2: LETS FINAL PROJECT REPORT APRIL 2014

Results Framework Indicator	Target	Achieved
# of Learning environment teams formed	120 schools	119 schools
# of Schools that developed an ISP	120 schools	120 schools
# of Schools that integrate RBB to improve LE	120 schools	120 schools
# of Schools that used improvement plans with an LE component	120 schools	120 schools

Learning Environment (LE) Teams

The evaluation findings on the sampled schools indicate that all 31 (100 percent) had formed a learning environment team composed of the required core members; i.e., the school principal, one or two teachers, and a counselor (where there was one in the school). The LE teams had also created sub-team of teachers, students, and in some cases, parents, to support specific activities in the areas of communications, health, cleanliness, orderliness, behavior, teaching and learning, community engagement, and school maintenance, among others.

Individual School Profiling (ISP)

Although the majority of schools (77 percent) had an ISP, about one-fourth (23 percent) did not.¹¹ In some instances, the school principal asserted having completed the ISP but was unable to find the document in the LETS school files,¹² and instead, provided a flier or a poster. In other instances, while the principal did not recall having completed an ISP, the evaluation team would find a copy of the document in the school files.

Results Based Benchmarking (RBB)

Nearly all (94 percent) of the school principals and LE teams confirmed having conducted the RBB assessment at least once during the life of the project. However, most school principals reported that they did not fully understand the RBB tool the first time it was introduced in October 2013. Some noted that they understood how to use the RBB as an LE self-assessment tool only after attending Creative Associates regional meetings,¹³ where RBB was explained to them with specific examples. There is also the possibility that the coaches themselves had not understood the tool well and, consequently, had not properly explained it. This may be why some teachers and principals felt that RBB was not appropriate for the Jordanian school environment. A principal at the Ekrima Secondary Boys School said, “The coach’s objective was just to fill a paper and take a stamp from me.” By the time of the second round of RBB in December 2013, the project was nearly at its end. As a principal at the Mahis Secondary Boys School remarked, “We are still at the stage of assessment — we didn’t get enough time to implement. The timeframe of the project is too short. We need time to make a real impact.”

Learning Environment Improvement (LEI) Plans

The majority (81 percent) of the LE teams developed a learning environment improvement plan based on their RBB assessment. In the rest of the schools, the RBB was used only to measure improvement of the LE from one stage to the next. It is important to note that schools whose LE teams had developed RBB-based LEI plans also integrated them into the school’s overarching development plan. Some of these schools are now actively lobbying

¹¹ The significance of the ISP is in its relationship to the RBB: “improve school community access to and use of learning environment data through the joint use of a) Individual School Profiles and b) Results-based Benchmarking.” Please refer to the project summary- component 1. The ISP is a comprehensive tool that allows the school to pinpoint gaps *and* to *carry out the RBB assessment*.

¹² Some of the interviewed principals explained that the LETS coach took the file to type and print but failed to share the completed ISP copy with the school later.

¹³ Jerash in the North, Amman in the Center, and Aqaba in the South. Meetings were conducted the first two weeks of September 2013 (September 8, 15 and 18).

the Ministry of Education, the private sector and the community to address the LE weaknesses they identified during the last round of RBB. The *high levels of LE improvements* experienced in these schools *encouraged* them to seek more support from other sources. School lobbying efforts were ad hoc and not systematized. Lobbying efforts were driven by individuals: in some cases, the coach encouraged it and in others, it was driven by the principal or the principal and the parents. The targets of lobbying and fundraising efforts were the municipality, MoE, and the private sector companies in the region¹⁴. These findings are based on the triangulation of information from the LE team, teachers and principal in addition to a review of schools' LETS-relevant documents.

School Community Projects (SCPs)

Most schools had difficulty differentiating between LEI initiatives implemented after the training sessions and the two required SCPs that should have resulted from the RBB assessment and subsequent LEI plans. This finding can be partially explained by the fact that the LEI plans for the SCPs were supposed to be based on results of the RBB assessments. Given that the RBB was introduced late in the project, most schools had already developed some action plans for school initiatives following the trainings, and considered them to be the same as the LEI plans and ensuing SCPs. Minding this confusion between LEI initiatives and SCPs, the evaluation was able to confirm that only 52 percent of schools have actually designed SCP projects based on the RBB assessment. This finding is based on triangulation of information from the LE team, teachers and principal, as well as a review of the school's LETS-relevant documents.

Seed money for SCP projects was not directly allocated to the projects, compounding the difficulty in differentiating between which LE initiatives emerged from coaching and which emerged from an RBB-based assessment of weaknesses and gaps. LETS schools were supported with seed money — in-kind support — through three procurements: one based on a standard package and two based on school selection from a standard list of approved items.¹⁵ Thus, there was no direct conditionality between seed money and RBB-based SCPs, but rather a general allocation of in-kind support materials through a package in the early capacity-building and training phase.

If one considers “initiatives” and SCPs together, as part of efforts to improve the school learning environment, then almost all sampled schools (97 percent) implemented some initiatives and projects to enhance school Learning Environment (e.g., teacher for a day, painting murals, cleanest class award, reward system, gardening, chess competition, plays and skits, among others) along with the SCPs in the effort to improve the school learning environment.

In summary, the evaluation results indicate that only 71 percent of the sampled schools had established all five LEI systems and structures (LE teams, ISP, RBB, LEI plans for initiatives or SCPs, and projects or initiatives) for monitoring and improving the learning environment. All schools formed LE teams, which included at the minimum a principal and two teachers and organized subteams. Students were often included in subteams, and parents were included in a few subteams. About three-fourths of the schools completed an ISP, and nearly all conducted the RBB self-assessment at least once. Almost all schools initiated activities related to LE domains and LE improvement, and more than three-quarters of the school sample developed LEI plans for either school initiatives or the SCP. See Table 3.

¹⁴ Examples of successful lobbying and fundraising include: i) JD 80,000 worth of construction/repairs from MoE (Mahis Secondary Boys school); ii) MOE's acceptance of increase in rent in exchange for construction of additional classes (Im Itham Mixed Elementary school); iii) JD 6,000 in-kind support from private sector (Abu Hwaidy School in Zarqa); and iv) Lobbying with the municipality to clean up the school's environment (Abu Obaida school).

¹⁵ Each school was allocated a seed money budget according to school size.

TABLE 3: SUMMATIVE FINDING – SAMPLED SCHOOLS’ LEI SYSTEMS AND STRUCTURES

	LE Team	ISP	RBB	LEI Plans	LEI Initiatives	All Five Elements in Place
% of schools	100	77	94	81	97	71
# of schools	31	24	29	25	30	22

CONCLUSIONS

Although all schools had an LE team and a large majority had implemented LE improvement initiatives, project activities were not implemented in a consistent and timely fashion. This hindered a universal understanding of the LE improvement tools and their relation to the overall project objective of monitoring and improving the school learning environment, and the implementation of LEI projects in LETS schools. The late introduction of the RBB and the short project timeframe due to rescoping, in addition numerous LETS schools not fully comprehending the tool until December 2013, resulted in insufficient time for schools to integrate the RBB assessment systems (RBB, LEI plans and SCP) into their school structures. Even though a large number of schools completed all required documents (e.g., referral logs, ISP, RBB assessments), many LE teams did not see the linkage between the ISP and the RBB and were not aware of the ISP’s importance in monitoring LE improvements. Hence, while the introduction of the LEI system was effective in establishing LE teams and LEI initiatives, it failed to create an understanding of an integrated system to improve the school learning environment. Finally, not only were there no alignments between the seed money support to schools and the SCPs or even to the schools’ needs, but the materials received by ALL schools were late and of poor quality, which contributed to negative perceptions of the program¹⁶, as well as limited commitment on the part of principals and teachers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings from the implementation of LETS, the evaluation team recommends the following for future LE improvement initiatives:

1. Implementers should introduce the project in schools in an integrated way so that its contribution and relevance to improving the school learning environment can be fully understood;
2. Implementers should introduce assessment tools such as the RBB and ISP at the onset of the project to be able to assess and monitor progress of the school learning environment;
3. USAID and project implementers must plan an adequate project timeframe to properly integrate and practice the structured approach of RBB assessment, planning and implementation of LEI initiatives at the school level.
4. USAID and project implementers must ensure that integration of project assistance in the form of seed money directly supports implementation of LEI projects. This support can be extended through financial assistance (rather than in-kind) to facilitate execution of planned LE improvement initiatives at the school level. This approach to financial support proved effective in UNICEF’s education project and CIDA’s School and Directorate Development Program (SDDP).

II. PROJECT RESULTS: *Has the school learning environment improved as a result of the LETS project? If yes, how so?*

¹⁶ Almost ALL schools reported poor quality materials. The quality of the materials affected the credibility of the program but was not the most determining factor in the schools’ buy-in or levels of LE improvements.

To respond to this question, the evaluation team sought feedback from the Ministry of Education (both central and field directorates), LETS-sampled schools, community-level stakeholders and LETS implementers Creative Associates and subcontractor ASK.

Table 4 presents the evaluation findings on the perceived level of LE improvements reported through in-depth interviews with school principals and feedback from focus group discussions with teachers and parents.

TABLE 4: PERCEIVED LEVEL OF LE IMPROVEMENT IN EVALUATION SAMPLE

Level of LE Improvements in Evaluation Sample			
Perceived LE Improvement	Great Improvement	Satisfactory Improvement	Limited Improvement
# of schools (out of 31)	6 ¹⁷	20	5 ¹⁸
% of sample	19	65	16

As these results indicate, almost all sampled schools reported a certain level of LE improvements, with more than half (65 percent) reporting a *satisfactory* level of LE improvements as a result of LETS. Perceptions of the level of LE improvements varied across schools according to the following:

Gender and School Level: Feedback from multiple stakeholders, supported by project reports, confirmed that boys-only schools, especially at the secondary level, experienced the least change or improvement in school LE compared with girls-only, mixed and elementary-level schools. Determining reasons for this is beyond the scope of this evaluation, although three explanations were offered by respondents for the limited effectiveness of LETS implementation in boys' schools:

- 1) Boys' schools have male teachers, who usually have two jobs (teaching and an after-hours job) to be able to support their families; they are thus less inclined than female teachers to engage in extra work at school for LETS activities to improve school LE;
- 2) Girls' and mixed schools have a higher proportion of female teachers, who are traditionally more committed to teaching; and
- 3) Adolescent boys (10 and older) are going through a difficult phase of their life and may need an approach that is more suited to their needs, such as activities that are geared more towards sports and competitions (rather than reward systems for participation in LE improvement activities) to expend their high level of energy positively instead of through violence and rebellious behaviors.

The challenges in schools for adolescent boys, as opposed to those for girls, were highlighted in LETS school assessments, GSA and SSA. It is the evaluators' opinion that these gender differences should have been further assessed prior to the design of the interventions so that the root causes (i.e., at the cultural, community, school, curriculum, and policy levels) could have addressed accordingly.

School Size and Grade Span: Some school principals reported that schools with larger student bodies experienced greater LE weaknesses and gaps. The grade span was also mentioned by some as a factor for a weak LE; lower-grade students were likely to experience bullying or violence from older students. In addition, all coaches spent one day a week at each school, regardless of school size. Therefore, larger and smaller schools may not have

¹⁷ "Great" LE improvement was reported by six schools (19 percent); five of these are girls' or mixed schools while one is an elementary boys' rented school.

¹⁸ "Limited" LE improvement was reported by five secondary schools (16 percent); four are boys' secondary schools.

benefited equally from the coaching, especially in larger schools with multiple LE problems. The fact that the larger schools received more seed money (proportional to size) does not invalidate this hypothesis. As the principal at Fathema Zahra Mixed Secondary School noted, “The level of LE improvement is limited because the school is large and we have extensive issues to be addressed.”

Engagement: The most influential factor found to support higher levels of LE improvements was engagement; that is, the extent to which school stakeholders and LETS coaches were committed to improving the school LE. For the most part, respondents attributed the school’s LE improvements to LETS initiatives, capacity building and support, as well as to teachers’ commitment and the parents’ volunteer support. Hence, some factors that may have impeded improvements in LE were negated when the principal, teachers and parents engaged in the change process. Although some LE teams and teachers were initially reluctant to participate in LETS, their attitude changed when they noticed improvements in student behavior because of LETS trainings and LEI initiatives. Some school principals, LE teams and teachers noted the coach’s commitment and active participation in LE initiatives and classroom teaching as a determining factor in initiating and motivating their engagement in improving school LE. Hence, the level of trust and willingness of principals, teachers, and even parents to become engaged in LE improvement activities was to a large extent determined by the coaches’ enthusiasm and dedication to their work. A “more than satisfactory” level of LE improvement was reported in secondary-level boys’ schools when the principal and teachers, supported by parents, engaged in LETS initiatives. Also, in some rented schools where limitations to physical facilities would have normally impeded improvement in school LE, principals and teachers as well as parents reported great improvement because of their involvement in school activities. As one parent at Um Itham School noted, “The project would get more support if there is increased awareness by the families.”

Percent of School Staff Engaged in LETS: One factor that determined the extent of LE improvement is the percentage of teachers who engaged in LETS trainings and activities at the school level. Findings indicate a positive correlation between LE improvements and the number of teachers participating in LETS trainings and ensuing initiatives. Having more teachers (relative to the total teaching staff) engaging in LETS trainings was linked to greater perceived school LE improvements. LETS planning documents had projected to engage around 80 percent of school staff in the project activities. It is not clear whether this percentage refers only to the number of teachers attending the trainings or it also includes teachers and students who participated in LE improvement initiatives.

Most Improved Domains: Caring and Engaging: LETS capacity-building workshops and ensuing LEI initiatives and projects resulted in improved school LE, mostly in the caring and engaging domains. Reported examples from principals and teachers included:

- Increased student leadership and engagement in academic and extracurricular activities: Principals reported that LETS capacity-building and LEI initiatives had strengthened student leadership and engagement. Examples included: taking the lead to propose and implement LE initiatives, leading the morning march, being in charge of maintaining order and discipline and acting as a teacher or a principal for a day.
- Decreased level of violence: Principals who maintained referral logs reported some decrease in reported incidences of violence, bullying and negative behavior referrals to the counselor. The principal at Wadi al Rayan Boys Elementary School said, “We have a student who used to be a troublemaker and bully and at the same time he is very clever, the teacher treated him in special way, where he assigned many responsibilities to him such as to supervise the students and to give speeches in the school broadcasting in the morning. Now he is one of the best students.”
- Improved communication between teachers and students: Some parents noted an improved level of communication between their children (as students) and the teachers.
- Increased communication with parents: Some teachers reported that student absenteeism has decreased

because the teacher is now following up with parents when students do not attend school. In certain cases, teachers talk to parents about students who fall behind in studies or display negative behavior.

- Improved Physical Aspect of the School: This is an additional improvement resulting from school LE due to LETS. A classroom code of conduct was instituted, triggering follow-up on classroom cleanliness; murals have been painted to decorate the playground walls; boards were hung in the hallways decorating bare walls with paintings, posters and photos of school events; and gardens were planted, among other initiatives.
- Improved engagement of parents: Some LETS schools made special efforts to engage the parents in school activities and events. When parents engaged with the school, LE improvements were amplified. Parents volunteered skills and time to contribute to the learning environment of their children's school. For example, parents volunteered to take on gardening, painting, maintenance/repair work and organizing bake sales. As the principal at the Mahis Boys School indicated, "The activities associated with the project should enable the school to be or act as one entity — the community, school, student, parent, administrator and teacher — within the four domains, with the key one being engagement with the community." Furthermore, one parent observed: "The school is acting as one family now."
- Improved academic achievements: Some teachers and parents reported that student grades had improved as a result of LETS; its initiatives increased student achievement through reward systems; parents noted that their children began applying themselves more as they were being recognized and rewarded. Student achievement also improved when a parent volunteered to teach students after hours to help them in specific subjects.

Least Improved Domains: Safe and Healthy: The LE teams reported fewer achievements in the Healthy and Safe domains. The main reason for this was attributed to the schools' physical facilities and environments, such as: school location on a busy main street (with risks of passing cars); damaged walls; playgrounds without shade or shelter; a small number of washrooms relative to the student population; maintenance needs; and old and broken classroom furniture¹⁹ among others. The principal at the Abu Obaida Boys School stated: "We have problems related to the physical school facility that need to be addressed in order to make an impact on the learning environment. For example, I have 50 kids in the classroom with one teacher. I have three toilets and five faucets for 300 students. My school does not have a fence or barrier between it and the street. So it becomes very difficult to make a deeper impact on the learning environment, especially in the health and safety domains. We cannot advance to competence levels because the physical facility is so bad — no matter how hard we work on teachers and students."

When respondents reported improvement in the Safe and Healthy domains, they referred to establishment of a first aid station, the Civil Defense providing a first aid lecture, personal hygiene days and a traffic safety awareness lecture by the police. Schools also received cleaning and personal hygiene products, which they used to clean the school and distribute to students. A few schools were able to fundraise from the community to either have separate boys and girls bathrooms or improve the bathroom facilities.

Limited LE improvements: As noted in Table 3, five schools of the sample of 31 reported limited LE improvements as a result of LETS. Several factors were reported to account for this, including: inadequately trained coaches, secondary boys' schools with special challenges, community members uninterested in getting involved with the school, principals failing to support the coach, teachers who are neither interested nor engaged with LETS and particularly rundown and overcrowded schools.

¹⁹ Note that USAID procurement under this project is restricted and does not allow for furnishing or construction material support.

Finally, it is noteworthy to mention that feedback of the MoE Field Directorates concurred with the majority of the findings on LE improvements and challenges.

CONCLUSIONS

Schools reported some improvement in the LE as a result of the project, though the degree varied across schools depending on factors such as gender, school level, school size and grade span. These factors were important in influencing the degree of teacher/principal involvement in LE activities, and thus student behaviour. Some schools, such as boys' secondary level, that face multiple challenges may require a more tailored approach for LE improvements. However, even in these schools, the project achieved some results to the degree that it was implemented in a comprehensive manner with the presence of qualified coaches, strong principal and teacher commitment (reflected in the composition and size of the LE teams), as well as parent and community engagement in the school.

The most significant changes in the LE were in the Caring and Engaging domains, and the least in the Safe and Healthy domains. This can be partially attributed to LETS limitations in addressing school infrastructure and physical environment, including furniture and facility development.²⁰

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the evaluation findings of LETS, it is recommended that USAID, in future LE improvement initiatives:

- I. Assess the commitment level of principals and teachers before selecting schools. When principals and teachers are not committed to project objectives, efforts are hampered. Some suggestions are:
 - Past history: assess the school principals' past history in going beyond 'duty' and request for school application to include examples of initiatives of school improvements brought about by the principals' personal initiative;
 - Consult with other education projects about their own experience with the school and/or the principal. This can be done either directly with the donors or indirectly by requesting references to be included in the application. Example is the Queen Rania Teaching/Principal Excellence Award;
 - Request the endorsement of the parents' committee as a requirement in the school application to participate in the project;
 - Ensure that there is an adequate number of school teachers who are willing to attend trainings and engage in learning environment improvement activities prior to the final school selection;
 - Consider cost share contributions in the project design whereby for every dollar the school receives, a percentage amount must be raised locally by the school or community – can be in the form of labor or volunteer time.
 - Discontinue work in schools that do not demonstrate an acceptable level of engagement in the startup period, and inform applicant schools and the MoE about this option before full project engagement at the school.
2. Ensure that the project engages the planned 80 percent of school staff²¹ to generate higher levels of LE

²⁰ The LETS project was to be implemented in conjunction with another USAID-funded project for school infrastructure development, the Learning Environment Infrastructure Improvement Project (LEIIP), which was delayed due procurement issues.

improvement. This is particularly important in larger schools, where increased commitment is needed to generate momentum for LE gains.

3. Ensure that the project engages and/or trains parents and students to increase momentum for change and ensure engagement of all school stakeholders. Projects such as USAID-CMP and Madrasati have adopted this approach to whole-school community engagement, which has yielded positive results.
4. Ensure that the project invests proportionately in the coaching interface for larger/boys'/challenging schools and institute a differentiated approach to target "difficult" schools that would respond to the particular type of challenge.
5. Introduce fundraising and lobbying methods to support physical facility improvements. Lobbying and fundraising were occurring organically at some sampled LETS schools. Sharing lessons learned and systematizing the lobbying and fundraising functions of the LE teams may help schools overcome resource-based obstacles to school improvement. Mechanisms for schools to accept funds raised within the regulations of the MoE should also be explored to enable committees/LE teams to raise cash as well as in-kind donations.

III. CAPACITY BUILDING: *To what extent has the LETS project built the capacity of local counterparts to support learning environments in schools?*

The LETS project sought to institutionalize and sustain improved learning environments in schools through building the capacity of key stakeholders at the school level and at the central level of the MOE. These objectives are reflected in two of the project's results indicators:

IR 1.2: Strengthened School Capacity and Support and

IR 2.1: Improved MOE Capacity to sustain and institutionalize learning environments.

Strengthened School Capacity: The project interventions sought to train school LE teams on the foundations of the learning environment, positive behavior change and expectations and how to plan, lead and implement school and community-based projects. Beginning in February 2013, LETS coaches conducted a series of training and coaching sessions for the LE teams (consisting of school counselors, principals, teachers and students). Counselor sessions focused on building the counselors' capacity to deal with students' negative behavior and how to best teach positive behaviors. Principals received a three-hour coaching session on motivation strategies and participated in LEI RBB training sessions. School staffs were trained in change management, with an emphasis on how best to promote positive student/teacher relations. Teachers received 16 sessions of training over the span of two semesters²²; the first half of these workshops focused on basic ways to improve the LE and the second half focused on new trends in LE improvement. Training topics included modern teaching pedagogies, classroom management, learning by playing, teaching positive behavior, social and emotional intelligence, the parents' role in classroom management, learning styles and multiple intelligences. To develop students' leadership skills and positive behaviors, LETS coaches facilitated the "Leaders of Change" session and conducted training on positive behaviors to practice in and out of school. Parents and community members participated in "Toward Better Learning Environment" trainings and directly engaged in the schools' self-assessments.²³

Improved MOE Capacity to Sustain and Institutionalize Learning Environments: Under this result, the project had only two key activities: to conduct a needs assessment and develop an MoE capacity-building plan and to provide capacity-building training to sustain positive learning environment efforts. To engage MoE senior staff in capacity building, LETS conducted a two-day workshop in October 2013 to help identify their training needs.

²¹ Refer to LETS Performance Management Plan – Indicator table. SIRI.2.b: % of Teachers attending "Towards Better Learning Environment" training sessions. Target: 80% of teachers. Target for this indicator was not achieved by LETS.

²² Eight sessions took place from January to June 2013 and eight took place from September through December 2013.

²³ This refers to the project introductory session with school communities where the project formed LE teams and facilitated a general SWOT analysis of the school learning environment.

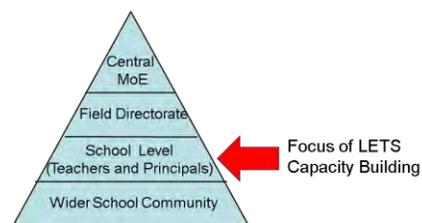
Twenty-four MoE senior staff members and two members of the Ministry of Health (MoH) LETS Technical Committee participated in the workshop. The needs assessment workshop resulted in a capacity-building plan that proposed training in three topics: 1) management of change, 2) data-driven decision-making for leaders and 3) communication and leadership skills. Twenty-eight participants from the MoE Managing Directorates and the MoH attended the capacity-building seminar. The training covered the following topics: program management (e.g., the project management cycle, specific tools for program planning, overcoming resistance to change); decentralization and accountability in the context of LETS and best practice (e.g., the importance of community involvement in education, ownership of programs, school-based management, leadership and decision-making); and monitoring and evaluation (e.g., stages of monitoring and evaluation, key decisions in evaluation of projects, advantages and disadvantages of current MoE approaches to project planning, and benchmarking). In addition to these capacity-building sessions, MoE task force members also participated in a one-day RBB workshop in April 2013, where they conducted an in-depth review of each of the tool's rubrics. According to LETS quarterly reports, *central MoE task force members and all 10 FD members have participated in LE/RBB trainings*; some have also taken part in project school visits.

The LETS project final report from April 2014 noted several achievements for IR 2.1 related to the improved MoE capacity to sustain and institutionalize learning environments, detailed in Table 5.

TABLE 5: LETS FINAL PROJECT REPORT (APRIL 2014) ON CAPACITY BUILDING

LETS Project Indicator	Target	Reported
# of FD team members completing training	75	80
# of MOE workshops conducted	3	3
# of MoE units trained in supporting positive LE in schools	11	16
# of capacity-building plans developed from needs assessment and approved	1	1

LETS capacity building for LE focused primarily at the school level. Excluding the school level, the extent of LETS of LETS capacity building for LE of local counterparts was limited. The graphic illustrates the focus of LE capacity-building efforts related to LE. The evaluation results indicate that the project largely targeted teachers and principals, did not train parents and the wider community, and provided limited LE training to the MOE and FD. Evaluation findings reveal that MOE training did not center on LE, and FD training sessions seemed to revolve around orientation to the project, but not LE training. Of the training sessions mentioned in the Component 1 description in the Project Summary above, the evaluation revealed that only the RBB training for principals, and 16 training sessions for teachers, and a few capacity building activities for the ME task force, and FD orientation session took place during the life of the project.



At the school level, most said the trainings were beneficial. LEI teams found the trainings useful in engaging schools in LEI improvements. Through the RBB trainings, principals learned how to monitor and document LE improvements. Principals said the most beneficial trainings focused on education strategies for teachers and local community engagement. LE teams confirmed the LE training provided to teachers were effective in helping them institute new strategies in the classroom. The teachers stated that they benefited most from strategies for improving student behavior (e.g., use of drama, learning through play, alternatives to punishment and classroom management), which generated improved student engagement in the classroom. *The implementation of LE initiatives following the training was the most useful aspect of the capacity building, as it ensured application and teachers were able to see and feel the difference in the school LE.*

The capacity building provided by the coaches was appreciated and effective depending on the quality and consistency of the coach. For example, one principal at Othman Bin Afan Boys School stated, “The coaches visited the schools on a weekly basis, attended lessons and were very committed and serious in conducting the training.” This encouraged the school to increase the response rate of teachers attending the trainings. However, a principal from another school stated that they had three different coaches due to high turnover; the only benefit of coaching reported was how to make a mural or poster.

Nearly all schools reported that parents, community members and students were not involved in any LE trainings through the project. There was general consensus among parents that they did not receive any training. The majority of parents expressed the desire to be more informed about the project and related plans, and to attend trainings on education related topics. This desire was mostly expressed after parents noted improvement in their children’s behavior and positive attitude towards the school and teachers. Parents and community members also stated that the project did not build the capacity of any community or government organizations. There were, however, a few exceptions; for example, at In A-Fayha’a Elementary School for girls in Jerash, parents received some capacity building during PTA meetings.

Apart from teacher-training workshops, teachers did not participate in RBB training and were not involved in developing the LEI plans.²⁴ Teachers said they would have liked the opportunity to tailor the preset LEI program plans to their schools’ LE needs. As one teacher at Ekrima Boys School noted, “If the decision-makers or managers of the LETS project consulted us in advance and identified the needs of the school, we could have merged our ideas, and the intervention would have been more successful.”

Project sustainability depends not only on the teachers’ and community’s involvement in planning and implementing project activities, but also on the extent of involvement of the FD and national-level MoE.

Evidence of capacity building at the district and central levels was insufficient to institutionalize LE efforts. At the field directorate level, supervisors and staff were involved only in “informative meetings”²⁵ rather than specific trainings on the LEI or RBB assessment. FDs claimed the extent of their involvement was to conduct field visits or attend school events. For the most part, the field directorates requested to have a role, and to be more informed and involved as key focal points. Some FDs went further to propose a supervisory role for the MoE Field Directorates in future Learning Environment Improvement projects.

Principals also expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of support, collaboration and communication with the FD, stressing a lack of recognition for schools that improved their LE. The FD supervisors interviewed had different understandings of the RBB and no in-depth knowledge of the tool itself. One FD in North Ghor was the exception; its supervisor was aware of issues regarding the quality and capacity of trainers, the training topic issues and the resistance of teachers. He intervened on occasion to solve the problems when he attended trainings or spoke to trainers during school visits on behalf of the MoE.

At the central level, the key finding was that the capacity building did not relate to LE improvements and institutionalization. As noted in the Component 1 description above and verified through interviews, the topics of the six-day seminar in December 2013 were program management, decentralization and accountability in the context of LETS and best practice, and M&E. According to an MoE task force (TF) representative, a thorough needs assessment of *knowledge gaps related to LE* was recommended, but time did not allow for a thorough gap analysis; thus, the training design was based on topics of general interest. Creative Associates’ training consultant, though excellent at delivering training, did not have LE expertise to link the generalized topics to school LE improvements. According to one TF member, the majority of central MoE participants did not benefit much from

²⁴ Only school principals and LE teams participated in RBB trainings and subsequent development of LEI plans.

²⁵ The project reports refer to this as professional sharing and reflection sessions (PSRS).

the training, as they were already familiar with topics like evidence-based school assessments from other SDDP project trainings.

The evaluation also found that not all MoE stakeholders received RBB training. One representative stated the MOE staff learned about the RBB system through meetings and discussions, not formal training. However, another stakeholder stated that the field and technical committee had received training on the RBB self-assessment tool. Therefore, only the MoE LE task force committee is relatively aware of LE domains, tools and activities.

CONCLUSIONS

Practical application of LE training in the classroom, such as behavioral modification strategies, with support from qualified coaches had the most impact on improving teacher capacity to strengthen student engagement. The LETS project's capacity-building component, however, was not adequately and systematically implemented. While the project had some success in building the capacity of schools to monitor and improve LE, it failed to build the capacity of all stakeholders including teachers, parents/community members, the MoE and the FDs, especially with regard to the LE system as whole. Not all teachers or parents were involved in training sessions on the RBB/LEI assessment, and consequently, did not participate in any activities based on the RBB assessments. Absence of comprehensive and systematic capacity building at the MoE and FD levels precluded active participation of these stakeholders in LE improvements at LETS schools. It is important to note that the project did not clearly delineate a role for the MoE and FDs, and was therefore unable to respond to their capacity needs regarding their engagement in the project.

The evaluation observed that the LETS project did not *systematically* engage the students or parents in LE improvements. The evaluation team observed that where community engagement levels were higher, LE results were also higher. This was consistent with higher levels of both parental involvement and student leadership in LE improvements. The evaluation team also observed that where the larger community (community members, municipality, companies, CBOs, civil defense) was involved, schools also saw increased support for LE improvements. It is noted that parental involvement and community engagement was part of the scope of LETS, as referenced in the LETS contract, LETS rescoping document, as well as project documents, quarterly reports, teacher training sessions in each of the three semesters, RBB benchmarks, school checklists and assessments, and project M&E data. However, very few schools engaged community members as members of LE teams or sub-teams, as verified by LETS project reports: "Only 4.7% of lead team members were students, another 4.8% were local community members or parents." (FY 2014 First Quarterly Report). LETS project documents observed that in RBB self-assessments, schools rated themselves at the lower end of the spectrum on "welcomes parents" and "community partnerships," resulting in a project-assessed "need for more projects and activities involving parents and community and mobilizing these partnerships." (Third Quarter 2013 Annex IA)

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the evaluation findings and conclusions in terms of *building capacity of local counterparts to support learning environments in schools*, it is recommended that in future LE improvement initiatives:

1. USAID must ensure that the MoE and FDs receive sufficient training and capacity building to fully understand, use and integrate LEI components into the MoE framework. Suggested topics for the training are:
 - a. theoretical understanding of the importance of LE and its contribution to student achievement;
 - b. conceptual overview of the RBB tool benchmarks with an explanation of how the absence or presence of each indicator affects student learning outcomes; and
 - c. sample LEI initiatives based on international best practices and Jordanian schools that have exemplified achievements.
2. Implementers must adequately train LETS coaches on the RBB assessment and other monitoring tools to insure informed introduction and, consequently, improved understanding and integration of the tools at the school level.

3. Implementers must systematically monitor coaches' performance in schools to ensure that corrective actions can be taken while project is being implemented.
4. USAID must design future capacity building for school and MoE stakeholders based on a thorough needs assessment of conceptual and procedural knowledge gaps related to LEI implementation and with full participation of targeted stakeholders.
5. USAID must ensure full participation of all relevant stakeholders in LEI trainings, including conducting the RBB assessment, developing LEI plans, monitoring LEI initiatives at the school level and sharing good practices.
6. USAID must ensure that parents are engaged in LE assessment and implementation (e.g., include a PTA representative on the LE team to promote broader parental and community involvement).
7. USAID must clearly assign FD and MoE responsibilities and accountability lines. For example, the following suggestions were offered at the LETS Professional Sharing and Reflection Session (PSRS):
 - *Liaison Officer* (head of the Counseling Division): facilitate LE implementation through school-based activities by coordinating with principals and coaches, conducting monitoring and supervision and reporting regularly on the school's implementation of its plan.
 - *FD Director and appointed FD members*: sustain the project by ensuring LETS is included in schools' improvement planning process.
8. USAID must orient the FD and MoE on the project and their designated roles and responsibilities.

IV. STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES: *What are some of the strengths, achievements, gaps and weaknesses of the LETS project?*

The LETS project encountered and reported several challenges as well as achievements throughout its lifespan (August 2010–April 2014). The following section presents the evaluation findings as project strengths and weaknesses as reported by the project main stakeholders (i.e., school beneficiaries and the Jordanian MoE).

LETS Strengths and Achievements

School-Level Approach: Numerous schools reported LE improvements as a result of LETS. According to school-community stakeholders, these improvements are mostly attributed to the LETS project's school-level approach and coaching interface. Compared with other education programs, the LETS approach of extending capacity building and support to the overall school — coaching principals and counselors, training a large number of teachers and implementing initiatives with teachers, students and community — created momentum for change that generated LE improvement results. Thus, based on ample feedback from principals and LETS, the school-level coaching interface was instrumental in instituting change in schools' LE environment.

Training-Associated Practice: Numerous school-community stakeholders reported that another instrumental aspect of the LETS project in improving the learning environment was the combination of practice and capacity building. The training offered by coaches, while not new topics for all teachers, offered teachers the opportunity to apply the training, resulting in initiatives such as reward systems, classroom management techniques and teaching and learning strategies. Where applied, these activities in turn resulted in improved student engagement and behaviors, as reported by teachers, principals and parents. In schools using the referral logs, principals reported a reduction in incidence of violence and bullying and a general reduction in referrals to the counselor. These LE improvements resulting from the capacity-building training workshops at the school level also enabled schools to expand their

focus beyond academics to include reward systems that recognized other positive behaviors, in addition to academic achievement.

Engaging Community and Government: Despite the absence of capacity building for parents and community members, the majority (81 percent) of the schools reported that parents and community members had become involved in some way with LE initiatives (e.g., parents volunteering to take on gardening, giving lectures, painting, maintenance/repair work and organizing bake sales) at the request of the schools. Similarly, while the central MoE and the FDs were not engaged in LE improvements, most schools (90 percent) reported the involvement of other government entities such as the civil defense, public health centers and the municipality in LE improvements (e.g., through lectures at schools on healthy lifestyles, safety, avoiding drugs and violence, among others) at the schools' request. Hence, even though parent/community and the government's engagement cannot be attributed to LETS training activities, the fact that LE teams got them involved in some type of LE improvement activity attests to an important degree of project effectiveness at the school level.

When engagement on school projects occurred, particularly with parents, the LE results were amplified. Examples of parent engagement include delivery of extracurricular activities, support to school maintenance and support to lobbying efforts. Schools were also encouraged by some coaches to lobby the government. Examples range from asking the municipality to clean up in front of the school to requesting that the MoE increase rent to the landlord to encourage building additional classrooms. As the principal at the Suleiman Nabulsi Boys School noted: "Before this project the MoE did not accept that strangers come to work in our school. This project allowed us to engage the school community. Now we have permission to engage and this has made all the difference."

RBB Self-Assessment: In spite of the RBB-related issues noted earlier, etc., 52 percent of sampled schools rated the RBB (as a self-assessment tool of school LE environments) as "greatly useful" and 29 percent as "average useful." Principals and LE team leaders found the RBB assessment to be useful as a roadmap or guideline for LE improvement. The majority of school principals and teachers who conducted the RBB assessment indicated that the RBB clarified the relationships between activities and allowed them to see "where we are as a school and where we want to go." School LE assessment became organized, documented and a systematic practice. As the principal at Im Itham Mixed School observed: "We moved away from randomness, we became organized, systematic and also documenting school improvements. ... The RBB for me was the starting point. We thought we were in a good place with respect to the assessment, but the RBB showed us that while we were working on LE we didn't know how we were working. The RBB structured our activities."

Learning environment is more than infrastructure: According to FGDs and principal interviews, the guidance provided by the RBB — as well as the changes seen at the school level due to increased student engagement, positive behaviors and improved relationships between teachers, students and parents — increased awareness among school-level stakeholders that the concept of LE extends beyond improving the physical environment.

LETS Weaknesses and Gaps

RBB shortcomings: While the introduction of the RBB was helpful in providing a roadmap for LE improvements in schools, the tool presented some shortcomings that need to be addressed before it can be endorsed in final form as a best practice LE self-assessment in education programs. Some RBB shortcomings are:

- More detailed facilitator guide: The RBB tool does not provide detailed and written guidelines on how to complete the tool, precise definitions of some of its concepts, detailed reference of standards such as MoE standards for healthy foods ...etc.
- Overlap between benchmark stages or levels: Schools sometimes reported difficulties in understanding or firmly assessing the level at which they could place themselves due to overlap in some benchmark levels or difficulty interpreting indicators objectively across schools.

- Schools noted that some RBB criteria would be difficult to meet without increased resources; one example is “School premises are well maintained and in good repair.”

For reference, the annex section of this evaluation report includes a detailed review of the RBB tool and provides comments, suggestions and recommendations on how to improve this self-assessment tool.

Teacher engagement constrained by time: Almost all teachers who engaged in the LE teams and LEI activities reported that LETS training demands on their time were high and scheduled outside of work hours. This finding was also reinforced by the principals and field directorates. Many teachers have household responsibilities or second jobs after school, so time constraints and trainings scheduled after school created inconvenience and a burden. Some schools reported having to schedule training within school hours, taking five to 10 minutes from each period and sending the children home early on a weekly basis for the semester of training. Time constraints negatively affected the number of teachers willing to attend LETS capacity-building activities.

Lack of motivation / incentives for teachers to engage with LETS: Teachers noted that participation in the project did not provide extra credit or recognition that would differentiate them from other teachers. Many principals reported that the training demands and absence of incentives (including recognition) posed some difficulty to the project’s launch at the school level.

Coach turnover: While the coaching interface was widely reported as beneficial, many schools reported a high level of coach turnover, with some schools averaging three to five coaches during the three semesters. While some coaches were replaced at the schools’ own request, the increase in the number of coaches (from 12 to 40) as a result of project rescoping may have also contributed to the high coach turnover rate, especially since recruitment was based on availability rather than coaching skills and capacity. The high turnover of the coaches negatively impacted project performance, as some schools were unable to establish rapport with the coach, and others found some coaches unqualified to train their teaching staff.²⁶ When the level of coach commitment and trust were reported to be high, school LE improvements were stronger. Conversely, when the level of coach commitment and trust were perceived as low, LE improvements were also low.

Procurement-in-kind support to LEI projects: Almost all schools reported that LETS project material support (stationery, furniture, equipment and school materials) arrived late, were of poor quality, were overpriced,²⁷ and did not correspond to their needs. Examples of materials received included paint, markers, paper, refrigerators, flat screen TVs, cleaning products and personal hygiene products (e.g., shampoo, toothpaste and toilet paper). Schools reported receiving markers that did not work and materials that were not of use. For example, the principal at the Ekrima School for Boys noted, “We got six or seven calculators for a school of 600 students. We got a household thermometer instead of a lab thermometer. We got half a container full of toilet paper. These materials were useless to us. Students need learning tools and resources, not toilet paper. I doubt very much that this came from USAID.” Most schools made use of the materials by offering them to students under the reward systems. Some schools reported that the materials arrived so late that they felt the coaches had made empty promises, which in turn affected their level of performance and commitment to the LETS project.

Lack of project support to physical environment improvements: Principals, teachers and parents noted that LETS support to LE improvement fell short on supporting physical environment improvements.²⁸ As a result, schools reported difficulty in addressing LE weaknesses and gaps in the healthy and safe domains. This was particularly

²⁶ Some LE teams noted that some coaches were not qualified since they had never been in a classroom before LETS.

²⁷ For the second and third batch of procurement, the schools received a list of items to choose from. This list quoted the estimated price of each item.

²⁸ According to the original scope of work, LETS was slated to work in the same schools as another USAID infrastructure improvement project. Unfortunately, the school infrastructure project was delayed and is only beginning in this period.

pronounced in schools where the physical environment posed health and safety threats, such as slippery and poorly spaced stairs leading up to the school's main entrance, lack of fencing around the school premises, low bathroom-to-student ratios, poor bathroom facilities and, in one case, the entire school premises being slated for demolition but still being used daily. The principal at Mariam Bint Omran School observed: "We were not able to address the safety domain — we have very unsafe stairs leading up the school. In the winter they are very slippery and unsafe. The kids can fall and hurt themselves. The project did not address the physical environment."

Unclear role of the MoE: Based on LETS project documents and feedback of the MoE and field directorates, LETS did not delineate a clear role for the MoE in the school learning environment, especially regarding its sustainability. What is expected from the MoE beyond coordinating the implementation of LETS project in Jordanian schools? What is the ministry's projected role in sustaining the learning environment at later stages, after the project's conclusion? These questions were not addressed in the LETS project design. This omission was mostly perceived at the field directorate level, where one department head of counseling noted that "their role was to ... sign permissions" for the project interventions in target schools under their jurisdiction. Though the MoE FDs were invited to and participated in some of the school events or other project-level regional meetings, the ministry's FDs were not involved in the project beyond this capacity. The ill-defined role of MoE in the school learning environment has created a challenge in designing the ministry capacity-building plan and affected potential LETS sustainability. An FD supervisor in Salt noted: "The objectives of the project were not clear, at all levels. They should have started with an introduction to the project and explained the implementation and roles and responsibilities of the FD. That way we would have been able to support it better."

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the findings presented above, LETS has differentiated itself from other programs with the coaching and school-level approach; according to key stakeholders, this made the difference in LEI improvement results. The coaching interface was effective and widely valued and enabled LE teams to apply their training to achieve LE gains. This was most notably seen in schools with a high level of commitment and trust with the coaches. Moreover, the level of engagement with the community and government also influenced the level of LE improvement and activities reported by schools. The RBB self-assessment tool was effective as both a self-assessment tool and LE guide. The vast majority of schools found the RBB valuable as a guide for LE improvement. The self-assessment exercise also enabled LE teams to see the larger picture for LE improvement and better structure LEI activities. Finally, the schools' experience in LE improvement raised awareness at all levels that LE is about more than physical environment improvement.

While LETS achieved LEI results, the project experienced a multitude of challenges that negatively impacted its performance, stakeholder satisfaction and consequent results. The teacher training demands were an impediment for high levels of engagement/commitment. Moreover, teachers participating in the project were not rewarded differently from nonparticipants. This impacted the level of commitment in schools, particularly among teachers who were the primary leads for LE team composition and LEI activities. The RBB and associated tools were introduced late in the project, posing some difficulty in generating a high level of understanding of the RBB and its associated elements or embedding it in school LEI culture. Furthermore, the RBB posed some difficulties in enabling school LE teams to accurately self-assess their standing within the five levels due to overlap between levels within benchmarks.

The LETS project's provision of school materials generated disappointment and produced negative perceptions of the project by stakeholders, and in some cases diminished their commitment. Additionally, lack of project support to physical environment improvements at times posed challenges that no other LE improvement efforts would be able to rectify or improve.

Finally, the project was not clearly defined to the stakeholders, especially at the FD and central MoE levels; the roles and responsibilities of the Field Directorate and central MoE with respect to learning environment improvement and sustainability also were not clearly identified.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Though LETS challenges are numerous, they can be addressed with improved project design and better planning and management. Based on the identified strengths and weaknesses it is recommended that USAID’s future LE improvement initiatives:

1. Continue the school-based approach and coaching interface to support LE improvement in schools while ensuring that coaches meet qualification standards.
2. Review the RBB tool for shortcomings, specifically pertaining to providing detailed guidelines, adjusting overlap and improving definition of standards.
3. Improve quality and appropriateness of project material support to school LEI initiatives, or extend financial support rather than in-kind. The financial assistance approach proved effective in UNICEF’s education project and the CIDA School and Directorate Development Program (SDDP).
4. Improve teacher/participant recognition: Explore ways with the MoE to link training to incentives for participants so they add career value and differentiate themselves through participation in the project.
5. Associate the LEIIP-USAID infrastructure project with the LETS project to target the same schools, particularly those where the physical facility challenges are so great that no other LE improvement efforts would be able to rectify or improve the school learning environment.
6. Define the expected roles of the MoE and FD within the project design: Explore with the MoE the future expected role of the ministry — central and field directorates — in integrating, supporting and supervising the LE in schools. Other countries’ best practices can be reviewed for adaptation in Jordan.

V. STAKEHOLDER BUY-IN: *How do project stakeholders view the value of LEI practices, including the RBB, in Jordanian schools, and how has this affected their participation in LE activities?*

The RBB posed a point of contention between the LETS prime contractor (Creative Associates) and its subcontractor (ASK), particularly regarding its ease of applicability and suitability for Jordanian public schools. ASK found the tool confusing and in need of adaptation to the Jordanian context. Creative Associates had drawn the tool from international best practices and found it suitable to any school context. Due to this difference of opinion, questions arose around the suitability of the RBB as a learning environment assessment tool for Jordan.

The evaluation assessment into the usefulness and applicability of the RBB tool solicited the viewpoints of the main stakeholders (i.e., schools, MoE central and field directorates). Table 6 presents the evaluation findings as collected at the school level.

TABLE 6: PERCEIVED USEFULNESS OF THE RBB TOOL

	Perception			Total
	Very Useful	Average Usefulness	Limited Usefulness	
# of schools (out of 31)	16	9	6	31
% of sample	52	29	19	100

As noted in the table, a majority (81 percent) found that the RBB tool was useful as an assessment tool of school learning environment state and progress. When principals and LE team leaders found the RBB to be useful, they

confirmed that it provided them with a roadmap or guidelines for LE improvement. The principal at Abu Hwaidy Mixed School said, “If you have a team and work regularly you can achieve a lot. The weaknesses are identified within the RBB — it lays a pathway for improvement — you see how to improve.” The principal at Im Itham Girls School added, “The RBB showed weaknesses and we made a plan accordingly. For example, we saw that we have areas to work on where it is just words on paper — we need to see the activities behind it. For example, the student council exists on paper — but the RBB asks for the student council to be active. So we started working on activities.” These schools confirmed that the RBB tool is practical and applicable in the Jordanian schools. The concepts contained therein did not seem foreign to sampled schools, and a few principals thought the RBB was developed in Jordan by Jordanians. A teacher at Abu Hwaidy School noted, “All school learning environments are one, whether they are in the U.S. or in Jordan. The RBB is suitable to the Jordanian context if resources can be applied to RBB-related school improvement projects.”

In schools where the RBB was perceived as having limited usefulness, objections mainly stemmed from difficulty in achieving competence levels, limitations and challenges of the school physical environment and, most importantly, limited interest and engagement from the community and parents. The principal at the Phosphate Secondary boys’ school said, “We call for a parents’ meeting and only 18 individuals show up.” These schools noted the difficulty in completing the assessment due to overlap of some RBB stages.

Based on the school principals’ feedback during the project regional meetings,²⁹ the MoE accepted the RBB and this form of structured LE assessment. Meetings with MoE field directorates confirmed the ministry’s buy-in and that MoE is in the process of considering integration of the RBB tool with the SDDP school improvement checklist.

VALUE OF LETS-INTRODUCED LEI PRACTICES: the evaluation confirmed that there is overall consensus of stakeholders that improved school learning environments contribute positively to students’ academic achievements. Most principals and le teams have a solid understanding of the learning environment and its relevance to improved student performance, both academic and behavioral. Most principals, teachers and parents agreed that the learning environment extends beyond the physical facilities of the school, and includes relationships between students and teachers, academic and non-academic issues, engagement of the community and the health and safety of the student. Almost all stakeholders were aware of the four domains (Safe, Healthy, Caring, and Engaging) pertaining to LE and the LETS project. While most of the elements were not new to the schools, the convergence of the four domains as one concept, according to many principals, gave a new and more comprehensive perspective to LE.

A new awareness of LE was also generated at the Field Directorate and MoE level. Central MoE interviews revealed that LE was initially seen as an infrastructure or physical facility concept from the central MOE down to the schools, and referenced as such in the current ERfKE strategy. According to key informant interviews, the LE concept has taken hold and there is a more comprehensive understanding of LE that is inclusive of the four domains and elaborated by the RBB benchmarks. The DCU coordinator at MoE observed, “There is no specific definition in the MoE of LE. That’s why it is not reflected in ERfKE. Most references are to physical environment. LETS raised the importance of issues such as behavior and stakeholder involvement, and the need for a supportive environment that will make the mission of the school better. In 2008 we focused on physical environment within the strategy. I would now include the learning environment as well.”

²⁹ Professional Sharing and Reflection Sessions (PSRS)

CONCLUSIONS

The LETS project has generated a good level of stakeholder buy-in for LEI practices in Jordanian schools and with the Ministry of Education. The Results Based Benchmarking tool was deemed useful and appropriate to the Jordanian context, though it needs to be reviewed and adjusted.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the evaluation findings and conclusions in terms of LETS project “stakeholder value of LEI practices and RBB,” it is recommended that:

1. USAID should continue its investment in supporting improvements in the school learning environment while taking into account the lessons learned through the LETS project.
2. USAID/Jordan should lobby the ministry to integrate learning environment improvements into the ministry strategic plans, and not limit the LE integration to just the RBB assessment tool.

VI. SUSTAINABILITY: *Which LEI elements, processes or components that have been instituted in schools by the LETS project will likely be sustained?*

LEI elements and processes introduced at the school level included introduction and institution in target schools of LE teams, learning environment self-assessment tools, LE improvement plans and projects. Stakeholder engagement was also encouraged. These interventions were intended to build capacity for the school to sustain LEI efforts.

LETS project documents state that the period afforded the LEI pilot under RBB was “much too short to offer sustained cultural changes.” LETS project staff also speculated that a few more semesters would have allowed a systemic approach to take seed. As noted in the LETS Final Report of April 2014: “In that sense, it is fair to say that project schools as a whole still have a long way to go before they fully internalize a culture of objective professional assessment; a development that is key to further growth and development in support of spreading the value of positive, child-centered learning environments.” At the school level, LETS noted that signs of sustainable action were more often seen in schools with more engaged teachers and principals.

The evaluation solicited responses of school principals, LE teams and teachers on whether LETS-instituted LEI systems and structures will be sustained, and which LEI elements were most likely to be sustained after the project’s closure. Table 7 shows school responses:

TABLE 7: PERCEIVED SUSTAINABILITY OF LEI ELEMENTS

	Perception of Sustainability by LEI Element			
	LE Teams	RBB	LEI Plans	School Projects
# of schools (out of 31)	24	12	12	28
% of sample	74	39	39	90

Most sustainable LEI elements: The LEI elements that received the highest-rated likelihood of sustainability at the school level were LE teams and LE improvement projects and initiatives. Almost three-quarters (74 percent) of sampled schools reported that LE teams would be sustained, while almost all (90 percent) reported LE activities would be sustained after project closeout. Focus group discussions with teachers and interviews with principals revealed that LE team and LEI initiative sustainability is highest because these elements were instituted at the onset of the project, had more time to generate results and became embedded in the school system. Sustainability of the LE teams would be compromised if the principal and members of the LE team transferred to other schools. This

challenge would be overcome when LE teams become part of the school systems when and if LEI is instituted at the ministry level as a requirement for all schools. A small number of principals noted that LEI projects would not be sustained after LETS closeout because it requires budget support that is not available at the school.

Least sustainable LEI elements: The RBB tool and LEI-based plans are least likely to be sustained, according to feedback of principals, LE teams and teachers. Only 39 percent of sampled schools confirmed that the RBB and LEI plans would be maintained after project closeout. This relatively low figure is not surprising in light of the following:

- According to the evaluation findings, only 52 percent of sampled schools have fully integrated the LE teams and RBB assessment system into their plans to identify and improve school LE.
- Though a majority of schools found the RBB useful as a roadmap, the RBB and LEI-related plans had the least amount of time to be practiced and instituted within the school system for long-term sustainability to be instituted at the school level.

The principal at Miriam Bint Omran School summarized: “The RBB was not explained how often it should be used. Are we supposed to use it again? You mean we need to do it again? We are working on these issues continuously. But we didn’t know we need to do it again. Should we fill out our next assessment underneath the first one on the same paper? We did not receive another copy.”

Finally, the evaluation results indicate that when the school has implemented and or is implementing other donor-funded education initiatives, the likelihood of LETS LEI element sustainability is higher. This is specifically true in the Canadian SDDP project, where many schools noted a high degree of overlap of activities between SDDP and LETS, and where learning environment improvement plans have been integrated in the overall school improvement plan, which is an SDDP-supported activity.

It is important to note that the LETS Final Report of April 2014 highlighted that the MoE “has been very keen in ensuring that LETS benchmarks find their way into the National SDDP Reform program where they will continue to offer an ever-larger contingent of Jordanian public schools the means to further their LE progress integrating international best practices.” The MoE’s decision to integrate the Result Based Benchmark tool into the SDDP school improvement checklist was reported from multiple sources, most specifically by the FDs.

CONCLUSIONS

The LE teams and activities are likely to be sustained without further project support. This is mostly due to the LE teams and LEI initiatives being instituted in schools at the onset, being practiced for three semesters and not requiring a high investment to be maintained or implemented.

Although the RBB was found to be useful in most schools and the RBB training generated a good level of buy-in, the evaluation findings validate the project implementers’ claim that the RBB and associated tools need additional support to be sustained. This includes having a longer timeframe of intervention to ensure the RBB is embedded in school culture, improving training and explanations of the tools’ interrelation and functions and training the entire LET team, not just the principal, on the RBB to insure that skills will not be lost if staff and principal change schools.

Finally, the sustainability of LETS-instituted elements improves when other donor-funded projects (such as the Canadian-supported SDDP) have been implemented in the same school. This was most apparent with linkages of LEI plans to SDDP school improvement plans.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the evaluation findings and conclusions regarding the sustainability of LEI elements, processes or components, it is recommended that future USAID LE improvement initiatives:

1. Ensure sufficient time for an RBB rollout;
2. Strengthen the quality of training to ensure that schools are able to effectively conduct the self-assessment and LEI processes independently;
3. Monitor the LE team's knowledge and application of RBB in schools;
4. Ensure a wider audience for RBB training to mitigate principal and teacher turnover affecting sustainability;
5. Link LE improvement initiatives to other education interventions for increased sustainability. National initiatives such as SDDP, Safe Schools, Healthy Schools, Madrasati and the Queen Rania Award for Excellence in Education offer opportunities for linkages and partnerships for increased sustainability.