

April 14, 2017

Hon. Minister George K. Werner  
Liberia Ministry of Education

Dear Minister Werner,

### **The future of Partnership Schools for Liberia**

Under your leadership, Partnership Schools for Liberia (PSL) has become one of the best-known and most carefully scrutinized education reforms in Africa. As PSL approaches the end of its first year and you prepare to make decisions about the program's future, we are writing this letter to summarize the advice that we have provided over recent months. While the Ministry alone must take policy decisions about year 2, we are also sharing this letter with a broader set of PSL stakeholders, because we know many of them have received contradictory reports about the advice that we have provided. We hope this letter contains no surprises to your Ministry team, and makes our recommendations as technical advisors and evaluators as clear as possible to outsiders.

Back in January 2016 it was announced that Liberia would launch a single-operator public private partnership, with plans to rapidly expand to cover every primary school in Liberia. Following this announcement, we and others advised a different, less radical plan. You subsequently amended the plan and created PSL as it exists today:

- A **pilot**, with just 93 schools in the first year rather than hundreds, which are...
- ...**free** to families (with no fees at any grade level),...
- ...**publicly owned and staffed**, with unionized teachers on the civil service payroll,...
- ...operated by eight different operators, selected (in seven of eight cases) through a **competitive, transparent procurement** process,...
- all within the context of a **randomized impact evaluation** focused on demonstrating learning gains for all children before any scale-up decisions are made.

We want to congratulate you on building this model in year 1. Turning to year 2, we believe that the principles you communicated during the stakeholder meeting in Monrovia in February (see annex) are sound, and we hope these will underpin plans for year two and beyond.

**Wait for evidence before scaling:** We would encourage you to stick to your public commitment that any significant scale up of PSL will await the results of the randomized evaluation. Since those results will not be available until August 2017 at the earliest, this effectively rules out dramatic scale-up in year 2. The evaluation was designed to measure progress over three years, and we feel all stakeholders should be realistic about the learning gains that are possible to achieve in one year, and be patient with the expansion plans.

To clarify some misunderstandings we have heard from stakeholders, we want to stress that the evaluation team has not provided any impact results from PSL that would justify expansion at this stage.

**Build up government capacity:** You have been clear that the Ministry of Education requires sufficient capacity to manage PSL before it scales significantly. We strongly endorse this. In year 1, the Ministry of Education has faced challenges getting teachers on payroll in PSL schools, and developing the monitoring and evaluation system to hold operators accountable for learning gains and the general care of children has been weak or non-existent outside of the randomized evaluation. In the long run, accountability cannot depend on the randomized evaluation. The Ministry needs to be stronger before PSL expands. We hope to support that strengthening. But to scale rapidly right now would skip critical capacity-building steps that put the government at risk of losing control of the program.

**Demand financial sustainability:** There are two issues here: (i) waiting to scale until the funding is clear, and (ii) insisting that operators demonstrate a clear plan for financial sustainability within the Ministry's budget, to minimize the possibility that operators later pull out and disrupt schools. On the first point, to our knowledge commitments are not yet in place to fund any expansion in year 2. We strongly believe major donors are more likely to be supportive if expansion is slow, evidence based, and competitively procured. On the second point, the operator budgets show that the eight operators are projecting to spend between \$50 and \$1,100 per child in year one, in addition to the \$50 spent by the government. While we are sympathetic to higher costs at the start due to upfront/fixed costs and economies of scale, we have not seen convincing financial models showing that the more expensive operators can bring their costs down dramatically. Once again, we would caution slow expansion to show the financial sustainability targets can be achieved before dramatic expansion.

**Adhere to good governance practices:** Ark supported the Ministry to implement a transparent operator commissioning process for year one. We would all encourage the same in year two. Furthermore, we feel it is important that no single operator dominate the program. Competition between operators may help performance. And if one operator underperforms or pulls out, the Ministry needs viable alternatives. Any one operator setting up a monopoly within PSL puts the government in a weak negotiating position.

**Ensure equity:** While the current PSL pilot schools are disproportionately outside of Monrovia and serve rural areas in 13 of 15 counties, the schools selected for year 1 are in easier to reach areas, and PSL has not achieved equitable coverage in the Southeast. We advise that any modest expansion in year two should prioritize these areas, and should offer operators the opportunity to demonstrate that they can deliver high quality and cost-effective education in regions without 2G network coverage and good roads. Even if the randomized evaluation shows learning gains in the pilot schools, is not clear operators will be able to achieve the same in more marginalized areas. We strongly recommend that the Ministry identifies which schools will become part of the program on the basis of need and fairness, rather than convenience to operators alone, and allocates them to eligible operators accordingly.

**Remain child centered:** We applaud your commitment to this principle. We would note that in some cases it forces you to make politically difficult choices that shake up the status quo in the public education system, while in other cases it may require you to push back and ensure that public sector interests are prioritized over the interests of private operators.

It has been our privilege to work with you over the course of the last year, and we hope that PSL will remain a strong, evidence-based, government-led, multi-operator program with the potential to strengthen the education system as a whole and improve the life chances of Liberia's children.

Best wishes,

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## Annex

### Principles for scale announced by Minister Werner at stakeholder meeting in Monrovia, 22<sup>nd</sup> February

1. **Child-centred:** decisions will be made based on the interests of the child, not private operators
2. **Evidence-based:** we will only scale when we have rigorous efficacy data from the randomized control trial and performance metrics
3. **Equity:** we will ensure that PSL is on a trajectory towards national representation and reaches the poorest areas
4. **Financial sustainability:** PSL must be affordable to the system. Operators must show they can be sustainable without long term philanthropic support
5. **Political sustainability:** we will plan for the political transition by building a coalition of support
6. **Public sector capacity:** the government requires sufficient capacity to manage PSL effectively – private operator scale must not outpace public sector capacity
7. **Good governance:** we will adhere to principles of good governance, including transparent commissioning and performance management. PSL will remain a strong, multi-operator initiative