Girls' Empowerment through Education and Health (ASPIRE) Activity

Final Report

Volume 1: Main Report

December 17, 2014 – December 16, 2018

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Acronyms

3KHP	Three Key Hygiene Practices
AGYW	Adolescent Girls and Young Women
ART	Antiretroviral Therapy
ASPIRE	Girls' Empowerment through Education and Health Activity
ASRH	Adolescent Sexual and Reproductive Health
BLM	Banja la Mtsogolo
CDA	Community Development Assistant
CHANCO	Chancellor College, University of Malawi
CPD	Continuous Professional Development
CPW	Child Protection Worker
CRECCOM	Creative Center for Community Mobilization
DCE	Domasi College of Education
DEM	District Education Manager
DEN	District Education Network
DHO	District Health Offices
DIAS	Department of Inspection and Advisory Services
DTED	Department for Teacher Education and Development
EDM	Education Division Manager
EGR	Early Grade Reading
ELP	English Language Proficiency
FAWEMA	Forum for African Women Educationalists – Malawi Chapter
FRM	Female Role Model
GBV	Gender-based Violence
GEN	Girls' Education Network
GOM	Government of Malawi
GVH	Group Village Headman
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Syndrome
HSA	Health Surveillance Assistant
HT	Head Teacher
HTC	HIV Testing and Counseling
HTS	HIV Testing Services
IGAs	Income Generating Activities
KAP	Knowledge, Attitudes, Practices
LSE	Life Skills Education
MANEB	Malawi National Examination Board
MC	Male Champion
MG	Mothers' Groups
MHM	Menstrual Hygiene Management
MIE	Malawi Institute of Education
MoEST	Ministry of Education, Science and Technology
MOH	Ministry of Health
NLS	National Library Service
NRP	National Reading Program
OVC	Orphans and Vulnerable Children
PEA	Primary Education Advisor
PO	ASPIRE Project Officers

PSI	Population Services International
PSLCE	Primary School Leaving Certificate Examination
PTA	Parent Teacher Association
SC	Save the Children
SEED	South East Education Division
SEGREM	Strengthening Early Grade Reading in Malawi
SEMA	Secondary Education Methods Advisor
SHD	School Health Days
SMC	School Management Committee
SRH	Sexual and Reproductive Health
TA	Traditional Authority
TDC	Teacher Development Center
TFD	Theatre for Development
TTC	Teacher Training College
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
VSL	Village Savings and Loan
VSU	Victim Support Unit
WASH	Water, Sanitation and Hygiene
YFHS	Youth Friendly Health Services
YLM	Youth Literacy Movement

Executive Summary

USAID/Malawi launched the Girls' Empowerment through Education and Health (ASPIRE) Activity in December 2014, beginning a bold cross-sector investment to improve the achievement of girls in upper primary and secondary school in Malawi. USAID's investment in ASPIRE recognized that for girls' to achieve academic success, they must enter and stay in school, be learning and safe while in school, and be healthy and supported by their community at all times.

ASPIRE targeted all primary and secondary schools in Malawi's Balaka, Machinga, and Zomba districts. This included 537 primary and 80 secondary schools. In 2018, ASPIRE reached 361,870 primary learners (185,929 girls) and 38,242 secondary learners (17,674 girls) in these schools. The 617 schools and their catchment communities were the focus for interventions to meet the three ASPIRE objectives:

- Output 1: Reading skills for girls in upper primary school improved
- Output 2: Adoption of positive sexual and healthcare-seeking behaviors among youth ages 10–19 increased
- Output 3: Key structural and cultural barriers for girls ages 10–19 decreased

Led by Save the Children (SC), the ASPIRE implementing team included three accomplished Malawian implementing partners, Creative Center for Community Mobilization (CRECCOM), Forum for African Women Educationalists – Malawi Chapter (FAWEMA), and the Malawi Institute of Education (MIE). ASPIRE implementation relied on the engagement of key government and community partners from across the education, health, and social welfare sectors.

From its inception, ASPIRE promoted integrated girl-focused programming by bringing together three separate funding streams from three different technical teams within the USAID/Malawi mission, with complementary objectives to support girls' learning, retention and safety in school, and self-efficacy to make healthy choices to avoid pregnancy and the risks of HIV infection. **ASPIRE's integrated approach brought 1,844 girls back into school after having dropped out—an important achievement of the Activity.**

The story of ASPIRE, and its impact on the lives of girls and boys, demonstrates the opportunities of bringing education, health, and water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) stakeholders together. Figure 1 below summarizes key results of ASPIRE's work by funding stream.

Basic Education funding supported achievement of Output 1. This featured the introduction of evidence-based teaching and coaching strategies for upper grade literacy in standards 4-8 (later focusing on just 5-8), complementing USAID's investment in the National Reading Program (NRP) to improve reading in standards 1-4. ASPIRE trained 4,978 upper primary teachers in advanced literacy skills instruction. To support those teachers in their instruction, ASPIRE also trained a cadre of coaches, focusing especially on head teachers and key teachers within a school.

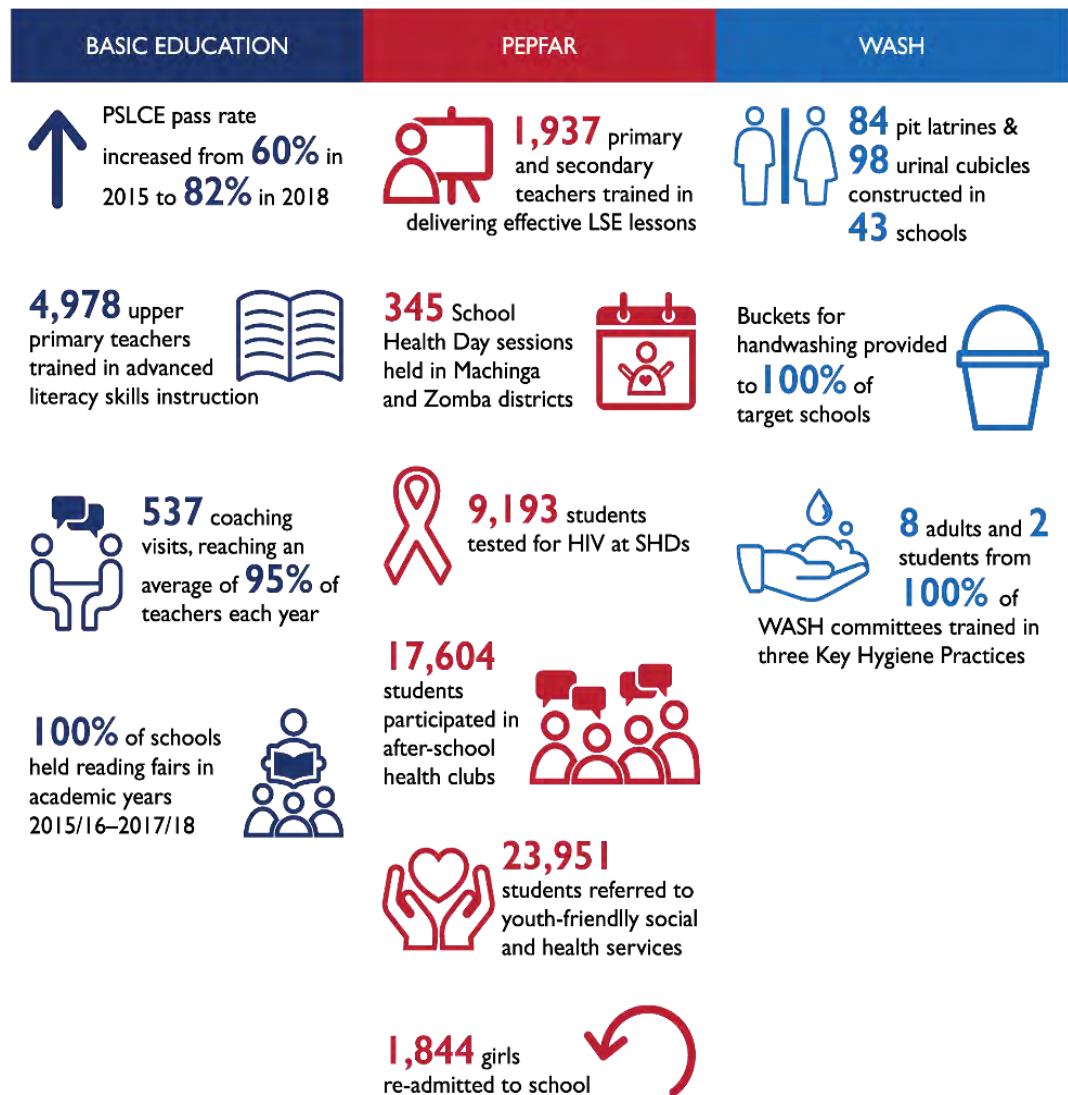| BASIC EDUCATION	PEPFAR	WASH
PSLCE pass rate increased from **60%** in 2015 to **82%** in 2018	**1,937** primary and secondary teachers trained in delivering effective LSE lessons	**84** pit latrines & **98** urinal cubicles constructed in **43** schools
4,978 upper primary teachers trained in advanced literacy skills instruction	**345** School Health Day sessions held in Machinga and Zomba districts	Buckets for handwashing provided to **100%** of target schools
537 coaching visits, reaching an average of **95%** of teachers each year	**9,193** students tested for HIV at SHDs	**8** adults and **2** students from **100%** of WASH committees trained in three Key Hygiene Practices
100% of schools held reading fairs in academic years 2015/16–2017/18	**17,604** students participated in after-school health clubs	
	23,951 students referred to youth-friendlly social and health services	
	1,844 girls re-admitted to school	

Figure 1. ASPIRE Key Results by Funding Stream

Coaching visits encouraged teachers to reflect on their instructional practices, and offered support to improve their skills through modelling and co-teaching. ASPIRE made 537 coaching visits to schools, reaching an average of 95% of targeted teachers each year. In addition to supporting improved literacy instruction, ASPIRE also worked with communities to foster a habit of reading and promote a strong reading culture. Reading clubs, reading competitions, and reading fairs were activities that ASPIRE supported to give learners greater opportunities to practice reading skills, and encourage and acknowledge their reading achievements. Working with community stakeholders, 100% of schools held reading fairs in academic years 2015/16-2017/18.

Overall, findings from the ASPIRE 2017 external performance evaluation[1], and ASPIRE's annual reading assessments, found that students in the target regions are successfully learning the mechanics of reading by the time they are in the upper grades, but still struggling with the critical skill of comprehension in both English and Chichewa. From the larger lens of academic achievement, however, ASPIRE did see an increase across the districts in the primary school leaving certificate examination (PSCLE) pass rate from 60% in 2015, to 82% in 2018.

PEPFAR funding supported achievement of both Outputs 2 and 3. This work included classroom, school, and community-based interventions to increase girls' life skills knowledge and self-efficacy, with the particular goal of empowering girls and boys to avoid and mitigate risks related to sexual behaviors that affect retention. ASPIRE reached 54,828 learners aged 10 and over with Life Skills Education (LSE) lessons. ASPIRE improved teachers' capacity and comfort in life skills instruction and schools' support for HIV+ students—1,937 primary and secondary teachers received training in delivering effective LSE lessons. ASPIRE significantly invested in Mothers Groups (MG) and female roles models (FRM), in order to increase girls' access to correct information, mentoring, and support to return and stay in school. Most of the orphans and vulnerable children (OVC) in ASPIRE's target schools received support from MGs that included school fees, uniforms, scholastic materials and counselling. In ASPIRE's final year, for example, over 16,000 OVC received these types of education and health services. Among other outcomes, this work contributed to the annulment of 189 early marriages (42 in FY2018).

ASPIRE worked with school, community and district-level stakeholders to make learning environments more girl-friendly, while actively promoting awareness, reflection, dialogue and action to address the deep-rooted cultural beliefs, norms and practices that create barriers to girls' participation and performance in school. ASPIRE reached over 140,000 community members and students during community sensitization meetings.

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[1] Falconer-Stout, Z., K. Simmons, P. Godbole, S. Topolansky, R. Frischkorn, and L. Franco. 2018. *The Malawi Girls' Empowerment through Education and Health Activity (ASPIRE): 2017 Performance Evaluation Report.* Prepared for the United States Agency for International Development. Rockville, MD: EnCompass LLC.

In 2016, the addition of **PEPFAR DREAMS** funding deepened efforts to reduce new HIV infections in adolescent girls and young women (AGYW), promoted positive sexual health behaviors, and increased girls' access to sexual and reproductive health services. DREAMS funded work in Machinga and Zomba districts only. ASPIRE launched after school health clubs, in which 17,604 students participated. With DREAMS funding, ASPIRE awarded block grants to all secondary schools and prioritized primary schools, through which 2,350 secondary learners received bursaries (61% went to girls). DREAMS also supported school health days (SHDs) to bring youth-friend health services (YFHS) closer to students. ASPIRE held 345 SHDs across the three districts, reaching over 290,000 learners. During these events, 9,193 students were tested for HIV. ASPIRE also developed a school-based YFHS referral program, resulting in 23,951 students referred to health services.

Overall, 188,546 girls received the DREAMS primary school package of services (school-based HIV/violence prevention, SHDs/referral services, MG/female mentor support, and condom promotion for those over 15 years old). The DREAMS secondary school package of services reached 34,237 girls with post violence care, menstrual hygiene management (MHM)/ WASH social asset building (after school clubs), and school support (bursary/block grant).

WASH funding also supported achievement of Output 3, by funding interventions to increase students' access to adequate water, sanitation and hygiene (including MHM commodities). Across all three districts, ASPIRE trained school WASH committees and provided training to promote handwashing; proper water storage, handling and treatment; and sanitation facility management. Eight adults and two students from 100% of WASH committees were trained. ASPIRE provided buckets for handwashing to 100% of target schools across all three districts. In selected primary schools of greatest need in each of the three districts, WASH funding supported the construction of girls' latrine blocks. ASPIRE constructed 84 pit latrines and 98 urinal cubicles in 43 schools, resulting in 38,301 girls with access to improved sanitation facilities as a result of USG assistance.

ASPIRE was positively defined by its cross-sectoral, girl-focused approach to programming. Integrated projects like ASPIRE have the potential to significantly impact beneficiaries, but require greater labor, management and communication efforts from both USAID and implementers. The experience of ASPIRE showed that cross-sector (and cross-team) collaboration is facilitated by combining funding streams. However, separate funding timelines per stream are important parameters that can affect planning and spending, and need to be clearly understood (i.e. ASPIRE accelerated DREAMS spending, and lowered OVC spending, which then later affected OVC allocations). To improve coordination and communication on cross-sectoral activities in the future, USAID should consider limiting the number of staff who communicate and make requests to the implementer, and channeling all communications through point person(s). Also, organizing internal (USAID) coordinating meetings may help prevent the sending of mixed messages to the implementer.

The Malawi government and USAID both clearly recognize that evidence-based, contextually designed school

health and WASH programs can contribute to education sector goals. However, ASPIRE's experience found the education and health sectors approach school-level work with very different operating expectations and assumptions. For example, expectations around club leadership and participation is different when the clubs are school-based than when community-based. In addition, there are different priorities and vocabulary in health and education, which sometimes invite miscommunication. If USAID continues to pursue cross-sector programming like ASPIRE, which is encouraged, USAID should consider advocating with the Government of Malawi (GOM) for harmonized policies that support adolescents' welfare regardless of sector.

Finally, SHDs and the school-based referral system for youth-friendly service providers showed that the school is an effective entry point for health service providers to reach adolescents, thereby supporting increased access to health services. ASPIRE identified partners with required skills to provide services. This helped to bring services closer to the schools thereby promoting access to health and social services. This was especially important for students in underserved areas such as the Lake Chilwa Islands. Continued donor funding to this type of programming is encouraged.

Introduction

Background

USAID/Malawi launched the ASPIRE Activity in December 2014, beginning a bold cross-sector investment to improve the achievement of girls in upper primary and secondary school in Malawi. USAID's investment in ASPIRE recognized that for girls' to achieve academic success, they must enter and stay in school, be learning and safe while in school, and be healthy and supported by their community at all times. Compared to boys, a higher proportion of girls in Malawi repeat grades or drop out of school, often leaving the education system without having attained basic literacy, numeracy and essential life skills. Access rates, particularly at early primary levels are high and equitably balanced. The far greater challenge lies in keeping adolescent girls in school and ensuring they are learning. The challenge of retention is deep-seated with complex and socially driven factors.

Poverty, early pregnancy and marriage significantly contribute to girls' dropout. By the time a girl reaches adolescence, there are pressures to stay home and care for family members or to marry and start her own family. Girls' development, therefore, cannot be considered outside their social web of relationships, norms and systems.

Theory of Change

ASPIRE's theory of change states that (1) if evidence-based approaches to develop girls' foundational literacy skills and a gender-sensitive learning environment – inclusive of adequate water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) – lead to improved learning outcomes; and (2) if collective community dialogue and action positively change attitudes and behaviors directly affecting the causes of girls' dropout to increase retention; and (3) if girls are empowered with the knowledge, motivation and skills to be effective agents in their personal development; then girls in upper primary and secondary school will demonstrate improved academic achievement (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. ASPIRE Theory of Change
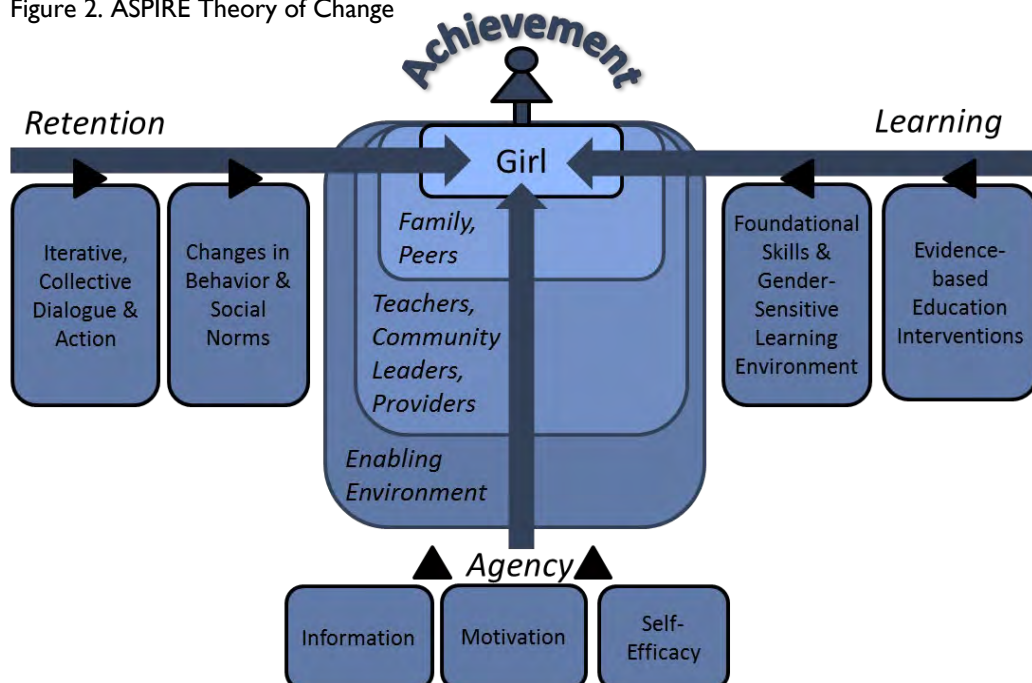
Beneficiaries and Objectives

Beginning in December 2014, and for the first two years of the activity, ASPIRE targeted all primary and secondary schools in Malawi's Balaka and Machinga districts. This included 319 primary schools and 37 secondary schools across these two districts. In 2016, with the introduction of PEPFAR DREAMS funding, ASPIRE extended into all schools in Zomba district, raising the total number of target schools to 617, including 537 primary and 80 secondary schools (see Figure 3). In 2018, ASPIRE reached 361,870 primary learners (185,929 girls) and 38,242 secondary learners (17,674 girls) in these schools. The 617 schools and their catchment communities were the focus for interventions to meet the three ASPIRE objectives:

Output 1: Reading skills for girls in upper primary school improved

- 1.1: Reading systems for students, particularly for girls, in standards 4-8 improved
- 1.2: Greater engagement, accountability and transparency by communities, private sector, and public to support reading
- 1.3: Reading instruction in standards 4-8, with emphasis on increased access to gender sensitive teaching and learning materials, especially for girls, improved
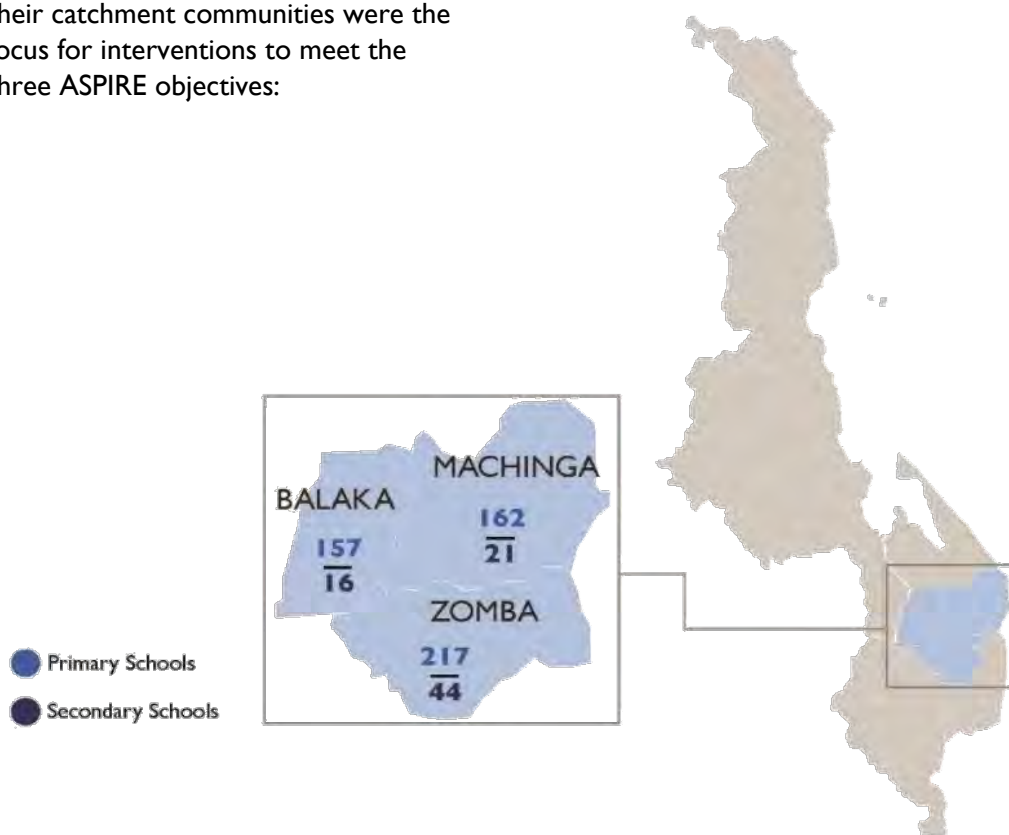
Figure 3. ASPIRE Target Districts and Schools

Output 2: Adoption of positive sexual and health-care seeking behaviors among youth ages 10-19 increased

- 2.1: Capacity of teachers and district trainers to provide comprehensive sexual and reproductive health education to youth 10-19 increased
- 2.2: Risk mitigation and pregnancy prevention behaviors adopted
- 2.3 Provision for HIV+ students delivered
- 2.4 [DREAMS funding]: Core HIV and violence prevention package for adolescent girls provided to increase their knowledge, self-efficacy, and risk reduction

Output 3: Key structural and cultural barriers for girls ages 10-19 decreased

- 3.1: Engagement and accountability by communities to support improved educational outcomes for girls and boys increased
- 3.2: Capacity of community groups to support and advocate for girls' empowerment to stay in an complete school increased
- 3.3: Utilization of successful and sustainable performance-based financing mechanisms to support complete secondary school increased
- 3.4: Access to adequate WASH (including menstrual hygiene management commodities) improved
- 3.5: School based strategies, guidelines, and policies to safeguard the girl child adopted or operationalized
- 3.6 [DREAMS funding]: Provide safe school environments

Technical and Management Approach

From its inception, ASPIRE promoted integrated girl-focused programming by bringing together **three separate funding streams from three different technical teams within the USAID/Malawi mission**, with complementary objectives to support girls' learning, retention and safety in school, and self-efficacy to make healthy choices to avoid pregnancy and the risks of HIV infection.

Basic Education funding supported achievement of Output 1. This featured the introduction of evidence-based teaching and coaching strategies for upper grade literacy in standards 4-8 (later focusing on just 5-8), complementing USAID's investment in the National Reading Program (NRP) to improve reading in standards 1-4. With USAID's flagship early grade reading activity, MERIT, building students' foundational skills in phonemic awareness, phonics, decoding, fluency and comprehension, ASPIRE focused on strengthening teachers' capacities to teach specific reading skills for older learners, such as introducing new vocabulary and advanced comprehension, while promoting a gender-sensitive learning environment and greater community engagement and support for reading. ASPIRE's Basic Education interventions began in Balaka and Machinga in 2015, and in Zomba in 2016, and continued throughout the life of the Activity in all three districts.

PEPFAR funding supported achievement of both Outputs 2 and 3. This work included classroom, school, and community-based interventions to increase girls' life skills knowledge and self-efficacy, with the particular goal of empowering girls and boys to avoid and mitigate risks related to sexual

behaviors that affect retention. ASPIRE improved teachers' capacity and comfort in life skills instruction and schools' support for HIV+ students. ASPIRE significantly invested in MG and FRM, in order to increase girls' access to correct information, mentoring, and support to return and stay in school. ASPIRE worked with school, community and district-level stakeholders to make learning environments more girl-friendly, while actively promoting awareness, reflection, dialogue and action to address the deep-rooted cultural beliefs, norms and practices that create barriers to girls' participation and performance in school. ASPIRE's PEPFAR interventions began in Balaka and Machinga in 2015, and in Zomba in 2016. PEPFAR funded interventions closed in Balaka after fiscal year 2017, when PEPFAR removed Balaka from its focus districts.

In 2016, the addition of **PEPFAR DREAMS** funding brought important changes to the ASPIRE Activity, and added the guidance and support of a fourth USAID technical team. DREAMS funding allowed ASPIRE to extend all programming to Zomba district. DREAMS funding deepened efforts to reduce new HIV infections in adolescent girls, promote positive sexual health behaviors, and increase girls' access to

sexual and reproductive health services. With DREAMS funding, ASPIRE launched after school health clubs, awarded block grants to all secondary schools and prioritized primary schools, supported SHDs to bring YFHS closer to students, and developed a school-based YFHS referral program. DREAMS funded work in Machinga and Zomba districts only, continuing through to the end of the Activity.

Water Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) funding also supported achievement of Output 3, by funding interventions to increase students' access to adequate water, sanitation and hygiene (including MHM commodities). Across all three districts, ASPIRE trained school WASH committees and provided training to promote handwashing; proper water storage, handling and treatment; and sanitation facility management. ASPIRE particularly focused on helping schools support girls' MHM needs. In selected primary schools of greatest need in each of the three districts, WASH funding supported the construction of girls' latrine blocks. ASPIRE's WASH interventions began in Balaka and Machinga in 2015, and in Zomba in 2016, and continued throughout the life of the Activity in all three districts.
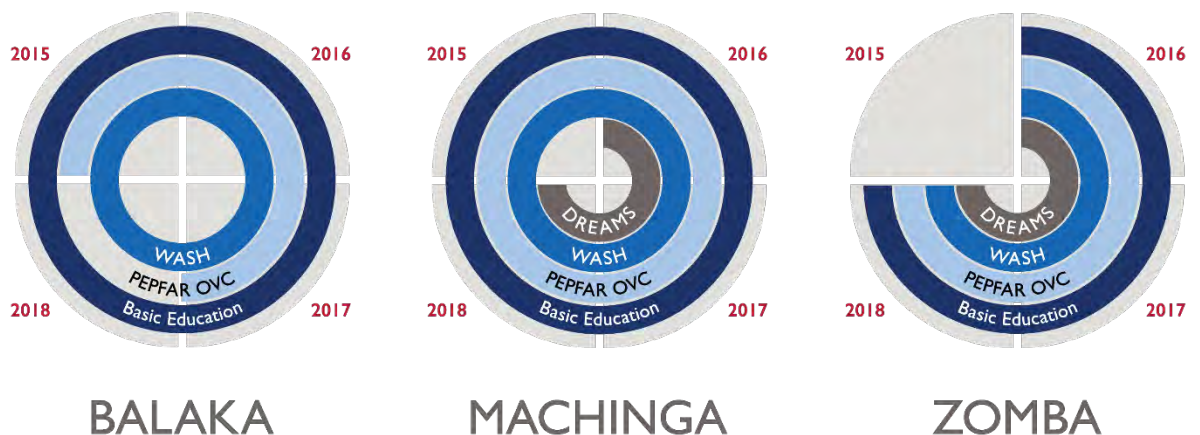

Figure 4. ASPIRE Funding Stream Timeline by District

ASPIRE's integrated approach brought 1,844 girls back into school after having dropped out—an important achievement of the Activity. The story of ASPIRE, and its impact on the lives of girls and boys, demonstrates the opportunities of bringing education, health, and WASH stakeholders together. In many ways, the success of ASPIRE is greater than the sum of its component sectoral parts. The imperative to support girls' education provided an opportunity for stakeholders across the community and district to work together.

1,844 girls
re-admitted to school

Led by Save the Children (SC), the ASPIRE implementing team included three accomplished Malawian implementing partners, each of which brought significant experience and complementary technical expertise to the Activity. Implementing partners CRECCOM, FAWEMA, and MIE are national leaders in community mobilization, girls' achievement, and teacher training and curriculum development, respectively. With USAID's external evaluation partner and ASPIRE monitoring, evaluation and learning staff, qualitative and quantitative data was collected during the four years to assess performance and inform strategic planning. In a spirit of collaboration, key evidence-based strategies were combined with a commitment to adaptive management and iterative process of assessing root problems; designing solutions; implementing, monitoring, evaluating and adjusting those solutions in response.

ASPIRE implementation relied on the engagement of key government and community partners from across the education, health, and social welfare sectors. As a school-based activity, ASPIRE worked closely with education partners from the Ministry of Education Science and Technology (MOEST) that included the Education Division Manager (EDM) for the South East Division, the District Education Managers (DEM) in all three districts, as well as Primary Education Advisors (PEAs), head teachers, teachers, and students. These education partners helped to plan and implement ASPIRE's school-based activities in literacy, Life Skills, WASH, and the SHD activities.

The Ministry of Health's (MOH) District Health Offices (DHOs) provided Health Surveillance Assistants (HSA), who provided HIV testing and counseling services (HTC) and nutritional assessments at SHDs and also supported WASH trainings. MOH health facilities also served as important referral points in the DREAMS school-based referral system. Child Protection Workers (CPWs), from the Department of Social Welfare, conducted gender-based violence (GBV) screening to identify adolescents suffering abuse and to make necessary referrals. Members of the police participated in SHDs, raising awareness of GBV issues and encouraging students to report cases to local victim support units.

In school communities, Community Development Assistants (CDA) provided ongoing support to MGs in management of village savings and loans. MGs worked with FRMs and Male Champions to encourage and engage community support for girls' education. ASPIRE engaged traditional authorities,

"We have developed by-laws to show our commitment. We haven't done this alone, we have consulted the communities and now we are ensuring that everyone knows about them. The aim is to instill discipline and commitment towards girls' education in this community so that our future is better."- Community Leader, Chilipa Zone, Zomba District

initiation counselors, parents, and students themselves to identify and mitigate barriers to girls' education.

ASPIRE connected disparate groups within the community in support of girls education, and promoted an enabling environment for both girls' and boys' achievement.

Accomplishments Summary

Students Reached

- 361,870 primary learners (185,929 girls) in 2018
- 38,242 secondary learners (17,674 girls) in 2018
- 54,828 learners aged 10 and over reached with LSE lessons
- 2,350 secondary learners received bursaries through DREAMS block grants (61% went to girls)
- 27,454 students referred through school-based referral system
- 38,301 girls with access to improved sanitation facilities as a result of USG assistance

Learning Outcomes

Primary School Leaving Certificate Examination

- Pass rate increased from 60% in 2015 to 82% in 2018
- Girls' pass rate increased from 60% in 2015 to 77% in 2018

Girls' literacy gains on internal assessments

- Girls' performance increased by 4 percentage points from 2016 to 2017
- Girls' performance increased by 6 percentage points from 2017 to 2018

Girls Protected and Readmitted

- 1,844 girls re-admitted to school after dropping out
  - 1,621 primary
  - 223 secondary
- 189 marriages annulled
- ASPIRE worked with traditional leaders who have now developed by-laws to keep AGYW in school
- USAID-supported community-based MGs worked with authorities to annul child marriages

Training Reach

- 4,978 upper primary teachers trained in advanced literacy skills instruction

- 1,937 primary and secondary teachers trained in delivering effective LSE lessons
- 446 teachers participated in English language proficiency program
- 537 youth trained as YLM volunteers
- 5,645 school health club members trained in 3 Key Hygiene Practices (3KHP) in 2018

Materials Highlights

- Continuing Professional Development (CPD) Manual for Upper Grades Literacy Instruction
- Mentoring Guide for Upper Grades Literacy Instruction
- English Language Proficiency program Facilitator Guide and Participants Workbook
- Life skills materials incorporating school-based HIV education, violence prevention programming, and gender sensitive programming
- CPD Manuals for Primary and Secondary LSE instruction
  - School Club Guidelines
  - 33 Activity Cards

School and Community Outreach

- Over 5,000 community members attended drama performances on AGYW themes
- Over 140,000 community members and students reached during community sensitization meetings
- Over 290,000 learners reached at SHDs in 2018
- Over 17,000 students participated in after-school health clubs
- Over 1,200 MG members trained across the impact area

The following sections of this report analyze the accomplishments and results of ASPIRE's work by funding stream.

Activities and Results

Basic Education

Strong instruction in reading prepares students to become confident and independent readers, and sets them up for success across academic subjects as they progress in school. When children master key reading component skills, they are then able to read to learn, paving the way for academic success. USAID's continuing investments in early grade reading (EGR) support in Malawi has provided proven quality inputs to build children's foundational skills in phonemic awareness, phonics, decoding, fluency and comprehension.

After standard 3, students with basic reading skills need support to further deepen competencies in comprehension, advanced decoding and word recognition, vocabulary, and writing – in other words, reading to learn. To accomplish that, students require clear instruction on advanced reading skills, a variety of texts, and time to practice. Over four years, **ASPIRE and MOEST partners trained 4,978 teachers on explicit strategies to improve student's advanced reading skills** and provided ongoing **instructional coaching that reached 95% of teachers per year**. Recognizing that teachers' own limited English skills can challenge their ability to teach upper grade subjects in English, ASPIRE later piloted an English Language Proficiency program for teachers. ASPIRE increased the reading materials available at schools, and engaged communities and students in activities to promote a reading culture—in many cases building upon similar EGR efforts in the target districts and working to extend activities and events to include upper grade learners.

Overall, findings from the ASPIRE external performance evaluation, and ASPIRE's final year internal reading assessment, found that **students in the target regions are successfully learning the mechanics of reading by the time they are in the upper grades, but still struggling with the critical skill of comprehension in both English and Chichewa[2].** Data from the 2017 midterm evaluation showed that upper primary students (standards 5 and 6), on average, are reading both English and Chichewa fluently, with no difference between girls and boys. On average, upper primary students read 55 words correct per minute (wcpm) in English and 42 wcpm in Chichewa. This data, however, also showed low comprehension scores, with average reading comprehension scores of 26% for English and 58% in Chichewa. Additionally, boys outscored girls in reading comprehension in both languages (33% vs 21% for English reading comprehension and 64% vs. 54% for Chichewa). There is still work

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[2] ASPIRE's final year internal reading assessment found similar reading achievement levels to the midterm evaluation. In the final year reading assessment, children in Grade 5 read with an average fluency of 27 wcpm in English and 51 wcpm in Chichewa, while grade 5 average reading comprehensions scores were 20% for English and 70% for Chichewa. In Grade 6, children read with an average fluency of 53 wcpm in English and 63 wcpm in Chichewa, and average reading comprehension scores were 23% for English and 70% for Chichewa. There were no statistically significant differences between boys and girls in terms of reading fluency or comprehension in the final year internal assessment. Note that the internal assessment used a different tool than the midterm evaluation, so these results are not perfectly comparable with the midterm results.

to develop and deliver practical models to help translate fluent reading into reading comprehension. From the larger lens of academic achievement, ASPIRE did see an increase across the districts in the PSCLE pass rate from 60% in 2015, to 82% in 2018. **What is clear is that ASPIRE positively affected literacy instruction and community support for reading, and that combined with other cross-sectoral inputs, increased opportunities for girls to be in a healthy, safe school environment necessary for learning.**

Literacy Instruction for Advanced Literacy Skills

ASPIRE's collaborative effort with MIE and MOEST to improve upper grade literacy instruction began in 2015 with the development of a scope and sequence for both Chichewa and English subjects in Standards 4-8. While the development of a scope and sequence for language skills had been completed much earlier for Standards 1-3, as a foundation to USAID's EGR projects in Malawi, this step had not yet been completed for the upper primary grades when ASPIRE began. ASPIRE's literacy experts worked with MIE to develop a scope and sequence of language skills in the Malawi National Primary Curriculum instructional materials for standards 4-8.

The team looked at competencies in the two subjects' learner books to come up with the scope and sequence charts. Reviewing Chichewa and English subject competencies by standard, and by unit side by side, facilitated the process of identifying possible cross-linguistic connections and opportunities for bridging between and across languages. A dual (Chichewa and

English) scope and sequence chart was developed for each standard.

ASPIRE next researched a wide range of instructional approaches and teaching routines to develop a CPD program that would strengthen the instructional skills of primary Chichewa and English teachers. ASPIRE conducted a desk survey of tested instructional approaches, teaching routines, available CPD literacy manuals, training reports, upper primary curriculum materials from other countries. To complement the desk research, ASPIRE and MOEST partners visited schools and observed literacy classes in the target district in order to map the instructional approaches and teaching routines already in use. The mapping exercise was carried out by a team of 16 literacy specialists drawn from ASPIRE, MIE, teacher training colleges (TTCs), MOEST's Department of Inspection and Advisory Services (DIAS) and Department for Teacher Education and Development (DTED). The information gathered from this exercise, the desk study, and the scope and sequence provided the basis for the collaborative development of the CPD manual—an important milestone of ASPIRE's first year.

"Learners from our school are able to identify word meanings including comprehending passages and providing appropriate responses from the passage because teachers have been trained." -English language teacher, Njerenje Primary School in Utale zone, Balaka District

The manual was designed and drafted at a workshop conducted over two weekends in May and June, 2015. Fifteen literacy specialists from ASPIRE, MIE, DIAS and TTCs participated in the workshop. Importantly, participants ensured the manual reflected principles of gender-sensitive pedagogy. Refinement of all the draft chapters occurred later in June, and again involved a broad range of relevant stakeholders representing ASPIRE, MIE, DIAS, the Malawi National Examination Board (MANEB), Domasi College of Education (DCE), and University of Malawi Chancellor College (CHANCO). In addition, two practicing teachers

participated in this process. The practicing teachers provided valuable refinement recommendations based on their classroom perspective. The manual served as the basis for the skills-based CPD program (Figure 5).

The CPD program consisted of three cycles of five-day trainings, progressively covering content in the manual, followed by a one-time, two-day refresher training focusing on teacher's greatest areas of difficulty.

Two teachers per standard, per school received training. ASPIRE employed a cascade training model. The team of experts who developed the CPD manual trained a cadre of 92 teacher trainers. ASPIRE maintained a roster of these teacher trainers, which included TTC lecturers, PEAs, Secondary Education Methods Advisors (SEMAs), ASPIRE project officers, and MIE Curriculum Specialists. The roster was intentionally large to mitigate against the possibility that trainers might be engaged in other USAID or other donor education interventions.

Even so, scheduling trainings throughout the period of performance proved challenging because ASPIRE utilized many of the same trainers supporting the NRP. With the NRP a national priority, ASPIRE utilized any available gap in the school calendar for the training of teachers.

ASPIRE rolled out training first to teachers in standards 4-5, and then standards 6-8, with trainings in Zomba beginning later than in the original two districts (Table 1). At the end of FY 2017, the remaining Basic Education funds to be obligated to ASPIRE were reduced, which greatly affected ASPIRE's Year 4 training plans. ASPIRE did not complete any refresher training for standard 6-8 teachers, or for standard 4-5 teachers in Zomba. Instead, ASPIRE concentrated on strengthening the coaching and support available to teachers from head teachers, key teachers, and PEAs.
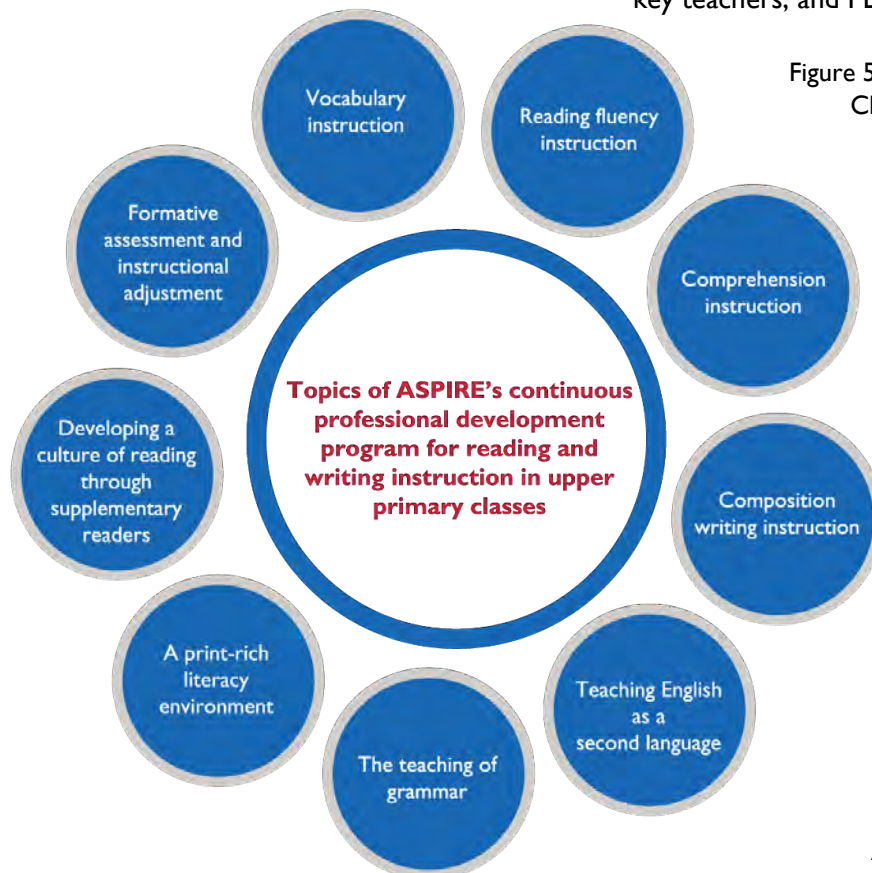

Figure 5. ASPIRE Literacy CPD Content

ASPIRE Final Report

Table 1: Timeline of ASPIRE Literacy CPD trainings

District	Standard (Grade)	Timeframes of the Trainings			
		Cycle 1	Cycle 2	Cycle 3	Refresher
Balaka	Standard 4-5	Aug 2015	Sep 2015	Apr 2016	Oct 2016
	Standard 6-8	Sep 2016	Dec 2016	Apr 2017	N/A
Machinga	Standard 4-5	Aug 2015	Sep 2015	Apr 2016	Oct 2016
	Standard 6-8	Sep 2016	Dec 2016	April 2017	N/A
Zomba	Standard 4-5	Sep2016	Dec 2016	May 2017	N/A
	Standard 6-8	Dec 2015	Dec2016	Aug2017	N/A

Over three years (2015-2017), ASPIRE's literacy CPD program reached 4,978 teachers across the three districts (3,446 males and 1,532 females). This total included 1,264 teachers in Balaka (927 male 337 female); 1,277 teachers in Machinga (1,005 male 272 female); and 2,437 teachers in Zomba (1,514 male 923 female). Throughout the training period, teachers were active and willing to learn, evidenced by mature demonstration of strategies and meaningful and constructive arguments. Many teachers noted that the training served as a reminder of what they had learned in college and provided a platform for them to try out strategies that they had never used before.

Teacher Coaching and Support

Critical to any successful CPD model is the provision of ongoing coaching and support to teachers to implement their newly learned skills. In Malawi, USAID's EGR activities had already worked to strengthen PEAs' role in supporting teachers' use of effective EGR reading instructional strategies, through specific training, and a coaching manual. PEAs, however, tend to be overstretched, with both their normal monitoring and support duties as well as heavy involvement in many donor-funded basic education activities. For this reason, ASPIRE pivoted from its original plans to predominantly target PEAs, to additionally focus on developing the capacities of head teachers and key teachers as literacy coaches. Head teachers, and key teachers within a school, are a more sustainable choice for providing teachers with ongoing coaching and mentoring, since they are always available in their schools and coaching can easily be included in their routine work.

ASPIRE developed a coaching manual with the involvement of TTC lecturers, PEAs, CHANCO lecturers, DIAS officers, and MIE literacy curriculum specialists, and distributed it to all schools and TDCs. The manual explicitly focused on how to coach teachers on the upper grades literacy instructional skills and routines introduced in the CPD program. **Using the manual, ASPIRE trained 544 head teachers, 44 PEAs, and ASPIRE's six literacy-focused project officers (POs) as coaches.** Among ASPIRE's cadre of field-based POs, six were specifically recruited and assigned to support teachers' literacy instruction.

During visits to schools, often with the help of technical staff from TTCs, Chancellor College, DIAS and MIE, ASPIRE's POs observed lessons and met one-on-one with teachers.

These visits encouraged teachers to reflect on their instructional practices, and offered support to improve their skills through modelling and co-teaching. Coaching and support visits also helped coaches to identify best practices to share with other teachers. ASPIRE made 537 coaching visits to schools, reaching an average of 95% of targeted teachers each year.

537 coaching visits, reaching an average of **95%** of teachers each year
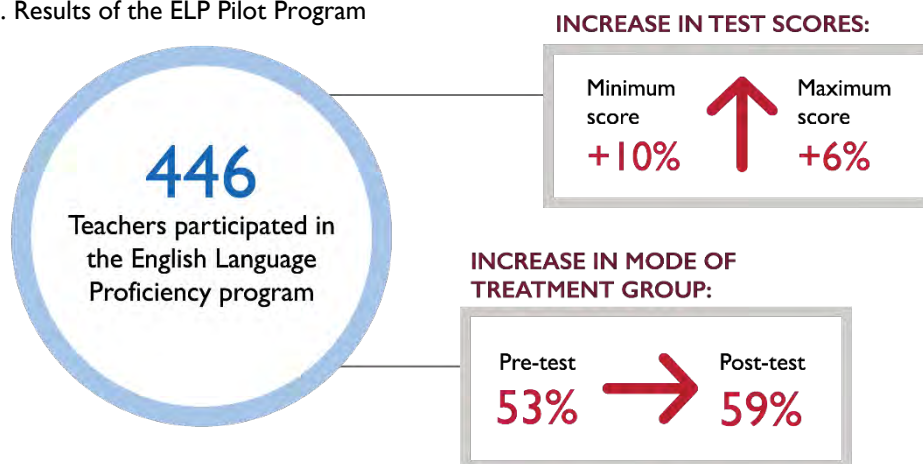
Support for Teachers' English Language Skills

ASPIRE's overall objective was to help increase girls' and boys' academic achievement. Helping students effectively read to learn was a primary focus of the ASPIRE design. The teaching and learning process in upper primary grades, however, is significantly affected by the shift to English as the medium of instruction. Students in standards 4-8 are learning and building their English skills, even as they use these skills to study other subjects. The teachers who teach them, however, often struggle to deliver English lessons fluently. Through a skills mapping exercise, ASPIRE identified English language proficiency as a challenge for teachers in Machinga and Balaka districts. To respond to this challenge, ASPIRE developed a complementary initiative to improve their English language abilities when delivering English as both a subject and medium of instruction. The ASPIRE team secured early support from both the MOEST and the Teachers' Union of Malawi to pursue this work.

A preliminary needs assessment administered in selected schools in Balaka and Machinga districts in 2016 led ASPIRE to develop an English Language Proficiency (ELP) program focusing on improving teachers' skills in listening and speaking, reading comprehension, vocabulary, grammar, and writing. The ELP materials included two separate training tools: a *Facilitators' Guide* and a *Participants' Workbook*, with course content split into activities for cluster training, peer work, and individual work sessions, allowing teachers to follow a best-practice cycle of learning and continuous practice, use, and room to reflect on their new skills.

Intended and designed as a pilot activity, ASPIRE introduced the ELP program in 30 clusters across the three districts, targeting 450 teachers drawn from standards 4-8. A group of 10 clusters pre-tested the materials before they were rolled out to the full 30 clusters. In order to be able to measure the effects of the program, ASPIRE conducted a pre-test with 20 clusters (10 treatment and 10 control).

Each ELP training session began with two-day trainings at cluster level, followed by two weeks of peer and individual work. This approach was designed with three mutually reinforcing components so teachers would have opportunity to learn in groups with support, from their peers and individually so that information was constantly reviewed and opportunities to practice were continuous. The cycle repeated once per month for three consecutive months. Each training session covered two units; five units were covered in total. Cluster trainings were led by a key teacher from the cluster (a high performing English teacher), trained by ASPIRE.

Figure 6. Results of the ELP Pilot Program

446
Teachers participated in the English Language Proficiency program

INCREASE IN TEST SCORES:

Minimum score
+10%

Maximum score
+6%

INCREASE IN MODE OF TREATMENT GROUP:

Pre-test
53%

Post-test
59%

Results from the post-test showed an increase on average of teachers' English language proficiency, and this was also the case for the lowest and the highest performing teachers. At the same time, there was variation with regard to literacy sub-skills and although some sub-skills improved, others did not. The main finding of the study was that the ELP intervention had a positive effect on the level of English language proficiency among teachers in the treatment group. The minimum score for the treatment group increased by 10% after the intervention and the maximum score went up by 6%. The mode of the treatment group went up from 53% during the pre-test to 59% during the post-test.

Learning Resources at Schools

Most Malawian primary schools do not have sufficient supplementary reading materials, or funds to acquire them. ASPIRE helped ensure that upper grade learners in the target primary schools had an increased and diverse set of supplementary reading texts to practice reading. ASPIRE reviewed and levelled supplementary readers from the National Library Service (NLS), the Ministry of Gender, Children, Disability and Social Welfare, as wells as previous reading initiatives (including the Primary School Support Program, Read Malawi, and Complementary Basic Education). The review and levelling aimed at ensuring that readers selected for upper primary were appropriate to this level. Participants in this exercise included primary school teachers, MIE staff, DIAS representatives, and TTC lecturers. ASPIRE applied USAID's *Guide for Strengthening Gender Equality and Inclusiveness in Teaching and Learning Materials* in the review and selection of the supplementary readers. The supplementary readers that were selected feature girls and other disadvantaged learners. Efforts were

made to ensure that the supplementary readers selected do not present girls, women and other vulnerable groups as followers or failures.

ASPIRE printed and distributed 33 copies of each of 24 Read Malawi titles to all schools Balaka, Machinga and Zomba districts. **In total, 421,000 copies were delivered to schools.** Implementing partner MIE held the copyright for the Read Malawi titles, facilitating the reprinting and distribution of these titles. Unfortunately, copyright issued hampered and delayed efforts to distribute additional titles from other sources, though ASPIRE did eventually print and distribute to all schools copies of nine Complementary Basic Education program titles and copies of one title from the Ministry of Gender, Children, Disability and Social Welfare.

Community Support for Reading

Parents and communities play a crucial role in supporting children's literacy skills, helping to foster a habit of reading and promoting a strong reading culture. When ASPIRE began in December 2014, USAID's Early Grade Reading Activity (EGRA) had already been building a solid community mobilization foundation on reading, albeit with a focus on students and learning in the early grades. ASPIRE strategically built upon earlier USAID investments, increasing community support for reading in the target districts. Reading clubs, reading competitions, and reading fairs were activities that ASPIRE supported and expanded to include older learners, to give learners greater opportunities to practice reading skills, and encourage and acknowledge their reading achievements.

"The reading fairs were exciting for our learners; we will continue to implement them so that learners are still being exposed to more reading materials considering that the project provided us with a number of reading materials already." –PTA chair, Bisa Primary school, Boma zone, Machinga district

Reading Clubs, Competitions and Fairs
ASPIRE established a reading club in every target school to serve as a literacy resource for the community and for fielding a team for reading competitions. Reading competitions showcased students' reading achievements to parents and stakeholders, and reinforced performance with rewards. The termly competitions were organized at a zonal level, taking advantage of existing zonal meetings for head teachers. During these meetings, ASPIRE gathered ideas for prizes that became a standard prize list distributed to schools (which included items such as school bags, pens, flipcharts, notebooks, netballs and footballs). Schools also used these meetings to discuss and share innovative club activities to prepare for the competitions.

Similarly, schools organized reading fairs during which learners spelled words, read passages from books, recited poems and performed role-plays for an audience of parents and community members. Reading fairs gave learners the opportunity to display their reading skills for community appreciation, and allowed teachers, parents and all other community stakeholders to appreciate learners' acquisition of literacy skills. While reading competitions and fairs were not new activities in target schools, ASPIRE ensured learners from standards 4-8 were included, a shift from the previous exclusive focus on early grade learners.

100% of schools held reading fairs in academic years 2015/16–2017/18

Early ASPIRE facilitation of reading fairs and competitions transitioned into school communities' commitment to lead planning and implementation of the events. **By the final year, PEAs and head teachers had assumed responsibility for organizing and implementing zonal reading fairs**, including holding preparatory meetings, confirming and announcing dates for zonal reading fairs, and deciding on activities to be showcased by individual schools.

Youth Literacy Movement
ASPIRE introduced the Youth Literacy Movement (YLM) to strengthen the coordination of literacy activities taking place in schools and surrounding villages. SC had first successfully introduced the YLM model in Malawi under TiANA, a USAID-funded All Children Reading Grand Challenge

award. ASPIRE identified eight school-based youth community volunteers to act as YLM members in all targeted primary schools in Balaka, Machinga and Zomba. YLM volunteers were trained to work closely with reading camps and mobilize community opinion leaders to proactively play their roles to promote literacy activities for their children. **In total, 4,296 YLM members (2,120 female; 2,176 male) were trained by ASPIRE in Balaka, Machinga and Zomba.** To be selected as an YLM, candidates needed to be secondary school graduates, possess basic reading and writing skills, display strong enthusiasm and passion for education, and be willing to work as a volunteer in their home communities with no expectations for monetary gains.

"The provision of supplementary readers and establishment of community reading centers has increased learners' interaction with literacy materials and encouraged a reading culture amongst learners."- YLM member, Kalira School, Chilipa zone, Zomba district

Figure 7. Key Activities of YLMs

YLM members developed action plans to support reading and girls' education in their community (see Figure 7). Across the districts, YLMs ran village reading camps, conducted sensitization meetings and worked with communities to set-up village reading camps where these were not in existence. YLMs supported reading competitions and reading fairs, served as advocates and important voices in community dialogues and local level reading activities' planning and implementation. In some schools, YLM members worked with MGs and Village Heads in facilitating readmission of learners, particularly girls, back into school, and building shelter and pit latrines for reading camps, as happened around Mlambe and Malundani primary schools in Machinga. In all schools, YLM members served as positive role models for primary school students.

*"It is interesting to note that the faith leaders are giving learners reading materials during faith gatherings, this wasn't the case in the past." -*Faith leader, Mponda Primary school, Mponda zone, Balaka district

Faith Leaders
Recognizing the importance of faith communities to the population in its target districts, ASPIRE conducted community-based meetings for faith-based leaders to orient them on how to facilitate the integration of reading and writing in religious activities for youth. ASPIRE was guided by an assumption that engaging religious leaders in ASPIRE activities would help increase community support for reading and girls' education. This assumption proved true. **ASPIRE targeted two faith leaders in each education zone, totaling 88 faith leaders trained (65 males, 23 females) in Balaka, Machinga and Zomba.**

After training, faith leaders intensified sensitization meetings during religious services and encouraged parents to send their girls to schools and reading camps, and to bring girls who had dropped out back to school.

Faith Leaders regularly followed up and supported reading activities in the villages. For example, some faith leaders supported inclusion of older learners in church programs to read Sunday scriptures. Many supported the creation of print-rich environments by hanging posters on church walls. Faith leaders from the Muslim community encouraged parents to send their children to the reading camps and divide time and days so that learners could take part in both madrassa and reading camp activities.

Media Partnerships
In order to further encourage community participation and support to reading on a broader scale across the districts, ASPIRE developed partnerships with local radio and television to promote and highlight reading achievements in Balaka, Machinga and Zomba districts. These partnerships culminated in Memorandums of Understanding with several local radio and television broadcasters operating in the targeted districts (including Angaliba Television and Malawi Broadcasting Corporation), with the aim of expanding the coverage of listenership, community outreach, and disseminating information about the success of ASPIRE activities. These broadcasters conducted recordings and aired stories from the target districts. Through these partnerships, ASPIRE showcased promising best practices for improving health care-seeking behaviors amongst adolescents, improving reading among learners, reducing harmful cultural practices impacting girls' education, as well as examples on how to sustain ASPIRE activities beyond donor support. Examples include stories of teen mothers who were readmitted into school, girls prevented from early marriages, and parental involvement and support in advancing girls' education issues.

TRADITIONAL INFLUENCER PRIORITIZES EDUCATION

Initiation counselor promotes and leads community literacy activities

Photo Credit: ASPIRE Activity

Ingesi Maposa captured at his house at Mposa.

"Many community members failed to understand the importance of education as long as they have money and food and never thought that there are many things one or the community would achieve when one is educated."

— *Attribution*

Injesi Maposa is a well-known and respected initiation counselor from Traditional Authority Mposa in Malawi's Machinga District. In this area along Lake Chilwa, economic interests are often prioritized over education. Proximity to the lake and commercial activities leads many learners to drop out of school, some to fish and others to engage in rice farming along the lake. Centers of economic activity, like the fishing docks of Lake Chilwa, are also known to be hot spots for the participation of vulnerable adolescents in harmful social practices, such as trading sex for food or other material needs, and dropping out of school at an early age. Statistics from Mposa Health Centre indicate the area has a high prevalence of HIV and AIDS and gender based violence cases.

Influential and respected community members can catalyze increased community support for education. Mr. Maposa demonstrates that such respected community members can also directly participate in important education support activities. A strong supporter of local health and education development activities, in 2017 the community around Mchilima Primary School chose Mr. Maposa to be a member of the Youth Literacy Movement.

ASPIRE introduced the YLM model in all targeted primary schools in Balaka, Machinga and Zomba districts, training eight volunteers from each school community to advance strategies for promoting and increasing local literacy activities. YLM members in all the three districts developed action plans to revamp village-reading camps and even construct reading camp shelters in communities where there is none.

Just weeks after his YLM orientation, Mr. Maposa established a reading center in a shelter sometimes used to house children during initiation ceremonies. He went on to establish five more reading camps in his area. In his dual role as a YLM member and initiation counselor, Mr. Maposa proved well positioned to ensure activities of the initiation camps did not interfere with children's education. "Many community members failed to understand the importance of education as long as they have money and food and never thought that there are many things one or the community would achieve when one is educated," he explained.

Across the three districts, ASPIRE trained 537 YLM volunteers. YLM members have run reading camps, mobilized communities to build reading camp shelters, sourced materials for reading centers, and facilitated readmission of girls into school.

PEPFAR

PEPFAR funded activities in ASPIRE aimed at increasing adoption of positive sexual and healthcare-seeking behaviors, reducing new HIV infections in adolescent girls, and addressing key cultural barriers to education for girls ages 10-19. One of the biggest reasons for girls' dropout is early pregnancy. Many factors influence sexual activity among adolescent girls. ASPIRE worked to positively affect both individual and interpersonal factors, including adolescents' knowledge of the consequences of early sex, of abstinence, contraception, sexually transmitted diseases, HIV risks, and access to sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services. ASPIRE also promoted adolescent skills in prevention techniques, mitigating peer pressure, negotiating sexual activity and protection decisions with partners.

At a school level, ASPIRE helped school leadership better support HIV+ students and promote accurate information on HIV and AIDS. ASPIRE ensured teachers in target schools knew the code of conduct, and that students were aware of readmission policies after pregnancy. ASPIRE specifically invested in the most relevant support structures to mentor and support girls: mothers groups and female role models. In the community, ASPIRE built stronger support for girls' education and reduced cultural barriers by fostering girls' education advocates and targeting the influence of key cultural leaders within the community. PEPFAR also supported ASPIRE's community mobilization efforts, through drama, media, and working with special groups.

The results of ASPIRE's PEPFAR funded work are multi-dimensional. ASPIRE reached a total of 54,828 learners aged 10 and over with LSE lessons. Students, teachers, and community groups interviewed as part of ASPIRE's 2017 performance evaluation reported increased access to SRH services for students, largely due to ASPIRE's work in YFHS referrals and SHDs, which involved HIV counseling and testing. **Over 9,000 students were tested for HIV as a result of ASPIRE activities.** The 2017 evaluation also found high levels of general knowledge about HIV/AIDS among primary and secondary students, with students most knowledgeable about aspects corresponding directly with the Life Skills curriculum taught in schools. Without prompting, the evaluators found majorities of primary and secondary students correctly identified the two most common methods of HIV transmission, sexual intercourse and contaminated blood. **Among the most important results of ASPIRE's integrated girl-focused approach to reduce barriers to girls education is ASPIRE's success in bringing girls into school, out of early marriages, and keeping them in school**.
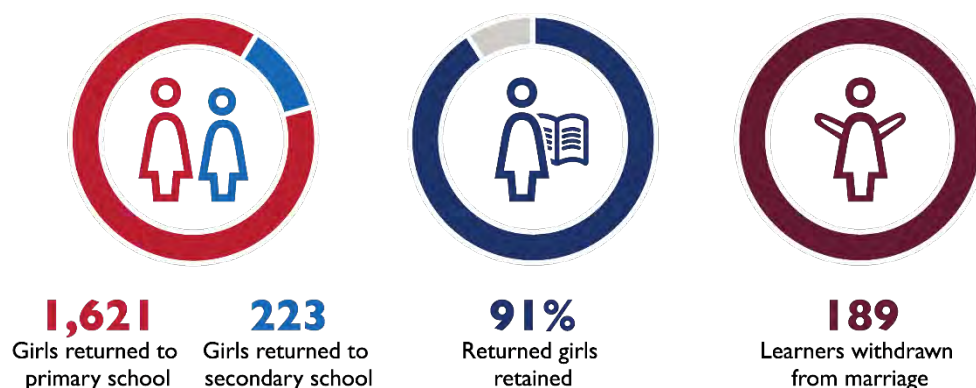

| **1,621** | **223** | **91%** | **189** |
| Girls returned to primary school | Girls returned to secondary school | Returned girls retained | Learners withdrawn from marriage |

Figure 8. ASPIRE's Integrated Girl-Focused Approach Results

In-School Support

School Support to HIV+ Learners

At the inception of the activity, ASPIRE conducted a rapid assessment in all target schools in Balaka and Machinga, and replicated this in Zomba in 2016. This assessment observed the availability of records for HIV+ students in schools and the support activities and services schools provide for HIV+ students. This assessment found that few schools provided support services for HIV+ students. The schools that were found to support HIV+ learners mostly provided them with food supplements. Schools not providing support to HIV+ students indicated that it was difficult to know the status of students for ethical reasons. ASPIRE's efforts to strengthen schools' capacity to support needs of HIV+ students and reduce stigma focused strongly on school leadership. **ASPIRE conducted orientation sessions for 520 Head Teachers (HTs), PEAs, Assistant Centre Coordinator (ACCOs) and MOEST officials which included roles of HTs in creating a positive environment to support HIV positive learners; support needs of HIV+ students, including training for HTs in HIV and AIDS issues concerning adolescents; and how to reduce stigma and discrimination towards the HIV+ learners.** At the end of the sessions, action plans were developed to support schools and students, especially those that are HIV+.

ASPIRE next developed HIV messages for school assembly talks, dividing the topics into terms and developing content delivery methodologies. These messages standardized information given to students by schools in an effort to increasing awareness and knowledge on HIV and AIDS among school going

adolescents. Head teachers from all the target schools were trained on how to deliver these messages in short talks during assembly sessions. Each school was required to give the talk once a week, for no more than five minutes to not delay learners to start their lessons. Over the same week, the message was repeated to ensure retention of these messages by the learners.

Provision of HIV & AIDS messages during assembly helped to reach adolescents with correct messages on prevention of contracting HIV, ways of contracting HIV, and treatment and management of HIV. During the district close out meetings, stakeholders noted that introduction of HIV & AIDS assembly session talks and in-school and after-school health clubs have led to increase in HIV & AIDS knowledge amongst adolescent girls. Supervision visits to the targeted districts in the final year found that schools and community structures [MGs, school management committees (SMCs) and parent teacher associations (PTAs)] were active in support provision to HIV+ students. Schools and community structures encouraged parents and guardians to provide consent for their children to undergo HIV testing, and ensured that those children that tested HIV+ were referred for antiretroviral therapy (ART). MGs provided scholastic and other material support to the HIV+ learners such as pens, notebooks, school uniforms and sanitary pads.

Teacher Code of Conduct

Teachers have a responsibility of protecting the children when they are in school. ASPIRE realized the importance of creating friendly safe schools to retain learners, especially girls, because teacher behavior may be a contributing factor to learners (especially girls) dropping out of school.

Though the preservice training for teachers covers the teacher code of conduct, ASPIRE still promoted the code of conduct with DREAMS funding as one way of making schools safe for learners and combatting school-related GBV. **ASPIRE oriented 4,301 teachers (1,356 female and 2,945 male) in 100% of the schools in Zomba and Machinga on the teacher code of conduct.** Officials from MOEST at district level and the division office took part in facilitation of the orientations as a way of ensuring that teachers are dedicated in protecting their learners.

Improved Life Skills Education
LSE in schools was used in ASPIRE as an entry to providing correct information on SRH, HIV and AIDS and GBV. Teachers can have challenges delivering LSE lessons, as the topics are considered sensitive. With the cultural beliefs in Malawi, many of these topics are taboo and difficult to discuss. ASPIRE aimed at promoting effective delivery of LSE by especially focusing on these topics that are considered taboo, to ensure that students would receive accurate instruction on these important topics.

At the time of the ASPIRE design in 2014, the MOEST was beginning to roll out a newly revised LSE curriculum.

ASPIRE developed both materials and a CPD program to scaffold the curriculum roll out and help teachers become more comfortable in delivering LSE lessons in the new curriculum. In the first year, ASPIRE conducted an assessment in sampled schools in Balaka and Machinga to investigate challenges that teachers encounter in delivering LSE lessons. The results of this assessment fed into one of the most important year 1 technical activities, which was the development of activity cards (known as "Macheza cards") for use in classrooms and in after-school club settings. Modeled after similar activity cards developed by SC's GREAT and Keep it Real Projects in Uganda, the cards are both a teaching and learning resource. The cards promote interaction between the teacher and students, or between learners, by offering step-by-step guidance for active learning activities focused on LSE topics.

ASPIRE worked with LSE Specialists from MIE, LSE TTC Lecturers, DEMs offices, South East Education Division (SEED) office to develop 28 activity cards (14 for very young adolescents and another 14 for older adolescents).

"The Malawian culture doesn't give freedom to us to discuss sexuality issues hence it was difficult to deliver such topics. The training emphasized on the need to teach the seemingly sensitive topics very well and freely so that the adolescent girls are aware of all HIV & SRH related issues."- LSE teacher, Liwonde Secondary School, Machinga District

Table 2. Macheza Card Titles

Older Adolescent Cards	Very Young Adolescent Cards	DREAMS Cards
1. Condom true or false	1. Ask the health worker game	1. Consequences of stopping ARVs
2. Consequences of early pregnancy	2. Completing scenarios on friendship	2. HIV Management
3. Decision making in interpersonal relationships	3. Fatima's story	3. HIV Testing and Counselling
4. Drug and substance abuse	4. Healthy and unhealthy role play	4. Respecting our past protecting our future
5. Early marriage drama and song	5. HIV prevention positive living	5. School related GBV
6. Empathy drama and song	6. How alcohol feels game	
7. Gender based violence	7. Male and female roles game	
8. Harmful cultural practices discussion	8. Menstruation at school story	
9. Health service linkages	9. Myths and truths about sexual violence	
10. Preventing pregnancy HIV &STI story	10. Reproduction true or false game	
11. Resisting peer pressure and assertiveness	11. Say no	
12. Sexual and reproductive health and gender quiz game	12. Taking a stand	
13. Show that you know HIV risk quiz	13. The empathy game	
14. Staying in school community interviews	14. When I grow up interviews	

The cards were pre-tested in primary and secondary schools and the feedback helped to refine the cards, before the cards were then also translated into Chichewa. ASPIRE trained schools' club patrons and matrons from all the primary schools in Balaka, Machinga and Zomba, totaling 1,082 teachers. Upon receiving DREAMS funding, ASPIRE developed five additional cards with focus on HIV, GBV and cultural issues.

To promote effective LSE delivery, ASPIRE developed and rolled out a CPD program for teachers. Originally targeted only for secondary school teachers across the three districts, with DREAMS funding, ASPIRE also developed a CPD program for LSE instruction in primary schools in Machinga and Zomba. ASPIRE worked with LSE Specialists from MIE, SEED, DEM and TTCs in 2016 to develop first drafts of the CPD manuals. Based on feedback from USAID, ASPIRE identified an international expert on sexuality education to review the manuals. The expert made recommendations to improve on the content to ensure that LSE provides the platform for behavior change among learners. ASPIRE revised the manuals in 2017 before rolling out training to teachers.

ASPIRE reached 100% of the secondary schools in all three districts with a one-week residential training. **ASPIRE trained two teachers per school, one for the junior classes and the other for the senior classes, reaching 173 teachers.** TTC lecturers, SEED officials and other secondary school LSE teachers facilitated these trainings. To further support the LSE curriculum roll-out, ASPIRE procured and distributed LSE textbooks to all secondary schools in Balaka, Machinga and Zomba.

A total of 1,764 teachers from 377 primary schools in Machinga and Zomba were reached with the primary LSE CPD trainings, held at zonal level over the course of two weekends. Five teachers responsible for standards 4 to 8 from each school participated.

1,937 primary and secondary teachers trained in delivering effective LSE lessons

To further support teachers in their LSE instruction, ASPIRE developed LSE coaching, monitoring and supervision tools to monitor teachers in targeted primary and secondary schools on delivery of LSE lessons to learners. ASPIRE engaged TTC tutors as expert trainers to train SEMAs, PEAs and ASPIRE POs using the LSE coaching manual. The coaching manual provides practical hints on how teachers can be supported through coaching. The training led to teachers receiving problem-based instant support through coaching by the trained officials. The monitoring visits indicated that teachers were practicing the new LSE teaching methods that they had acquired during CPD trainings.

Community groups, teachers, and girls interviewed as part of the midterm performance evaluation highlighted the importance of ASPIRE's Life Skills training for teachers in improving girls' HIV knowledge. Monitoring reports and teachers' feedback suggest the training made them more comfortable teaching LSE topics. Still, the influence of the training, and teacher's improved instruction, on learners' positive sexual and healthcare-seeking *behaviors* (versus knowledge) is harder to determine.

The CPD program could only ever support effective delivery of the LSE curriculum, and could not compensate for what the curriculum itself does not include. Explicitly teaching students about mitigating peer pressure, negotiating sexual activity, consent, and protection decisions with partners, is important for driving changes in sexual choices and behaviors. As the LSE curriculum does not heavily target these skills, ASPIRE helped build these skills through the Macheza cards use in clubs, and mentoring and support.

Health Clubs
Malawi schools have a strong tradition of student clubs, many supported by donor-programs. With DREAMS funding, ASPIRE established or strengthened existing after school health clubs for girls and boys as a fun way to reinforce classroom LSE lessons and school assembly HIV/AIDS messages. The clubs were designed to provide both girls and boys the opportunity to discuss different scenarios with their friends, sing songs, act out dramas and play games on topics like puberty, relationships, gender, HIV and STIs, drug and substance abuse, assertiveness and decision making.

One lesson learned from Malawi's student clubs is that clubs may "die out" over the course of the school year, especially if there is no structured content for the clubs and no reason for students to keep coming to club meetings. ASPIRE therefore developed guidelines for the health clubs that

integrated the three materials utilized in the clubs (Macheza cards, DREAMS toolkit[3], and SC's puberty books[4]). The club guidelines were developed to standardize the work in the after-school clubs while ensuring club patrons/matrons (teachers from the school) were equipped with skills and knowledge of how to facilitate clubs successfully.

ASPIRE trained 498 patrons and 396 matrons in Machinga and Zomba districts to lead after school health clubs. These were LSE teachers responsible for supervising the clubs and supporting peer leaders during club sessions. As a way of ensuring students' participation, schools identified peer leaders that were oriented to enable them facilitate club activities with support of patrons and matrons. Ten students (2 from each class from standards 5 to 8) were identified from all schools in Machinga and Zomba. Peer leaders were oriented on the club guidelines for after school health club implementation. The content of the training included roles and responsibilities of peer leaders, characteristics of a good peer leader, facilitation skills and scheme of work.

The health clubs served an important need. The 2017 performance evaluation found that youth of all ages interviewed want more extracurricular activities sponsored by ASPIRE, especially sexual and reproductive health-focused youth clubs and forums.

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[3] The toolkit, "My DREAMS, My Choice!" is a participatory toolkit for both in- and out-of-school girls. It provides a safe and fun opportunity for AGYW to understand their bodies as they transition from childhood to adulthood and gain skills knowledge and self-efficacy to live productive lives, free from HIV.
[4] The Puberty and Gender Workbooks include three main thematic components: Puberty Education, Menstrual Hygiene Management, and Gender Norm Formation, presenting information in a simple, non-threatening way, using illustrations to show body changes during puberty, quizzes and written games and exercises.

A total of 17,604 students in Machinga and Zomba participated in the clubs.

17,604 students participated in after-school health clubs

School Health Days
DREAMS-funded School Health Days (SHD) were the most prominent example of ASPIRE's cross-sector collaboration. In an effort to reduce new HIV infections, teen pregnancies and GBV issues amongst adolescent girls, ASPIRE implemented SHD in partnership with other DREAMS partners and government partners to strengthen the link between the education, health, and social sectors. Health and social services were delivered close to the school by working with partners that provided these services. The SHDs were conducted at cluster level, bringing together three or four schools in one place. **Each school in Machinga and Zomba benefitted from three SHD sessions. Three-hundred forty-five total SHDs were held in the two districts.**

345 School Health Day sessions held in Machinga and Zomba districts

Since ASPIRE was not providing services, collaboration with other DREAMS partners, other USAID-funded projects, as well as various government partners was key to successfully deliver the initiative.

Population Services International (PSI) in Machinga and Banja La Mtsogolo (BLM) in Zomba, were the key partners ASPIRE worked with in the implementation of SHDs. BLM or PSI and DHO provided HIV testing services (HTS) and SRH services[5]. Learners aged 16 years and above voluntarily accessed HIV testing and those aged less than 16 years were allowed to go for HIV testing only if they had consent from parents or guardians. The service providers mounted a tent at a distance of a minimum of 300m away from the school premises to provide SRH services, since education policies do not allow provision of SRH services on school premises.

Many different organizations and partners participated and provided services:
- YONECO gave talks on GBV and encouraged use of their toll free hot lines (*116 and 5600*) to report cases on GBV.
- Village Reach gave SRH support services on Chipatala cha Pa phone, which is free.
- Girl Effect with Zathu pa wailesi aired programs around SRH, HIV and GBV.
- Dignitas International offered HTS and also referred HIV+ students to teen clubs that are supported by them. Guest speakers living positively with HIV from Dignitas International gave talks on living positively with HIV, adherence to treatment, HIV testing and prevention.
- HSAs conducted nutrition assessments of the learners from lower classes, while those from upper classes participated in the actual SHDs where SRH issues and HIV testing was done.

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[5] Contraceptives, individual and group counseling and HIV testing services.

- Police provided talks on GBV and the support they provide in times of reported cases of abuse.
- CPW provided talks on their work and provided psychosocial support.
- Teachers that work as referral agents provided referral tickets for students to access services.
- Learners took time to educate fellow learners through dramas, poems, songs and dances.

During these sessions, learners as well as teachers were given opportunity to ask questions to these service providers. The days were completed with sporting activities where school teams played netball and football games and the winning team was given a trophy.

To strengthen the delivery of SHDs, ASPIRE held meetings with officials from different government departments and other NGOs to ensure the SHDs were delivered effectively and in a multi-sectoral approach. ASPIRE held meetings with relevant partners and stakeholders to plan for the implementation of SHDs. ASPIRE also participated in a meeting convened by USAID, with BLM and PSI, to strategize on implementation of this activity. The partners agreed to share responsibilities: ASPIRE had the responsibility of giving health talks, while BLM and PSI provided health services outside the school premises. ASPIRE also met with government stakeholders that included HSAs, CPW and HIV counsellors to ensure their involvement and support in the implementation of SHDs, as they had the responsibility of providing health and social services. ASPIRE also lobbied support from local leaders to assist with mobilizing communities to ensure that learners under 16 years accessed HIV

testing, as they required consent from parents or guardians. Parents and guardians came with their children and accessed HIV testing services.

The provision of services at a school provided an opportunity to reach out to as many students in remote areas as possible. This increased access to services for students, teachers and community members. For example, one Group Village Head (GVH) mentioned this in his speech with much appreciation and excitement. In order to show his gratitude, he himself went for HIV testing as an example to his subjects and then urged others to follow suit. This encouraged many parents who witnessed this to go for HIV testing, as well as taking their children for HIV testing.

The SHDs also provided an opportunity for referral. Learners were referred by referral agents from their schools to access services such as HIV testing, SRH and GBV screening. Working with senior HSAs promoted follow up of cases, as they assigned HSAs to visit schools in their catchment areas. An example is Namakwena School in Zomba, where a learner tested HIV+ during SHD and the senior HSA tasked the HSA responsible to follow up with the parents of the child. The learner is now reported to have started ART. The SHD also provided an opportunity for parents to disclose status of those children that were on ART, but were not aware as to why they take medications every day. Parents took advantage of the health providers to disclose and counsel the adolescents, as they did not know how to tell the children that they were HIV+.

Involvement of CPW and police also helped community members to realize the importance of reporting GBV issues. It

helped to bring awareness on the services that are available in their communities. For example, a learner from Namatapa School (a standard 6 boy) reported that his mother did not provide him with school necessities and he was asked to provide for the family through piecework. The student failed to sit for end of term one exams, because he did not pay the school development fund. He even mentioned that the money he raised was used by his mother for maize milling. After the talk that was made by the police officer, the child realized that what he was going through was negligence and he needed assistance. The deputy head teacher made efforts to call the mother of the victim to help resolve the matter and the school promised to assist the boy whenever necessary. In both districts, structures such as MGs and other school committee members were also available to help

identify issues and showcase the support they have provided to needy students, such as back to school campaigns, and provision of scholastic materials such as uniforms and writing materials. In addition to the services provided, the SHDs provided edutainment and promoted students' participation as they performed traditional dances, poems, quizzes, dramas, and choirs—all as a medium of providing correct information to the learners.

Figure 9. below presents important results from ASPIRE's SHDs. An important conclusion from ASPIRE's 2017 performance evaluation was that SHDs and the school-based referral system for YFHS show that **the school is an effective entry point for health service providers to reach adolescents, thereby supporting increased access to health services.**

Academic Year 2016–2017 SHD Reach			Academic Year 2017–2018 SHD Reach		
Males	Females		Males	Females	
13,009	12,244	Learners Reached	153,043	137,622	
Males	Females		Males	Females	
182	281	Total learners tested for HIV across both districts	6,587	5,838	
Males	Females		Males	Females	
3	1	Total teachers tested for HIV across both districts	615	783	
Females			Females		
382		Female learners referred to SRH services during SHDs	2,008		
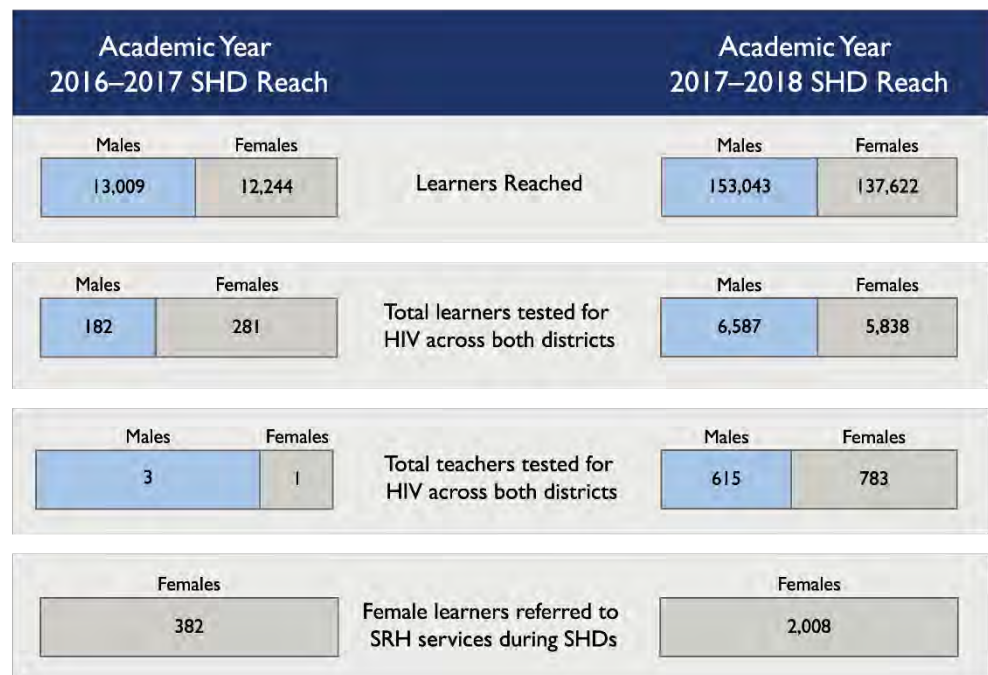
TOTAL SHDs ACROSS BOTH DISTRICTS

201	144
ZOMBA	MACHINGA

Figure 9. ASPIRE School Health Day Results

School-Based Referral System
Beginning in 2017, ASPIRE implemented the DREAMS school-based referral system, which strengthened the link between schools and health and social services providers. It enabled students to easily access services from YFHS and social protection service providers. The referral system's tools included referral tickets, registers and standard operating procedures (SOPs). The PEPFAR team from USAID led in the development of all materials and setting the delivery of the referral system. ASPIRE printed the first set of tools that were used by all the DREAMS partners. Using these tools, DREAMS partners conducted a pilot of the system in traditional authorities (TAs) Liwonde and Chikowi in Machinga and Zomba districts, respectively. Following the pilot, ASPIRE implemented the referral system in all schools in Machinga and Zomba districts.

ASPIRE trained two teachers (one male and one female) from each school plus a PEA or ACCO to gain support from the management of the zone. These trained referral agents handled the referral system at the schools. Each school was supposed to have a male and female teacher as referral agents, but due to fewer female teachers in most of the schools, fewer female teachers participated. ASPIRE also oriented service providers from health and social services points on the system, to ensure they were aware of the system and how it worked. These included Victim Support Units (VSU) from police, health centre in-charges, HSAs, CPWs and Child Protection Committee members. A total of 1,927 referral agents and service providers (1,547 males and 380 females) were reached (Table 3.)

Table 3: Referral Agents and Service Providers Reached by ASPIRE in FY17

Cadre	Males	Females
Teachers	1, 068	267
Health Surveillance Assistants	343	60
Victim Support Unit	27	19
Child Protection Committees	53	13
Child Protection workers	56	21
Total	**1,547**	**380**

Schools were supplied with referral tickets, registers, SOPs and referral boxes. The referral tickets only have ID numbers to ensure confidentiality. Once a learner gets a referral ticket from a referral agent, they present it to the service provider who just ticks the service that has been provided. The referred learners are required to bring back the referral ticket, which is then placed in the referral box. In the absence of referral tickets, it was agreed that referral agents may utilize notebook pages as referral tickets.

More than 27,000 students were referred through the school-based system. During zonal-based review meetings held on the referral system, learners indicated that the referral system eases their access to health services, as they are no longer required to queue at service provision points. Since the referral provision also engaged with YFHS providers, it helped to promote the provision of YFHS.

ASPIRE helped strengthen the referral system by improving the child protection case management skills of ASPIRE staff and CPWs. Twelve ASPIRE staff received training on child protection case management from the Ministry of Gender, Children, Disability and Social Welfare. The training's main aim was to help staff understand the principles of child protection case management. ASPIRE then engaged all CPWs in Machinga and Zomba, case managers in their respective communities, to strengthen their links with schools.

1,927
1,547 Males / **380** Females
School-based referral agents trained

27,454
Students referred through school-based referral system

HSAs and CPWs oriented to build stronger links with schools

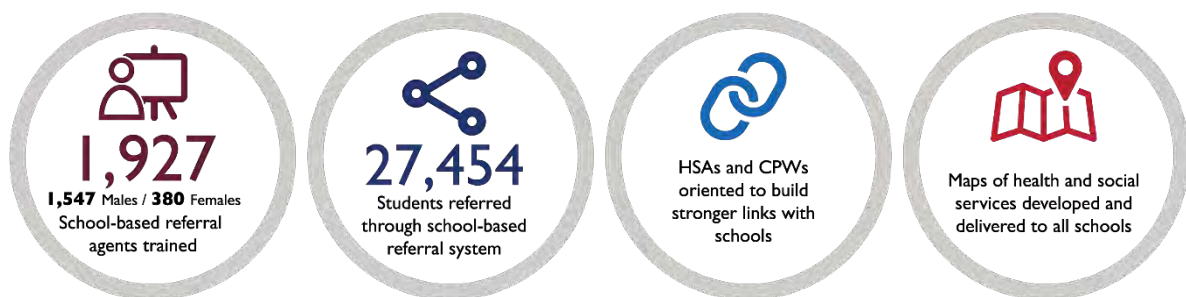Maps of health and social services developed and delivered to all schools

Figure 10. ASPIRE Referral System Results

Block Grants

DREAMS-funded block grants in the 2016-2017 academic year supported secondary and primary schools to enhance access, safety and learning for all learners, and supported OVC learners in secondary school with school fee bursaries. ASPIRE provided grants to 125 selected primary schools and all secondary schools in Machinga and Zomba districts. ASPIRE selected the 125 primary schools from among hard-to-reach rural areas based on OVC burden, dropout rates, and remoteness.

Each secondary school received $3,200, while primary schools each received $1,500. Secondary schools selected from a menu of eligible expenses to support OVCs in their schools. The schools identified OVCs through a school-based committee comprised of the deputy head teacher, bursar/accounts officer, teachers, student counselor, PTA chairperson, MG chairperson, and head boy/girl. The process was led by the head teacher. While the selection of support areas varied from one school to another, most schools opted for school fee bursaries as a way of retaining OVCs in school. Secondary schools were also encouraged to support MGs with IGA initiatives, as MGs have proved key to sustain ASPIRE initiatives that support OVCs.

Each of the 125 selected primary schools received $1,500 which was used to support MGs to produce reusable sanitary pads (all start up materials for pad production, including a sewing machine and other supplies); school uniforms; basic WASH supplements (e.g. hand washing soap); a bicycle the for MGs to visit OVCs at highest risk of leaving school; and scholastic materials for all students in selected schools (pens, copy books, and student supplies).

ASPIRE trained 250 MG members from the 125 primary schools on the production of re-usable sanitary pads to equip the MG members with skills that economically empowered them to support OVCs. At the end of the training, each school received a startup pack of materials (sewing machine, flannel, waterproof material, cotton material, and scissors). The reusable pads produced by MGs were distributed for free to OVCs. MGs also sold the pads to those that could afford to buy them. The MGs were further encouraged to use the sewing machines for making other clothes to promote income generating activities (IGA).

Prior to distributing the grant funds, ASPIRE developed guidelines for the grant management and held orientation meetings with school authorities to guide them on managing the block grant. After distributing the grants, ASPIRE conducted support visits to both primary and secondary schools in Zomba and Machinga to provide guidance in financial management and ensure compliance with the grant policies, procedures and USAID requirements. In collaboration with the EDM and DEMs, ASPIRE made support visits to monitor and follow-up areas that needed corrective actions. The support visits were also used to verify with the beneficiaries the kind of support they had received, as per school records.

Schools greatly appreciated the block grants. Still, community groups, school staff, and government officials interviewed in the 2017 performance evaluation reported that they did not see ASPIRE's direct resource provision as sustainable. Specifically, most

"Since we have been trained in the making of the re-usable sanitary pads, it's a skill that we will still have even though the project is ending and we will carry on with this to keep helping needy girls and to be selling so that we make profits as well."- Mother group member, Khwisa Primary school, Mponda zone, Balaka District

government officials reported that the direct resources ASPIRE provided in the form of school block grants would be difficult to sustain after the activity ends. ASPIRE recognized this challenge from the start, and it was a main reason the primary block grants so heavily invested in building the capacity of MGs to develop reusable pads, both as a support to students, and as an IGA that would generate future funds to provide ongoing support to OVCs.

In an effort to continue support for the secondary school bursary recipients, ASPIRE provided names of supported students to other organizations implementing DREAMS funded bursaries in the target districts.

Number of secondary Block Grant recipient schools

ZOMBA	MACHINGA
44	21

$ 67,052

$ 139,928

$ 8,918

$ 23,002

$ 4,794

$ 5,165

$ 72,272

$ 49,113

$ 4,067

$ 39,646

■ Bursaries (school fees)　　■ Support to IGA　　■ Sanitary pads
▫ School shoes　　■ School uniforms　　■ Feeding program supplements
▫ Basic WASH supplements　　■ Scholastic materials
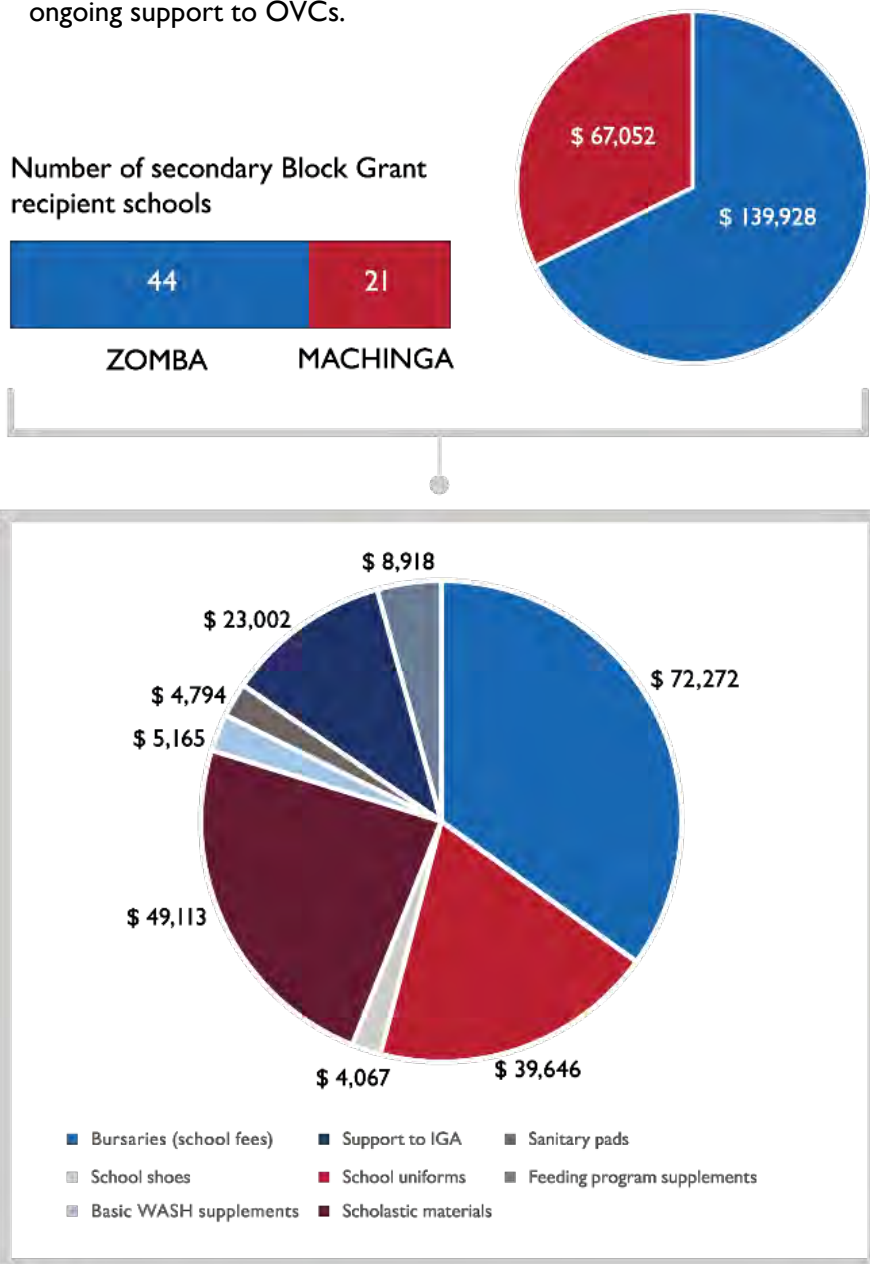
Figure 11. Secondary Block Grants

Number of primary Block Grant recipient schools

ZOMBA	MACHINGA
55	70

$82,500

$105,000

$ 80,479

$ 62,073

$ 11,130

$ 10,274

$ 23,544

- Sanitary pad production materials
- Basic WASH supplements
- Scholastic materials
- School uniform
- Outreach support materials (Bicycles)

Figure 12. Primary Block Grants

Out of School Support

Mothers Groups

MGs are an integral part of the MOEST National Education Sector Plan. MGs have a mandate to ensure girls complete school education through counselling and guidance, lobbying and advocacy on girls' education, resource mobilization, addressing and responding to GBV, and community sensitization—which made them a natural focus of ASPIRE's capacity strengthening and support investments.

ASPIRE conducted a rapid assessment on the status of MGs in all schools in Balaka and Machinga in 2015, and later in Zomba in 2016. Most schools had MGs, though some were not functional and needed regrouping and strengthening. Most secondary schools had no MGs in place, and so ASPIRE asked these schools to form these groups. As per MoEST guidance, the MG composition is 10 mothers and 4 co-opted members (head teacher, village head, SMC and PTA representative, regardless of their sex). The MGs underwent various trainings over the four years that included roles and responsibilities, as well as basic counseling skills to allow MG members to assist the girl child to cope with the challenges that come along with adolescence. All the 537 primary and 80 secondary schools were reached. **A total of 1,234 MG members were trained across the three districts.**

As important influential voices, ASPIRE worked with MGs to provide important guidance and counseling to girls on the dangers and risks of sexual activity and strategies to avoid and mitigate peer and cultural pressures to have sex. MGs also followed up girls who dropped out and encouraged their readmission. Respondents in the performance evaluation noted that a

key ASPIRE accomplishment has been work with MGs to reinforce the readmission policy of 1993, which reversed the practice of expelling girls who become pregnant. Evaluation data found that MGs are now perceived to be an important community force for promoting attendance and readmission. MGs were trained on the provision of psychosocial support, especially to girls that had been readmitted. They provided group as well as one-on-one sessions, depending on need.

The MGs were also trained on making of reusable sanitary pads and Village Savings and Loans (VSL). They were encouraged to conduct IGA to develop special funds to support girls' education. The MGs used these funds to support OVCs with school fees, uniforms and school materials. The reusable pads they made were distributed to OVCs for free, and sold to those that could afford to buy, thus generating more funds to support OVCs. The groups were encouraged to form Auntie/Agogo clubs to support teen mothers. These aunties and agogos (grandmothers), encouraged girls to remain in school. They also helped teen mothers in taking care of the babies when the mother (teen mother) was in school.

Most of the OVC in ASPIRE's target schools received support from MGs that included school fees, uniforms, scholastic materials and counselling. In ASPIRE's final year, for example, over 16,000 OVC received these types of education and health services. All respondent groups in the 2017 performance evaluation lauded MGs for their role in educating girls on sexual and reproductive health, bringing girls back to school and sensitizing the community to the importance of girls' education.
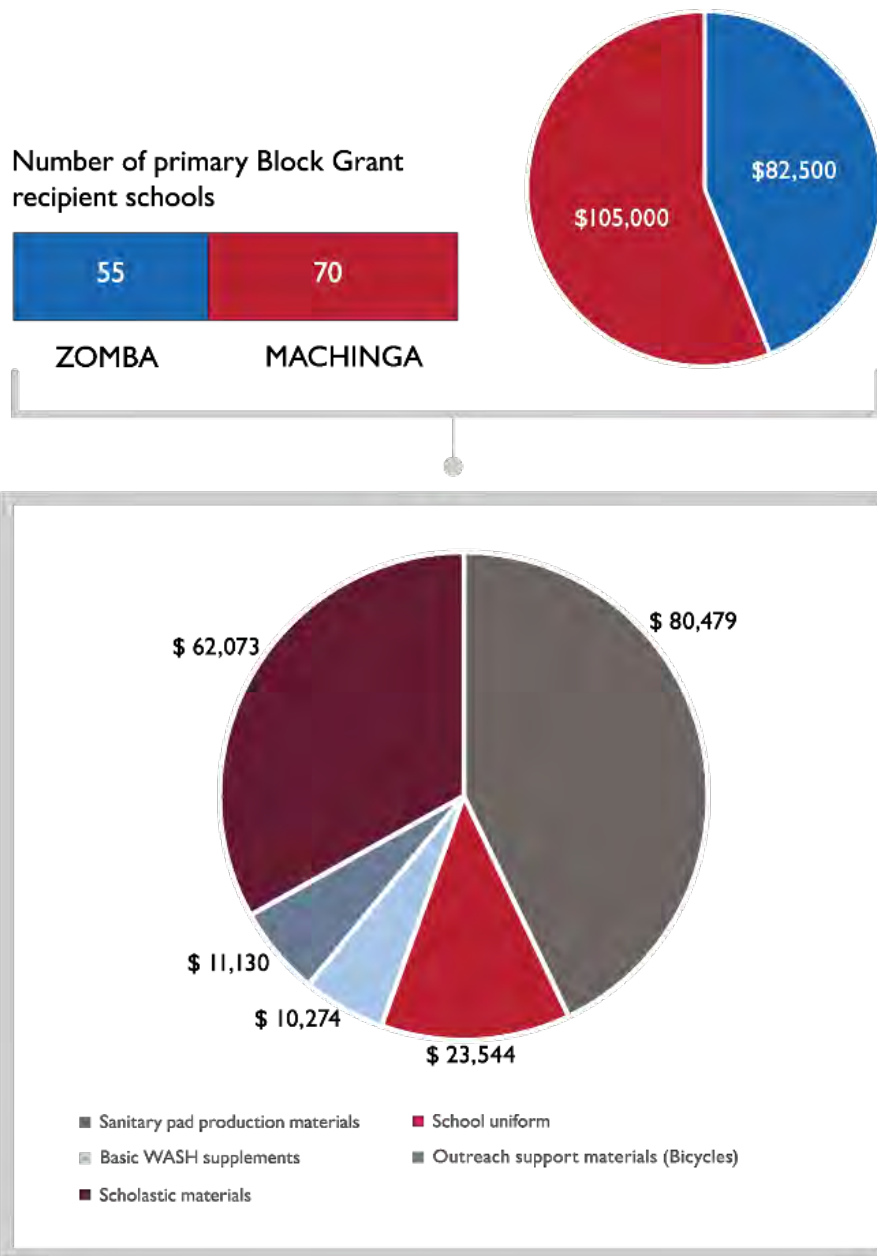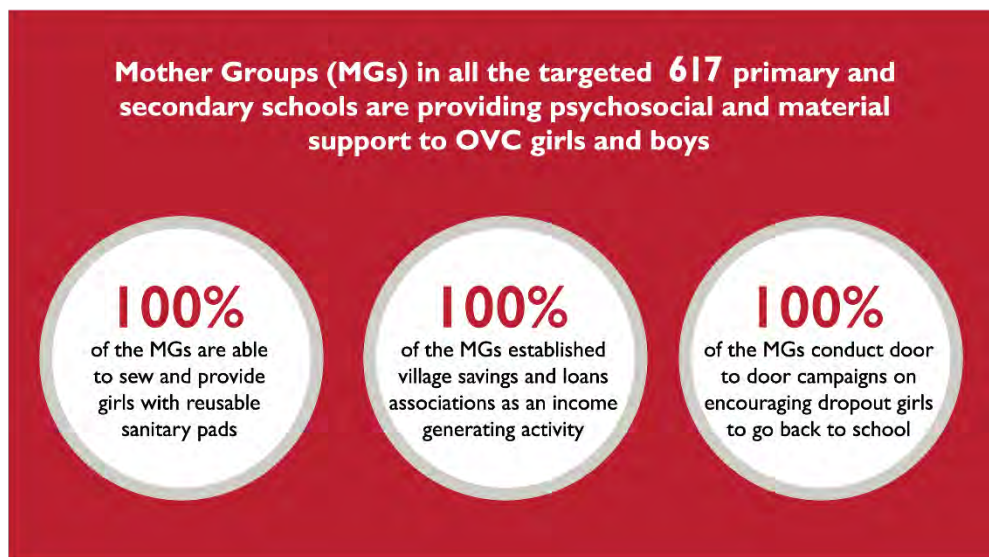
"We have so far managed to assist a total of 37 girls with soap, sanitary pads, exam fees, school uniforms and scholastic materials."- Mother Group member, Chimbwinda Primary School, Chilipa Zone, Zomba District

Figure 13. Mothers Group Results

During the evaluation's focus group discussions, female and male students most often reported MGs trained by ASPIRE as having the biggest influence on increasing their knowledge of sexual and reproductive health.

Female Role Models and Male Champions
The strengthening of MGs by ASPIRE was part of a larger effort to empower strategic girls' education advocates within schools and communities to positively influence girls themselves, as well as root community attitudes and cultural practices. This also included fostering FRM and male champions. ASPIRE trained FRMs help motivate girls to continue their education, serve as resource persons for MGs and school-clubs, and shift and change community perceptions on the importance of supporting girls education. ASPIRE worked with male champions to tackle deep-rooted gender and power imbalances in the communities, which are often the origin of many barriers and harmful practices to girls' education. ASPIRE's primary schools in Balaka, Machinga and Zomba

each identified a FRM and a Male Champion, who also supported any neighboring secondary schools.

ASPIRE developed a training manual adapted from the USAID's Girls Mentoring Resource Guide to train the FRMs. FAWEMA district members from the three target districts served as trainers, building off experience SC and FAWEMA had with the DFID-funded Keeping Girls in School program. The trainers were paired and delivered trainings at the zonal level. ASPIRE equipped 537 FRMs with knowledge and skills to mentor girls, provide guidance and counselling, and effectively work with other stakeholders within the district. Schools further identified 537 male champions, whom ASPIRE trained on communication skills and advocacy skills to promote issues of girls' education at community level and reinforce community behavioral change against GBV.

The introduction of DREAMS funding helped further strengthen the capacities of FRM and Male Champions (MC) in Machinga and Zomba, with Go Girls! Go Families! training. The Go Girls! Go Families! training[6] is aimed at building adults' skills to communicate with young people in order to prepare MGs, parents, caregivers and other concerned adults to better communicate with the young people in their lives about the unique needs, concerns and interests of adolescents. The training helps adults to be supportive and develop relationships with young people through role-modeling and helping adolescents in developing skills on growing up, sexuality, HIV/STI prevention and GBV. In 2017, ASPIRE trained 3,220 participants in Machinga and Zomba districts on Go Girls! Go Families! (20 people drawn per school, which included HT, SMC Chair, PTA Chair, Group Village Head, FRM, MC and MG members). The non-residential cluster level trainings were held for three days.

"ASPIRE has oriented us on the re-admission policy, and teen-mothers are able to come back to school, a thing which was not a practice before ASPIRE." -MG member from Misangu Primary School, Nsondole Zone, Zomba District

Across the three districts, these structures worked together to track teen mothers, nullify teen marriages and enroll the girls back into school. ASPIRE's district-based staff reported FRMs conducting guidance and counselling sessions with adolescent girls, including teen-mothers, covering HIV and other SRH messages. MGs and FRMs worked together to provide counselling and material support to readmitted girls in the target districts. Some readmitted girls in the target districts have been selected into secondary schools—a significant achievement for these girls. The FRMs ensured that the MGs themselves were functional, and providing support to girls, especially to those that are vulnerable.

Monitoring visits found that MGs and SMC members in many targeted schools constructed girls' change rooms to provide a healthy learning environment when they are menstruating. The Head Teacher for Nsunuzi Primary School in Balaka specifically cited the positive effect of new girls' change rooms. He explained: "Since inception of ASPIRE at our school, we have managed to construct a total of four change rooms and now adolescent girls are no longer absenting themselves during their menstruation as they are assured of privacy at the school."

MGs, FRM and MC across the districts also supported literacy activities in the schools, such as reading fairs and reading competitions, by providing resources and awarding best performing students with notebooks, pencils and pens.

During closeout meetings in Balaka, Machinga and Zomba districts, discussions revealed that male champions are still sensitizing communities, including the girls themselves, on their rights. The male champions promote girls' rights to education and health services. On girls' right to education, the male champions emphasize the readmission policy and availability of quality education in their respective target schools. On health rights, the male champions promote girls' access to YFHS, which includes utilization of the school-based referral system.

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[6] The Go Families! adult-child communication program emphasized the need for programming that gives adults the skills they need to build strong, nurturing relationships with their children and other adolescents in the community. This adult-child communication program component was developed to address adults' reluctance to discuss sexuality with children.

Engaging Traditional Leaders as Change Agents

ASPIRE made progress in reducing cultural barriers to girls' education, thanks in great part to work with traditional leaders as change agents. By the end of the first year of implementation, ASPIRE organized orientation sessions on its interventions for government field workers who included PEAs, HTs, District Community Development Officials (DCDO), Social Welfare Officials (SWO), Social Welfare Assistants (SWA), and CDAs. The government field workers then implemented community awareness meetings in year two and trained local change agents including teachers, chiefs, SMCs, PTAs, and faith leaders to implement community level initiatives to support girls' education. HT's worked with community stakeholders to develop girls' access and retention action plans.

Examples of action points:

- Checking on absenteeism
- Learner tracking of those found in video show rooms during school time
- Enforcement of by-laws
- Checking opening and closing time of initiation camps

Training for local change agents focused on the ASPIRE goals, and building capacity to implement village initiatives including establishment of YLM committees, WASH committees, VSL groups, collective planning and execution of girls' reading interventions, as well as formulation and enforcement of by-laws to improve girls' education and health. Examples of the by-laws established by communities after being sensitized by ASPIRE on importance of girls' education include:

- A parent shall ensure that his/her child is attending school without any hindrance and failure on his/her part to send the child to school shall be an offence.
- Cultural practices and domestic chores that hinder smooth attendance of classes by children shall be prohibited.
- Teen marriage shall be nullified by the chief.
- Parents of the teen mother to take responsibility of caring for the baby and allow the mother to go back to school.

ASPIRE repeated this cycle in subsequent years, following up the action plans to review their implementation status, as well as supporting development of sustainability strategies for maintaining the action planning and implementation process for increasing girls' access and retention. In 2018, ASPIRE reached community stakeholders at cluster level with closeout meetings to develop sustainability strategies for promoting girls' education in their respective schools.

One group of traditional leaders that received particular attention from ASPIRE are Senior Traditional Chiefs and District Initiation Counselors. In 2016, ASPIRE supported these leaders to supervise initiation camps (*Nsondo, Jando, and Chidontoto*) in all TAs within Balaka, Machinga and Zomba. The supervision team monitored times for the camp sessions to avoid collision with the school calendar; reviewed sanitation, hygiene and health for initiates and the camp, to prevent

"As community leaders we will ensure that the by-laws are adhered to since they are now functional so that people in this community support girl's education." – Community leader, Utale Zone, Balaka District

initiates from contracting diseases; and modified or eliminated harmful practices[7] previously practiced in camps to promote girls' education and health. ASPIRE review meetings for Initiation Counselors in Machinga and Zomba the following year to check progress on implementation of previous plans as well as check that initiation camps closed before the start of the 2017-2018 academic year. ASPIRE also monitored the sanitation improvements in initiation camps, elimination of harmful practices, linkage of camps and schools to ensure reading activities in camps, and linkage with SRH service providers for voluntary medical male circumcision to expedite healing and reduce time in the camps.

ASPIRE's 2017 performance evaluation found that ASPIRE has reduced cultural barriers to girls' education and health through policy advocacy at the national level, and at the local level, capacity building and operationalizing strategies that safeguard girls. It is, however, difficult to quantify the cumulative impact of this work, which is best communicated through examples and individual stories. Success stories at the end of this section and in annexes highlight examples of the impact of ASPIRE's work with traditional leaders.

Theatre for Development
Used successfully throughout Malawi by CRECCOM and other groups, Theatre for Development (TFD) is a culturally-relevant medium that helps communities develop awareness of key cultural and structural barriers to girls' education and identify how problems are related to one another and to social, political, economic and cultural

In Balaka in 2017, the Chancellor College TFD troupe members conducted a performance at Chisa Junior Primary School in Phalula zone. Action research conducted by the TFD troupe members revealed the following reasons as major contributors to girls' dropout at the school: poverty, inadequate female role models, unavailability of water source, and long distance to Makande and Nziza full primary schools, as learners have to transfer from Chisa junior primary school once they reach upper classes.

In an interface through the TfD performance, district stakeholders from the Community Development, Education and Water Development Departments deliberated with the community and agreed on the following: promote village savings and loans to increase households' income, post female teachers to the area so that they are utilized as role models for the girls, upgrade Chisa junior primary to a full primary school, and provide alternative clean and potable water. The performance was attended by an audience of 361 school community stakeholders.

factors. There are several steps to TFD: information gathering and analysis, play creation, performance, and follow-up. ASPIRE used TFD performances as a key strategy for building awareness on importance of girls' education and addressing cultural barriers to girls' education.

ASPIRE identified local youth drama groups in Balaka and Machinga and later in Zomba. ASPIRE engaged the TFD troupe from Chancellor College (University of Malawi - Arts students) to train the local youth drama groups to conduct theatre performances. The main objective of the training was to equip local actors with knowledge about the ASPIRE Activity and skills for

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[7] In some tribes, for example, traditional initiation practices and rituals often promote elderly men "inducting" young adolescent girls who have commenced menstruation on sexual intercourse.

82,640

Total people attended ASPIRE community mobilization events focused on issues related to adolescent girls

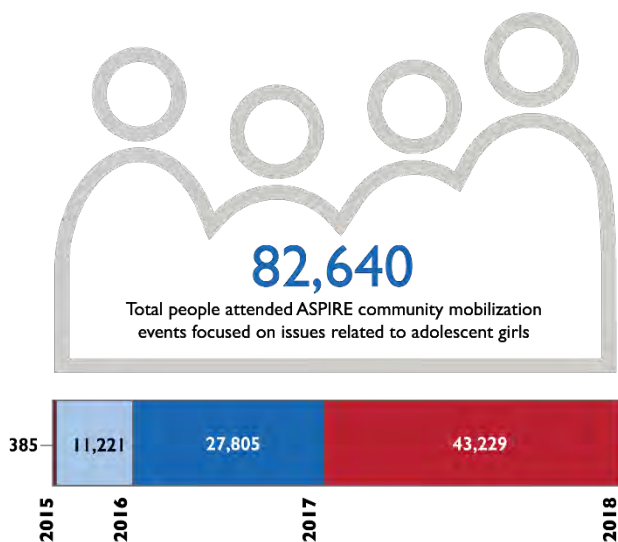| 385	11,221	27,805	43,229
2015	2016	2017	2018

Figure 14. Community Mobilization Results

incorporating this information into participatory drama. Thirty TFD drama groups (10 for each district) received trained. The drama clubs then produced action plans to guide their performances in their respective communities and promote girls' education.

These participatory drama performances engaged communities in deep discussions on girls' education, and addressed several issues depending on the impact areas. The common challenges affecting girl's education and health were teen pregnancies, poor performance of girls in schools, high dropout, parental negligence, and preference for boys' education as compared to girls. During the performances, community members looked into the issues hindering girls' education in their area and came up with action plans to help curb the challenges, including formulation and reinforcement of village by-laws to promote girls' education and health.

Coordination of Girls Education Stakeholders

Throughout the four years of implementation, ASPIRE worked to amplify its efforts, by advocating and coordinating government and civil society actors at the district level to advance girls education. ASPIRE facilitated Girls Education Network (GEN) and District Education Network (DEN) meetings in Balaka, Machinga and Zomba districts. Generally, the meetings aimed at sharing best practices, challenges and any other key issues affecting girls' education in the specific districts. Additionally, the meetings were utilized as platforms for mapping out key areas of integration amongst partners implementing girls' education interventions. Advocacy issues were tabled and discussed in detail for possible consideration. These included the significance of strengthening school and community structures in support of girls' education and raising awareness on the re-admission policy. One key issue that was discussed in DEN meetings in Machinga was the district's failure to achieve the recommended number of 60 learners being selected to National Secondary Schools in each academic year. In 2017, only 25 learners were selected to National Secondary Schools. District Education Officials in Machinga were encouraged to ensure that more learners (especially girls) are being selected to secondary school. When PEPFAR activities phased out in Balaka, the DEN meeting in the district was utilized as a platform for discussing key close out strategies, such as ensuring that the identified OVC girls have been transferred to other implementing partners for continued support.

LEADER KNOWS STATUS AND ENCOURAGES OTHERS

Village Head uses school health day to champion HIV/AIDS testing

Photo Credit: ASPIRE Activity

A male nurse from Machinga DHO addresses learners at Kamwendo primary school in Machinga

"Today my children are six years old, since realizing my sero status, I have taken it as a priority to be on the fore-front to bring awareness to young girls in my community to go for HIV testing and know their status."

— *Esther Bizwick,*

Kamwendo GVH

27-year old Esther Bizwick is a mother of twins, a boy and a girl. She is one of the youngest females to act as a group village head Kamwendo in Traditional Authority Sitola in Machinga district. She was saddened, a year after giving birth to her twins, to realize that she was diagnosed HIV positive and that the female child came out positive, while the boy child tested negative.

"Today my children are six years old, since realizing my sero status, I have taken it as a priority to be on the fore-front to bring awareness to young girls in my community to go for HIV testing and know their status. Using my position as a Group Village Head (GVH Kamwendo's heir) I grab every opportunity to talk to young people that comes my way," said Esther when ASPIRE interviewed her.

During a school health day at Kamwendo Primary School, organized by ASPIRE to bring services and information to learners on HIV testing services and gender-based violence prevention, she came out in the open to tell learners and community members to embrace her example and be champions of change.

Such a public disclosure is not easy for a young lady of authority to do. She had even struggled before to tell her girl, 6 years old, of her status. "I had really struggled to tell my child, she would go like why am I not getting healed and am forced to take these drugs daily?"

With courage, Esther finally revealed the status of her daughter who at 6 received the news with a broken heart. Esther leaned on mentor teachers and female role models at the school to help provide her daughter with needed psycho-social support. These teachers report Esther's daughter is coming to school without fear or self-blame, just like any other kid, and the school will continue to support her in her studies.

Esther firmly believes that one way to curb discrimination is to defy the odds, wear a brave face, and be truthful in one's dealings as one could be to themselves. In this way, she is proving a leader for those in her community.

WASH in Schools

Poor WASH conditions are one of the greatest structural barriers to girls' education access and retention, particularly once they reach adolescence and begin menstruating. If girls face challenges to manage their periods at school – they may start missing days or drop out. A healthy, safe, and gender-sensitive school environment is one in which girls have access to safe drinking water; clean, safe and private toilet access; hand washing facilities with soap; and private spaces to wash sanitary pads. The national 2008 WASH survey in schools found only 24% of Balaka schools and 14% of Machinga schools had adequate quantity and quality of sanitary facilities for girls (MOEST, 2009). It was clear during the design of ASPIRE that the Activity would not be able to meet the full WASH facility needs in the target districts, but that strategic focus of construction would support schools with greatest infrastructure needs, and that capacity building, community mobilization, and key hygiene messaging could improve WASH standards and hygiene practices across all schools. Thanks to ASPIRE's WASH inputs, 38,301 girls have access to improved sanitations facilities.

38,301

Girls with access to improved sanitation facilities as a result of USG assistance
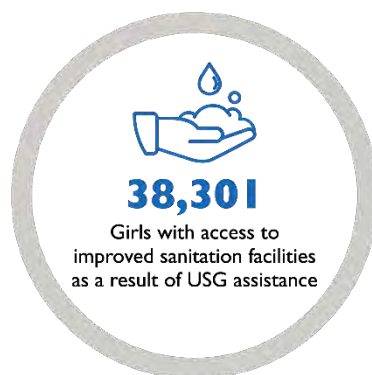
WASH Facilities

ASPIRE conducted a rapid assessment of WASH facilities in all the schools in the three target districts as part of baseline efforts. This occurred in 2015 for Balaka and Machinga, and in 2016 in Zomba. Results found that 54 schools did not have a water source. The MOEST's WASH in School standards recommend a latrine to student ratio of 1:60. No schools had less than 100 students per latrine, many schools had more than 200 students per latrine, and the worst had more than 500 students per latrine. ASPIRE worked with district officials in each district to identify schools with the highest ratios, and these were selected for girls' latrine construction.

ASPIRE constructed girls' latrine blocks in 43 (14 Balaka, 15 Machinga, 14 Zomba) schools. A total of 258 drop holes were constructed in the 43 schools. Each six-roomed sanitation block included four standard drop hole rooms, one drop hole room for physically challenged students, and one drop hole room that provides MHM facilities. Each block also included seven urinal chambers, designed to provide more light so girls would not be afraid to use them. The design located the hand washing facility outside the block, but allowing the water to pass through and drain the urinals, thereby cleaning and reducing smell.

ASPIRE hired local contractors to build the latrines. Management of local contractors brought mixed results and experiences for the ASPIRE team. In one case, work had to be redone, in part, to arrive at the expected result. School management committees, school staff members and the entire school community at each of the selected schools were sensitized and assigned responsibility to support monitoring construction, safe guard materials, as well as ensure adherence to safety measures for students and all those involved in the construction work. Despite efforts to enlist community members to support the construction monitoring, significant ASPIRE staff time was spent monitoring and following up with local contractors. ASPIRE received some feedback from school communities that were disappointed that ASPIRE invested in girls' latrines, but not boys, which is important to consider in future USAID activities.

Buckets for handwashing provided to **100%** of target schools

In addition to construction of latrines, ASPIRE distributed nine buckets with taps per school in all the targeted schools. The buckets are used for hand washing as well as drinking water points. The buckets were placed in strategic places outside the classrooms so that the leaners do not walk long distances to access water during classes and recess. This reduced congestion at the water points.

ASPIRE's WASH construction was not without challenges, but it did greatly improve the school environments and experiences of girls in the schools that received new latrines. ASPIRE's external midterm performance evaluation conducted qualitative interviews and group discussions and most respondents cited the new hygiene facilities as contributing to reducing structural barriers for girls. Results from the 2017 performance evaluation's Knowledge, Attitudes and Practices (KAP) survey found 88 percent of upper primary girls and 95 percent of secondary female students reported coming to school when they were menstruating. The ASPIRE team conducted a KAP survey in late 2018, and found that in the construction schools sampled, most (74%) of respondent schools noticed an improvement in girls attendance after construction of the latrines.[8] Nevertheless, the need for WASH infrastructure investment remains high in ASPIRE's target districts and throughout Malawi, and will continue to require investment moving forward.

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[8] 39 out of 43 schools that received construction were included in the sample.

Girls' attendance improved after latrine construction reported by **74%** of respondent schools

Source: 2018 KAP Perception Survey of Construction Schools

Figure 15. Attendance Change in WASH Construction Schools

Menstrual Hygiene Management

ASPIRE increased the availability of MHM supplies and information for girls in target schools through several strategies. The most successful and sustainable strategy was training MGs to sew reusable pads. Commercially available MHM commodities are prohibitively expensive for most girls, while traditional use of rags and similar methods can be difficult to manage at school and may not adequately meet girls' needs. Production of reusable sanitary pads is one way of improving provision of MHM commodities, thereby reducing absenteeism among adolescent girls. ASPIRE trained MGs in secondary schools on making of reusable sanitary pads and provided them with sewing machines and start up materials, which included flannel, cotton cloth, waterproof cloth, sewing threads, a pair of scissors, and measuring tape. The approach of training MGs to produce reusable pads is also an IGA for the MGs, as the returns are used to support the OVCs with school materials like exercise books, pens, reusable sanitary pads at no cost and uniforms. Not only was this approach effective in providing girls with MHM supplies, it also is one of the most sustainable investments made by the ASPIRE Activity, making it a best practice.

From the 2017 Performance Evaluation:
"When asked about ASPIRE's most important accomplishments and best practices overall, school staff and community groups highlighted ASPIRE's activities in girls' hygiene and sanitation. Community members cited the important role of mothers' groups in teaching girls about menstrual hygiene and why they should stay in school during their menstrual cycles, as well as their role in making and selling sanitary pads for the girls…Teachers, head teachers, and PTA members highlighted that the reason ASPIRE's hygiene activities were best practices was their sustainable nature. Respondents noted that even if ASPIRE ends, they now have facilities for girls to use at school when they are menstruating. They also reported that because mothers' groups are producing the sanitary pads locally and using it as a business model, this practice could be continued well into the future."

With the introduction of DREAMS block grants, ASPIRE took the opportunity to provide training to the MGs in the recipient primary schools on reusable pad production. ASPIRE then extended the training in the final year to all primary schools in Machinga and Zomba.

ASPIRE contracted with trained MGs to produce 3,000 reusable sanitary pads that ASPIRE distributed to primary schools in Machinga and Zomba to be used for emergencies, along with painkillers. Fifteen selected MGs each produced 200 pads.

SC also facilitated a gift-in-kind donation of 2,600 reusable sanitary kits from Heart to Heart International. These kits were distributed to 2,600 OVC girl learners in Balaka.

The GIK items were distributed in Balaka because Balaka did not benefit from DREAMS funding and the primary school MGs in Balaka did not receive training and materials to produce reusable pads.

ASPIRE also provided girls with MHM information. Girls in secondary schools in Balaka, Machinga and Zomba all received the English version of the UNICEF MHM booklet. The booklets were subsequently translated into Chichewa, and ASPIRE delivered 25,000 copies to primary and secondary schools in Machinga and Zomba.

"We are able to produce at least 25 sanitary pads in a week and these pads are being distributed to vulnerable adolescent girls for free while at the same time being sold at a relatively lower price to the women." – Mother Group member for Nkalizi Primary School

**Gift in Kind (GIK)
menstrual hygiene management kits from
Heart to Heart International**

2017 — **2,000 kits** — Distributed by ASPIRE to adolescent girls → **45 Schools in Balaka**

2018 — **600 kits** — Distributed by ASPIRE to adolescent girls → **21 Schools in Balaka**

Kits include: two pads, a small cup and container for use in the change room, a puberty book for girls, a whistle for protection, a torch for studies, tablets of soap and sachets of powdered soap for washing the pads.

Figure 16. ASPIRE Gifts-in-Kind Summary

WASH Trainings

ASPIRE's WASH capacity building efforts focused on school WASH committees, school health clubs, and HSAs. ASPIRE formed WASH committees in each of the target schools to lead and promote WASH in schools. Membership of these committees included four community members (two female, and two male), the school's HT, sanitation teacher, two learners (one female, one male), and SMC and PTA representatives. ASPIRE trained these committee members on management of school WASH facilities. Specific training topics included general cleanliness; hygiene of latrines; urinal/latrine construction, maintenance, and rehabilitation; and MHM. Training placed a particular emphasis on the construction of MHM facilities in schools, and mobilizing community support. As a result, many schools in Machinga, Balaka and Zomba have constructed MHM facilities using locally available resources. Many schools also benefitted from new or improved latrines from community contributions.

ASPIRE also trained these committees to ensure that available water sources at school remain functional at all times and that the water from these sources is safe to drink. ASPIRE trained the committees on collection, storage and treatment of drinking water. Safe drinking water is a priority so that the learners are protected from water borne diseases. WASH committees later received training on proper chlorination of water to ensure that the water is properly treated and safe for drinking.

ASPIRE later provided WASH trainings for peer leaders of school health clubs. The learners in these clubs work hand in hand with members of school WASH committees in sanitation and hygiene

8 adults and **2** students from **100%** of WASH committees trained in three Key Hygiene Practices

promotion and management in schools. ASPIRE WASH training reached 1,884 learners in Balaka, 1,641 learners in Machinga, and 2,120 learners in Zomba.

ASPIRE also trained HSAs to provide support in advancing the improvement of WASH in the schools, by working with the trained school WASH committees. The HSAs provide technical guidance as well as conduct health talks in the schools, providing a sustainable source of technical support to WASH in schools.

The 2017 performance evaluation data showed that 88 percent of primary students and 94 percent of secondary students reported having clean water for hand washing. However, 80 percent of primary and 72 percent of secondary students reported that the water pumps were sometimes broken. Importantly, teachers and community members reported that improved hand-washing facilities encourage girls to use the toilets and increase their attendance rates. ASPIRE's 2018 KAP survey randomly sampled over 200 schools across the three districts. ASPIRE active support to schools ended after the completion of the 2017-2018 academic year in June 2018. Results from this survey in October 2018 found that nearly all schools still maintained a functioning WASH committee, and the large majority of schools had water and facilities for handwashing.

"The WASH activities have been good; we will make sure that the WASH committees remain functional so that this continues. There has really been improvement in the school health generally."- WASH committee member, Likwenu Primary School, Boma Zone, Machinga District
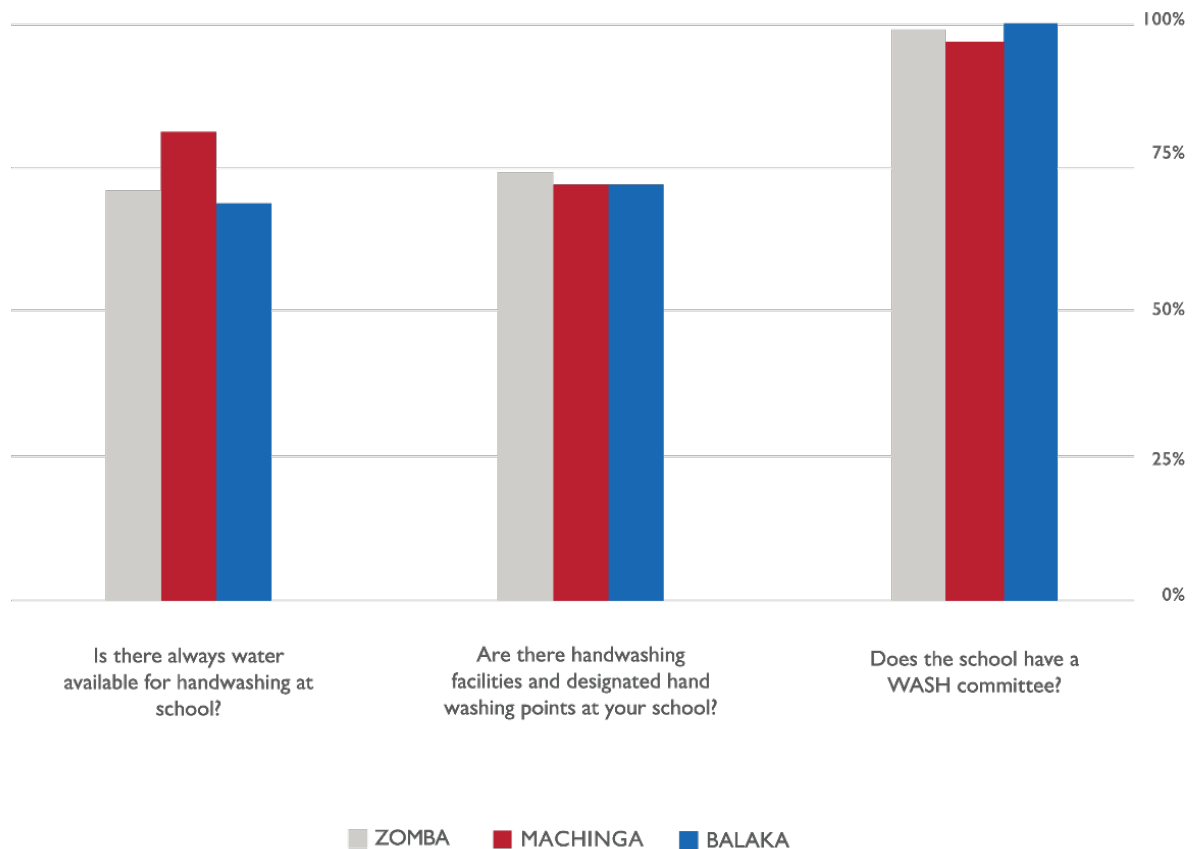
Figure 17. Results from ASPIRE KAP/WASH Survey in October 2018

Promotion of Key Hygiene Practices

Beginning in 2017, ASPIRE took advantage of the SHDs in Machinga and Zomba to disseminate 3KHP messages to the learners and school communities: to always wash hands before and after eating, and after using latrines, and to consistently use latrines and safe water. These messages were disseminated through performances that included TfDs, songs, poems and dances.

ASPIRE also promoted good hygiene practices through the launch of school WASH competition in all three districts in the 2017-2018 academic year. The competitions aimed at promoting sanitation and hygiene as the schools strived to win the competition by maintaining WASH standards and practices. ASPIRE developed a checklist

to provide guidance and standardize the monitoring. Schools were visited twice to monitor the status of WASH activities: the first visit was used as a baseline, and the second visit showed the improvements made by schools using the checklist. Three-member monitoring teams comprised of PEAs, CDAs, and HSAs visited schools. The three schools with top scores in each zone were identified as winning schools and were presented with awards (mops, scrubbing brushes, cartons of soap). The winning schools at each zone then competed at district level, and the three top schools were identified as district-level winners. These schools received cartons of soap, water dispensers with filters, mops and the top school received a trophy.

IMPROVED WASH FACILITIES EMPOWER FEMALE LEARNERS

New latrines and secure MHM room keep girls in school during menstrual periods

Photo Credit: ASPIRE Activity

Agnes posing at the new latrine.

"Now that we have modern latrines and handwashing facilities, we are practicing good hygiene all the time."

— *Agnes, primary school student in Balaka*

Like a normal student, Agnes arrived at school in high spirits, eager to learn. All of a sudden, she had stomach cramps. She noticed blood stains on her skirt. She is just thirteen and didn't know what was happening. Older classmates realized she was menstruating and they decided to take her out to assist her manage the menstruation. They thought of taking her into some private room at the school. Unfortunately, there were none at the school. They struggled to look for some place and eventually opted for some nearby bushes. After an hour, they decided to go back into the class, but Agnes couldn't and decided to go home. She was ashamed and didn't come to school again for the rest of the week.

Agnes, a standard 8 student at Chimbumbu Primary School, recalled this story and explained this was the situation that she faced whenever she would start menstruating. "The thought of a boy walking on me when inside the toilet was shameful. I did not even think of going to school during menses. We did not have change rooms and sharing the toilet with boys made it difficult to change pads. I used to stay at home until I finished my menses. I used to miss a lot of lessons and I did badly during weekly test or end of term tests," she lamented.

Girls at the school did not have any private room to help them change and wash when they were menstruating. Many would stay back from school to avoid the shame. It is a known fact that the absence of reliable and secure sanitary facilities in schools negatively affects the teaching-learning process. Research has also proven that the absence of latrines in schools is one of the leading factors for high drop out and absenteeism among female students.

ASPIRE embarked on pit latrines construction in primary schools in Balaka, Machinga and Zomba to minimize challenges faced by female students. Chimbumbu is one of the 14 beneficiary schools in Balaka district.

Things have changed now for girls at Chimbumbu. The MHM room is secure, fitted with a mirror glass and girls can now dispose of used sanitary pads and clean themselves whenever the need arises. The urinal blocks minimize congestion in the toilets. Girls can now easily take part in outdoor activities, as they feel much more comfortable during their menstrual period. "Now that we have modern latrines and handwashing facilities, we are practicing good hygiene all the time", explained Agnes.

ASPIRE constructed 84 pit latrines and 98 urinal cubicles in 43 schools across Balaka, Machinga and Zomba districts. Over 38,000 girls have benefitted from access to improved sanitation facilities as a result.

Cross-Cutting Components

Performance Monitoring

The performance of ASPIRE was monitored according to the Activity Monitoring and Evaluation Plan (AMEP) (see Annex 1 for the life of activity performance indicator data). Over the four year period of performance several indicators were changed, revised or dropped due to mission, or more often, funding stream direction (such as changes to PEPFAR indicators). Annex 1 reflects the history of ASPIRE indicators. The frequent changes posed challenge to the comparability of data across years, and also incurred significant staff time and training when new indicator changes necessitated changes in tools and data collection procedures.

ASPIRE developed a suite of data collection tools to facilitate reporting by key structures. Notable tools are the school data collection tool, MG data collection tool, learner re-admission tool, and youth literacy movement tools. These tools were used to collect data on a monthly basis. Data were entered in the web-based ASPIRE database.

School records such as school enrolment forms, attendance registers, examination result books and other related records were used to collect data on a number of output and outcome indicators. The frequency of data collection ranged from termly to annual (academic year).

Findings from ongoing monitoring and assessments were used to make activity management decisions to improve activity performance through corrective and/or additional action. Some of the actions taken included, but not limited to, developing new strategies and activities, supervisory support, re-allocation of resources/supplies and capacity building. Results were also shared back with the grassroots stakeholders to enhance efficiency, ownership and sustainability.

To ensure that the data collected in the activity was of highest quality and in compliance with USAID Data Quality Standards, ASPIRE instituted and

implemented a number of mechanisms such as the introduction of Quality Benchmarks that ensured quality delivery of some of the ASPIRE key activities such as TFDs and trainings for teachers. USAID conducted data quality assessments (DQAs) on several occasions, which led to changes of the indicators and provided guidance on the implementation of its activities. ASPIRE also conducted DQAs at partner organizations to provide guidance on their implementation as well as data collection and management.

As ASPIRE had small scale WASH construction, the team developed an Environmental Mitigation and Monitoring Plan (EMMP) to guide the procedures and monitoring processes that ensured mitigation of hazards that come with construction.

External Performance Evaluation

USAID contracted EnCompass LLC to conduct an external performance evaluation of ASPIRE. Conducted 2.5 years after ASPIRE began, the evaluation established the activity's progress against its objectives, proposed adaptations for the final year, and captured lessons for application in future girls' empowerment, health, and education programming in Malawi. Primary source quantitative and qualitative data were collected in June and July 2017, and are supported with activity monitoring data. Quantitative tools comprised a six-task reading assessment; a KAP survey questionnaire for learners; a structured head teacher questionnaire; and a school-based checklist. These tools were based on ASPIRE's baseline. Qualitative methods drew on appreciative techniques, using key informant interviews and focus group discussions to gain a holistic

understanding of stakeholders' experiences.

Strategic Partnerships and Collaboration

USAID, through its country development cooperation strategy, advocates for an integrated approach to programming that concentrates resources geographically where and when feasible. The following strategic partnerships and collaboration contributed to this approach over the four years of the Activity.

SEGREM Activity

ASPIRE worked collaboratively with the Strengthening Early Grade Reading in Malawi (SEGREM) Activity. This activity, just like ASPIRE, is located in Zomba, however, SEGREM is mainly responsible for production of literacy materials for the National Reading Program. SEGREM is an MIE-based literacy activity. Together, ASPIRE and SEGREM piloted teachers' ELP in Zomba, Machinga and Balaka through trainings. ASPIRE drafted the ELP materials and met the cost of expert and facilitator trainings. SEGREM personnel attended the trainings, but SEGREM paid costs for its personnel. SEGREM did not have to develop new ELP materials but benefited from what ASPIRE had already developed. ASPIRE worked together with SEGREM to monitor ELP cluster trainings and school-based peer work.

SIFPO2 Partners

ASPIRE held collaboration meetings with SIFPO2 partners (BLM for Zomba and PSI for Machinga) to strategize on the implementation of SHDs. SIFPO2 partners were important partners for ASPIRE as they provided services during implementation of SHDs. ASPIRE continued creating demand for services by bringing together schools at cluster level and providing health talks to create a platform for the partners to provide services to students. This enabled students' improved access to SRH services, as they were closer to them. Among the services were contraceptives, individual and group counseling and HIV testing services. SIFPO2 funded their own activities and worked with ASPIRE sharing the cost. SHDs also provided an opportunity for referral and linkages, since teachers were able to refer students that required services from the providers.

One Community

ASPIRE collaborated with USAID's One Community Activity in ensuring that girls return to school. One Community is also engaging with the MGs to promote girls to return to school, especially girls that are in the community-based girls clubs established by One Community. ASPIRE shared with One Community the LSE materials developed by ASPIRE, as well as materials for the after school health clubs.

Dignitas International

During SHDs, ASPIRE worked with Dignitas International by involving youth living positively with HIV during the SHDs. These youth are termed as expert clients and were utilized by ASPIRE as guest speakers. In addition, DIGNITAS also provided and supported testing services and referred

students found HIV+ to their teen clubs.

DREAMS of St Edigio

During SHDs, ASPIRE worked with expert teens and expert clients from DREAMS of St Edigio; these expert teens are available at GVH level.

FHI 360

ASPIRE made use of the education and training coordinators from FHI 360, who had focused on provision of information on girl education, as a source of motivation and encouragement for young girls in lower primary school to excel to secondary schools. Central to their approach was the use of female role models from the same community, like female teachers, to motivate young learners and develop positive attitudes towards education.

ASPIRE shared the WASH manual with FHI360 which is used for training of school WASH committees.

Importantly, ASPIRE shared the list of students that were supported with block grants. This provided the opportunity for FHI 360 to continue paying school fees for the girls that had received bursaries for school feels under the ASPIRE block grants.

Village Reach

During SHDs, Village Reach disseminated information to learners about its existing *Chipatala cha pa Foni* project, which aims at keeping girls in school and reducing HIV infections among adolescents and young people. This is a platform where adolescents can get correct answers on the questions they have around SRH, HIV and GBV.

YONECO, Village Reach and Girl Effect

During the implementation of SHDs, ASPIRE worked with YONECO, which gave talks on GBV and talked about the hotline (116) that students can call when they have been abused. Village Reach also had an opportunity to talk about Chipatala Chapafoni so that students can also call to get correct information. Girl Effect also participated, and talked about the radio programs they air to encourage students to listen and learn.

Collaboration Meetings Between DREAMS Core Partners (ASPIRE and One C) and DREAMS IC Partners (FHI360, CAMFED and BADILIKA)

Partners implementing DREAMS activities in schools held meetings to align the work, focused on:

- Strengthening the collaboration to ensure cost effectiveness of the projects that are being funded by USAID, and are co-locating in the impact areas.
- Avoiding duplication of similar benefits to beneficiaries from the different partners.

ASPIRE shared the DREAMS referral tools with FHI360, CAMFED and BADILIKA. During the meetings, the partners also discussed ways of procuring reusable sanitary pads from MGs. Since ASPIRE trained MGs on making of reusable sanitary pads, other partners procuring pads could buy from the MGs as a way for the groups to support OVCs and empowering the MGs.

Lessons and Recommendations

Integrated Programming

ASPIRE was positively defined by its cross-sectoral, girl-focused approach to programming. Integrated projects like ASPIRE have the potential to significantly impact beneficiaries, but require greater labor, management and communication efforts from both USAID and implementers. The experience of ASPIRE showed that cross-sector (and cross-team) collaboration is facilitated by combining funding streams. However, separate funding timelines per stream are important parameters that can affect planning and spending, and need to be clearly understood (i.e. ASPIRE accelerated DREAMS spending, and lowered OVC spending, which then later affected OVC allocations). To improve coordination and communication on cross-sectoral activities in the future, USAID should consider limiting the number of staff who communicate and make requests to the implementer, and channeling all communications through point person(s). Also, organizing internal (USAID) coordinating meetings may help prevent the sending of mixed messages to the implementer.

The Malawi government and USAID both clearly recognize that evidence-based, contextually designed school health and WASH programs can contribute to education sector goals.[9] However, ASPIRE's experience found the education and health sectors approach school-level work with very different operating expectations and

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[9] Sarr B, Fernandes M, Banham L, Bundy D, Gillespie A, McMahon B, Peel F, Tang KC, Tembon A and Drake L (2017) The Evolution of School Health and Nutrition in the Education Sector 2000–2015 in sub-Saharan Africa. Front. Public Health 4:271. doi: 10.3389/fpubh.2016.00271

assumptions. For example, expectations around club leadership and participation is different when the clubs are school-based than when community-based. In addition, there are different priorities and vocabulary in health and education, which sometimes invite miscommunication. If USAID continues to pursue cross-sector programming like ASPIRE, which is encouraged, USAID should consider advocating with the GOM for harmonized policies that support adolescents' welfare regardless of sector.

Finally, SHDs and the school-based referral system for Youth-Friendly Service Providers showed that the school is an effective entry point for health service providers to reach adolescents, thereby supporting increased access to health services. ASPIRE identified partners with required skills to provide services. This helped to bring services closer to the schools thereby promoting access to health and social services. This was especially important for students in underserved areas such as the Lake Chilwa Islands. Continued donor funding to this type of programming is encouraged.

Basic Education Programming

Unlike for early grades, there are no benchmarks for reading performance in upper primary school, making it difficult to objectively assess performance of learners on literacy. This was a challenge noted in the performance evaluation. The lack of grade-level reading benchmarks for Chichewa and English in the upper primary levels means that reading assessment development (both by ASPIRE, and by EnCompass) was not guided by standards agreed upon by experts. Therefore, also, consideration should

be given when interpreting results as to whether passages are an accurate reflection of grade-level expectations.

As discussed earlier, data from the 2017 performance evaluation showed that upper primary students (in standards 5 and 6), on average, are reading both English and Chichewa fluently, but also showed low comprehension scores, There is still work to develop and deliver practical models to help translate fluent reading into reading comprehension. USAID should consider advocating for the establishment of benchmarks for upper primary literacy. Establishing these standards would assist in the design and measurement of future programming in this area.

Reflecting on the critical shift in language of instruction in the upper grades, USAID might also consider future research to examine the link between improved teacher ELP and student performance.

PEPFAR Programming

USAID's expectations for the outcome of PEPFAR-funded programming was changes in positive sexual and health-seeking behaviors. The MOEST would benefit from a process to clarify what they (and USAID and other donors) hope the curriculum can achieve related to ASRH outcomes, prioritize behaviors and skills that are most important, and determine what is truly amenable to change with a curriculum-based intervention. Investments in teacher CPD cannot fully compensate for, or overcome, the challenge of a government curriculum that isn't designed to change ASRH behaviors in the desired way. USAID should consider stronger advocacy for Life Skills curriculum revision, aligned to behavior change goals.

Goals related to behavior change may require programming approaches that extend beyond the types of school-based and community-based activities undertaken by ASPIRE. For example, NORC's recent baseline study for USAID's AMAA Activity in Machinga and Balaka districts suggests a disconnect between students' aspirations for education and timeline for marriage and child bearing, and practice. The baseline also found very biased gender attitudes. It is likely that ASPIRE has positively contributed to students' high educational aspirations. Future projects could benefit from matching ASPIRE's community mobilization approach and reach. At the same time, future investments by USAID to affect behaviors will need to consider new incentive structures and behavior change strategies that may fall outside of traditional EGR projects.

The introduction of DREAMS funded activities under ASPIRE also brought an expectation for collaboration with other DREAMS partners in the target districts. When multiple USAID projects are expected to collaborate, USAID should be clear at the planning stage of the expectations for all implementing partners, and ensure that collaborative activities appear in work plans of all implementing partners responsible.

WASH Programming

WASH infrastructure improvements were among most locally appreciated contributions of ASPIRE. Still, the WASH needs at Malawi's primary schools remains acute, and unfortunately expensive to address. ASPIRE's experience did show that local latrine construction through community contributions is feasible, but water point construction (bore holes) is still prohibitively expensive for communities. Just as USAID is boldly addressing secondary school infrastructure gaps, so too might USAID consider school-based WASH construction for significant investment. A key advocacy message from ASPIRE was to have MHM rooms at schools. While schools responded enthusiastically, it was observed that each group constructed as they saw fit, with some not hygienic as appropriate. It is therefore recommended that the MOEST develop a standard MHM room structure standard that can be constructed at low cost.

Monitoring and Evaluation

The ASPIRE Activity had 37 indicators at baseline, which increased to 56 in 2016, and then reduced to 46 later in 2016, and further reduced to 38 following the DQA in 2017. Only 12 indicators were maintained from baseline to present, 10 of which have most relevance. Much of this shift was driven by PEPFAR. Globally mandated shifts in indicators (i.e. PEPFAR) compromises missions' abilities to gather and report consistent data, as ASPIRE's experience showed.

ASPIRE contracted a local firm to conduct the baseline assessment at the start of implementation. The experience highlighted the need to ensure standards of quality when procuring local evaluation services is critical, requiring allocation of adequate budget, and rigorous terms of reference requirements and expectations. Moreover, USAID may wish to consider clarifying any mid-line and end-line evaluation expectations before baseline begins, which may help ensure comparability of data.

Local Capacities and Community Engagement

The imperative to support girls' education provides an opportunity for people in the community to work together. Different structures and stakeholders at community level are vital in progressing initiatives that support girls' education and supporting OVCs. When working with local stakeholders, however, it is important to consider the load on local government staff (i.e. PEAs), especially when projects of the same sector are co-located. During the four-year implementation period, ASPIRE frequently had to rearrange trainings and other activities around the availability of PEAs, who held significant responsibilities related to the NRP.

MGs are an important structure at community level in supporting girls' education. They can be strengthened to promote knowledge on sexual and reproductive health, bringing girls back to school, and sensitizing the community on the importance of girls' education. When trained and properly supported, MGs are capable of providing support and requirements to OVCs enabling them to attend and be retained in school. USAID should continue promoting and supporting the role of MGs in schools.