



**Knowledge hub**  
-  
**Collection of best practices**

**Summary of the best practice**

1. Title of the best practice (e.g. name of policy, programme, project, etc.) \*

Leading teaching and learning together: the role of the middle tier

2. Country or countries where the practice is implemented \*

Delhi (India), Jordan, Rwanda, Shanghai (China), Wales

3. Please select the **most relevant** Action Track(s) the best practice applies to \*

- Action Track 1. Inclusive, equitable, safe, and healthy schools
- Action Track 2. Learning and skills for life, work, and sustainable development
- Action Track 3. Teachers, teaching and the teaching profession
- Action Track 4. Digital learning and transformation
- Action Track 5. Financing of education

#### 4. Implementation lead/partner organization(s) \*

This research was conducted as a collaborative partnership between IIEP-UNESCO and Education Development Trust exploring how middle tier instructional leaders can become a nexus for change for improving the quality of education at scale. Through case study work in five jurisdictions- Delhi (India), Jordan, Rwanda, Shanghai (China), and Wales- it explores the professional practices and perceived impacts of instructional leaders as well as the enabling factors present in the systems where they work. This research focuses on highlighting promising practices globally and is designed to draw out insights and lessons for both policymakers and practitioners.

#### 5. Key words (5-15 words): Please add key descriptive words around aims, modalities, target groups etc. \*

Collaboration, professional development, instructional leadership, innovation, middle tier, system strengthening, trust, agency, motivation

#### 6. What makes it a best practice? \*

In education systems around the world, planners and policy makers are beginning to understand the importance of whole system improvement. To best address teaching and learning outcomes, teachers and head teachers need this whole system support to build professionalism and improve their practice. The 'middle tier' of education systems, or those professionals working between the school and central level, may offer a unique opportunity to facilitate collaboration, broker knowledge, scale innovations and provide instructional direction to school level practitioners.

## Description of the best practice

### 7. Introduction (350-400 words)

This section should ideally provide the context of, and justification for, the practice and address the following issues:

- i) Which population was affected?
- ii) What was the problem that needed to be addressed?
- iii) Which approach was taken and what objectives were achieved? \*

There are many forces that determine the effectiveness of teachers. One relatively neglected but significant factor is the nature of the professional support that teachers receive locally. Policymakers often find education systems resistant to reform. They struggle to find ways of translating a high-level policy vision into operational reality on the ground. Here the middle tier is highly relevant because it has the power to act as a champion and mediator of reform at local level and to provide central policymakers with invaluable feedback on aspects of policy that school professionals find problematic.

The central research question underpinning the enquiry was: In what ways can instructional leaders at the middle tier act as change agents to improve teaching and learning? We also devised a subset of questions to further guide the research:

- What are the professional practices of instructional leaders at the middle tier?
- How do these practices bring about change in teaching and learning?
- What conditions need to be in place for instructional leaders at the middle tier to be effective?
- What are challenges and policy recommendations for implementation?

These questions were explored through qualitative research, involving interviews with instructional leaders and other key education stakeholders, including at the school level and review of policy documents and programme documents and data in the five chosen research settings.

Looking to the future, and reflecting on the challenges the teaching profession faces, UNESCO, in its Futures of Education report, calls for 'recasting teaching as a collaborative profession', (UNESCO, 2021: 90). Our research is very much aligned with this vision and offers policy-makers some concrete perspectives on how to operate this 'recasting' of the teaching profession. Since almost all education systems possess a middle tier, enhancing the effectiveness of this cadre can be a low cost but high impact policy priority. Improving the effectiveness of the middle tier can generate a disproportionately large benefit in terms of the productivity of the whole school system.

## 8. Implementation (350-450 words)

Please describe the implementation modalities or processes, where possible in relation to:

- i) What are the main activities carried out?
- ii) When and where the activities were carried out (including the start date and whether it is ongoing)?
- iii) Who were the key implementation actors and collaborators? (civil society organizations, private sector, foundations, coalitions, networks etc.)?
- iv) What were the resources needed (budget and sources) for the implementation?

\*

This research is focused on highlighting promising practice globally, through a case study approach designed to draw out insights and lessons for policymakers and practitioners. To develop the case studies, new qualitative primary data was gathered from five jurisdictions, and combined with a synthesis of existing qualitative and quantitative data from each setting. Fieldwork took place in 2020 and early 2021.

Primary data were generated from semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with teachers, instructional leaders, and their leadership. Secondary data came from the analysis of background documents as well as programme monitoring and evaluation data. This approach specifically sought out examples of positive effects or improvements to teaching and learning quality in the highlighted middle tier programmes. Not aiming to produce advice on 'what works', or systematic evaluations of each initiative, we instead sought to provide insights on the strengths, weaknesses, and potential of different models. More specifically, we sought to better understand the specific functions and roles of middle tier instructional leaders and how these roles are implemented on the ground to influence best practice, as well as the enabling conditions within a system or country that allow instructional leaders to be effective. Data analysis and synthesis was conducted jointly between IIEP-UNESCO and EDT using manual coding. Further details on the methodology are presented in each case study.

## 9. Results – outputs and outcomes (250-350 words)

To the extent possible, please reply to the questions below:

- i) How was the practice identified as transformative? (e.g., impact on policies, impact on management processes, impact on delivery arrangements or education monitoring, impact on teachers, learners and beneficiary communities etc.);
- ii) What were the concrete results achieved with regard to outputs and outcomes?
- iii) Has an assessment of the practice been carried out? If yes, what were the results? \*

Based on our analysis of the case studies we identified five main functions that middle tier instructional leaders can undertake in order to act as effective change agents. All five functions are interconnected and are concerned with different ways of enabling powerful professional development. Too often teacher professional development is equated with occasional training courses. In the cases studies a much more mature model of professional learning can be found and the five main functions, taken together, constitute a learning system for education professionals:

- Providing support for school and teaching improvement
- Promoting professional collaboration within and across schools
- Brokering knowledge: the use of evidence to drive best practices
- Providing local instructional direction and system alignment
- Testing innovations and scaling up best practices

Our case studies revealed that instructional leaders at the middle tier have a fundamental role to play in the success of education systems. They can act as the voice of the profession, advocating upwards for teacher and school leader professionals, including influencing policy and ensuring head teacher and teacher feedback is taken seriously as part of system learning and improvement. They are also translators and mediators relaying reforms downward: they translate policy into meaningful statements about what needs to happen at school level to improve teaching and learning, thereby building ownership of reforms.

Laterally, they foster collaboration between school-based professionals, to encourage the exchange of practice and knowledge. They partner with teachers and school-based professionals, coaching them towards improved teaching and learning. They promote learning by translating evidence and research into practical solutions for teachers and leaders to try in their practice, by raising expectations, and by modelling great practice and high professional standards. They understand how to take the first, realistic steps towards improved teaching and learning, and scaffold development for school-based professionals. They often use soft power – using informal networks to influence. They see themselves as solution builders not decision-makers, build professionals' confidence, sense of status, resilience and sense of agency, as well as skills.

## 10. Lessons learnt (300 words)

To the extent possible, please reply to the following questions:

- i) What were the key triggers for transformation?
- ii) What worked really well – what facilitated this?
- iii) What did not work – why did it not work? \*

Across the five case studies, reform leaders used four common strategies to enable instructional leaders to be effective. First, reform leaders started by envisioning instructional leaders as change agents. Second, they set about professionalizing the middle tier. Third they nurtured an empowering culture and a collective vision. Finally, throughout this process they adopted a learning by doing approach to overcome challenges.

We recognise common traits in the vision or mindset of reform leaders that translate into policy design. We argue these are necessary to enable middle tier actors to deliver on their potential to act as change agents. They include:

- Envisioning instructional leaders as change agents
- Professionalizing the middle tier
- Nurturing an empowering culture and a collective vision
- Learning by doing to overcome challenges

## 11. Conclusions (250 words)

Please describe why may this intervention be considered a “best practice”.

What recommendations can be made for those intending to adopt the documented “best practice” or how can it help people working on the same issue(s)? \*

These case studies demonstrate that the potential transformational role of the middle tier is not a theoretical construct. Across the world, in different contexts, education systems are beginning to understand the transformational contribution of an effective cadre of instructional leaders at a local level.

In the context of the learning crisis the prize here is great. The middle tier can be a driving force for deep change. By rethinking and strengthening the relationships within the education sector, and by gearing systems towards more collaboration and professional development, the middle tier as catalyst can harness the intrinsic motivation of the workforce and contribute to transformation in teaching and learning. Instructional leaders at the middle tier have the potential to bring about a step change in quality and re-set education systems with a greatly strengthened focus on student learning.

## 12. Further reading

Please provide a list and URLs of key reference documents for additional information on the “best practice” for those who may be interested in knowing how the results benefited the beneficiary group/s. \*

<http://www.iiep.unesco.org/en/instructional-leaders>

<https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000374918>

<http://www.iiep.unesco.org/en/talk-author-change-agents-middle-tier-education-systems-13566>

<http://www.iiep.unesco.org/en/instructional-leadership-meeting-three-change-agents-13519>

<http://www.iiep.unesco.org/en/bridging-gap-between-policy-making-and-teaching-inspiration-wales-13508>