

Developing Collective Leadership to Improve Education Systems



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The [findings of Research on Improving Systems of Education \(RISE\)](#), the 10-year research project looking at education systems in low- and low-middle-income countries, point the way for policymakers interested in promoting large-scale change.

The findings make clear that systems do not improve unless a commitment towards ensuring students learn is deeply held throughout the education system, political system, and society. The authors say that education systems can, and often have, many different purposes other than students learning and developing; for example, they could be about maximising enrollment or about the employment of the adults in the system. The RISE conclusions do not point to particular pedagogical

strategies or solutions but rather show that the key to improving systems is committing to student learning, measuring progress, aligning all actions towards the purpose, supporting good teaching, and adapting solutions to local context and culture.

These findings resonate with anyone who has spent time in schools with transformational outcomes or in communities where aggregate learning outcomes are improving. These buildings and communities are always full of people on a shared mission.

The implication is that we need to rethink the prevailing solutions-led international development paradigm for improving educational outcomes. Currently, this paradigm is largely about spreading discreet solutions – policies, programmes, technologies, classroom practices – that are proven

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to work in one context, typically within a short time frame. Instead, we need to achieve a better balance between investing in these solutions and investing in developing the people who will be responsible for adapting them and continuously improving them over time. We need to shift more of our actions and investments towards developing purpose-driven leadership.

Across the Teach For All network, we are seeing the impact of developing “collective leadership” – a critical mass of change agents within communities and countries who have a shared purpose and the networks to collaborate with and learn from each other. The organisations in our network – including those in the

Commonwealth, Australia, Bangladesh, India, Kenya, Malaysia, New Zealand, Nigeria, Pakistan, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Uganda, and the UK – share an approach for developing collective leadership that they have adapted to their contexts. These organisations recruit and develop promising leaders who commit at least two years to teach marginalised students and become lifelong equity-centred advocates of the systemic changes needed to enable all children to fulfil their potential.

For example, over the last five years, Teach For Uganda has recruited 230 of Uganda’s most promising young leaders from its most selective universities to teach in the country’s rural communities in the Kayunga,

Luwero, Mayuge, and Namutumba districts in Central and Eastern Uganda. They were drawn by their passion and commitment from diverse backgrounds, having trained as chemical engineers, lawyers, and educators and having worked as university lecturers and accountants.

The teaching commitment proves to be foundational for a lifetime of leadership – fostering the sense of purpose, mindsets, beliefs, priorities, relationships and networks necessary to reshape systems. [A growing body of research](#) shows that participants grow in their belief in their own ability to make a difference and in the potential of students and families in low-income communities to thrive; developing their

understanding of educational inequity as a deeply systemic problem requiring adaptive solutions.

In Teach For Nigeria's most recent survey of the alumni of its fellowship, 100 per cent of alumni said they believed they have a role to play in ensuring all children attain an excellent education, and 92 per cent attested they believe it is possible to achieve this in Nigeria. These mindsets and commitments are spurring most of their alumni to continue to work to address the issues they encountered as Fellows.

Alumni of the fellowships attest to the transformation of their priorities. One alum from Teach For Pakistan's 2020 cohort shared: "In this work, I saw my biases being removed. I realised that irrespective of the background I am coming from, I am also a part of this system and have the competency to change it. Challenges shifted my identity. Previously I was someone who would feel helpless seeing injustice or in times of challenges. But in these two years, I was being prompt in taking action and solving the problems. I remained adaptive and my strengths have magnified. I am more sensitive now – in a good way which can push someone to take action and not to feel helpless."

Syed Asaad Ayub, the CEO of Pakistan's Citizens Foundation, who has enlisted Teach For Pakistan's alumni in leading all their flagship programmes, attests to this transformative impact: "I believe there is a certain level of purity, passion, sense of purpose, and the understanding that comes from their

experience with Teach For Pakistan (TFP). The TFP experience really adds fuel to the fire."

Beyond the teachers' two-year commitments, these organisations continue to foster their learning and leadership, networks, career advancement, and collective leadership as "alumni" who work together with allies within their communities and countries.

Since its launch in 2009, for example, Teach For India has developed more than 4,700 leaders. A full 77 per cent of alumni continue to work in the social sector – leading classrooms and schools, working in non-profits, leading organisations, training teachers, designing policy, and working in government. Teach For India alumni are reaching 33 million children from various levels of the system – that is one in 10 of India's children. Collectively, they have founded more than 150 organisations.

Over time, developing a critical mass of change agents with shared purpose and networks contributes to improving systems. The UK's Teach First – which has recruited almost 15,000 teachers for schools in cities and towns across England and Wales over the last 20 years – provides evidence of the ultimate impact of the network's approach.

In London alone, Teach First has developed and placed over 6,500 teachers who have served as an impactful leadership force during and beyond their two-year commitments. For years, London was among the worst-performing areas in England

in terms of outcomes for pupils from low-income communities. Today, the city's schools have become the highest performing in the country, and [independent research](#) identified Teach First as one of four key factors in this transformation. Today, one in 14 teachers working in schools serving London's low-income communities are Teach First teachers and alumni, with over 1,000 alumni serving in middle or senior leadership positions in London schools. Teach First alumni serve as head teachers at almost 100 schools, having either founded new schools or overtaken existing ones. Beyond the classroom, hundreds of alumni work in non-profit organisations that seek to fill gaps and influence system change. Forty have founded and lead social enterprises, including organisations that focus on training and developing teachers and school leaders, expanding the focus of schools to ensure students are developing holistically, and providing mentoring and support to facilitate first-generation college students in attending selective universities. About 50 alumni are working at every level of policy.

As governments across the Commonwealth consider how to transform their education systems and achieve the excellence and equity envisioned by SDG4, they must prioritise investing in developing the leadership necessary to shift systems and continuously improve over time. This is the foundational investment that will ensure all our other investments pay off. ■

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