

# MANDELA WASHINGTON FELLOWSHIP CATALYST GRANT

2024-25

## Education Challenges

### Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) in Resource-Limited Settings

*We challenge you to design a new social enterprise that delivers Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) to underserved primary students in a developing region. It is an educational program designed to improve primary grade literacy and numeracy. Through a partnership with the U.S. Department of State, IREX, and D-Prize, up to \$20,000 will be awarded to teams with a plan to launch a three-month pilot of this work serving 100-250 primary students with a vision to scale country-wide.*

#### The Poverty Problem

Over the last two decades the world has enrolled millions of previously out-of-school children in primary school,<sup>1</sup> but attendance has not improved learning outcomes. In many resource-limited countries over 50% of Grade 2 students are unable to read a single word of a short text or perform two-digit subtraction.<sup>2</sup>

Why does this happen? Structural inefficiencies in education systems are at the root of the problem. School systems are not well designed to address the needs of students who may be the first in their families to attend school or who enter the school system without having gained early-learning skills during early childhood. Additionally, children are grouped according to age, and often move to new grades regardless of learning level. Teachers often use a prescribed curriculum which frequently disfavors students who are not yet at that learning level, and they fall further behind.<sup>3</sup> Children who miss key concepts in the early grades often never have a chance to catch up, no matter how many years they spend in school. As a result, investments made by governments, communities, and parents in order to get children into schools will go to waste for millions of students.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://data.unicef.org/topic/education/secondary-education/>

<sup>2</sup>

<https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/28340/211096ov.pdf?sequence=61&msAllowed=y>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.povertyactionlab.org/case-study/teaching-right-level-improve-learning>

## The Proven Intervention

Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) was developed by Pratham in the early 2000s to respond to the failures of the education system. At the classroom level, TaRL is a teaching approach that assesses children using a simple testing tool and then groups them according to their learning level rather than their age or grade. For a period of the day, children in middle to upper primary focus on foundational skills through appropriate activities and materials. What happens in the classroom is enabled through a few key defining components of TaRL including, strong mentoring and monitoring by leaders of practice who have experience conducting the TaRL in the classroom, simple assessment data that is used to inform action at all levels of the education system, and a classroom methodology that is designed to accelerate children's acquisition of reading and Math skills in the middle to upper primary.

Pratham has partnered with Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL) affiliated professors for over 15 years to evaluate, adapt, and develop the TaRL approach for scale in India. Six randomized evaluations in seven states of India indicate that when TaRL is well implemented, learning outcomes improve.

There are currently TaRL programs in over 15 countries in Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia.

TaRL Africa, which began in 2018 as a joint venture between Pratham and J-PAL, is now an organization with a regional office in Nairobi, and country teams in Côte d'Ivoire, Nigeria, and Zambia, supports governments and partners to pilot and scale-up TaRL programs in Sub-Saharan Africa. Pratham continues to scale up TaRL in India and supports partners across the globe to do the same. However, with more organizations implementing the approach fewer children will fall behind.

## Your Distribution Challenge

The Mandela Washington Fellowship Catalyst Grant will award up to \$20,000 to teams that can create a new organization that teaches the TaRL education program to students who otherwise would fall behind. You must have a vision to reach 50,000 students (about 1,000 classrooms) within five years. Our award is meant to enable the first step toward this vision by supporting a small test pilot of your idea, that helps anywhere from 100-250 students.

## Designing Your Social Enterprise

There are several challenges we think an organization implementing the TaRL approach must eventually solve. We recommend you consider focusing your pilot on testing solutions to these challenges.

1. *How do you gain Government support?* Cooperation with existing education systems is almost always required. You may need a high-level government partner who is willing to collaborate with you, or who is at least willing to signal support with a Memorandum of Understanding.

Cooperation at the local level is almost always important too. You must also consider how you will work with local school officials.

2. *What is your TaRL implementation model?* The Teaching at the Right Level approach can be delivered in a number of different ways. When designing a TaRL program it's important to keep in mind both global evidence on what works as well as what the contextual considerations are. Learn more about how to design a TaRL program on the Foundational Literacy and Numeracy hub [here](#).
3. *What materials and activities will be used to accelerate children's learning?* The Teaching at the Right Level approach has a specific classroom methodology that accelerates children's acquisition of reading and Math skills. Materials and activities will need to be designed taking into account the language, resources, and learning goals. Learn more about TaRL teaching learning materials [here](#) and [here](#).
4. *How will you set up mentoring, monitoring and review systems?* Mentoring and monitoring is a core component of TaRL and has been identified as necessary for effective implementation. Learn more about this [here](#) and [here](#).

#### *Context Conditions*

- TaRL is not appropriate for all geographies. Learn more [here](#) about whether TaRL could be a helpful approach for your context or not.
- The Catalyst Grant aims to support ventures that work to reach the most underserved students. This generally means students who lack reliable internet access. We recommend tailoring your idea to these students and avoid plans that require stable internet access.

## Ready To Apply?

Complete your Round 1 Mandela Washington Fellowship Catalyst Grant application at <http://www.d-prize.org/MWFRound1>.

## Need More Information?

More Resources on TaRL:

- <https://www.teachingattherightlevel.org/the-tarl-approach/resources/>
- <https://www.flnhub.org/focus-area/teaching-at-the-right-level>

Learn more about the MWF Catalyst Grant timeline, evaluation process, and eligibility at <https://mwfellows.info/CatalystGrant2025>.

Questions? Email [MWFAlumni@irex.org](mailto:MWFAlumni@irex.org).