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ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF AFGHANISTAN  
MINISTRY OF EDUCATION

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# National Early Grade Reading Policy

MAY 9, 2018

## Foreword

I am grateful to almighty Allah that we have been able to develop this document that paves the way to improve education in the early grades. Given the developments in the field of education at various levels, it is imperative to pay sufficient attention to the early grades that lays the foundation to improved education in higher grades, up through the higher education. Reading in early grades has proven to be of paramount significance in education as it enables children to correctly read and understand the text they read. Building foundational reading skills will help students in higher grades to better understand other subjects.

The policy has been developed with the untiring efforts of the Ministry of Education staff and support of international experts. It is the first ever document in Afghanistan that focuses specifically on reading in early grades based on internationally accepted standards on reading and in line with the strategic goals of the MoE. The policy document herewith is to guide the MoE, school teachers and principals to implement a system that supports improved quality of education in early grades and notably enhances student learning.

I am pleased and optimistic that the development of this document will help the Ministry take solid steps towards improving the quality of education in the early grades. I would like to direct teachers, school principals and relevant officials to leave no stone unturned in implementation of this policy.

Finally, I would like to thank and appreciate the effort of all those involved in the development of this policy document. This document, as a national policy will help Afghan boys and girls to read, write and learn on their journey to becoming positive contributing citizens in the further development of Afghanistan.

Minister of Education of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan

## Acknowledgement

This policy has been developed through the invaluable support and efforts of the MOE Early Grade Reading Policy Taskforce. The EGR Taskforce was endorsed by the Deputy Minister for General Education who are individuals from different departments of the MOE including school teachers (see the list of members in Annex A). The Taskforce recognizes the technical contributions of experts from *Afghan Children Read* project supported by the USAID.

The EGR Policy Taskforce also recognizes the contributions and inputs from stakeholders from various organizations, parents, community members, school principals and teachers who provided helpful insights towards the enrichment of this policy document during the development process.

## ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ANDS	Afghanistan National Development Strategy
ANPDF	Afghanistan National Peace and Development Framework
DP	Development Partners
EGR	Early Grade Reading
EJSR	Education Joint Sector Review
GE	General Education
GIRoA	Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan
MDG	Millennium Development Goals
MOE	Ministry of Education
NESP	National Education Strategic Plan
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
UN	United Nations
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

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## 1. BACKGROUND

The Government of Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA) has set education as one of its top priorities since 2001 and has plans to improve access and quality of education. The Ministry of Education developed and implemented the first and second National Education Strategic Plan (NESP I-II) based on the UN's Millennium Development Goal (MDG) indicators on education, the Afghanistan National Development Strategy (ANDS) and the National Priority Programs (NPP) which included education as a top priority for the government to improve access, quality and transparency. The MoE subsequently developed the third National Strategic Plan (NESP III) based on the UN's Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) indicators which is reflected in the Afghanistan National Peace and Development Framework (ANPDF).

The MoE's drive for reforms has resulted in the need for a policy document to support the initiatives aimed at improving literacy in early grades as part of the national education policy development. The MoE formed a taskforce to formulate the National Early Grade Reading Policy that reinforces the government's initiatives to improve reading in early grades.

The government of Afghanistan can make decisions and develop plans that serve to improve the quality of education being provided and enhance the achievements of students in reading and writing in the early grades. Implementing this policy will also achieve gains in increasing student retention, improving the gender parity, lowering dropouts, and reducing absenteeism, among other positive benefits. Also, this policy document defines the path for teacher professional development and officials' capacity development, for EGR curriculum and learning materials, continuous assessment and build strong community engagement.

## 2. EGR Journey in Afghanistan

An important area that lays the foundation of a literate society is improved quality of education in the early grades. Economists from the World Bank have found that well-targeted programs at the early grades cost less and produce more dramatic and lasting results than education investments at any other level, if followed by good quality education for its positive effects to be sustained. Evidence shows that the quality of education is low in public primary schools in Afghanistan. Teachers do not receive proper on-the-job support; more than half of teachers do not have required qualifications; many teachers teach subjects, they are not qualified for; many children do not have access to complete sets of textbooks; teaching hours are short in many schools, and school administrators are not able to provide strong instructional leadership.

### 2.1. History

It is generally accepted that Afghanistan's education system during the late period of the monarchy (1960s) was in respectable shape. Primary education was taught using an effective curriculum that was accompanied by **colored textbooks**. Education in general

and particularly in the early grades was of good quality and undergoing further development and improvement. The major challenge during this period was equitable access to education and schools. During the period of Republic of Afghanistan (1973-1978), the education system, particularly the early grades, went through fresh developments in terms of access and quality. During this period, curriculum was reformed based on acceptable standards and new textbooks were printed and distributed. Access to education remarkably improved, however, equitable access to education remained a major challenge. During the period of Democratic Republic of Afghanistan and the Republic of Afghanistan (1978-1992), the only development in education was improvement in access to education, however, curriculum and textbooks were based on ideological and partisan norms which lost its national status. During the period of Interim Islamic State of Afghanistan and the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (1992-2001), Afghanistan's education system experienced its lowest level due to the civil war and the instability in the country. In 2001, Afghanistan established the first ever education system based on national and international standards and the country adopted a single-curriculum nationwide in line with the constitution, which entitles citizens to education as a basic right. During this period, progress has been made to improve education service delivery in Afghanistan wherein access and quality of education remarkably improved and the foundations of national and equitable education system was laid.

## 2.2. Achievements

The Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan has made progress with the support of the Development Partners (DPs) in rebuilding Afghanistan's education system. The number of children in early grades has risen almost nine-fold. Notable progress has been made in rebuilding schools and increasing overall enrolments from approximately 0.9 million students in 2001, almost none of them girls, to more than 9.2 million students in 1394 (2015) of which 39% are girls. New schools have been established in rural villages to reduce the walking distance from home. The number of schools has increased from 3,400 to 16,400. Over 8,000 schools have been constructed to provide an environment conducive to learning. School *Shuras* have played a key role in community participation in the education of children at the local level.

The MoE's approach to improving quality of education in primary grades has been to enhance student reading through teacher professional capacity development, improving the learning environment, development of standardized curriculum and mobilizing communities to encourage literacy. This has yielded a slight improvement through programs such as **EQUIP, GPE, STAGES, BEACON, PACE-A**. However, a broader, multi-facetted and multi-dimensional reform was required to improve learning in early grades. The MoE established a reading-centered approach to improve literacy in early grades in collaboration with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). An assessment was conducted to determine the level of student learning in early grades,

which showed that Grade 2 and 4 students in public schools, using Dari and Pashto as the language medium, struggle with reading comprehension.<sup>1</sup> The MoE's reforms in primary education **is** expected to achieve NESP III and the UN's SDG indicators for quality of education.

### 2.3.Challenges

Despite the progress made to improve education in Afghanistan, there is still need for development in the country's education sector. The early grades have seen low enrollment rates that contribute to large numbers of out of school children, diminished availability of textbooks, a gross decline of infrastructure and school environments, and the reliance on unqualified teachers to teach lower primary. These and other factors hinder students' learning achievement in early grades. A challenge is to develop improved data collection, reporting, and analysis especially in addressing differential performance across the country.

Approximately 50% of schools do not have usable buildings; 70% of school buildings lack surrounding walls, 30% of schools lack drinking waters 60% lack sanitation facilities, and 88% lack electricity. In addition, many schools in big cities are very crowded. The percentage of primary school repeaters in 2013 was 3.9% (4.1% boys 3.7% girls) constituting 220,000 students. As students move to higher grades the percentage of repeaters rises: from 1.5% in grade 1 to 6.3% in grade 6. Grade four, however, has the highest percentage of repeaters is 7.4%. This could be explained by the fact that when students reach grade four they transition from early grade learning to exposure to science subjects (increase in the number of subjects) and the exams become the primary means of placing students. Only 6 out of 10 students who start in grade one reach at grade 6 and of those who do, only 63 % pass their exams, 91% of whom transit to secondary level. Improved pre and in-service training of teachers are some of the measures that MOE has adopted to address the low internal efficiency.<sup>2</sup>

### 2.4.Opportunities

The GIROA has planned to address most of the challenges through implementation of the NESP III and programs run by the Donor Partners to improve access to schools, availability of textbooks, conditions of the learning environments, capacity and qualifications of teachers, and to reduce the number of out of school children in rural and urban areas. The priority of the government is to complete the building of more schools, to improve the quality and relevance of programs, and to better prepare graduates for productive work. The MoE's strategy, as reflected in the NESP III, aims to build on three key components to strengthen education service delivery. These are 1) Quality and Relevance, 2) Equitable Access, and 3) Efficient and Transparent Management. Through these three pillars, the

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<sup>1</sup> EGRA IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS OF AFGHANISTAN: 2016 EGR General Education (GE) Results in Afghanistan

<sup>2</sup> Education for All National Review 2015



GIRoA plans to increase the currently low primary attendance and improve secondary school enrolments especially for poor and disadvantaged children in rural areas where only 21% of girls and 43% of boys attend school. It will streamline MoE operations, improving the efficiency and harmonization of donor funding and strengthen program management.

The considerable demand for education places it as a priority of the new government. To respond to this priority, the government needs to urgently: complete the building of more schools and equip them adequately; improve the quality, relevance and accessibility of educational programs and services; and better prepare graduates for productive work. In January 2016, H.E President Ashraf Ghani sent the strong message, welcomed and accepted by Development Partners, that a fundamental change in approach to education is needed. Public perceptions of performance in the education system have a direct impact on the confidence it places in the government. The President and government leadership acknowledge, therefore, the need to rebuild trust in Afghanistan's education service delivery through new forms of participation, transparency and a focus on results. The sector efficiency and contribution to economic growth urgently needs to be improved.

This policy serves as a foundation to improving reading in early grades ultimately contributing towards improvement of the education sector, in general. Through implementation of this policy, the education sector will witness improvements in quality of education in the country.

### 3. EARLY GRADE READING POLICY

The EGR Policy provides essential guidance to the Government of Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, through the Ministry of Education, to underpin policy decisions, the development of plans and the allocation of resources. It serves to improve the teaching and learning of reading and writing in the early grades as a fundamental skill needed to advance learner achievement across their years of schooling. Implementing this policy is expected to influence increases in student retention, improve the gender parity, lower dropout rates, and reduce absenteeism, among other positive benefits. Furthermore, this policy document defines three aspects critical to the success of this educational approach: 1) instituting a path for the professional development of teachers and other education officials that includes a well-grounded knowledge in the EGR curriculum and learning materials, 2) increasing the budget, allocations and disbursement of resources to improve EGR classroom practice, and 3) mobilizing strong community engagement to promote EGR in schools and at home.

#### 3.1. Purpose and Rationale of the Policy


The Afghanistan National Early Grade Reading (EGR) Policy is intended to strengthen the NESP III and other key education sector policies and regulations. The EGR policy defines a course of action to support decisions that increase awareness and expand

implementation of EGR programming in Afghanistan. EGR programming will, in turn, lay the foundation for a literate society that will advance the social and economic opportunities for the population.

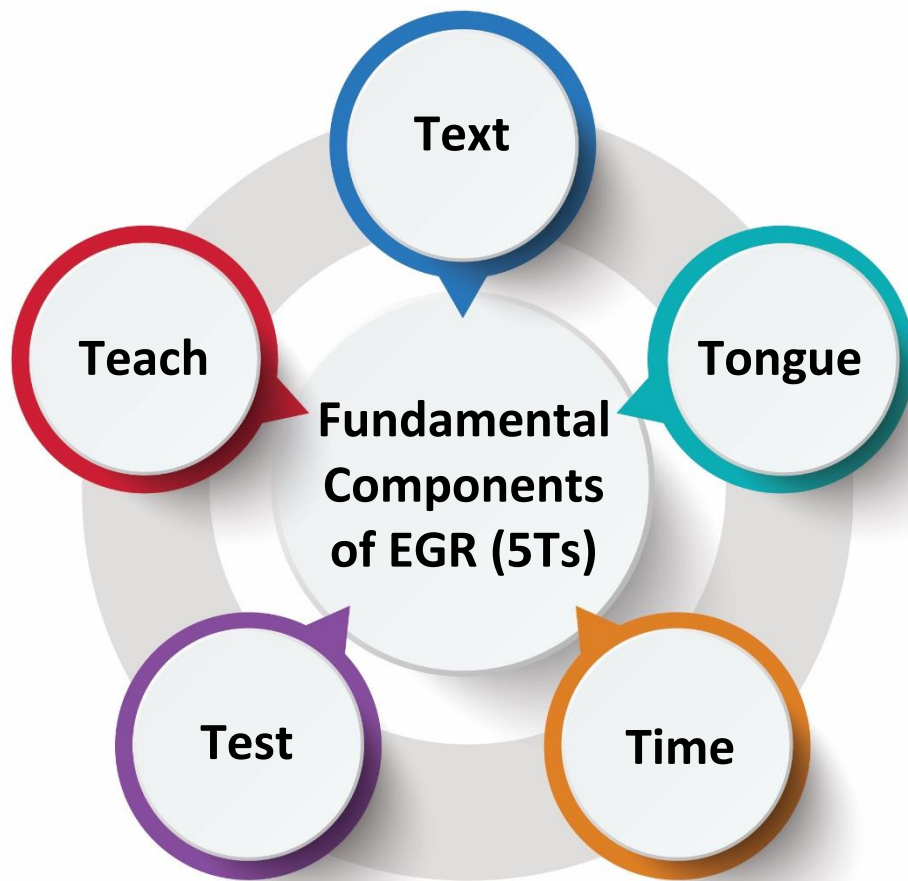
### 3.2. Scope of the Policy

This national EGR policy falls within and supports the mandate of the MoE to provide quality education as outlined in the Education Law and implemented through the NESP III. The EGR policy will be implemented in a variety of ways to achieve the goals outlined in the policy statements. The policy applies to MoE departments at the National, Provincial and District levels responsible for planning and implementing a reading strategy and public, private and CBE school administrators and teachers tasked to deliver a relevant and practical reading program. This policy targets students by ensuring they are provided with the learning resources that enable them to succeed at reading and writing and thereby increasing the likelihood they will remain in school. Lastly, this policy incorporates the involvement of parents and surrounding school communities to appreciate the value of reading, promote reading to their children and encourage them to read and be more engaged with the school to ensure that the quality of education being provided to students is sustained.

### 3.3. Policy Statements

The NESP III defines a sound strategic framework for the delivery of quality education in Afghanistan. The policy statements herein strengthen that structure with a focus specifically on early grade reading, including writing,  priority. The policy provides government decision makers, planners, and implementers the functional parameters to make actionable decisions related to curriculum and supporting materials, the language of instruction, teacher professional development, administration of the teaching force, learner assessment, systems of quality assurance, learning environment and community mobilization. These elements come together to reinforce the five T's (Teach, Time, Tongue, Test, Text) essential to delivering a quality early grade reading program.

The five Ts frames the core areas of intervention essential to improved reading, which includes: improving teaching, making sure children have enough time to learn to read, teaching reading in a language students understand, making reading materials available to students, and assessing the progress of children to ensure they are meeting reading goals. The policy statements are based on internationally accepted principles of reading in early grades, which is based on phonemics that enables students to read and comprehend. Specifically, the students will be taught to focus on phonological awareness, lexical resources, alphabetic principle, comprehension and fluency.



Within the five T's (5Ts) the following policy statements are here made:

3.3.1. **Text** (Curriculum and associated materials)

- 3.3.1.1. Developers of learning materials will have their skills and knowledge developed in the principles of EGR to enable them to produce EGR teaching and learning materials that are in line with the national curriculum and evidenced based global best practices.
- 3.3.1.2. Instructional materials reflecting EGR competencies will be developed and available at the beginning of the academic year in adequate quantity and quality through an improved system of textbook distribution.
- 3.3.1.3. The national curriculum framework and instructional material will meet reading standards and benchmarks for early grades.
- 3.3.1.4. The national EGR curriculum will be developed such that it reflects national and Islamic values, considers national terminologies, methodologies and themes that supports social and emotional learning.
- 3.3.1.5. Teaching and learning materials will be developed for students with disability and learning challenges.
- 3.3.1.6. Reading in early grades will be reinforced by the development of supplementary reading material and use of educational technology in early grades.

### 3.3.2. Teach (Teacher Professional Capacity Development and Instructional Support)

- 3.3.2.1. EGR teacher qualifications will be established and considered when hiring. The qualifications include:
  - A. Establishment of EGR as a field of study across teacher training colleges and universities.
  - B. Awarding teaching licenses to qualified EGR teachers as per Teacher Education Directorate policies.
- 3.3.2.2. EGR teachers will be trained on phonics-based reading approach as part of continuous professional capacity development.
- 3.3.2.3. EGR support will be provided through professional learning communities that supports a continuous coaching and mentoring system that strengthens teacher and learner performance.
- 3.3.2.4. EGR departments will be established across schools that strengthens teacher and learner performance.
- 3.3.2.5. EGR classes will be formed with a pupil-teacher ratio of 30:1.
- 3.3.2.6. Recruiting female teachers for early grades will be a priority to improve quality and learning effectiveness.
- 3.3.2.7. Classrooms will be improved to be more conducive learning spaces. Improvements will include separate facilities for early grades such as dedicated classrooms, toilets and appropriate furniture for pupils. Facilities will be provided to students with special needs, physical and learning disabilities.
- 3.3.2.8. Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) components will be incorporated in teacher training programs.
- 3.3.2.9. Professional development will be provided to supervisors and head teachers to provide EGR coaching and mentoring support to teachers.
- 3.3.2.10. EGR teachers will complete competency testing to ensure adequate reading skills that meet teaching standards.
- 3.3.2.11. Educational technology will be used to improve teaching reading in early grades.

### 3.3.3. Test (Student Assessment, Monitoring and Evaluation)

- 3.3.3.1. Learner performance will be measured through standards-based assessments based on minimum standards and benchmarks for the language of instruction.
- 3.3.3.2. Teachers will use continuous assessment methods to improve reading and provide feedback to students and parents and on how to take corrective measures for students requiring dedicated support.
- 3.3.3.3. Classroom observations and EGR assessment data will be used to inform reading programming design, teacher, and learner performance and to improve curriculum and teacher training.
- 3.3.3.4. Students in grade one will be promoted to the next grade based on an assessment and without taking the annual examination considering corrective measures on the student after promotion.

#### 3.3.4. Time (Instructional duration and community mobilization)

- 3.3.4.1. At least six teaching hours per week will be dedicated to reading instruction.
- 3.3.4.2. Local communities (mosques, parents, village elders and honorary teachers) will be involved to contribute towards reinforcing reading in off-school hours.
- 3.3.4.3. Social mobilization activities will be undertaken through parents, School Management Shuras, mosques, media, civil society organizations and education activists to encourage parental/caregiver and community support to improve reading quality.
- 3.3.4.4. Teacher and student attendance will be regularly monitored, and continuous absenteeism trends will be identified and addressed.
- 3.3.4.5. Significance of reading in early grades will be promoted through media and other community outreach activities.

#### 3.3.5. Tongue (Language)

- 3.3.5.1. Dari and Pashto will be the two official languages of instruction taught in the early grades.
- 3.3.5.2. Findings from a national language mapping study will be used to improve early grade literacy instruction in Dari and Pashto, and other recognized official languages.

## 4. Analysis of Cost Implications

The GIRoA is committed to improving quality of education in primary grades that improves literacy of students. To achieve this objective and in line with the strategic goals of the NESP III, it is necessary to determine financial, human, and institutional resources and capacity required to implement the National EGR Policy. To this end, an implementation strategy will be developed that considers the sustainable costs associated with improving teacher qualifications and skills to teach reading and writing in the early grades, the development of appropriate early grade teaching and learning materials, the cost-effective printing and efficient distribution of learning materials, and assessment and monitoring of learner performance.

The EGR implementation strategy will be the planning document to facilitate government commitment to sustaining implementation of a nationwide EGR program. To achieve the stated goal of this policy, an implementation plan will be developed that is in line with the policy statements. It will consist of the following:

1. Analysis of cost implication and strategic implementation objectives
2. Implementation plan listing key milestones and tasks, and
3. Overall implementation budget to sustain EGR programming throughout Afghanistan

It will serve to guide the Ministry of Education to effectively and efficiently provide early grade reading instruction to boys and girls throughout the country.

## Annex A – EGR Policy Taskforce Members

No.	Department	Name	Position
1	Policy and Strategic Planning	Abdulhaq Rauf	Head of Policy Unit
2	Curriculum Development	Sher Ali Zarifi	Director
3	Teacher Education	Abdu Haq Rahmati	Director
4	Social Mobilization	Abdul Karim Afzali	National Social Mobilization Coordinator
5	Academic Supervision	Najibullah Kamran	Director
6	Gender Unit	Najiba Nooristani	Head
7	Literacy Department	Abdullah Daneshjo	Specialist
8	Chehlsetoon Female high school	Lailoma	School Headmaster
9	Haji Abdulqadeer high school	Parween Hamgam	School Teacher
10	Admin and Finance DM	Mohammad Sarwar Azizi	Sr. Advisor
11	Basic Education	Torpekai Momand	Director
12	Afghan Children Read	R. Drake Warrick	ACR Policy Expert
13	Afghan Children Read	Muhammad Akbar Rahid	Senior Program and Policy Specialist