



DATA MUST SPEAK

## Schools that inspire change: Research on positive deviant schools in Mali

### Executive Summary

Mali's education system faces many challenges, stemming not only from rapid population growth, a shortage of qualified teachers, and gender inequalities in promotion rates (UNICEF Innocenti et al., 2023), but also from ongoing insecurity in the country since 2012. Nevertheless, Mali's policymakers continue to work tirelessly to ensure access to quality education for all children.

The Data Must Speak (DMS) research initiative aims to support these efforts by identifying effective local practices and behaviours that improve school performance, with a view to scaling them up across the country. In Mali, this research was developed jointly by Mali's Ministry of Education, local research partners, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) Mali country office, and the UNICEF Innocenti – Global Office of Research and Foresight.

In an earlier stage of the research, using administrative data from Mali, the team identified schools that were outperforming other schools despite working under similar conditions and with similar resources (positive deviant schools). This report presents Stage 3 of the DMS research and examines qualitative data from 36 basic education establishments to identify the specific practices and behaviours that lead positive deviant schools to outperform comparison schools.

## The following key conclusions were drawn from the analysis:<sup>1</sup>



### School leadership and management:



**Positive deviant schools support teachers more proactively, both in pedagogical and material terms.** Their head teachers and school management committees listen to teaching staff and strive to create better working conditions.



**Head teachers, school management committees and mothers' associations working in positive deviant schools adopt more effective practices to reduce student absences and ensure regular attendance.** They monitor absences more rigorously and also involve parents.

### Community engagement:



**In rural areas, the school management committees (and sometimes mothers' associations) of positive deviant schools play a more active role in raising community awareness.** Their activities address important issues such as dropping out and girls' education.



**Similarly, the school management committees of positive deviant schools in rural areas often act as mediators between the school and the community in the event of conflict.** This role is lacking in comparison schools, which also more frequently report strained relations with members of the community.

<sup>1</sup> Detailed results from Stage 3 of the DMS research, including practices and behaviours from positive deviant schools, can be found in the longer version of the report.

Beyond these differences between positive deviant and comparison schools, the data also revealed that, more generally, Malian schools often report issues in receiving direct support funds to improve school performance (ADARS funds). Furthermore, advisers from pedagogical advice centres very often find it difficult to travel to schools to supervise teachers on a regular basis. In addition, teacher learning communities in schools for basic cycle 1<sup>2</sup> are highly appreciated by teachers, who report that learning communities help them improve their teaching methods. In contrast, most teachers in basic cycle 2 regret not being able to benefit from this type of professional development. Lastly, female teachers report having greater difficulty than their male colleagues in being respected and taken seriously by their students, even though it would appear that they are more invested in their students' learning.

## These results allow for several recommendations to be made:



**1.** Broaden access to opportunities for initial training and continuing professional development for teachers, and improve their working conditions (i.e., salaries and accommodation) to improve staff retention, particularly in rural areas.



**2.** Strengthen the mandates and capacities of school management committees to enhance their management, awareness-raising and mediation roles within schools and communities. Consider also providing financial support to these committees to strengthen their impact and performance.



**3.** Identify and remove obstacles to the allocation of ADARS funds to schools, to enable the timely disbursement and efficient use of these funds.



**4.** Encourage the establishment of pupil absence monitoring systems in all schools in Mali, with a view to improving their performance.

Stage 4 of the DMS research will make more detailed recommendations in these areas, with the aim of scaling up practices and behaviours from positive deviant schools through a concrete plan developed in cooperation with the Ministry of Education.

<sup>2</sup> Basic cycle 1: from first grade to sixth grade; basic cycle 2: from seventh grade to ninth grade.