Speed School Model's Programmatic Achievements: Summary Findings of the University of Sussex / Hawassa University Longitudinal Study

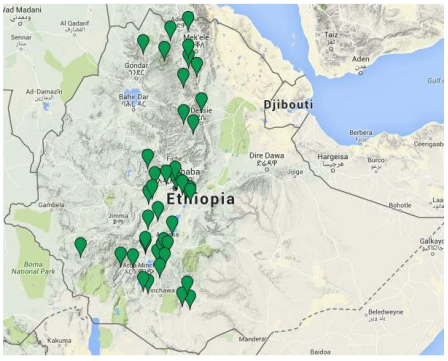
Introduction to the Speed School Program

Over the past two decades, the Government of Ethiopia has greatly expanded access to free, quality primary education for all its citizens. Despite this critical public investment, the government estimates that there are over two million out-of-school children (OOSC) nationwide. Poverty is a major cause. While primary education is formally free, it incurs direct costs, such as supplies, travel, and time, as well as indirect ones, like lost labor at home. Families and communities suffer from other factors that keep children from school. These include internal conflict and displacement, illness and malnutrition, family-based violence, and culture-based exclusion.

Central to the government's commitment to free education is quality, yet quality is often poor. School infrastructure is frequently inadequate, with too few classrooms, latrines, and other facilities. There are too few teachers and materials for the number of students, and the caliber of instruction is low. As children fail to learn, both they and their parents become discouraged, causing many to abandon their studies entirely, if they enter the formal school system at all. Parents may withdraw their children or never register them because they find school to be irrelevant, preferring instead to educate them at home in household, vocational, and sociocultural skills. As children exceed the official age of initial primary school enrollment, six years old, they are caught in an education "no-man's land." Overlooked by both the primary schools and other civil society-operated youth and adult education programs, these children find few services where they can gain the knowledge and skills they will need to prepare for life and livelihood.

In response to this OOSC crisis, Geneva Global, Inc. launched the Speed School program in Ethiopia in 2011. Geneva Global is a philanthropy advising firm based in Paoli, Pennsylvania, USA. It works with high net-worth individuals and families, charitable organizations, and corporations to yield the greatest development outcomes from their philanthropic development investments. Having operated in over 100 countries, Geneva Global has influenced over $1 billion in giving and affected over 100 million lives. The Speed School program operates out of Geneva Global–Ethiopia (GG-Eth), the national nongovernmental organization of Geneva Global, Inc.

Since launching the Speed School program, GG-Eth has worked alongside civil society organizations and officials from the Ministry of Education and four Regional Education Bureaus—Amhara, Oromia, Tigray, and the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Region (SNNPR)—and their zone and district (woreda) education offices. A major inflection point occurred in the 2017-2018 school year. At that time, the transition from Speed School as a Geneva Global project to Speed School as a government program began. Now, the official government adoption of Speed School is well underway, with GG-Eth's playing increasingly a technical support role to the government's implementation.



The Speed School program was launched with funding from the Legatum Fund and is now supported by the Luminos Fund (created by Legatum for this purpose) and a group of anonymous donors. The model was adopted from the Stromme Foundation, whom Geneva Global formerly supported to implement the Speed School model in West Africa.

Overview of the Speed School Model

Speed School is, most simply, a model that combines an accelerated education program with a community development strategy to give OOSC between the ages of 9 and 14 years a solid "second-chance" at formal primary education. The accelerated Speed School class equips students with the core learning, knowledge, and skills from the government's official Grades 1 to 3 curriculum to ready them to join (or re-join) their age peers the following year in Grade 4. The key defining elements of the Speed School model are its use of a condensed curriculum, activity-based, learner-centered pedagogy, and a holistic approach to training and supporting facilitators. The community development strategy operates as mothers' Self-Help Groups. These aim to strengthen the financial and social capacity of the students' mothers (or fathers or other guardians) to enable and motivate them to support their

children's schooling in the future. It does this by training and supporting mothers to operate successful income-generating activities, to manage purpose-driven savings, and to conduct other social interventions to improve conditions for their children's school success. A third component, primary school capacity-strengthening, serves to strengthen the pedagogic capacity and performance of teachers in the government primary schools that will receive the Speed School "graduates" and often host Speed School classes.

Since its launch, the Speed School program has seen enduring impacts on the educational outcomes and well-being of around 200,000 formerly OOSC. These children not only achieve the educational standards of their peers but oftentimes surpass them. Building from the Speed School experience and results, the Ministry of Education and the four original regional education bureaus have taken steps to adopt the overall model and its key methods, aspiring to two outcomes. One is to expand the program's ability to educate OOSC in a sustainable way. The other is to extend the program's impacts on education quality and learning to children in conventional classes.

Measuring Success

Geneva Global identifies four fundamental indicators to represent the success of the Speed School program:

- The OOSC who enroll in Speed School class in September complete the year able to read, write, speak, and comprehend well and with confidence in the local language and Amharic (if different), and capable to a third grade level in mathematics;
- The students who complete Speed School enter a government school in Grade 4 the next year;
- These students perform well in the conventional classroom, achieving solid scores and continuing to higher grade levels; and
- The mothers (or other parent or guardian) of former Speed School children support them financially, practically, and morally as they progress through their formal schooling.

Geneva Global operates a rigorous monitoring and evaluation system that includes measures of all these indicators. Seeking an independent rigorous evaluation of these outcomes, the Legatum Fund commissioned the University of Sussex (England) to conduct an independent, longitudinal study (available here) between 2011 and 2017.

Methodology

The six-year study took place in SNNPR, where GG-Eth first piloted Speed School beginning with the 2011-2012 academic year. This initial cohort comprised 97 classes with 25 students each (totaling 2,425 students) across five woredas (districts). The University of Sussex—along with researchers from the University of Cambridge, the Institute of Education at the University College London, and Hawassa University—followed a sample of 1,875 students from this inaugural cohort from baseline through the 2016-2017 school year, the point at which most of the students should have entered secondary school. The sample comprised three groups of 625 students each, one experimental and two control groups (page 6[1]). The control groups included students of a similar age and gender profile as the Speed School students (so, from Grades 1 to 4) from conventional government primary schools. Half (625) of the control group was from "Link Schools," the name given to government or schools that will receive Speed School "graduates.". The other half were from government schools with no connection to the program. The researchers employed assiduous tracking strategies to be able to assess the same students from the original baseline six years later, in the summer of 2017, five years after completing the Speed School experience.

The study measured the program's enduring impacts on former Speed School students in three main areas (page 4): (1) their formal primary school completion, (2) learning outcomes, and (3) attitudes toward learning. Additionally, the program tracked a group of former Speed School students who completed the program but dropped out of government schools at some point after transitioning. This allowed researchers to examine whether students retained residual benefits from the program despite dropping out, and if so, would strengthen the argument about the efficacy of the program pedagogy. Four overarching questions guided the research:

1. What is the impact of the Speed School program on progression through the grades to completion of primary education of former Speed School students compared to students who had attended government schools?

[1] - All page references come from the Sussex longitudinal study.

2. How do the attitudes to learning and further education for former Speed School students compare with students who attended government schools?
3. What is the impact of the Speed School program on the learning outcomes of former students compared to other students who had attended government schools?
4. Which household and student-level factors are the most important correlates of differences in learning outcomes and progression over time?

Major Findings

The results of the longitudinal study (pp. 33-37) show that Speed School students performed better than both control groups across all measures. Specifically, the former Speed School students had:

- **Better academic performance,** performing consistently better than their non-Speed School peers, scoring 10.4 points (26%) higher in mathematics, 13.5 points (35%) higher in Sidama language, and 7.4 points (24%) higher English (7.4%).
- **Better retention rates,** with nearly three-quarters (74.6%) of the 2011 Speed School cohort still in school five years after completion, compared to just 66.1 percent of government school students and 60.5 percent of link school students.
- **Increased motivation and aspirations,** expressing greater aspirations to continue their education beyond primary school, and achieving this.
- **Greater family support**, viewing the support of their family to be an important factor in both continuing and performing well in their academics.
- **Increased confidence,** expressing more confidence in their abilities to learn than do their non-Speed School peers—and while not finding their lessons to be any easier, trusting more their ability and being more motivated to work hard to succeed.
- **Improved financial standing of families,** with the overall wealth status of their households' improving by 45 percent, and an average increase in the number of livestock by 53 percent—while they remained poorer than the families of the control group students, the gap closed substantially since the control groups families' wealth essentially stayed the same as at baseline.
- **Benefits beyond the classroom,** with former Speed School students who dropped out before completing primary education performing better than government school students who attended the same schools and had also dropped out, and even better than many control group students who were still in school.

Key Components of Success

Facing these positive outcomes, the researchers sought to explain how the former Speed School students were able to transition so successfully into government schools and perform there so much better than their conventionally educated peers. They found little difficulty explaining the greater success of Speed School students at the end of the Speed School year, attributing the learner-centered pedagogy, the students' older age, and the small class sizes. The surprise, however, was that the advantages persisted and actually grew, even when former Speed School students re-joined their age peers in over-crowded classes with classic teacher-centered instruction. The expectation was that they would flee in droves, no longer learning and gravely discouraged by conditions that contrasted severely with what they knew in their Speed School classes.

The researchers concluded that the major reason the Speed School program achieves enduring impacts is its long-term view of the education of OOSC by combining both pedagogic and household strategies. The pedagogic 'boost' children receive from Speed Schools does not only bring them up to the standard of their age peers, but also gives them an advantage over the majority. This results from their having acquired not just a more solid foundation in numeracy and literacy but also greater skills and confidence as learners. Once in the conventional classroom, they are able to keep up with and understand the teacher, are confident to ask and answer questions, have the skills and habits of reviewing and reinforcing what they have learned on their own, and consult with their classmates to consolidate their learning and to keep learning more fun. These effective learning attributes trace in large part to a few essential aspects of the Speed School pedagogy:

- The strong emphasis on reading, dedicating about four times as many hours as compared to the conventional classroom;
- The student-centered approach, which recognizes that children can learn even if teachers are not teaching them directly;
- The use of continuous formative assessment, with ample time built in to allow for feedback and remediation;
- An integrated lesson delivery approach that combines multiple academic subjects into single lessons while also promoting students' ability to apply their lessons practically and fostering the cultivation of their personal skills; and
- Learning that is guided by facilitators who are recruited from the students' own communities and who are equipped to lead Speed School classes through a holistic training model that combines (i) practice-oriented workshops with (ii) dialogue-based supervision, and (iii) vibrant and regular consultation and collaboration among facilitators and teachers, operating as education communities of practice.

The researchers attribute the Speed School students' success also to the significant household boost that derives primarily, though not exclusively, from the Self-Help Group. Most obvious may be the improved family financial situation that results from the mother's participation in income-generating activities and formal group savings. With the Self-Help Group's direct role in monitoring and supporting the Speed School class, mothers also gain greater understanding of the educational support they can provide their child at home. As mothers grow in their confidence to help their children succeed in school, they also consolidate their commitment to do this as they see their children learning so well and with joy.

From the teaching perspective, the researchers attribute the results to the new attitudes and practices of Speed School instructors. Facing older children who had either never been in a classroom or abandoned early, researchers might reasonably conclude that the OOSC's "ship had sailed," so they would not succeed. Geneva Global and the civil society collaborating partners who implemented the Speed School classes convinced the facilitators that the older students may come with learning deficits, but they also arrive with many solid learning assets. Most basically, they have life experience, an accumulation of contextual knowledge and skills, sometimes basic literacy and numeracy, and perhaps most importantly, a keen understanding of the value of school learning. Similar negative preconceptions existed among many of the conventional schoolteachers who received the Speed School "graduates:" How could these former dropouts and non-schooled children now come into the classroom and succeed? Teachers quickly changed their tune, realizing that the former Speed School students did not just dominate the top academic ranks of their classes but stood apart as class leaders and role models.

Recommendations

In the end, the study finds that although most former Speed School students achieve enduring academic success, there remains a risk that older students will drop out without continuing to secondary school. Practically, it may be difficult for a child who enrolls in Speed School at 14 years old to start secondary school at the age of 19 or 20, especially for girls. Looking ahead, the researchers suggest it may be relevant to introduce a more robust dimension of life and technical skills training to the Speed School program. They also propose that the program might increase support to government schoolteachers and take measures to ease children's transition to primary schools through the following year. Concerning the Self-Help Groups, the researchers raised the prospect of extending technical support to a second year, helping to secure the groups' success and sustained operation.

In conclusion, it is worth noting that the Sussex/Hawassa study traced children from Geneva Global's very first year of operating Speed School in Ethiopia. Since then, both the overall model and instructional methods and the materials and methods Geneva Global uses to disseminate and support these have evolved vastly. It would be reasonable to expect that if a similar study were to happen with more recent cohorts, the difference in outcomes might be even greater. Geneva Global's own monitoring and evaluation results and the independent evaluation conducted by researchers from Mekelle University suggest that this might indeed be the case. In any event, Geneva Global embraces all opportunities to explore the sustained and scaled operation of Speed School in and beyond the original four regions and invites all outreach to do so.