

## Executive Summary

Governing multi-level education systems effectively requires governance models that balance responsiveness to local diversity with the ability to ensure national objectives. This is a delicate equilibrium, one that is difficult to achieve given the complexity of the education system in many OECD countries. As a result, governance issues have moved up political and policy agendas, and countries are increasingly looking for models that they can adapt to their own needs.

A number of intersecting trends contribute to increasing complexity in education systems. Decentralisation has allowed local authorities, school boards and schools a greater degree of freedom to respond to diverse and local demands. Parents, students and communities have become more diverse and highly educated and as a result have higher expectations that schools cater to students' individual needs. More information about school and student achievement is readily available, empowering a broader set of actors. This has changed the nature of the relationship between governance levels, moving away from a hierarchical relationship to a division of labour, interdependence and self-regulation. Education systems are now characterised by multi-level governance where the links between multiple actors operating at different levels are to a certain extent fluid and open to negotiation.

*Governing Education in a Complex World* addresses key challenges involved in governing modern education systems, looking specifically at complexity, accountability, capacity building and strategic thinking. The publication brings together research from the OECD Secretariat and invited chapters from international scholars to provide a state of the art analysis and a fresh perspective on some of the most challenging issues facing educational systems today.

### Setting the stage: Governance in complex systems

---

*Effective modern governance requires coordinated system-wide change involving a broad set of actors*

---

**Part 1** explores the concept of complexity and discusses its implications for educational governance. Chapter 1 provides an overview of the volume and proposes a set of key principles for modern governance of complex education systems. Chapter 2 looks at complexity theory and the argument that a significant degree of complexity in a system – whether an education system or a school – leads to emergent properties beyond those predictable from initial conditions. The discussion explores preconditions required to generate sustainable, positive, system-wide change in education. Chapter 3 explores the potential of governance networks, in which coordinated changes replace isolated interventions and align reforms to a system's contexts and resources.

## Accountability and stakeholder involvement in complex systems

---

*A constructive accountability system that balances the monitoring and pressure required to ensure efficient system functioning with support for improvement is crucial*

---

**Part 2** looks at the fundamental role of accountability in governance. Chapter 4 examines the increased use of test scores for accountability purposes worldwide, and asks how national testing systems are related to improvements in education performance. Chapter 5 discusses trends in accountability mechanisms and argues that regulatory and school performance accountability (vertical accountability), can be usefully augmented by horizontal measures involving multiple stakeholders. This has the potential to ultimately improve the level of achievement as well as the quality of education.

## Capacity building and the use of knowledge

---

*Local capacity building must be aligned with system vision and include a greater role of practitioners in knowledge production*

---

**Part 3** focuses on capacity building and the use of knowledge in increasingly complex education systems, providing concrete country examples. Chapter 6 examines the example of Austria and gives an outlook on how local capacity building could help mitigate governance inefficiencies in structurally complex systems. Chapter 7 looks at the role of knowledge production and knowledge use among teachers in improving instruction, providing concrete examples from England. The chapter discusses how policy can build capacity for teachers' involvement in research by providing tools and connecting points with large-scale education research.

## Innovative and strategic governance: the role of policy experimentation and risk-taking

---

*Taking risks and learning from failure is essential for innovation and the evolution of education systems. Controlled experimentation is one way forward*

---

**Part 4** explores tools for approaching reform. Policy experimentation has the potential to be an effective instrument for policy making in a complex environment but faces a number of difficulties in moving from theory to practice. Chapter 8 explores ecosystem experimentation as a way to operate at a small enough level to safeguard quality while maintaining a wide enough scope to allow for translating the findings to the system level (scaling-up). Chapter 9 discusses the Netherlands' experience in policy experimentation and the insights gleaned over the past decade. Chapter 10 turns to risk-taking, an often over-looked but essential part of any governance system as it is vital for innovation. Modern education systems have to allow for risk-taking, acknowledging the inherent possibility of failure and build processes to learn from failures.

## **The way forward: lessons learnt, and one essential ingredient: trust**

---

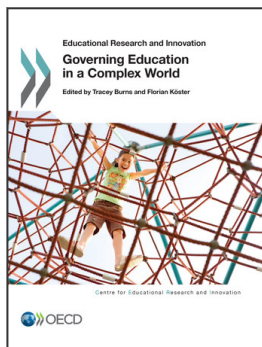
### *Legitimate trust is a cornerstone of effective and efficient governance*

---

The last chapter concludes the volume with the lessons learned from the work of the OECD on complex education governance. It also links the discussion to an often overlooked point: successful modern governance is built on trust. The final chapter examines this seemingly simple, yet decidedly complex topic in relation to the main themes in this volume. It ends with a return to the key principles of modern educational governance.

Creating the open, dynamic and strategic governance systems necessary for governing complex systems is not easy. This volume challenges our traditional concepts of education governance through work on complexity, change/reform and new modes of collaborative networks and decision-making. In doing so it sets the agenda for thinking about inclusive, adaptable, and flexible accountability and governance, necessary for governing complex systems in today's global world.





**From:**  
**Governing Education in a Complex World**

**Access the complete publication at:**  
<https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264255364-en>

**Please cite this chapter as:**

Burns, Tracey and Florian Köster (eds.) (2016), "Executive Summary", in *Governing Education in a Complex World*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264255364-2-en>

This work is published under the responsibility of the Secretary-General of the OECD. The opinions expressed and arguments employed herein do not necessarily reflect the official views of OECD member countries.

This document and any map included herein are without prejudice to the status of or sovereignty over any territory, to the delimitation of international frontiers and boundaries and to the name of any territory, city or area.

You can copy, download or print OECD content for your own use, and you can include excerpts from OECD publications, databases and multimedia products in your own documents, presentations, blogs, websites and teaching materials, provided that suitable acknowledgment of OECD as source and copyright owner is given. All requests for public or commercial use and translation rights should be submitted to [rights@oecd.org](mailto:rights@oecd.org). Requests for permission to photocopy portions of this material for public or commercial use shall be addressed directly to the Copyright Clearance Center (CCC) at [info@copyright.com](mailto:info@copyright.com) or the Centre français d'exploitation du droit de copie (CFC) at [contact@cfcopies.com](mailto:contact@cfcopies.com).