From 2017 to 2018, only 13.7 per cent of young children in Sierra Leone could access early learning services. Access was often confined to urban areas and was private or fee based. Many parents attempted to address the challenge of limited access by enrolling children in primary school early, which, coupled with low capacity of teachers to deliver early learning, high repetition rates and overcrowded classrooms, deleteriously impacted the quality of learning. Moreover, due to the lack of a national learning assessment system and outdated data, it was unclear what children were actually learning from pre-primary through to upper secondary.

To address these engrained challenges around early childhood education (ECE) and primary education, the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) approved a grant of US $17.2 million for Sierra Leone in 2018. The programme was split into a fixed part of US $12 million and a variable part of approximately US $5 million, which was designated under a results-based financing model. UNICEF Sierra Leone was selected as the grant agent due to its long-standing systems strengthening work in the country. Under the variable part model, the Government chose to focus on increasing equitable access to ECE in underserved areas; reducing the first grade repetition rate; and improving how learning is measured.

If the Government achieved the targets agreed for all three aims, it would receive US $5 million from the GPE to re-invest in the education sector. The programme was approved in 2018 and began implementation in 2019. Due to COVID-19-related disruptions, however, implementation was stalled and now is expected to conclude in 2022/23.
RESULTS
So far, Sierra Leone achieved nearly all the pre-agreed targets, despite interruptions to implementation linked to COVID-19. As such, the Government has been able to access 60 per cent of the variable part funding to date.

- From 2018 to date, the programme has benefited about 2,474 preschool aged children (1,189 boys and 1,285 girls) in three districts with quality learning opportunities that lay the groundwork for success later in primary school and life.
- UNICEF has helped the Government to increase pre-primary gross enrolment in the six most underserved local councils from 1 per cent of children aged 3 to 5 in 2016 to 20.6 per cent in 2020.
- UNICEF’s contribution has also led to a reduction in the national repetition rate in first grade from about 15.5 per cent in 2016 to 6.7 per cent in 2020, according to the Government’s 2020 Annual School Census Report.
- UNICEF supported the training of 151 early childhood teachers and caregivers under the programme as well as 6,925 primary school teachers.
- UNICEF also supported the creation a new official department for learning assessment—now called the National Assessment Services Unit—to oversee the annual survey that gauges student learning, including in preschools, and informs policy and strategic planning.

LESSONS LEARNED
- The results-based financing framework complements overall advocacy around ECE. At the systems level, the programme sharpened focus on ECE within the Government and other education stakeholders. This created opportunities to advocate for ECE, which emerged as a priority and is now mainstreamed into the national education sector plan.
- Improvements in data and monitoring systems for the ECE sub-sector remain a priority. Since release of funds is contingent on the achievement of agreed results, data must be accurate and analysis must be shared in a timely manner. Engaging in this results-based model bolstered national monitoring and evaluation systems and accelerated improvements to data systems.
- Effective coordination with the Government has a multiplying effect. Targets around reducing repetition and increasing enrolment rates were also accelerated by piggy backing on the Government’s Free Quality School Education Programme, which commenced at the same time as the GPE programme. Together, these initiatives augmented overall preschool enrolment. Teacher training, which was initiated under the programme, has also garnered more attention, leading to increased national investments beyond the amount projected during programme design.

NEXT STEPS
Looking ahead, with the construction of 29 new early learning centres in Karene District, UNICEF is currently supporting the Government in increasing the ratio of pre-primary classrooms so that for every 100 primary classrooms, there will be 6.6 pre-primary, compared to the current ratio of 100 primary for every 1.4 pre-primary classrooms. UNICEF is also working to strengthen national and district-level capacity to deliver quality early grade reading and numeracy programmes, aiming to improve learning outcomes and generate data and evidence to further refine pre-primary programming in the country.

Cost effectiveness: Through a generous donation of US $5 million from the GPE centred on the results-based financing model, UNICEF helped grow enrolment, reduce first grade repetition and establish better assessment and data collection systems in Sierra Leone, directly benefitting nearly 2,500 pre-primary aged students from 2018 to date.