

Evaluation shows education reforms in the Philippines lifted millions of learners' foundational reading skills through the ARAL Law

Noam Angrist, Mariel Bayangos, Konstantin Buchel, Jenny Perlman, and Elaine Umali-Trinos

A flagship reform for an urgent challenge: improving foundational reading skills

Ninety percent of ten-year-olds in the Philippines can't read and understand an age-appropriate text (Philippine Institute for Development Studies, 2023). That's the scale of the crisis the Academic Recovery and Accessible Learning (ARAL) Program was designed to address – and new evidence suggests it's working. In School Year (SY) 2025-2026, the Department of Education (DepEd) reported 4.5 million fewer struggling readers and 2.5 million more learners reaching grade-level readiness. A new evaluation shows that ARAL contributed meaningfully to this improvement: an estimated 1.37 million additional learners moved out of struggling-reader levels, while 730,000 more reached grade-level reading proficiency beyond progress that would have been expected over a School Year without the ARAL program. These first-year results are encouraging, and further gains are possible as ARAL implementation strengthens and matures.

ARAL is a flagship national learning recovery response in the Philippines. This ambitious reform targets students in kindergarten to Grade 10 falling below expected competencies in reading during its first year of implementation. Rolled out at scale nationwide in SY 2025-2026, ARAL marks a major positive strategic shift toward evidence-based remediation. ARAL comprises a package of reforms, including targeted remediation and tutoring to student skill levels using frequent diagnostic assessments, focusing on foundational skills, and providing structured support, such as learning resources and health screening, among other complementary interventions.

Measuring success using data available at scale and practical impact evaluation techniques

To measure impact on reading progress during SY 2025/26, we compared reading outcomes under ARAL to what would have happened without the reform. The aim of the impact evaluation was to be rigorous, while also being practical, ensuring a scalable and cost-effective impact evaluation approach that can be done rigorously, rapidly, and regularly.

We use data DepEd already collects at scale, rather than costly new instruments. We drew on reading assessments DepEd administers nationwide – for Grades 1 to 3, the Comprehensive Rapid Literacy Assessment (CRLA) and the Philippine Informal Reading Inventory (Phil-IRI) for Grades 4-10. Both assessments are conducted at the beginning of the school year (BoSY) and again at the end of school year (EoSY). The data are aggregates reported by schools, not individual learner records, enabling

assessments of average impacts, although the data cannot follow individual learners over time.

To estimate impact, we compare learning gains under the ARAL reform to “business as usual” learning – the reading progress that would have occurred without ARAL. The impact of ARAL is the difference between the two. This technique to estimate impact is known as a difference-in-difference (DiD) which compares adjacent cohorts. This can be done in two ways: first, by comparing learning gains observed in earlier years, before ARAL rolled out, to learning gains observed in the current year when ARAL was in full effect. Second, by comparing learning gained in 2025-2026 to baseline differences across grades using the same data to approximate “business as usual” learning between grades – capturing a typical year of schooling in the prior year before the ARAL rollout. This practical impact evaluation approach has been used regularly by Youth Impact to evaluate programs at scale and is increasingly used by global education research efforts, such as the What Works Hub for Global Education.

This third-party evaluation was conducted as part of a technical assistance package to the Department of Education through a collaboration between the World Bank – via a Global Partnership for Education System Capacity Grant – and Youth Impact.

New evidence shows ARAL is working: millions more children show improved reading skills

Results show large improvements in foundational reading skills.

DepEd's end-of-school-year reporting data showed considerable progress, [with 4.5 million fewer struggling readers in School Year 2025-2026](#), while the number of grade-level ready learners increased by 2.5 million. These reported figures capture the overall improvement observed over a typical school year. This evaluation goes further by estimating the progress specifically linked with the package of ARAL reforms, beyond what would normally be expected over a school year.

Results show that the ARAL package of reforms led to a 9 percentage-point reduction in Struggling Readers at scale. This is equivalent to approximately 1.37 million additional learners progressing out of a broad Struggling Reader category, aligned with the CRLA and Phil-IRI assessment categories. Additionally, a 4.8 percentage-point increase in grade-level proficiency was observed, with 730,000 more students reaching grade-level reading proficiency. These gains were broad-based: while some regions performed better than others, every region across the Philippines benefited.

These gains are additional gains that can be attributed to ARAL, beyond business-as-usual learning progress. This evidence is critical as it validates ARAL's effectiveness, showing that targeted remediation worked to improve learning for learners falling below expected competencies who are most at risk of persistent learning poverty.

The road ahead — protect and improve ARAL, don't start from scratch

The lesson from year one isn't to redesign ARAL — it is to protect what's already working and strengthen aspects that drive learning gains. Transitioning into future years, the priority should shift toward institutionalizing implementation fidelity. Priority recommendations are detailed below:

Protect the instructional core of ARAL. This includes a daily ARAL session institutionalized in the school calendar, regular learning diagnostics and checkpoints, and skill-based regrouping using structured materials — these routines are what drive learning recovery, and they're consistent with what [works globally](#).

Sharpen how students are grouped. Broad categories like "Low Emerging" are useful for reporting, but day-to-day instruction often needs finer detail, highlighting reading categories such as letter recognition, decoding, fluency, and comprehension. Aligning assessments to capture results at this more granular skill level will empower teachers to know exactly what to teach next.

Shift support from monitoring to mentoring. Certified master coaches, or Leaders of Practice, can guide teachers through model-observe-feedback cycles, and focus on key program fidelity elements: attendance, dosage, grouping, and materials use. To make this cost-effective at scale, in-person coaching could be complemented by structured coaching phone calls and targeted follow-up for schools or divisions showing implementation challenges or minimal progress.

Use ARAL data systems to act, not only report. The ARAL Dashboard should trigger action: coaching, regrouping, attendance follow-up, materials resupply, parent or Local Government Unit (LGU) support, and data-quality assistance. Future enhancements could prioritize learner-level tracking (in addition to the current school-level data), item-level or skill-level data tracking, dosage and fidelity measures, equity disaggregation, and regional and divisional learning reviews and exchanges.

Keep it simple and cost-effective where possible. Ensuring implementation is feasible within the existing system and within existing teacher workloads can include using more low-cost materials that are available locally, simpler and shorter assessments, and ensuring dedicated time in the school timetable.

Institutionalize regular impact evaluation and localized adaptive experimentation. To keep impact on track, regular impact evaluation at scale is a priority. Cost-effective impact evaluation should become a regular part of how DepEd governs learning recovery.

Future evaluations should also measure implementation alongside outcomes and encourage regular adaptation to figure out what works best.

Overall, ARAL's first year shows that a national system can accelerate foundational literacy recovery at scale, using the best evidence available and generating new evidence on what works. The road ahead should focus on protecting and strengthening the gains made, and to integrate ARAL from a recovery intervention into DepEd's core model for how learning reforms get implemented and improved at scale.