May 2024

Education for Children with Disabilities in Malawi

Data from 5 Districts: Dedza, Dowa, Mzimba, Kasungu, Nchisi

World Vision

Prepared By: World Vision Malawi

Contacts: Kenan Z. Nyirenda (Kenan_Nyirenda@wvi.org);
Edward Winter (ewinter@worldvision.org)

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Background

World Vision launched the Able to Thrive program in October 2023[1]. This program seeks to support the holistic needs of 4,300 children with disabilities, aged up to 18 years old, in the first two years with the goal of reaching 10,000 children with disabilities over four years. Able to Thrive will meet a variety of needs including health, rehabilitation, assistive devices, information and education.

In February 2024, the program started to identify and then register children with disabilities in different communities in the five target districts of Mzimba, Kasungu, Dowa, Ntchisi and Dedza. World Vision had some existing presence in all districts. This process uses a Case Management Application within CommCare, a powerful digital platform for data collection and case management. The data collected from Registration and Screening processes is incorporated in this report based on responses to questions from the Washington Group's Inclusive Education Module[2]. Please note that this report is still a draft.

Methodology

Data related to education was extracted from the CommCare Registration module on May 2nd, 2024, and then analyzed using SPSS. Regular school attendance was defined by a response that the child had not missed half or more of days in the current school year in an early childhood center or school for children aged 3 or older.

[1] https://www.worldvision.org/evidence/research-publications/malawi-able-to-thrive-project-summary/

[2] https://www.washingtongroup-disability.com/question-sets/wg-unicef-inclusive-education-module-iem/.

Overall Sample

The data was analyzed for all children identified with a disability, a total of 1,413 children. **Of these, 609 were girls (43%) and 804 boys (57%).** The team hypothesizes that the disproportionate number of boys with disabilities may stem from a perception of parents identified in registration data that they would be more likely to be treated differently by the community if they had a girl with a disability rather than a boy with a disability. However, this hypothesis is yet to be confirmed. Data was collected from both the parent or caregiver and/or the child if the child was able and willing to respond.

Data was collected in five districts as outlined in the table below:

District	Number of children	Percent
Mzimba	138	9.8
Kasungu	93	6.6
Dowa	444	31.4
Ntchisi	374	26.5
Dedza	364	25.8
Total	1413	100.0
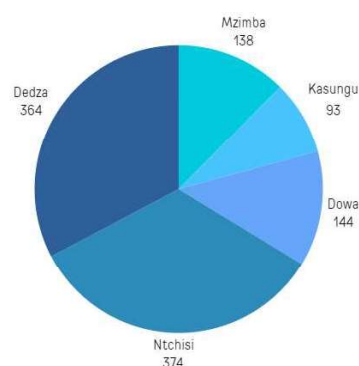
Age	Number of children
0-5	280
6-11	516
12-17	546
above 18	71
Total	1413
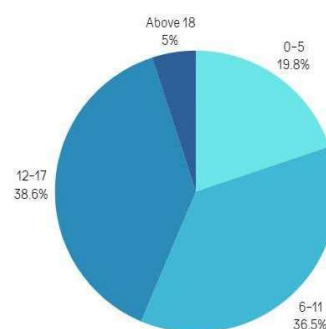
Identifying children with disabilities at an early age is a major challenge. Disability prevalence among children from birth to five years old nearly half of that of older age groups. This discrepancy underscores the need for enhanced early detection and intervention strategies to support young children with disabilities. Early identification is crucial for timely intervention, which can significantly improve the developmental outcomes and overall well-being of children with disabilities.

Implications

The data suggests that current efforts may not be adequately capturing younger children with disabilities, pointing to a critical area for improvement within the "Able to Thrive" program.

Overall Findings and Implications

School Participation

The data reveals significant challenges in school participation for children with disabilities. Of the children aged 36 months or older (1,308), 498 (38%) have never attended school or any pre-primary early childhood development (ECD) program, 170 didn't attend this year and 641 attended this year. Of the 641 children, 22 only attended at home (3.4%), 160 learned both at home and school (25%) and 459 (71.6%) only learned at school. **Only 1.3% of those attending school are attending secondary school, as show in the Table below.**

Level of education	Number of children	%
Early Childhood Development/ Pre-Primary	89	13.9
Primary	544	84.9
Lower Secondary	5	.8
Upper Secondary	3	.5
Total	641	100.0
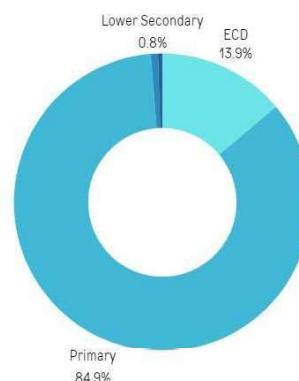
Most children in primary schools are attending the lower grade levels. This is mainly due to high rates of repetition and a delayed start to school. There are also seemingly high rates of drop off during primary school with Grade 6 participation only 37.6% of Grade 1 participation.

Grade level	Number of children
1	130
2	118
3	102
4	55
5	64
6	49
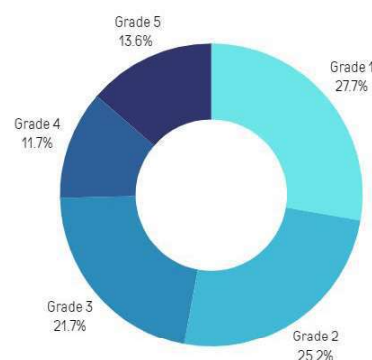
Of the 641 children currently in school, 350 are repeating the grade (54.6%). Only 343 children attended school or early childhood programs regularly this year, (they did not miss half or more days of school, only 24.3% of the total number of children). Most children (71.1%) are expected to complete the school year with 13.9% unsure and 15% not expecting completion.

Most of the 1,308 children older than 36 months are attending schools in their own communities. Only 12 children (1.9%) are attending a boarding school, three (0.5%) are attending a special school for children with disabilities and four children (0.6%) attend a specialized classroom and general classroom. Six children (0.9%) attended online classes or e-learning at home. For the 182 children learning at home,

9.3% are helped by a teacher, 81.9% by a parent or family member and 8.8% by both.

These results reveal that children with disabilities are not getting the education they need. Only 6 children (0.7%) have attended Lower Secondary school and 5 children Upper Secondary School (0.6%). In the 12- 17 age range, when children should be entering secondary school, 319 are still in primary school and only 8 in secondary school.

Level/age/%	3-5	% of 3-5	6-11	% of 6-11	12-17	% of 12-17	18+	% of 18+	Total
Early Childhood Development	68	38%	60	12%	25	5%	3	4%	156
Primary	13	7%	284	55%	319	59%	27	38%	643
Lower Secondary	0	0%	0	0%	5	1%	1	1%	6
Upper Secondary	0	0%	0	0%	3	1%	2	3%	5
Never attended	98	55%	169	33%	193	35%	38	54%	498
Total	179		513		545		71		1308

Implications

These findings underscore the urgent need to address barriers to school participation for children with disabilities in Malawi. Key areas needing further intervention include:

- **Early Identification and Intervention:** The low identification rates of disabilities in early childhood may necessitate enhanced early detection and intervention strategies to support children from birth to five years old.
- **Reduction of Repetition Rates**: High repetition rates indicate a need for improved teaching strategies and learning support tailored to children with disabilities to ensure progression through grade levels.
- **Enhancement of School Infrastructure and Support**: Improving school facilities and support systems, such as accessible classrooms, adequate learning materials, and trained teachers, can help address drop-out rates and ensure regular attendance.
- **Parental Engagement and Support**: Providing resources and training to parents can enhance their ability to assist with home-based learning and advocate for their children's needs.

Parent and Caregiver Attitudes Towards Education

Four questions related to education were asked to parents or caregivers to understand their attitudes. The questions and the responses are presented below. Parent and caregiver responses indicated a lot of uncertainty and a feeling that they needed more support to be able to meet their child's needs. Only 44% thought that children with and without disabilities should go to the same schools and only 15.8% think they can help their child to learn at home.

1. Do you think that children with and without disabilities should go to the same schools?

Response	% of responses
No	31.4
It depends	21.9
Yes	44.0
Don't know/ not sure	2.7

2. *Do you think you can help your child to learn at home?*

Response	% of responses
No	40.4
It depends	15.2
Yes	41.9
Don't know/ not sure	2.5

They do however have confidence that the school can help their child to learn, with 86% believing this. However, the data indicates that parents and caregivers don't believe that schools are providing adequate support to their child as only 15.8% believe that they have the educational support necessary. The challenge is to empower parents to understand that they and their community have a role to play in children's education too. Work needs to be done with parents to help them feel they can support their child's learning at home and get the support that they need.

3. *Do you think the school can help your child to learn?*

Response	% of responses
No	4.1
It depends	8.1
Yes	86.0
Don't know/ not sure	1.8

4. *Do you have the support you need from other people to meet your child 's educational needs?*

Response	% of responses
No	72.8
It depends	10.3
Yes	15.8
Don't know/ not sure	1.1

Implications

The data suggests a need to:

- **Build Confidence in Inclusive Education**: Only 44% of parents believe in inclusive education. Increasing awareness and demonstrating the benefits of inclusive education can help shift this perception.
- **Enhance Parental Support Systems**: With 72.8% of parents feeling unsupported, it is essential to develop strong support networks that provide resources, training, and encouragement to parents of children with disabilities.
- **Increase Home-Based Learning Resources**: Empowering parents with tools and knowledge to assist their children's learning at home can bridge gaps in formal education and ensure continuous learning.

Child Attitudes

Overall, children are more optimistic than their parents about their learning opportunities. Almost all children believe that they can learn in a school (93.4%) and nearly two-thirds in a home setting (65.7%).

Child attitudes questions were only asked to 318 children 60 months or older as many children didn't respond to questions asked during registration. Parents and caregivers did not answer on behalf of their children. Only 52.5% believe that children with disabilities should go to the same schools as children without disabilities. Most children (75.8%) feel they have the support they need to meet their educational needs.

	No	It Depends	Yes	Don't know
CA1 Do you think that children with and without disabilities should go to the same schools?	25.8%	18.9%	52.5%	2.8%
CA2 Do you think you can learn at home with support from others?	12.6%	17.3%	65.7%	4.4%
CA3 Do you think the school can help you learn?	0%	5.3%	93.4%	1.3%
CA5 Do you have the support you need from other people to meet your educational needs?	15.1%	8.2%	75.8%	0.9%

Implications

There are two key issues emerging:
- **Attitudinal change** is needed to support children so they believe that they can learn in the same schools as children without disabilities.
- **Targeted behavior change** initiatives are necessary to create an environment among learners and teachers in schools to provide children with the support they need.

School Environment
Responses were collected for the 641 children who reported they had attended school this year. From the responses, the biggest challenge was not the physical environment at the school, but the responsiveness of the school to the child's learning needs. **Less than 40% of parents think that the**

school's program and teachers can meet their child's learning needs. If their needs are not met, parents are not confident that schools will be responsive.

Question	No	Yes	Don't know
Is the school responsive if you have concerns about child's education?	21.2	57.5	21.3
Does the school have a program that meets your child's learning needs?	47.7	32.6	19.7
Do teachers know how to meet your child's learning needs?	35.2	38.9	25.8

Children received the following types of support from school staff:

academic	72.5%
for moving around the school	16.0%
communication	14.3%
counselling	12.1%
Other	2.6%
no support	25.1%

Getting to school was difficult for many children, 35.9% needed help from another person to get to school, of those the main reasons were a lack of transportation (33%), other (31.5%), distance too far (28.4%), unsafe (21.6%) and too young to go alone (15.8%).

Once at school, 83% are using the learning materials provided by the school. The school environment is not ideal with overcrowded, dark classrooms. Only 27.9% said that there are desks or tables for every student in the classroom and only 41.5% that there is enough light for students to do their work. Nearly 20% said that there aren't any drinking water facilities. However, 92.6% can move around the school easily, 95.5% can access the toilet, 92.1% can use areas where children play and socialize and over 80% said that the classrooms are a comfortable temperature, well ventilated, not too noisy inside or outside.

The students generally feel safe and accepted at school. Only 5.5% said their child wasn't safe at school and 8.7% that their child wasn't accepted by other students.

Implications
Improving the school environment and responsiveness to children's needs can be significant. This can be achieved by:
- Training teachers to better understand and meet the learning needs of children with disabilities.
- Ensuring that schools are equipped with adequate facilities, such as accessible classrooms, proper lighting, and sufficient learning materials.
- Developing safe and reliable transportation options and ensuring the safety of children both in transit and within the school environment.

Situation for Children Not Attending School

These questions were asked of children who have attended school before but who didn't attend this year, 192 in total. The major barrier was that parents didn't believe that the school could meet their child's

needs and 37.5% felt that their child would need extra help or services at school and 35.9% would need assistive devices or technology.   In addition, they have concerns about the teachers treating their child fairly with only 55.7% believing that the teachers will treat their child fairly.

Question	No	Yes	Don't know
Do you believe that teachers at that school would know how to meet your child 's specific learning needs?	50.0	31.3	18.8
Do you believe that teachers at that school would treat your child fairly?	23.4	55.7	20.8

For children not attending school, the next greatest challenge seems to be around having an appropriate school in the area (OS1) with additional challenges around the safety of the child getting to school and safety at school. The overall school environment and barriers related to safety, transportation and access to school facilities are significant enough to prevent many children from attending school but not as concerns around children's learning needs being met and the children being treated fairly.

Question	Percentage (%)		
	No	Yes	Don't know
OS1 Is there a school that other children who live in the area attend?	27.6	68.2	4.2
OS2 Was your child ever denied enrolment in that school?	90.6	7.3	2.1
OS3 Is your child not attending that school because of conditions at the school?	80.2	15.1	4.7
OS4 Is your child not attending that school because there is no adequate transportation to get to school?	81.3	15.1	3.6
OS5 Is your child not attending that school because there is no one available to take him/her?	88.0	7.8	4.2
OS6 Is your child not attending that school because he/she would not be safe getting there?	75.0	20.8	4.2
OS7 Is your child not attending that school because he/she would not be safe in school with other students?	75.0	20.8	4.2
OS8 Is your child not attending that school because he/she would not be able to use the toilet?	88.5	9.9	1.6
OS9 Is your child not attending that school because he/she would not be able to move around the school or classroom with ease?	85.4	13.0	1.6

Implications:
Addressing the barriers for children not attending school involves:
- Ensuring teachers are equipped to meet diverse learning needs and treat all children fairly.
- Making assistive devices and technology available to support children with disabilities in their learning.

World Vision's Safe and Nurturing Schools (SNS) model includes a holistic approach to enhancing the school environment and may be used in the Able to Thrive districts to begin addressing some of these barriers.

School Attendance Determinants

These questions were asked to children who had missed half or more days of school this year or who are not expected to complete this year or who are taught only at home and who are 36 months or older, 950 in total. The numbers of respondents per question change according to the question parameters. This is reflected in brackets below after the question.

Question	Percentage (%)		
	No	Yes	Don't know
SA1 Is there enough money to pay the cost of your child's clothing?	90.6	8.5	0.8
SA2 Does your child need to work, earn money, or help out at home? (older than 5 years old – 851)	90.1	8.8	1.1
SA3 Is your child married or about to get married? (older than 13 years old – 365)	98.1	1.1	0.8
SA4 Does your child have children or is he/she about to have children? (older than 13 years old – 365)	96.7	1.4	1.9
SA5 Does your child care for other children in the household, or for other members who are old, sick or have a disability? (if older than 3 years old)	98.5	1.4	0.1
SA6 Does your child have a health condition that prevents (him/her) from going outside of home? (if never gone to school, not gone this year or only schooled at home – 690)	77.0	19.6	3.5
SA7 Does your child have a health condition that prevents him/her from going to school? (for those that can go outside of the home – 531)	52.9	45.4	1.7
SA8 Do you consider your child to be too old or too young to attend school? (for those that can go outside of the home – 531)	74.4	19.2	6.4
SA9 Has your child completed enough schooling? (for those that can go outside of the home – 531)	96.2	3.2	0.6
SA10 Is your child interested in going to school? (for those that can go outside of the home – 531)	28.8	65.2	6.0
SA11 Is it important for your child to go to school? (for those that can go outside of the home – 531)	7.0	89.8	3.2
SA12 Will going to school help your child make a living? (for those that can go outside of the home – 531)	8.9	85.1	6.0

From this data, it clear that it is important to address issues of poverty and health to support more children to get into school. Nearly all parents (96.1%) recognize that their child needs more education and 89.8% feel schooling is important for their child.

Parents are not expecting their children with disabilities to contribute economically or to care for other children, which may be good in that they can have more time to study but this is also symptomatic of a broader reluctance to include children with disabilities in family and community activities

This can lead to greater social exclusion for children with disabilities and lower expectations of how they can contribute to the family and broader society. Parents are concerned about the health of their child with 19.6% believing that their child can't leave the home. Of those parents whose health allows them to leave the home, only 52.9% believe that they can go to school. In addition, 90.6% of parents feel they don't have enough money to pay for their child's clothing. Another issue is that 65.2% of parents believe their children are interested in going to school. We don't have data from the children, but from the more

positive attitudes shown by children when compared to their parents, it is likely that more children would be interested in going to school than their parents think. This would require further analysis.

Implications

Getting more children who are out of school back into school means:
- Providing financial assistance to families to cover educational expenses, particularly school uniforms.
- Ensuring access to healthcare services to manage health conditions that prevent school attendance.
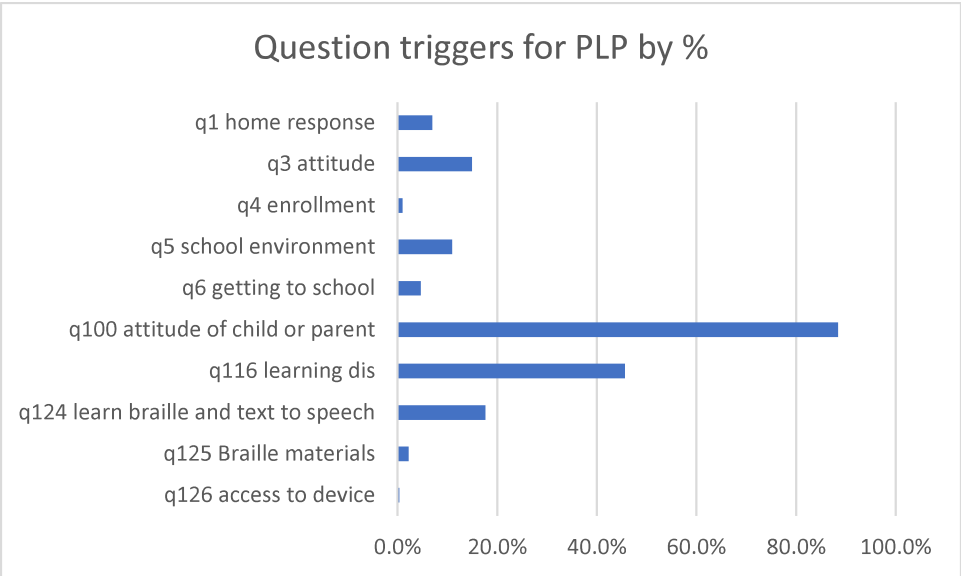
Recommended Actions

The CommCare application generates automated recommendations for actions (addressed through a targeted case management approach) based on the responses to questions. The education-related recommendations are listed below. The percentage listed is the percentage of children who had this recommended action. Many children had multiple recommendations.

Question (with number)	Recommended Action	%
Q1 –School attendance determinants – if the child must earn money, is married or about to get married, has children or about to have children, cares for other children in the household.	Discussion with parents to address family-related barriers	7.0%
Q3 – School attendance determinants related to a parental attitude – that they consider the child too young, that they have completed enough school, they are not interested in going to school, it isn't important for them to go to school, or they believe school won't help the child to earn a living.	Discussion with parents and child to address attitudinal issues that prevent regular school attendance.	14.9%
Q4 – child being denied enrolment in school	Support to enroll – discussion between parents and school administration	1.0%
Q5 – Learning environment not suitable – unable to use the toilet, can't move around classroom, no access to assistive devices or specialized help, teachers can't meet learning needs or treat child fairly	Work with the school to assess how the learning environment can be improved.	10.9%
Q6 –Challenges in the child getting to school because of safety, transport issues or a lack of anyone to take them.	Identify with parents, community, and school how to get the child to school.	4.6%
Q100 – Parental or child beliefs that they can't attend the same schools as other children, don't have the support to meet educational needs, can't support learning at home or don't think the school can support learning	Work with the parents, children, and educational institutions to provide everyone in the education eco-system with the confidence to support the child.	88.4%

Q116 – if the child has difficulty learning, remembering, concentrating, or accepting changes or has been assessed as having a learning disability	Develop a Personal Learning Plan that incorporates ways to make learning easier and includes actions for the child, parents, community, and schools	45.7%
Q124 – for children with visual impairment who don't know how to use braille or text to speech	Train the child on how to use braille or text to speech	17.6%
Q125 – for children with visual impairment who don't have the access to braille materials they need	Provide access to braille materials	2.2%
Q126 – for children with visual impairment who would benefit from access to a mobile phone or computer	Provide access to a phone or computer for learning	0.3%

The relative scale of each can be seen here:

Question triggers for PLP by %

Most children that needed a Personal Learning Plan had more than one reason for the recommendation. The questions that have been used to come up with the overall percentage are listed in brackets:

Type of response	%
Only attitude (q3,q100)	33.3%
Only visual impairment (q124,q125,q126)	3.0%
Only getting to school (q6)	0.1%
Only enrolment (q4)	0.0%
Only environment (q5)	0.2%
Only home response (q1)	0.6%
Only learning disability (q116)	3.6%
Multiple	59.2%

Recommendations and Proposed Program Responses

A variety of factors are involved in supporting children with disabilities to attend school on a regular basis. Some are in the locus of control of the school, some in the control of the family and child and some in the control of the community. One example of how WV Malawi intends to address this in the Able to Thrive Program is through personal learning plans (PLP). The PLP process brings together, children, their parents, community members, teachers, and school administrators to identify the actions they can take to support a child and family's learning goals. Specialists in inclusive education and education for learners with visual, hearing and learning disabilities can be included when specialized assessment is needed.

The PLP process will be conducted initially as a group with parents and children coming to sessions together. Children will be in a different room so that they can be supported and assessed by occupational therapists and special education teachers who can support the PLP process. School teachers, administrators and community members including the parent teacher association can be engaged as observers who can identify ways they can support the learning plans. An outline of the content is included:

- Parental attitude and home response issues
    - Talking about every child's right to access education, details of relevant legislation
    - Talk about how all children can learn, giving examples of major types of disability
    - Support the parent to understand a vision for their child's future that includes learning, relationships, participation in family activities etc.
    - Talk about the critical role that parents play in supporting their child's education
- Getting the child to school
    - Uniform and clothes
    - Identifying transport or support if needed
    - Encouraging, preparing, and supporting the child to attend school
    - Understanding the process of enrolling in school or community based early childhood development program
- Address barriers within the school environment
    - Provide accommodations for your child depending on their disability type
    - Identify a list of priority accommodations to discuss with the school
- Set learning goals with your child as part of the PLP
    - Identify what the child is good at, enjoys, struggles with and doesn't enjoy
    - Types of goals you can set – academic, physical, social, emotional etc.
    - How to discuss with your child
- Parents and children work together on the PLP within a Learning Passport document (see below) and enlist the support of other community members and teachers:

All About Me

Things I am good at:

Eg:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Things I like: Eg:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Things I don't like: Eg:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Things I find hard: Eg:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

I want to

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

If, after this process, a personalized plan cannot be developed because of the complexity of a child's learning needs, then a referral could be made to someone who can support a more complex plan such as an occupational therapist or special education teacher.

The PLP itself won't be sufficient to facilitate change. The effectiveness of the PLP will depend on enhancements made in school, community, and home-based learning environments. In communities where WV is running education programs, this includes community reading clubs and support to parents to create reading corners and a suitable learning environment in the home. Additionally, WV will do the following:

The support I need

Parents:

X:_____

ECD Caregivers:

X:_____

Reading Club Facilitator:

X:_____

Community Library Facilitator:

X:_____

School/teacher:

X:_____

School/teacher:

X:_____

- In schools, ECD/pre-primary Centers, reading clubs and homes WV can use its MEQA coaching and quality assurance tool (see www.meqadata.com) to enhance the use of universal design for learning (UDL) in schools. WV will also link parents and teachers, bridge transitions into early childhood education and primary school, sensitize teachers and other learners and enhance the school environment.
- WV will also test an approach to community-based sign language instruction to enable children who are deaf to learn alongside their parents, friends, teachers, and siblings, giving

them the option to stay in their community. Communication support has also emerged as a real need and WV will explore the use of C-Board and other tools to enhance communication as well as use of Braile devices and other technology to support learning for children who are blind. WV will continue to support the development of inclusive teaching and learning materials for use in schools, homes, and the community.

- Address medical issues and poverty during the process of inclusion. The Able to Thrive Case Management System, using the CommCare application, supports an integrated approach and will work towards addressing medical issues and prioritizing interventions which result in regular attendance at school. Based on available Registration Data to date, cash transfers or other livelihoods support will be necessary to support many families.

Overall, using the Case Management System provides an integrated, holistic response to the emerging needs of children and referrals to service providers who can meet those needs. Monitoring children over time will allow us to refine the PLP and improve support services based on data exported from the case management system. WV commits to supporting children already registered in the program via follow up visits, local capacity strengthening for disability service providers and organizations of persons with disabilities. WV will also continue registering children in the system as they are identified by MACODA community rehabilitation volunteers, child protection committees and sponsorship volunteers. The data presented in this report clearly shows that children with disabilities are not receiving the education they deserve. Knowledge sharing and collective problem solving is the only way to change the status quo and address the barriers to education which prevent children with disabilities from learning.