

2024/5 GEM Report: Leadership in education

LEAD FOR LEARNING

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Education leaders, often overlooked, shape the direction of their institutions and teams.

Their leadership styles vary widely, making it difficult to measure their impact. Yet the need for good school, system and political leaders is acute to help drive education in the right direction, particularly as education challenges remain daunting.

KEY FINDINGS ON LEADERSHIP

Education leaders are more than managers. They are change agents.

- **Policy makers face a major challenge:** how to ensure that people with the right skills and vision are identified, selected, prepared and supported as leaders.
- **National plans at the school, system and political level need to nurture four essential leadership dimensions:** set expectations, focus on learning, foster collaboration and develop people. Yet a global review of school principal preparation and training programmes and courses suggests that barely half of them focus on any of these four dimensions – and just one third focus on all four.

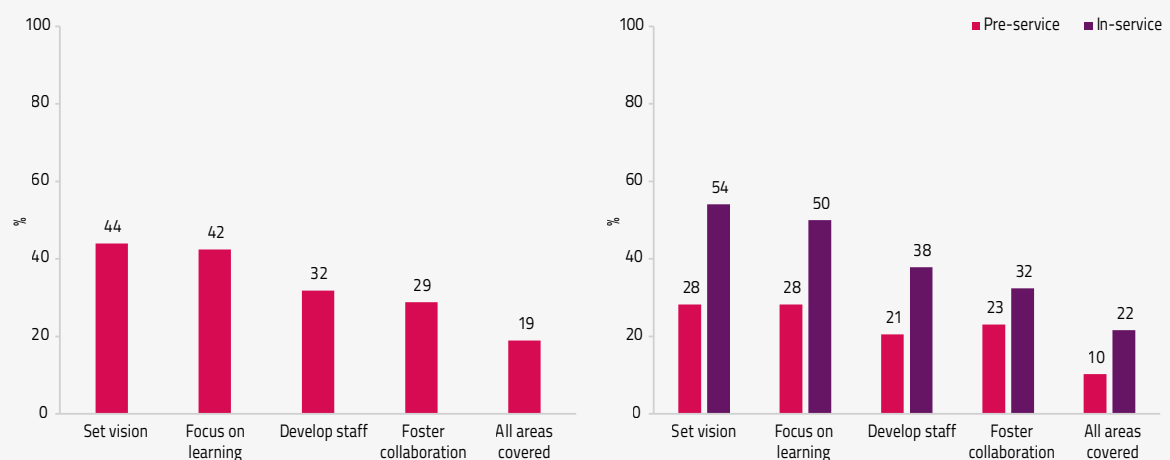
FIGURE 1:

Only one fifth of principal preparation and training programmes cover all four dimensions of leadership

Percentage of school principal preparation and training programmes, by area of focus, selected countries, 2024

a. Total

b. By type



Note: The analysis is based on information from 132 programmes in 92 countries.

Source: GEM Report team analysis based on the PEER country profiles.

Good schools need good school leaders.

- **Effective principals bring out the best in students.** In the United States, it was estimated that principal and teacher leadership inputs contributed up to 27% of the variance in student outcomes, ranking just below teachers' impact on learning among school-controlled factors.
- **Effective principals bring out the best in teachers.** A study of 32 countries affirmed that strong leadership correlates with improved teaching practices. Globally, 57% of countries expect principals to provide feedback to teachers based on their observations. However, the share of secondary school principals overseeing teaching activities fell from 81% in 2015 to 77% in 2022 in high-income countries.
- **Effective principals ensure their schools are safe, healthy and inclusive.** Preventing bullying and ensuring student safety are key objectives for school leaders. In the United States, principals adapted the curriculum to prioritize social and emotional well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic. In Malta, principals worked with communities to develop an inclusive school culture for migrants with language support.

Effective leadership demands fair hiring practices, trust and growth opportunities.

- **Talent recruitment and retention requires open and competitive hiring processes.** Limiting political discretion in appointing school principals improves school outcomes. Yet globally, only 63% of countries have open and competitive school principal recruitment processes in primary and secondary education.
- **The best teachers do not necessarily make the best principals.** But while almost all countries require principals to be fully qualified teachers, only some 3 in 10 also specify management experience.
- **Autonomy can unlock leaders' potential.** Higher-performing education systems tend to grant greater autonomy to principals over decisions on human and financial resources. But in richer countries, less than half of principals are responsible for course content or establishing teacher salary levels. And almost 40% of countries do not recognize higher education institutions' autonomy by law.
- **Professional leaders need preparation and training.** School leadership standards can help guide training by outlining the required competencies, which almost all countries have set. However, almost half of principals in richer countries do not receive any training before appointment and only 31% of all countries have regulations for the induction of new principals. Practical skills like data use, financial management and digital literacy are also essential, yet a quarter of principals in richer countries lack adequate training in such areas.

School leaders are expected to do too much with too little.

- **There are too many demands on school operations to leave enough time for principals to set a vision.** Expectations of principals are often too high. Principals are key to effective implementation of reforms. In some countries, they are also under intense scrutiny due to new accountability mechanisms. Yet a survey of principals in 14 middle-income countries showed that 68% of their time is spent on routine management tasks. About one third of public school principals and one fifth of private school principals in OECD countries reported lacking sufficient time for instructional leadership.

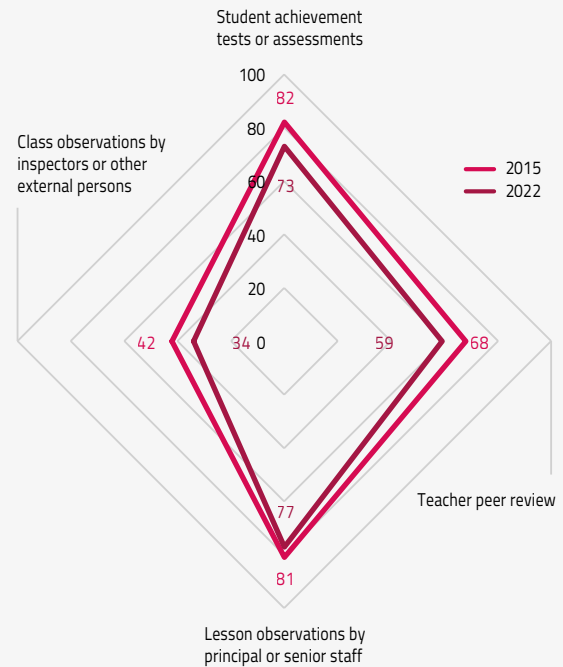
School leaders should not be heroes. Sharing leadership builds better schools.

- **Sharing leadership throughout the school creates a collaborative learning environment.** It empowers teachers to lead within their classrooms, students to be active leaders with their peers, and parents and community members to be involved. Yet collaboration is the most underemphasized of the four leadership dimensions in training programmes.

FIGURE 2:

School principals have reported a decrease in their oversight of teaching activities in high-income countries

Percentage of secondary school principals reporting selected teaching oversight activities, OECD countries, 2015 and 2022



Source: OECD (2023).

- **School leadership is too often hierarchical.** Assistant principals and teachers can help achieve school goals when enabled with clear roles, training and incentives. But only half of countries explicitly emphasize teacher collaboration in their leadership standards and barely one third of leadership training programmes focus on it. Some 80% of countries require school boards to include teachers and 83% to include parents, 62% community members and 57% students.

System leaders do not receive sufficient attention in leadership plans.

- **Education officials at the central and local levels are potential leaders.** They can drive system-wide improvement and alignment in education reform and policy. Countries increasingly recognize that these officials can have greater influence if they are given greater autonomy.
- **System leaders are effective when they work with other actors.** In the Mexican state of Puebla, the success of the education reform was the result of coordinated system-wide efforts that included the leadership of education officials.

Education ministers work in complex political environments and are stymied by short tenures.

- **Ministers balance multiple demands during short tenures and often do not have a background in teaching.** A new global database by the GEM Report shows that half of education ministers since 2010 leave office within two years after their appointment; only 23% have prior experience of teaching in schools.
- **Political leaders need to be astute in political compromise and outreach to make reform happen.** Coalition and relationship building can make up for a lack of time and good data and in the face of conflicting opinions.
- **Short tenures make it hard to deliver reform.** Analysis of World Bank education projects between 2000 and 2017 in 114 countries found a substantive negative correlation between ministerial turnover and project performance.

More women in leadership can have positive outcomes in education.

- **Female political leaders have prioritized education more than their male peers.** Female parliamentarians have helped increase primary education spending globally. Yet, the percentage of female ministers has increased only from 23% in 2010–13 to 30% in 2020–23.
- **Some studies suggest that women achieve better learning outcomes than men as principals.** In francophone Africa, students in primary schools led by female principals outperformed those in schools led by male principals in mathematics and reading by at least six months.
- **While many women teach, far fewer lead schools.** The share of female principals in primary and secondary education is on average at least 20 percentage points lower than the average share of female teachers. Only 11% of countries globally have measures in place to address gender diversity in principal recruitment.

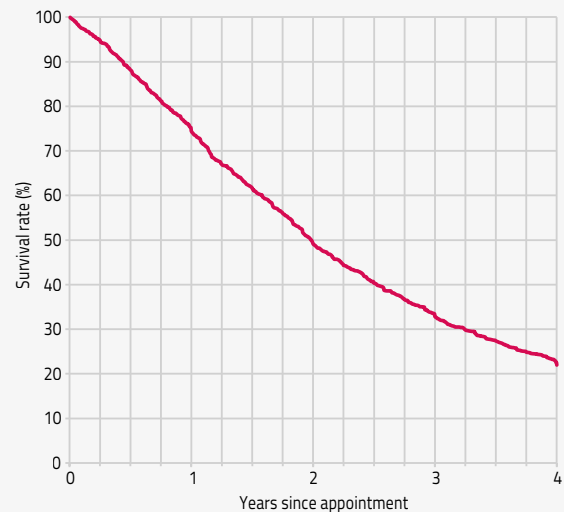
Many actors exercise leadership by influencing the direction of education systems.

- **Teacher unions, student unions, business leaders, academics and civil society hold governments to account, lobby and raise awareness.** Influence matters: In the United States, some think tanks score low on expertise but high on education discussions in Congress, with the reverse being the case for others.
- **International organizations help frame and inform the global debate on education, as well as fund countries' education systems.** However, competition for space and influence can distract them from the goal of education improvement and their legitimacy can be challenged by a lack of capacity or efficiency.

FIGURE 3:

Within two years of their appointment, 51% of education ministers have left office

Probability that an education minister is still in office, by time elapsed since appointment



Note: The analysis covers the period 1 January 2010 to 31 December 2023 and includes 1,412 ministers of education from 211 education systems.

Source: GEM Report team analysis.

KEY FINDINGS ON PROGRESS TOWARDS SDG 4

More children are in school and progressing through education today than ever before.

- The participation of children under 3 in education has increased globally and, most notably, by over 10 percentage points in sub-Saharan Africa over the past decade.
- Since 2015, 110 million more children, adolescents and youth have gone to school.
- Completion rates are also rising: 40 million more young people are completing secondary school today than in 2015.
- Since 2010, the tertiary education gross enrolment ratio has increased from 30% to 43% and even faster in Latin America and the Caribbean and in Eastern and South-eastern Asia.

But those left behind are the hardest to reach, leading to stagnation and, in cases of conflict, a reversal of education development.

- Enrolment at age 5 has stagnated at around 75% for the past decade.
- Globally, 251 million children and youth remain out of school, a reduction of just 1% since 2015, of which 129 million are boys and 122 million are girls. Exclusion is exacerbated by social norms and poverty: Around 6 in 10 children, adolescents and youth are out of school in Afghanistan and Niger.
- Too many children start school late and repeat grades in sub-Saharan Africa: 26% are at least two years too old for their grade in primary school; 35% are over-age in lower secondary school.
- The secondary completion rate has increased from 53% in 2015 to 59% in 2023. Globally, 650 million leave school without a secondary school certificate.
- Gender gaps in secondary completion rates have been eliminated globally, but remain wide in sub-Saharan Africa, where the pace of progress over the past decade has been half of that in Central and Southern Asia, the only other region where girls are behind boys.
- The percentage of adults with at least secondary completion has increased on average by 5 percentage points in the past 10 years. At this rate, it would take another 80 years to achieve universal secondary completion.
- Only 3% of adults participate in education and training. Participation rates have fallen in more than half of the countries with trend data available since 2015.
- Attacks on schools totaled some 3,000 in 2022, exacerbated by the war in Ukraine, and again in 2023 by the war in the State of Palestine. As of July 2024, 61% of schools in Gaza had been hit directly.

Standards for teachers are often too low or not met.

- Insufficient teachers in classrooms can be due to a shortage of applicants or a shortage of vacancies. The first is more common in rich countries: only 4% of 15-year-olds in the richest countries want to become teachers; the second in poorer countries: in Senegal, there was a surplus of over 1,000 qualified teachers in 2020 alone.
- Many teachers do not have the minimum required qualifications. In sub-Saharan Africa, the share has dropped from 70% in 2012 to 64% in 2022. In Europe and Northern America, it has dropped from 98% in 2010 to 93% in 2023.
- Standards vary across regions. Most countries require teachers to have a bachelor's degree to teach in primary education, while 17% of sub-Saharan African countries accept a lower secondary certificate.

Learning outcome levels were declining even before COVID-19 but the pandemic coincides with an acceleration of that trend.

- It is difficult to establish trends, as there remains an acute data gap globally: low coverage of learning assessments means there is no information on 680 million children.
- Evidence from 70 upper-middle and high-income countries that took part in the 2022 PISA (at the end of lower secondary school) shows that the share of students proficient in reading fell by 9 percentage points from 2012 to 2018 and by 3 more points to 47% in 2022.
- The share of these students proficient in mathematics increased by 2 percentage points from 2012 to 2018 but fell by 8 points to 36% in 2022. A long-term decline may have been ongoing since 2009. COVID-19 may have accelerated the decline but might mask other structural factors.
- Evidence from 6 sub-Saharan African countries that took part in the 2021 and 2023 AMPL surveys (at the end of primary school) shows that only about 1 in 10 students reached the minimum proficiency level in reading and 2 in 10 in mathematics.

Technology helps learners access education who previously could not but brings new issues.

- In upper secondary education, 8 in 10 schools are connected to the internet. Countries' progress towards their connectivity benchmarks is only three percentage points off track.
- There are major gaps between countries in familiarity with basic computer-related activities: 8 in 10 adults in high-income countries but only 3 in 10 adults in middle-income countries can send an email with an attachment.
- With respect to smartphone-related activities, 51% of youth and adults could set up security measures for digital devices in high-income countries compared to 9% in middle-income countries.

- Formal education is linked to higher digital skills acquisition. In the European Union, the share of adults with basic digital skills rises from 34% among those with lower secondary education to 51% for those with upper secondary education and 80% for those with post-secondary education.
- A faster increase in the prevalence of bullying for girls than for boys aligns with their higher vulnerability to cyberbullying. Girls are at higher risk, at least partly because they spend more time on social media.

Climate change poses challenges to infrastructure and curricula.

- Globally, almost one in four primary schools do not even have access to basic drinking water, sanitation and hygiene, yet governments need to also make more extensive investments to protect students and schools from rising temperatures and natural disasters.
- A new indicator which monitors green education content shows that climate change education needs to be taught more in the earlier grades and across more subjects than just science.

National and international investment in education is declining.

- Globally, public education expenditure fell by 0.4 percentage points of GDP between 2015 and 2022: the median level fell from 4.4% to 4%.
- The share of education in total public expenditure decreased by 0.6 percentage points from 13.2% in 2015 to 12.6% in 2022.
- The growing weight of debt servicing has implications for education spending. Sub-Saharan African countries spent almost as much on debt servicing in 2022 as they did on education.
- In terms of the twin international benchmarks of spending at least 4% of GDP and at least 15% of public expenditure for education, 59 out of 171 countries met neither target.
- Education spending per child has largely stayed the same since 2010.
- The share of aid going to education dropped from 9.3% in 2019 to 7.6% in 2022.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Leadership matters in education. It helps education institutions, education systems and societies to change for the better. Leaders do not act on their own – they respond to other actors who help shift the political system: members of parliament, researchers, international organizations, civil society, trade unions, media and many others. All of them exercise leadership, helping influence countries towards specific education and broader societal goals. Some politicians, for example, have made inclusive and equitable education of good quality a priority in their countries through forward-looking reforms and adequate resource allocation. But before delving into the ‘how’ of leadership – and risk it becoming an end in itself – it is important to look into ‘what’ leadership is meant to achieve.

Leadership is exercised in many ways and multiple forms, given differences in contexts, values, personalities and organizations. The range of outcomes to which leaders contribute is so wide that focusing on any single one for analytical convenience underestimates the full impact of leadership. Stories of good leaders inspire but can only offer direct lessons to those in similar situations. The challenge is to draw from these individual stories and focus on institutional mechanisms that nurture rather than stifle talented leaders of all styles and backgrounds, in all contexts. In many countries, education leaders are often thought of only as administrators or managers. Yet in recent years, some countries have recognized the full scope of their roles and built foundations for their professionalization. Other countries have even taken steps to shape approaches to leadership, urging leaders to engage more with those around them. Change can be slow, however, when it involves long-standing cultures and traditions.

This report’s four recommendations focus on actions governments can take to foster leadership in education at school and in the civil service. They are underpinned by the four dimensions of an education leader’s role that are relevant for them to lead effectively, whether they work in a school or a government education office: as introduced at the start of the summary – to set expectations, to focus on learning, to foster collaboration and to develop capacity. These dimensions should be the basis upon which to build coherent national strategies of education leadership that cut across all levels of the system. For an education system to work well, leaders at different levels need to be working in the same direction to achieve common goals.

RECOMMENDATION 1. TRUST AND EMPOWER

Create the enabling conditions for school principals to improve education

There can be no leadership when there is no opportunity to make decisions. Education leaders contribute to education improvement in all circumstances and contexts, but their influence is greater the more they are trusted to use their skills. Education systems therefore need to empower school principals with sufficient autonomy to manage financial and human resources and to make decisions related to teaching and learning.

But introducing autonomy will not be sufficient without support measures. Governments must be clear about the scope of school leaders' decision-making authority. They need to allocate adequate resources in a timely, equitable and predictable manner. School leaders need to be accountable to governments and communities for the responsible use of these resources to achieve feasible education outcomes. Governments must develop leaders' capacity to use resources effectively and their own capacity to monitor schools and use the information effectively. Trust should be developed further by meaningful and regular engagement. And governments need to be aware of and protect school leaders from the potential downsides of greater autonomy.

RECOMMENDATION 2. SELECT, DEVELOP AND RECOGNIZE

Invest in the professionalization of school principals

a. Select talented school principals through inclusive recruitment

Approaches to recruitment need to be inclusive and recognize that good leadership potential can be found in those who are 'modest and self-effacing, surprised to be singled out as effective leaders'. Talented people are likely to be discouraged if processes are closed and inequitable. While there may be alternative pathways to becoming a school leader, it is highly unlikely that someone could be appointed outside of the pool of current teachers. It, therefore, makes sense for initial teacher training to incorporate elements of leadership development. Talent spotting and succession planning should be integral components of recruitment strategies. Offering management and leadership roles in advance is desirable where circumstances allow. However, it is crucial to ensure that these approaches are free of bias, stereotypes and favouritism, and to avoid hierarchical structures, partisanship or patronage.

Selection criteria should be clearly defined, objective and transparent to ensure that qualified candidates, regardless of their background or gender, have equal opportunities to demonstrate their diverse leadership skills. Politics should not play a role in the choice of school leaders. The lack of diversity in leadership positions is a problem for education decision making at all levels. Currently, 8 in 10 countries do not have measures in place to ensure balanced representation.

Open selection processes could help reduce disparity in representation in leadership positions, but temporary quotas may be needed where problems persist.

The best teachers need not make the best principals – and care should be exercised to avoid signalling that the position of a principal is a reward for the best teachers. On the other hand, being a good teacher is important to succeed as a principal. The review of selection processes for this report shows that almost all countries consider teaching experience as a prerequisite for being a school leader. But only about 3 in 10 also specify management experience. Selection criteria should therefore be broadened and diversified.

b. Prepare, train and support school principals to focus on the core dimensions of their role

A global review of training courses for this report, both pre-service and in-service, suggests that barely half of training courses focus on any of the four dimensions of instructional leadership, expectations and vision, collaboration and alliances, and staff development – and just one third on all four. Training programmes need to pay attention to each of these four dimensions but tend to be primarily academic and do not distinguish between needs arising at different career stages.

Some types of support, such as induction, coaching and mentorship, are critical for novice and early career leaders' success, yet their role is downplayed. Only 3 in 10 countries have regulations to provide training for new principals after their appointment. Preparation programmes should include a practice or experiential learning element and enlist the support of coaches and mentors.

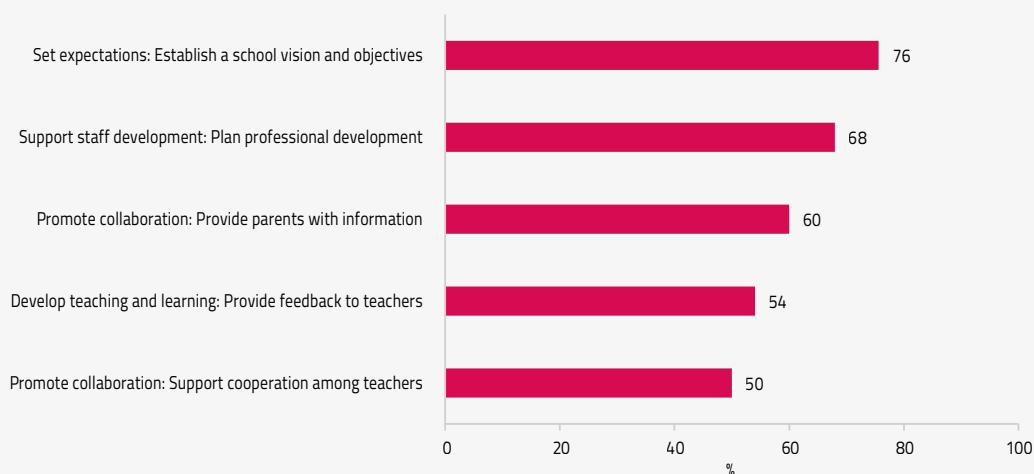
Professional development programmes should fill gaps, especially for leaders whose previous training did not cover the four core dimensions. Competences that can be nurtured include a range of good observation, listening, social, emotional and analytical skills. Training should also cover any government reform priorities to support their implementation, including familiarizing school leaders with core legislation and regulations, and developing practical skills in data, financial, human resource and pedagogical management. Ultimately, principals need to feel comfortable in making decisions. One quarter of school principals in upper-middle- and high-income countries have expressed the need for training in these areas. Specialized knowledge is needed to implement policies on inclusion and on digital transformation. Other education policy areas, such as greening and health and nutrition, will also require school leaders to develop capacity.

With a growing range of responsibilities, leadership is often associated with stress and burnout. It is therefore necessary to give access to professional counselling and mental health services, and to create a supportive network within the school environment where leaders can discuss challenges and seek assistance. The costs of these investments will be offset because sufficiently supported school leaders will be less likely to quit.

FIGURE 4:

Not all leadership dimensions are equally embedded in national professional standards

Percentage of countries with national professional standards frameworks, by leadership dimensions and practices, 211 education systems



Source: GEM Report team analysis based on the PEER country profiles.

c. Set and implement school leadership standards and recognize their achievement

Globally, almost half of countries have adopted stand-alone national professional standards or competency frameworks which outline the required competencies of aspiring and practising school principals and indicate desirable practices. Standards are particularly important where perceptions of school principals' roles remain limited to administration and management. They help communicate national priorities and can be used to guide selection, preparation and training. But they should not create uniformity and should reflect the country's education and cultural context, avoiding the temptation to import standards from other countries without adapting them to the local context.

School leaders' performance should be assessed against these standards and intended education outcomes. The primary intention of such appraisal should be formative: to give feedback and recommend changes in practice. Appraisal systems can be used as a basis to develop a certification process that recognizes the professional competences of school leaders. Well-organized appraisal systems can further be used to develop career advancement pathways.

RECOMMENDATION 3. SHARE

Promote shared leadership and collaborative school cultures

Leadership is sometimes thought of as a series of heroic acts. But school leaders are not and should not be seen as heroes; it is not possible for them to do everything and do it on their own. They need to lead through collaboration to achieve common goals so that all stakeholders are motivated to work in the same direction using their respective strengths.

Leadership status needs to have deeper roots than a position of power. It needs to be earned through daily practice that demonstrates integrity, commitment, ability and humanity. These qualities are strengthened if leadership functions are shared, formally and informally, with members of a management team (e.g. the vice principal or heads of department), teachers and school support staff, students, parents, and community members. School principals need to know how to meaningfully use structures, such as school management committees and student councils, as forums for consultation and engagement. Such collaborative relationships strengthen governance, improve decision making, enhance accountability, and foster inclusive and resilient environments. Policies on shared school leadership should be developed and implemented. Yet only about half of countries emphasize teacher collaboration in their leadership standards. And barely one third of leadership programmes reviewed for this report focused on developing school leaders' preparedness to share responsibilities through openness, collaboration and partnerships.

Professional development programmes should, therefore, help school principals to clarify roles; delegate responsibilities; empower colleagues, students and parents and recognize their unique contributions; create an environment where everyone feels valued; establish clear communication channels and regular feedback mechanisms; build teams; and see the school as a learning organization that works toward common goals.

RECOMMENDATION 4. INVEST IN SYSTEM LEADERS

Develop education officials' capacity to serve as system leaders

Education system leaders are among the least studied education actors – and quite possibly not sufficiently prepared. Yet they are entrusted with major responsibilities to initiate and implement education system reforms instigated by the government and to support quality assurance processes. Sometimes, instead of empowering them, their functions are outsourced or transferred to new governance structures.

The same challenges that affect the professionalization of school principals are exacerbated for these civil servants. Recruitment and selection processes are slow to change

because public administration reforms move at a slow pace. Preparation and professional development are hampered by the fact that education sector expertise may not be a prerequisite. This makes it very difficult for officials to fulfil one of their main functions: to lead instructional support. They also tend to see their role as one of control rather than support. Appraisal mechanisms lack measurable objectives, which could be used to give feedback.

Professional development programmes need to build capacity for education officials, with a particular emphasis on instructional leadership and quality assurance. In increasingly complex environments, education officials also need preparation in crisis management.

Related resources:



WIDE

The World Inequality Database on Education (WIDE)

analyses data from over 160 countries to allow you to compare education outcomes on 3 levels, according to factors that are associated with inequality, including gender, location, wealth, and ethnicity.

www.education-inequalities.org



SCOPE

Scoping Progress in Education (SCOPE)

summarizes the key facts and trends in education around the world through five themes: Access, equity, learning, quality and finance.

www.education-progress.org



VIEW

Visualizing Indicators of Education for the World (VIEW)

provides estimates of the out-of-school and completion rates by using multiple data sources to calculate time series by country and region and to address challenges of timeliness and consistency associated with survey data.

www.education-estimates.org



PEER

Profiles Enhancing Education Reviews (PEER)

provide comparable qualitative data on education policies and laws at the national level, covering inclusion, financing for equity, climate change education, regulations of non-state providers in education, comprehensive sexuality education, technology and leadership.

New PEER profiles on leadership for 211 education systems review legislation and policies on principals' selection, preparation and working conditions.

www.education-profiles.org

Accompanying content:

- 17 background papers
- Summary version in over 20 languages
- Gender edition (mid 2025)
- Youth edition (late 2025)
- Four regional editions:
 - Central and Eastern Europe, Caucasus, Central Asia: leadership and inclusion (Feb 2025)
 - Latin America on distributed leadership (April 2025)
 - East Asia on leadership and digital transformation (June 2025)
 - Africa Spotlight on instructional leadership (October 2025)

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