

# Roadmap to promoting equity and early literacy for Deaf learners through national recognition and documentation of Rwandan Sign Language (RSL)

## Policy Brief



## ***About this Policy Brief***

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<b>About the project</b>	<p>The purpose of this research project is to build rigorous evidence on how to contextualise, implement, and scale cost-effective solutions for creating and improving sign-language-rich environments in schools in Kenya, Malawi, and Rwanda. It will engage pre-primary and lower primary grade learners who are deaf, teachers who are deaf, teachers with sign language skills, parents, organisations of persons with disabilities (OPDs), the government, and relevant education stakeholders.</p> <p>To find out more about this project, go to <a href="#">Scaling Inclusive Early Learning with Deaf Children</a>.</p>

## Executive Summary

Rwandan Sign Language (RSL) is vital for the learning, inclusion, and identity of thousands of Deaf learners. However, the lack of formal recognition in the national policies continues to undermine the rights and outcomes of Deaf children in Rwanda. As of 2024, only 699 learners who are deaf were enrolled in inclusive schools, representing just 26% of an estimated 2,679 learners with hearing impairments ([National Institute of Statistics Rwanda, 2024](#)).<sup>1</sup> The remaining 74% are in mainstream schools, often without access to adequate RSL support. National data also indicate over 5,000 learners with speech and language difficulties, many of whom could benefit from RSL ([National Institute of Statistics Rwanda, 2024](#)).

Evidence from the 2025 Scaling Inclusive Early Learning with Deaf Children Baseline Study confirms that learners who are deaf thrive when they have regular access to RSL delivered by Deaf teachers or educators who are proficient in RSL. Schools using RSL reported better learner engagement, comprehension, and assessment participation. Yet without official guidance, many schools rely on improvised or foreign signs, creating barriers to learning and equity.

This brief outlines a practical roadmap across immediate, short term, and medium term priorities, and calls for multi sectoral action to formally recognise RSL as a national language of instruction, document regional variations and harmonise RSL use. It recommends integrating RSL into teacher training, expanding access to adapted materials, and embedding sign language support within inclusive education policy frameworks. By recognising and documenting RSL, Rwanda has the opportunity to lead in inclusive education and fulfil its commitments under the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4.1) and national inclusion policies such as the National Strategy for Transformation (NST2), and the Education Sector Strategic Plans, ensuring every child can learn in a language they understand.

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<sup>1</sup> This figure likely represents a low estimate, as hearing disabilities are often underreported in Rwanda due to limited screening and social stigma.

## The Landscape of Rwandan Sign Language Access and Recognition

*Rwandan Sign Language is more than a communication tool; it is a gateway to learning, inclusion, and opportunity for thousands of Deaf learners. Yet without national recognition and documentation, its impact remains limited.*

*We call on the Government of Rwanda to formally recognise and adopt RSL as a national language. This should be supported by a coordinated, multi-sectoral effort to document and integrate RSL across education, public services, and national communication platforms. Recognition would affirm the linguistic and cultural legitimacy of RSL and improve learning outcomes for the estimated 8,000 learners who depend on it, while advancing Rwanda's commitment to inclusive education and development.*

Despite Rwanda's strong policy commitment to inclusive education, the use of Rwandan Sign Language in schools remains fragmented. Learners, teachers, and interpreters across regions often rely on improvised or varied signs, shaped by local practice and community influence. These variations, while natural and culturally rich, have emerged in part due to the absence of official recognition, coordinated documentation, and guidance on RSL use in education.

Although the Rwanda Education Board (REB) has trained over 1,400 teachers in sign language and equipped 32 schools with disability learning materials (†[Muhinde, 2025](#)), the lack of national recognition for RSL limits the coherence and sustainability of these efforts. Without a unifying framework, schools use varied signs, interpretations, and teaching methods, leading to inconsistencies in how Rwandan Sign Language is delivered. These disparities contribute to gaps in communication, learner participation, and academic progression.

The Special Needs and Inclusive Education Policy (†[Ministry of Education, 2018](#)) acknowledges this gap, noting that Rwanda's education system is not equipped with any form of recognised sign language or interpretation services. It highlights that learners with hearing difficulties face persistent communication barriers, which contribute to higher dropout rates across all levels, including tertiary education.

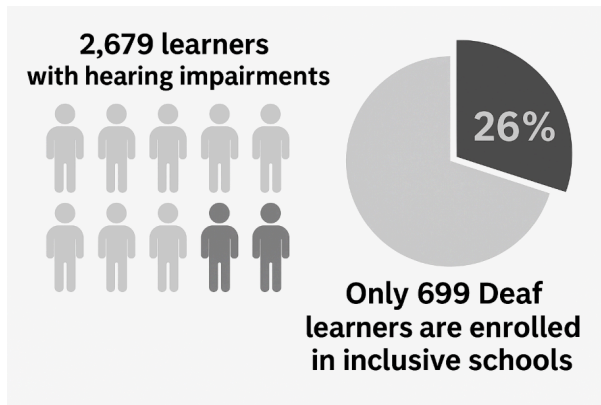
The policy also notes that sign language is neither officially recognised by the Ministry of Education nor systematically integrated into teacher training programmes. As a result, schools make individual decisions about communication modes, leading to inconsistencies in the use of RSL in teaching and learning.

However, Rwanda is well-positioned to address this challenge. The development of the RSL dictionary in 2024 by the Rwanda National Union of the Deaf and the National Council of Persons with Disabilities represents a major milestone. The RSL dictionary, together with storybooks, learning tools, and assessment content, provide a strong evidence base for national recognition; however, government validation of the resource is still pending, which limits progress (†[Uwayisaba, 2025](#)). As these resources are increasingly adopted in classrooms, they create a natural pathway for documentation and ultimately harmonising sign usage across the country while still accommodating regional variations.

Rather than eliminating differences, documentation recognises these variations while fostering harmonisation, mutual understanding and compatibility. Recognition and documentation must go hand in hand to elevate RSL as a language of instruction, inclusion, and national identity.

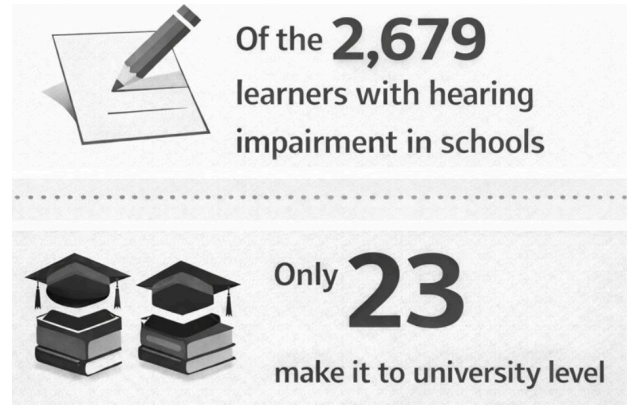
**Figure 1. Enrolment of Deaf learners in inclusive schools**

Source: [↑National Institute of Statistics Rwanda \(2024\)](#)



**Figure 2. Transition rates of Deaf learners**

Source: [↑National Institute of Statistics Rwanda \(2024\)](#)



This mirrors a global equity challenge. According to the World Federation of the Deaf, only 1 to 2% of Deaf children worldwide have access to education in sign language. The majority of these children struggle to access learning due to spoken language used to teach. Yet international evidence shows that Deaf learners educated in sign language rich environments achieve significantly better outcomes in literacy, identity, cognitive development, and long term academic achievement ([↑Mayberry, 2010](#)).

Without urgent and coordinated action, Rwanda risks entrenching educational exclusion for an entire population of learners. Approximately 8,000 children in the school system stand to benefit from access to a recognized RSL curriculum, yet current provisions fall far short. Integrating RSL across schools is not only a matter of inclusion, it is essential for delivering the promise of quality education for all.

*“Unlike other Rwandan schools, those for learners with hearing impairment freely choose any communication mode for teaching and learning because the standard sign language for schools is not yet in place.”*

*Special Needs and Inclusive Education Policy (2018, pg 16)*

### What the Evidence Shows

International research confirms that access to sign language is a critical foundation for Deaf learners' success. When Deaf children are exposed early to signed languages (particularly between the ages of 0 and 5), they can reach age-appropriate language milestones and develop typical cognitive, executive functioning, and reasoning skills essential for literacy ([↑Henner et al., 2016](#); [↑Mayberry, 2010](#)). A meta-analysis by [↑Goldin-Meadow & Mayberry \(2001\)](#) highlights that early language acquisition is foundational for reading development in Deaf children. Regardless of whether a child's parents are hearing or Deaf, studies consistently find that signing proficiency is a strong predictor of reading outcomes ([↑Hoffmeister et al., 2022](#); [↑Aura et al., 2016](#); [↑Padden & Ramsey, 2000](#); [↑Strong & Prinz, 1997](#)).

Ensuring early access to sign-rich environments for Deaf children is, therefore, a key factor in fostering healthy development and language and literacy skills. However, globally, an estimated 34 million children live with disabling hearing loss, representing a significant share of the overall 430 million people with moderate to severe hearing impairment worldwide ([↑WHO, 2025](#)). The prevalence of childhood hearing loss is particularly high in low- and middle-income countries, where early detection and access to language supports such as sign language are often limited. These global figures highlight the scope of the challenge and underline the importance of early language access, sign language documentation, and inclusive education policies.

In Rwanda, the recognition of RSL would align Rwanda's education system with its global commitments (CRPD, CRC and SDGs) and help ensure that no child is excluded due to language. At the national level, early findings from the Scaling Inclusive Early Learning with Deaf Children Baseline Study (2025) (henceforth referred to as the Baseline Study) confirm that consistent access to RSL significantly improves learner engagement, comprehension, and confidence. This research shows that:

### **1. RSL access determines whether learners can participate fully**

Access to RSL is a key factor in whether Deaf learners are able to follow lessons, engage in classroom activities, and complete assessments. According to the Baseline Study (2025)<sup>2</sup>, in approximately one third of the schools assessed, learners demonstrated a good ability to understand instructions, respond accurately to tasks, and interact confidently in class. These schools had consistent RSL instruction supported by teachers using RSL and Deaf teaching staff. By contrast, in schools where learners had little or no exposure to RSL, communication breakdowns were common. These findings affirm that the presence or absence of RSL support directly affects a learner's ability to learn and participate.

Importantly, these dynamics extend beyond the classroom (Allen & Morere, 2020; Lu et al., 2016). Many Deaf children in Rwanda grow up in households where family members do not know or use sign language, further limiting early language development. Without foundational exposure to sign language at home, school becomes the first and sometimes only setting where RSL is introduced. This places even greater responsibility on the education system to ensure early, consistent, and high-quality RSL instruction, recognising that language deprivation in early childhood can have lasting cognitive and academic effects.

### **2. Lack of RSL documentation can create inequity**

The Baseline Study also revealed that schools across Rwanda use a wide range of sign systems. Some draw on foreign influences, such as Italian or American Sign Language, while others rely on informal or locally developed signs shaped by community context and limited access to formal training. While variation is natural in any language, the absence of national documentation and subsequent recognition of RSL has left teachers and learners without consistent guidance or resources. While Deaf learners tend to adapt to sign variations, the absence of a shared RSL framework makes it difficult for hearing teachers and interpreters to deliver instruction. This complicates curriculum delivery, teaching material development, and assessment practices. As shown in the Baseline Study (2025), the absence of official recognition and documentation of RSL contributes to inconsistent use across schools, leading to disparities in learner comprehension and participation. Recognition provides the foundation for meaningful documentation and, over time, harmonisation.

Rather than imposing a single rigid version, documentation offers a means of harmonising and recognising regional variations while promoting mutual understanding across contexts. This approach values the richness of RSL as a natural language and lays the foundation for its national recognition and broader integration into education and public life.

### **3. Trained teachers make a measurable difference**

Teachers' knowledge and skills have been found to be important factors in ensuring sign language-rich environments, as well as an environment that fosters literacy development and effective engagement of Deaf learners. As shown in the baseline study (2025), schools with trained Deaf educators, or sign language assistants consistently outperformed others in the provision of inclusive learning environments. In roughly 25%

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<sup>2</sup> These findings are based on the Scaling Inclusive Early Learning with Deaf Children project, publication forthcoming [available here: <https://www.ekitabu.com/news/scaling-inclusive-early-learning-with-deaf-children-a-collaborative-approach>].

of schools assessed, the presence of trained<sup>3</sup> staff was linked with strong RSL usage, learner confidence, and successful assessment participation (Baseline Study, 2025). However, these cases remain the exception. Many schools reported challenges retaining trained staff, with teacher assistants leaving due to job mobility or lack of long-term support. Their absence often left schools struggling to find qualified replacements, with new staff frequently lacking prior experience in RSL or Deaf education. This points to the critical importance of investing in training and certifying Deaf Youth to become teachers and institutional structures that support RSL delivery across the system.

*“Since the [deployment] of the Deaf teaching assistants, classroom engagement has improved and participation of Deaf learners increased”*

*Female teacher, Grade 1*

## Overarching Implications

Recognition and documentation of RSL are foundational to establishing a formal qualification pathway for sign language interpreters. This ensures consistent standards, increases availability, and supports the professionalisation of interpretation services. Numerous examples of RSL use in schools clearly demonstrate the positive impact it can have on Deaf learners. Building on this, formally recognising RSL and investing in the training of both Deaf teachers and interpreters would further strengthen Rwanda’s progress in improving access to quality education for Deaf children. However, with the tools already in place (including a validated RSL dictionary and existing teaching materials developed by Rwandan Deaf educators), Rwanda is well positioned to lead by example. National recognition and documentation of RSL would not only close gaps in access and equity, but also reinforce the country's broader vision of inclusive education and social participation for all learners.

Of the estimated 2,679 learners with hearing impairment (↑[National Institute of Statistics Rwanda, 2024](#)), only 699 learners across 18 schools are currently enrolled in inclusive schools with some level of sign language support.<sup>4</sup> This means that approximately 74% of Deaf learners are in mainstream schools, where RSL support is either limited, inconsistent, or entirely absent. Evidence from the Baseline Study (2025) indicates that learners in these mainstream settings often experience reduced participation and confidence, especially when the language of instruction is inaccessible. In some cases, learners were unable or unwilling to complete assessments due to communication barriers or the lack of peer interaction in sign language.

This signals an urgent need to move beyond fragmented provision and toward a coherent national approach that recognises RSL as a legitimate language of instruction and ensures that it is documented, harmonised, and integrated across all education levels. Harmonisation does not mean erasing regional variation; it involves acknowledging and documenting the rich diversity of signs, while fostering mutual understanding and cross-school compatibility.

## What Comes Next, and How Do We Get There?

The roadmap below outlines a phased, multi-stakeholder approach to support the national recognition of RSL, its documentation and ultimately harmonisation. It builds on evidence from the Baseline Study (2025), which highlights the urgent need for consistent RSL use in schools to improve learning outcomes for Deaf learners. The roadmap identifies immediate, short-term, and medium-term priorities and assigns roles to key actors

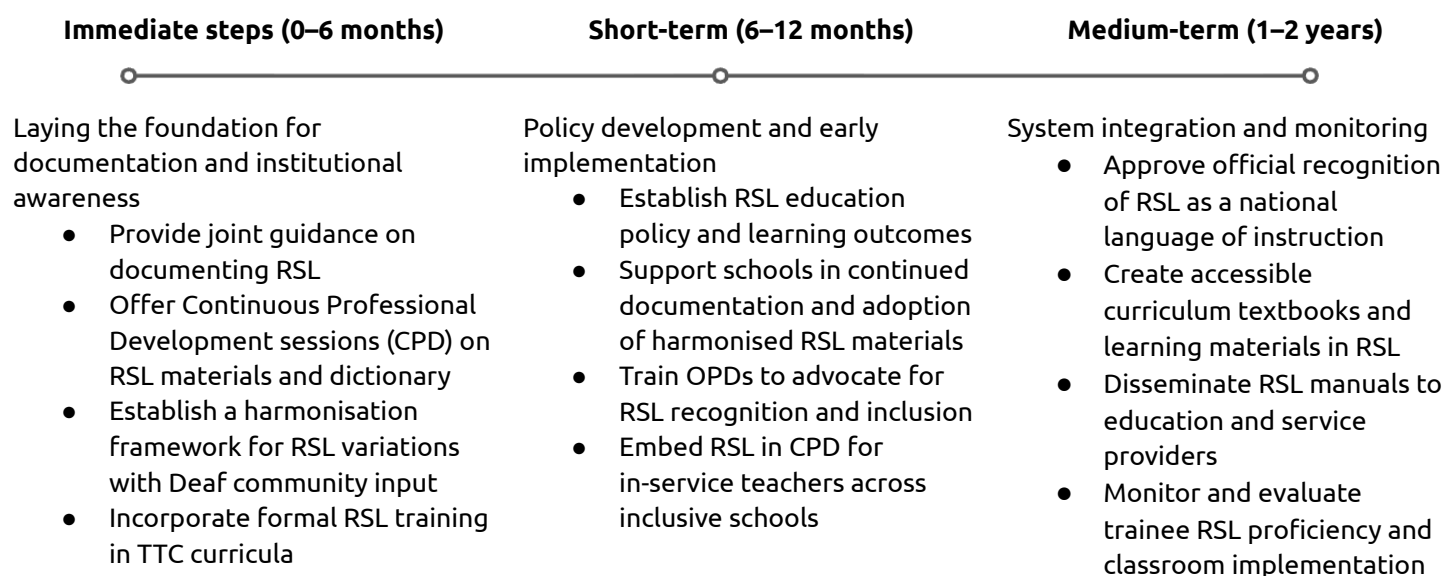
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<sup>3</sup> Teachers were trained on inclusive teaching practices based on Universal Design for Learning principles, RSL and use of technological resources such as Digital Story Time (↑[eKitabu, 2020](#)) in the classroom.

<sup>4</sup> Data based on an RNUD study and is publicly available here

[[https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1DyUBGVO\\_6KuPsLxtdQK7uN1vpCNo4tnUNchrPez6go8/edit?gid=0#gid=0](https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1DyUBGVO_6KuPsLxtdQK7uN1vpCNo4tnUNchrPez6go8/edit?gid=0#gid=0)]  
[Last accessed 18 December 2025]

across government, civil society, and education institutions. It aims to translate policy commitments into practical steps that will advance inclusive education and uphold the right of every child to learn in a language they understand.



## From Roadmap to Action

For these actions to take root, they must be backed by clear and coordinated policy decisions. The following recommendations outline what is needed at the national level to turn this vision into reality, ensuring that RSL is not only used in classrooms but officially recognised, resourced, and embedded in the wider education and public service ecosystem.

### 1. Rwandan government (including the Ministry of Education) / Sector Working Groups / Strategic Planning Units

- **Formally recognise Rwandan Sign Language** as a national language of instruction in inclusive and special schools, through legal or ministerial action.
- **Include RSL-related indicators** in national education strategies such as the National Strategy for Inclusive Education and Vision 2050, and in annual education sector reviews.

### 2. Rwanda Education Board / Rwanda National Union of the Deaf

- **Develop and implement a national framework** for documenting and harmonizing RSL, guided by existing materials such as the validated RSL dictionary and input from Deaf communities.
- **Ensure access to RSL-adapted materials** in all inclusive and early learning schools, including storybooks, manuals, and videos developed in collaboration with Deaf educators.

### 3. Teacher Training Institutions / Higher Education Council / Teacher Services Commission / Public Service Commission

- **Integrate RSL training** into all Teacher Training Colleges (TTCs) and professional development programmes to ensure educators are equipped to support Deaf learners in both inclusive and special school settings.

- **Create pathways for Deaf teacher recruitment and retention**, including accessible teacher training, certification support, and inclusion in public teaching service schemes.
- **Establish a structured pathway for RSL interpretation**, including training and certification programmes, to ensure that Deaf and hard-of-hearing learners have consistent access to RSL proficient teachers (or interpreters) in classrooms and other educational environments.

#### **4. Local Government / NGOs / Organisations for People with Disabilities / parent & community groups**

- **Promote RSL at community level**, working with Deaf-led organisations, parent groups to encourage the use of RSL in homes, schools (including caregivers in home-based, community-based, and model ECD facilities), as well as in public life.

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