Insights: How Do Systems Change?

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Transforming education is an urgent global priority. More than two-thirds of the world's children are not on track to learn the foundational knowledge and skills they need to participate in today's economy or society, let alone grow as leaders of a better future for themselves and all of us. This global learning crisis overwhelmingly impacts children from poorer backgrounds, making it, alongside tackling the climate crisis, the most pressing social justice issue of today.

For decades, people worldwide have been working to address the issue, ensuring that all of the world's 1.5 billion children have access to school. But once they are there, the urgent mission of ensuring that all children receive a great education falters. Despite significant investment, much evidence about what works, and many well-designed and implemented policies, children in school today aren't learning any more than they were twenty years ago.

How then do we transform education to develop students as leaders? In communities and systems across the Teach For All network, teachers, alumni, staff, and allies are showing how such a system transformation might be brought about. As we learn from these communities and systems, the following insights have emerged:

1. System change starts with people identifying issues to be solved, not with solutions to be rolled out

The frontline experiences of our almost 100,000 network leaders in 60 countries worldwide teach us that most system change efforts falter because they largely focus on spreading discreet solutions—policies, programs, technologies, classroom practices—that are proven to work in one context, typically within a short time frame.

On the other hand, where we see successful system change, it often starts with the people who are closest to the issues to be solved—community members and proximate practitioners—coming together and defining the change they want to see and then searching for the best solutions to create that change.

We need to achieve a better balance between investing in pre-defined solutions and investing in developing the purpose-driven leadership of the people who will be responsible for generating solutions, adapting them, and continuously improving them over time in their local contexts—an insight in line with the findings of the RISE Programme.

2. It is driven by collective leadership—diverse people working at all levels of the system on all aspects of change, towards a common goal

People with formal leadership roles within systems play an important role in system change. However, system change is not achieved only through top-down leadership, or solely from within the formal education system. Instead, system change is driven by collective leadership, meaning diverse people working at all levels of the system, each taking on their own piece of the puzzle, while working collectively on a shared agenda towards a shared goal. Our network leaders bring new energy and approaches in three critical areas:

- **Policy** — The design and implementation of evidence-based policy is a critical ingredient of system change, especially when those policies are co-created and co-implemented with beneficiaries

- **Practice** — System change is not possible without reimagining, improving, or adding greater capability to teaching, school leadership, teacher training, family engagement, and so on

- **Ecosystem** — Leaders across systems are creating innovative new nonprofits, groups of schools, advocacy organizations, ed tech solutions, infrastructure improvements, and organizing efforts

As important as the solutions generated by those leaders at all levels of the system is *how* those leaders go about their work, and *who* those leaders are. Collective leadership drives system change by growing:

- **Trust** — Trusting interpersonal relationships are critical to change, whether among teachers, schools, parents, students, and policymakers, or across coalitions of partner organizations

- **Power** — System change depends on a more equitable distribution of power among diverse people in the system, so students, parents, teachers, and businesses have agency alongside government

- **Collaboration** — In successful system change efforts there are a culture and structures that support effective collaboration among actors across the system

- **Learning** — A culture and processes for shared learning are critical, enabling the community to generate and reflect on evidence in an inclusive way, and adapting their approaches continually

Collective leadership is now cited by the Education Commission as a critical enabler of system change. It is in evidence in India's capital, Delhi, where the education system is on a path to transformation, both due to intelligent new policies on school funding, foundational learning, curriculum, and family engagement, and due to a city-wide political movement, a thriving coalition of civil society organizations working collectively to support children, and the closer engagement of parents and students in decision making.

3. Most critical is the orientation of the system to a clear shared purpose

In order to achieve system change, leaders across the community or system must be aligned to a clear shared purpose rooted in the local context. In Delhi, stakeholders aligned around a clear focus on improving foundational learning and growing the happiness and entrepreneurialism of the city's children. In the UK's capital, London, leaders across the system aligned around the purpose of improving the achievement of the city's poorest students, a focus that transformed the quality of the city's schools over the past two decades.

Across the Teach For All network, we see leaders working together to strengthen purpose. In Cambodia, a cohort of leaders is working to rebuild the nation through education. In Afghanistan, teachers are working with communities to support the continued education of girls. In Cajamarca in Peru, education leaders are centering tackling the climate crisis to transform education. These experiences align with the findings of the RISE Programme, which cites consensus around the purpose of learning as one of the key drivers of education system change.

4. It is possible to create the conditions necessary for this system change

Investing in systemic change means investing in strengthening the enabling environment, or nurturing the conditions that create energy for change, in parallel with investing in programmatic solutions or new policy. We're seeing that investments in the following areas enable and accelerate system change:

- **Leadership development** — Investments in growing leadership throughout education systems contribute energy and capability to achieve system change. Those leadership experiences should root leaders in equity, context, proximity to the problem, an understanding of systems, storytelling, and influencing.

- **Networks** — System change can be further enabled through investments in strengthening networks to give leaders access to new ideas and support, and provide opportunities for structured collaboration, coalition-building, collective impact, or community organizing.

- **Resources and infrastructure** — System change efforts can be enabled or disabled by: the availability of sufficient financing; infrastructure, such as school buildings, or the extent of access to devices and the internet; and human resources, such as the level of education of the teaching workforce.

- **Governance and capability** — Institutional capability of the government and formal education system informing the path to system change; economic conditions shaping the opportunities available to young people post-education; and governance, dictating whether education is a priority.

Learn More

To read examples of Teach For All network partners and their alumni, communities, and government partners who are working together to create system change in countries around the world, see Teach For All's Introduction Brochure.