

5. Making education reform happen

Why education reform is so difficult

As discussed in previous chapters, without substantial change, the gap between what education systems provide and what our societies demand is likely to widen further. There is a risk that education becomes our next steel industry, and schools a relic of the past. But to transform schooling at scale, we need not just a radical, alternative vision of what is possible, but also smart strategies that help make change in education happen.

Policy makers face tough choices when evaluating policy alternatives; they need to weigh the potential impact against the economic and political cost of change. Should they pursue what is most technically feasible? What is most politically and socially feasible? What can be implemented quickly? What can be sustainable over a sufficient time horizon?

The good news is that our knowledge about what works in education has improved vastly (see Chapter 3). It is true that digitalisation has contributed to the rise in populism and “post-truth” societies that can work against rational policy making. But the very same forces, whether in the form of more and better data or new statistical and analytical tools, have also massively expanded the scope and power of social research to create a more evidence-based environment in which policies can be developed. PISA is a good example of that. The first assessment in 2000 was

able to explain about 30% of the performance variation among schools across the participating countries; by 2015, that figure had risen to 85%. That means that most of the performance differences among schools can now be statistically associated and explained with the data that PISA collects from students, parents, teachers and school principals.

Still, knowledge is only as valuable as our capacity to act on it. The reality is that many good ideas get stuck in the process of policy implementation. Governments are under pressure to deliver results in education services while ensuring that citizens' tax dollars are spent wisely and effectively. They set ambitious reform agendas and develop strategic plans to achieve them. But in my conversations with education ministers around the world, the challenges they most commonly cite are not about designing reforms, but about how reforms can be put into practice successfully.

So what is holding back change in education and why do great plans fall by the wayside? My colleagues at the OECD, Gregory Wurzburg, Paulo Santiago and Beatriz Pont, have studied the implementation of education reform over many years, and have developed important insights into how plans are turned into practice.¹

One reason for the difficulty in reforming education is simply the scale and reach of the sector. Schools, colleges, universities and other educational institutions are among the biggest recipients of public spending. And because everyone has participated in education, everyone has an opinion about it. Everyone supports education reform – except when it might affect their own children. Even those who promote change and reform often revise their views when they are reminded what change actually entails.

The laws, regulations, structures and institutions on which policy makers tend to focus when reforming education are just like the small, visible tip of an iceberg. The reason why it is so hard to move education systems is that there is a much larger, invisible part under the waterline. This invisible part is composed of the interests, beliefs, motivations and fears of the people who are involved. This is where unexpected collisions occur, because this part tends to evade the radar of public policy. Policy makers are rarely successful with education reform unless they help people recognise what needs to change, and build a shared understanding and collective ownership for change; unless they focus resources, build capacity, and

create the right policy climate with accountability measures designed to encourage innovation and development, rather than compliance; and unless they tackle institutional structures that too often are built around the interests and habits of educators and administrators rather than learners.

The potential loss of advantages or privileged positions is of particular importance in education reform, because the vast structure of established, usually public, providers means that there are extensive vested interests. As a result, the status quo has many protectors – stakeholders in education who stand to lose a degree of power or influence if changes are made. It is difficult to ask the frogs to clear the swamp. Even small reforms can involve massive reallocations of resources, and touch the lives of millions. This rules out “reform by stealth” and makes it essential to have broad political support for any proposed reform. In essence, education reform will not happen unless educators implement and own it.

Education ministries have been at the frontline of some of the most visible public policy reforms on issues related to improving the quality and status of teachers, strengthening accountability, ensuring sufficient school places, and controlling and financing higher education. Education policy makers know only too well the difficulty of securing stable financing for expanding tertiary education, whether by reallocating funding from other areas of public expenditure, or imposing tuition fees. Reforms that entail more testing of students often encounter resistance from teachers; reforms to vocational education might be resisted by parents who are sceptical about the promised benefits.

There is often uncertainty about who will benefit from reforms and to what extent. This uncertainty is acute in education because of the range of people involved, including students, parents, teachers, employers and trade unions. Uncertainty about costs is problematic because education infrastructure is large and involves multiple levels of government, each often trying to minimise or shift the costs of reform. Assessing the relative costs and benefits of reform in education is also difficult because of the large number of intervening factors that can influence the nature, size and distribution of any improvements. The investment may be expensive over the long term, while in the short term it is rarely possible to predict clear, identifiable results from new policies, especially given the time lags between implementation and effect.

Teachers are generally viewed positively by the public, even when there is great dissatisfaction with education systems. Teachers also tend to command greater public trust than politicians, so any resistance to reform on their part is likely to be effective. Even when parents have a poor opinion of the education system, they will generally view their children's school and its teachers positively.

Implementing reforms is therefore often impossible without the co-operation of education staff. They can easily undermine reforms in the implementation phase, while blaming policy makers for having attempted misguided reforms in the first place. And teachers in many countries are well organised. But in fairness, many teachers have suffered from years of incoherent reforms that disrupt rather than improve education practice because they prioritise variable political interests over the needs of learners and educators. Many of these efforts to reform do not draw on the expertise and experience of teachers themselves. So teachers know that the easiest approach for them may be simply to wait out attempts at reform.

Timing is also relevant to education reform, and in more than one sense. Most significantly, there is a substantial gap between the time at which the initial cost of reform is incurred, and the time when it is evident whether the benefits of reform will actually materialise. While timing complicates the politics of reform in many domains, it seems to have a greater impact on education reform, where the lags often involve many years. It is a long way to successful reform implementation; failure is often just one small step away. As a result, the political cycle may have a direct impact on the timing, scope and content of education reform. Education reform becomes a thankless task when elections take place before the benefits of reform are realised. Policy makers may lose an election over education issues, but they rarely win an election because of education reform. That may also be why, across OECD countries, only about one in 10 reforms is followed by any attempt to evaluate its impact.²

The toughest challenge to policy implementation goes back to the way in which we manage and govern educational institutions. Public education was invented in the industrial age, when the prevailing norms were standardisation and compliance, and when it was both effective and efficient to educate students in batches and to train teachers once for their working lives. The curricula that spelled out what students should learn were designed at the top of the pyramid, then translated

into instructional material, teacher education and learning environments, often through multiple layers of government, until they reached and were implemented by individual teachers in the classroom.

This structure, inherited from the industrial model of work, makes change a very slow process. Even the most agile countries revise their curriculum only every six to seven years. But the rapid pace of change in most other domains makes that response far too slow. Digital technologies that have revolutionised nearly every aspect of our lives have entered our children's classrooms surprisingly slowly. Even when there are attempts to use new technology, it often seems to be misaligned with the needs of the curriculum.

In short, the changes in our societies have vastly outpaced the structural capacity of our current governance systems to respond. And when fast gets really fast, being slower to adapt makes education systems seem glacial and disconnected. Top-down governance through layers of administrative structures is no longer working. The challenge is to build on the expertise of the hundreds of thousands of teachers and tens of thousands of school leaders and to enlist them in the design of superior policies and practices. When we fail to engage them in designing change, they will rarely help implement it.

What successful reform requires

Successful policy implementation requires mobilising the knowledge and experience of teachers and school leaders, the people who can make the practical connections between the classroom and the changes taking place in the outside world. That is the fundamental challenge of policy implementation today.

There are strong countervailing forces pushing for a shake-up of the status quo. At an individual level, education plays an increasingly important role in determining individual well-being and prosperity; at a macro level, education is associated ever more strongly with higher levels of social inclusion, productivity and growth. The emergence of the knowledge society and the upward trend in skill requirements only increase the importance of education. The cost of underperformance and underinvestment in education is rising.

As a result, the circle of those who feel they are directly affected by the outcomes of education has broadened beyond parents and students to employers and virtually anyone who has a stake in social and economic welfare. These forces also make stakeholders more demanding.

Strategies to overcome resistance to education reforms are similar in certain respects to those adopted in other areas. Reform is more easily undertaken in “crisis” conditions, although the meaning of “crisis” might be somewhat different in education. The shock involved is likely to be something that alters perceptions of the education system (see Chapter 1) rather than an event that suddenly affects its ability to function.

“Crisis” in education can be slow-building, but relentless, pressures imposed by demographic changes. For example, rapidly shrinking school-age populations forced the Estonian and Portuguese governments to face the tough challenge of consolidating rural schools. This tends to be one of the most difficult reform issues because closing a school in a village means taking the heart out of that village. But such a move can also open up new opportunities, such as creating a broader array of courses for students, strengthening teacher collaboration and professional development, or simply freeing up resources for other investments in education. Some observers attribute the rapid improvement of education outcomes in Portugal’s rural areas to the change dynamic unleashed by these reforms. But that dynamic has not played out the same way in all countries. I have seen many half-empty primary schools in Japan, drained by declining birth rates and bled of much-needed resources. The fewer the students and teachers who remain in these schools, the harder it becomes to pursue any real change.

In Germany, smaller populations of school-aged children forced some *Länder* (states) to merge different types of secondary school, the *Realschule* (secondary middle schools geared towards both vocational and general programmes) and *Hauptschule* (secondary middle schools mainly geared towards basic vocational programmes). The important side-effect of these changes was a reduction in the degree of tracking and stratification in the German school system and, by implication, a weakening of the impact that social background has on learning outcomes.

Similarly, the prospect of fewer upper secondary school graduates forced the government of Finland, only a few years after it created a new polytechnic sector, to

launch ambitious reforms to reduce the number of tertiary institutions and alter how they were governed and financed.

As in other sectors, co-ordinated reforms in different parts of education systems have proved to be mutually reinforcing. Sometimes real opportunities are disguised as insoluble problems. This was the case in Scotland when the government, intending to initiate sweeping reforms to the curriculum, testing and leadership, started with an overhaul of teacher education, induction and pay. The success of reforms to the curriculum and testing were seen as dependent on prior reforms that would have an influence on who teaches and how they are educated.

But given that education systems involve multiple levels of government, implementation of “comprehensive reform” is often difficult to co-ordinate. Denmark faced this problem when it proved difficult to synchronise reforms to strengthen national testing with the pre- and in-service education of teachers employed by municipalities. Local and regional entities often do not have sufficient capacity to implement national policies.

Federal education systems, such as those in Australia, Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Germany, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and the United States, share a different dilemma. Though the federal government in the United States, for example, can require states to set quality standards as a condition for receiving federal money for education, it cannot determine what those standards are. In 2009, state school officials and governors in the United States agreed on the principle of establishing national, common standards in core subjects;³ but in 2015, these standards were still insufficiently implemented to affect teachers’ practice in the classroom at scale.

Germany was more successful in implementing national standards,⁴ even though it too has a federal government. The unsatisfactory results of the PISA 2000 assessment created huge pressure on policy makers to establish more rigorous and coherent school standards across the states, and to advance from traditional content-based curricula towards competency-based learning. Constantly prodded by federal authorities and an increasingly demanding public, the states progressively agreed and implemented such standards.

Why was the effort so much more successful in Germany than in the United States? First of all, Germany took time to engage a wide range of stakeholders in the

development, trial and implementation of the standards. Second, along with the standards, the states developed a range of resources to implement them in classrooms, including guidelines for instructional design, lesson plans and pedagogy. Capacity to implement the standards was developed at all levels of the education system.

Unlike the United States, the German states also put a premium on the improvement, rather than the accountability, function of these standards. While national tests were introduced, they were based on samples of schools; this avoided comparisons of individual schools. By implication, the immediate stakes for teachers in implementing new standards were intentionally kept low, while the stakes for policy makers responsible for state-level performance were high. In addition, teachers, schools and communities were provided with a range of methods by which they could monitor progress at the local level.

It is not only difficult to co-ordinate policy development across levels of government, it is also hard to align the perspectives of different government departments. But if education is to be developed over a lifetime, then a broad range of policy fields need to be involved, including education, family, employment, industrial and economic development, migration and integration, social welfare and public finance. A co-ordinated approach to education policies allows policy makers to identify policy trade-offs, such as between immigration and labour-market integration, or between spending on early education or investing in welfare programmes later on.

Creating linkages between different policy fields is also important to ensure efficiency and avoid duplication of effort. But a whole-of-government approach to education is not easy to achieve. Ministries of education will naturally focus on building strong education foundations for life, with due emphasis on transferring knowledge, skills and values. Ministries of employment, by contrast, are mainly concerned with getting unemployed workers into work through short-term, job-specific training. Ministries of the economy might be more interested in the skills needed to secure long-term competitiveness.

These competing interests were clearly evident in Portugal, where the government struggled to consolidate two parallel systems of vocational education and training, one run by the Ministry of Education that was school-based and focused on

foundation skills, the other run by the Ministry of Employment that focused on work-based learning. We were called in to help Portugal develop a coherent national skills strategy.⁵ We found a lot of goodwill among the different ministries to work together, but it took time to establish a common language and framework that centred on what young people should learn, rather than on how that learning should be provided and who should provide it.

More generally, I have found several aspects particularly important when implementing reform:

- Policy makers need to build **broad support** about the aims of education reform and engage stakeholders, especially teachers, in formulating and implementing policy responses. External pressures can be used to build a compelling case for change. All political players and stakeholders need to develop realistic expectations about the pace and nature of reforms.
- **Capacity development.** Efforts to overcome resistance to reform will be wasted if education administrations do not have state-of-the-art knowledge, professional know-how and adequate institutional arrangements for the new tasks and responsibilities included in the reforms. Successful reform might require significant investment in staff development, or clustering reforms to build capacity in related institutions. This also means that reform needs to be backed by sustainable financing.
- **The right governance in the right place.** Education systems extend from local schools to national ministries. The responsibilities of institutions and different levels of government vary from country to country, as do the relative importance and independence of private providers. Reforms need to take into account the respective responsibilities of different players. Some reforms may only be possible if responsibilities are well aligned or reallocated. Layers of regional government might be good at identifying local needs, but they might not be the right vantage point from which to monitor progress towards overall goals and objectives. They may also have insufficient scientific, technical and

infrastructure capacity to design and implement education policies that are consistent with national goals and objectives.

- **Use of performance data.** As obtaining, managing and accessing information have become easier and cheaper, education systems can capitalise on collecting better and more relevant data to track individual and institutional performance, locally, nationally and internationally. Evidence from national surveys and inspectorates as well as comparative data and assessments can be used to catalyse change and guide policy making. Such evidence is most helpful when it is fed back to institutions along with information and tools about how they can use the information.
- There needs to be progression from initial reform initiatives towards building **self-adjusting systems** with feedback at all levels, incentives to react and tools to strengthen capacities to deliver better outcomes. Investment in change-management skills is essential. Teachers need reassurance that they will be given the tools to change. Their motivation to improve their students' performance should be recognised too.
- **“Whole-of-government”** approaches can include education in more comprehensive reforms.

It is worth looking at these aspects in greater detail.

Different versions of the “right” approach

The diversity of views on education reform makes policy making particularly challenging, especially given that policy makers often represent one of the stakeholder groups: government authorities. For example, in the choice of teacher-appraisal methods, there is a particularly contentious debate about the relative merits of summative (evaluation of performance) and formative (providing continuous

feedback for improvement) appraisals. On the one hand, policy makers and parents tend to value quality assurance and accountability. They make the point that schools are public institutions, supported by taxpayers' money, and that the public has a legitimate interest in the quality of teaching. Summative teacher appraisal provides a way for school principals to reward excellence and commitment, and the public, their legislators, local boards of education and administrators with the means to monitor and ensure the quality of teaching. But teachers and their organisations often reject summative appraisals as tools for control; they favour more formative approaches.

But there are also many examples where divergent views have been successfully reconciled. The Czech Republic, for example, began developing a standardised section of the school-leaving examination in 1997, but the section was only introduced 14 years later, in 2011. During the intervening time, several models were developed, pilot versions were implemented, and fundamental features were modified several times. The reforms were hotly debated, particularly among the country's political parties, which could not reach consensus on the approach to the examination.⁶

Setting the direction

Another priority is to clearly communicate a long-term vision of what is to be accomplished for student learning. Individuals and groups are more likely to accept changes that are not necessarily in their own interests if they and society at large understand the reasons for these changes and can see the role they should play within the broad strategy. To achieve this, the evidence base of the underlying policy diagnosis, research findings on alternative policy options and their likely impact, and information on the costs of reform versus inaction should be disseminated widely in a language that is accessible to all.

For instance, in order to convince teachers of the need to reform standardised student tests, it is critical that teachers understand and support the broader goals of the assessment, and the standards and frameworks underlying the assessment. Establishing clear goals and standards, and communicating them to teachers,

mitigates such behaviour as “teaching to the test”, as teachers have a clearer sense of the kinds of student outcomes they should be trying to achieve.

Resistance to reform is often due to incomplete information about the nature of the proposed policy changes, their impact, or whether or not the stakeholders involved – including the general public – will be better or worse off. Opposition to change can also signal that the public has not been sufficiently briefed on or prepared for reform; it can also indicate a lack of social acceptance of policy innovations. This highlights the importance of making the underlying evidence available to convince educators and society at large. It involves raising awareness about how difficult decisions were made, enhancing the national debate and sharing evidence on the impact of different policy alternatives. That is the way to build a solid consensus.

Building a consensus

There is extensive evidence of the importance of consensus if policy reforms are going to be successful. At the same time, given the diversity of stakeholders in education, consensus might wind up meaning agreement at the level of the lowest common denominator; and that may be insufficient to lead to genuine improvement. Hence, strategic leadership is at the heart of successful education reform (see also Chapter 6).

Consensus can be fostered through consultations and feedback that allow concerns to be taken into account, and thus reduce the likelihood of strong opposition by some stakeholder groups. Regular involvement by stakeholders in policy design helps build capacity and shared ideas over time. Engaging stakeholders in the development of education policy can cultivate a sense of joint ownership about the need, relevance and nature of reforms.

The experience of OECD countries suggests that regular and institutionalised consultations – which are inherent in consensual policy making – help develop trust between the various stakeholder groups and policy makers, and help them reach consensus.

For example, in Chile, the Teachers’ Act of 1991, designed to introduce teacher-evaluation systems in elementary and secondary schools, allowed employers to

dismiss teachers who had negative evaluations two years in a row. But this evaluation system had not been implemented because of objections from the Teachers' Association about the composition of the evaluation committees, and the fact that the system focused on punishment rather than improvement.

Nevertheless, teacher evaluation continued to be a topic of public and political concern throughout the 1990s. In response, Chile's Ministry of Education established a technical committee composed of representatives of the ministry, the municipalities and the Teachers' Association. After several months, the committee reached agreement on a model for teacher evaluation. At the same time, its members agreed to prepare guidelines for standards of professional performance, and to implement a pilot project in several areas of the country to evaluate and adjust the procedures and instruments to be used.

After wide consultations throughout the country and agreement with the teaching profession, a framework for performance standards was developed and officially approved. The pilot project for teacher-performance evaluation was applied in four regions. In June 2003, the ministry, the municipalities and the Teachers' Association signed an agreement that established the progressive application of the new evaluation system.⁷

Several countries have established teaching councils that provide teachers and other stakeholder groups with a forum for policy development. For example, the Teaching Council in Ireland, established in 2006, seeks to promote and maintain best practice in the teaching profession and in teacher education.⁸ As a statutory body, the council regulates the professional practices of teachers, oversees teacher-education programmes and enhances teachers' professional development. Through these activities, the council provides teachers with a large degree of professional autonomy and thus enhances the professional status and morale of teachers. Some of the main functions of the Teaching Council are to establish, publish and maintain a code of professional conduct; establish and maintain a register of teachers; determine the education requirements for teacher registration; promote teachers' continuing education and professional development; and conduct inquiries into the fitness of teachers and impose sanctions on underperforming teachers, where appropriate.

The Council is composed of representatives from various parties involved in education, including registered teachers and representatives from teacher-education institutions, school-management organisations, national parents' associations, industry and business, and ministerial nominees.

Critically, these kinds of councils also offer mechanisms for profession-led standard setting and quality assurance in teacher education, teacher induction, teacher performance and career development. These bodies aim to establish the kind of autonomy and public accountability for the teaching profession that has long characterised other professions, such as medicine, engineering and law.

Our review of assessment and evaluation frameworks found numerous examples of how effective consensus building has resulted in the successful implementation of reform.⁹

In Denmark, following the 2004 OECD recommendations on the need to establish an evaluation culture, all major stakeholder groups agreed on the importance of working to that end.¹⁰ In fact, there is a tradition in Denmark of involving the relevant interest groups in developing policies for primary and lower secondary schools (*Folkeskole*). The key interest groups include education authorities at the national level, municipalities (local government), teachers (Danish Union of Teachers), school leaders/principals (Danish School Principals' Union), parents (National Parents' Association), students, the association for municipal management in the area of schools, associations representing the interests of the independent (private) primary schools in Denmark, and researchers.

The Council for Evaluation and Quality Development of Primary and Lower Secondary Education is the most prominent platform for discussing evaluation and assessment policies. But there are other initiatives promoting dialogue, including one on developing national student tests that, each month, selects and celebrates a school that has achieved excellent results, and one that encourages municipalities to work together to improve the *Folkeskole*.¹¹

At the heart of the New Zealand education system is trust in the professionalism of staff and a culture of consultation and dialogue. It was collaborative work, rather than prescriptions imposed from above, that was responsible for developing the country's evaluation and assessment system. I admit that I had been sceptical that New Zealand would be successful in developing a high-stakes assessment system

that would remain entirely teacher-graded. But they succeeded because of the time and effort they invested in educating teachers and fostering peer collaboration. At the end of the process, they not only obtained reliable student-performance data, but teachers also had a good understanding of the nature of the assessment and how students responded to the different tasks. Perhaps most important, teachers had a better sense of how teachers in other classrooms and other schools were grading similar student work.

As a result of this participative approach, schools now show considerable support for and commitment to evaluation and assessment strategies. While there are, of course, differences of views, there seems to be an underlying consensus on the purposes of evaluation and an expectation among stakeholders to participate in shaping the national agenda.

Policy making in Norway is characterised by a high level of respect for local ownership. This is evident in the development of the national evaluation and assessment framework. Schools have a high degree of autonomy regarding school policies, curriculum development, and evaluation and assessment. There is a shared understanding that democratic decision making and buy-in from those concerned by evaluation and assessment policy are essential for successful implementation. In addition, the government does a lot to build and strengthen capacity at local levels and to bring local communities together to compare notes.

In Finland, the objectives and priorities for education evaluation are determined in the Education Evaluation Plan, which is crafted by the Ministry of Education and Culture in collaboration with the Education Evaluation Council, the Higher Education Evaluation Council, the National Board of Education and other key groups. The members of the Education Evaluation Council represent the education administration, teachers, students, employers, employees and researchers.

A monitoring commission in the French Community of Belgium was given a key role in monitoring the education system. It has two main missions: co-ordinate and review the coherence of the education system, and follow the implementation of pedagogical reforms. Its membership reflects all the relevant actors in the education system: school inspectors, school organisers, researchers, teachers' unions and parents' representatives. When new policies are introduced, a combination of top-

down and bottom-up initiatives can generally build consensus. The involvement of practitioners – teachers, other education staff and their unions – in producing, interpreting and translating research evidence into policy can give these practitioners a strong sense of ownership and strengthen their confidence in the reform process.

Engaging teachers to help design reform

The process of developing policy is more likely to yield consensus if there is a range of stakeholders involved from the outset. Regular interactions help build trust and raise awareness of the concerns of others, creating a climate of compromise. When politics becomes managing mistrust, and when clinging to positions becomes more important than using common sense, we lose the capacity to change and develop ideas based on dialogue. Where teachers are not genuinely involved in the design of reforms, they are unlikely to help with their implementation. This needs to be more than lip-service. In fact, I have sometimes heard policy makers talk in somewhat patronising ways about the lack of teacher capacity, and their intention to address that by rolling out more teacher-training programmes. But the bigger problem is that policy makers often do not have much of a sense of the capacity and expertise that is dormant among their teachers, because all their efforts focus on getting government prescription into classrooms, rather than getting the good practice from great classrooms into the education system.

We have learned a lot about the dynamics involved from our review of evaluation and assessment practices. In fact, evaluation policy has much to gain from forging a compromise from different perspectives rather than imposing one view over all others. For instance, teachers will accept evaluation more easily if they are consulted as the process is being designed. In addition, this is a good way to recognise and capitalise on their professionalism, the importance of their skills and experience, and the extent of their responsibilities. If teacher-appraisal procedures are designed and implemented only from “above”, there will be a “loose coupling” between administrators and teachers. It could mean teachers are less engaged and less willing to identify any potential risks in the procedures.

Engaging teachers and school leaders in their own appraisal, such as by setting objectives, self-appraisal and preparing individual portfolios, can create a stronger sense of empowerment among teachers and school leaders and, therefore, ensure that the process is successfully implemented. Education authorities have a lot to gain from listening to the advice of experienced teachers. These teachers can identify good teaching practices and the best ways to evaluate their peers. An evaluation system is more likely to be successful if it is accepted by professionals and is perceived as useful, objective and fair.

The need to engage the teaching profession extends beyond politics and pragmatism. One of the main challenges for policy makers in an increasingly knowledge-based society is how to maintain teacher quality and ensure that all teachers continue to engage in professional learning. Research on the characteristics of effective professional development indicates that teachers need to be involved in analysing their own practice in light of professional standards, and in analysing their students' progress in light of standards for student learning.

Introducing pilot projects and continuous evaluation

Experimenting with policy and using pilot projects can help build consensus, allay fears and overcome resistance by evaluating proposed reforms before they are fully introduced. It is equally important to review and evaluate reform processes periodically after full implementation. Teachers and school leaders are more likely to accept a policy initiative if they know that they will be able to express their concerns and provide advice on making adjustments.

In New Zealand, the Ministry of Education commissions independent evaluations to monitor national policies. For example, the implementation of the curriculum in English medium schools was monitored by the Education Review Office. National standards were monitored by the ministry and the Education Review Office, using samples of schools, in a project run by a contracted evaluation team. The information obtained from these reviews was complemented by survey data, information from reports of the Education Review Office, and results from national and international assessments.

In a range of countries, external evaluators typically collect feedback from schools and other stakeholders on their experience with the evaluation process in order to monitor the implementation of that process.

Building capacity in the system

One of the biggest obstacles to reform is inadequate capacity and resourcing, often because the resource implications are underestimated in scope, nature and timing. The main shortcoming is often not a lack of financial resources, but a dearth of human capacity at every level of the system.

The Alberta Initiative for School Improvement, in Alberta, Canada, was created in 1999 to address exactly this kind of problem. It encourages teachers, parents and the community to work together to introduce innovative projects to meet local needs. The initiative's platform allows schools and school districts to improve teachers' professional capacity in curriculum and pedagogic development through a process of collaborative inquiry.

The initiative was the result of the close partnership between the Alberta Teachers' Association, the Alberta government and other professional partners, such as the Alberta School Boards Association. The Alberta Teachers' Association spends around half of its budget on professional development, education research and public advocacy to build a stronger and more innovative teaching profession.¹²

The OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) of 2013 clearly shows Alberta's strong commitment to teacher professionalism. Alberta's teachers were more likely to report participating in professional learning than teachers in other TALIS-participating countries and economies: 85% reported participating in courses and workshops (the TALIS average was 71%); almost 80% participated in education conferences (the TALIS average was 44%); nearly two in three teachers belong to a professional network (the TALIS average was just over one in three); and almost 50% were involved in individual or collaborative research (the TALIS average was 31%). Only 4% of Alberta's teachers reported that they had never participated in professional learning activities compared with the TALIS average of 16%.¹³

Teachers need to have time not only to reflect on their own practices, but to avail themselves of professional development activities when they are offered. Teacher education for reform is also often needed to ensure that all stakeholders are equipped and prepared to assume the new roles and responsibilities that are required of them.

Timing is everything

A week is a long time for a political leader, but successful education reform often takes years. First of all, as I mentioned before, there is often a substantial gap between the time at which the initial cost of reform is incurred, and the time when the intended benefits of reforms materialise. I have often asked myself why underinvestment in early childhood education and care is so persistent, despite the extensive evidence that these investments have particularly large social returns and a significant influence on what happens in subsequent schooling. In Germany, parents must pay a fee for enrolling their child in pre-school programmes, but it has proved impossible to impose even the most modest fees on Germany's university students, where there would be much stronger justification for doing so. The reason is not just that children have no lobby behind them, it is also because it takes such a long time for the fruits of improvements in early childhood education to become apparent. That is also why we tend to try to find a way to afford the most expensive medical treatment when foregoing it would immediately compromise our health, while we are all too often ready to accept serious shortcomings in education services when their consequences won't be apparent for years.

In addition, reform measures are often best introduced in a specific sequence. For example, one element – curriculum reform – may require prior reform in pre-service and in-service teacher education in order to be effective.

It is also crucial that there is, from the outset, a clear understanding of the timing of intended, implemented and achieved reforms. Time is also needed to learn about and understand the reform measures, build trust, and develop the necessary capacity to move on to the next stage of policy development. Sir Michael Barber examines the design and implementation of reform trajectories, the sequencing of reform steps,

and ways to leverage principles of best-in-class performance management in his book, *Deliverology*.¹⁴ But what has been eloquently described in print is rarely put into practice.

Making teachers' unions part of the solution

To put the teaching profession at the heart of education reform, there must be a fruitful dialogue between governments and the teaching profession. A survey conducted in 2013 among 24 unions in 19 countries by the Trade Union Advisory Committee to the OECD¹⁵ revealed that this dialogue is in many countries already well developed.

The large majority of respondents to this survey indicated that they at least partially engage with governments on developing and implementing education policies. However, while most unions reported that governments had established arrangements for consultation, half of the respondents felt only partially engaged in these consultation structures. Moreover, unions considered themselves generally more engaged in policy development than in implementation.

This suggests that the mere existence of formal structures alone does not guarantee actual engagement. Perspectives sometimes varied between unions in the same country, reflecting the fact that governments may have different relations with unions representing different sectors of the workforce.

Union representatives were also asked to identify those areas of education policy that were under discussion. Almost all respondents mentioned teachers' professional development, followed by working conditions and equity issues. Issues concerning the curriculum, pay, support for students with special needs, teacher evaluation, student assessment and institutional evaluation were also mentioned by a majority of unions. One in three reported that there are productive discussions on student behaviour. Issues rarely mentioned were education research, school development and teaching councils.

Similar questions were asked about training policies. More unions reported that they are not engaged in discussions about the implementation of training policy than

reported full engagement. Fewer said that they were able to engage governments when they considered it necessary. Asked to cite areas of training policy where there were productive discussions, the majority of unions identified the curriculum, followed by professional development, equity issues, pay, adult learning and working conditions. Less consultation was reported on strategies for training youth and funding for training.

In general, this union survey presented an encouraging picture of involvement in most OECD countries, particularly on teacher and skills policies. But there is room for improvement, especially when it comes to establishing union-government dialogue across the board. Governments need to play a more active role in encouraging a dialogue with unions by recognising and supporting such initiatives.

This is not easy to do, because there are many thorny issues that separate teachers and policy makers. There are opponents of teachers' unions who see the unions as interfering with promising school-reform programmes by giving higher priority to their own bread-and-butter issues than to what the evidence suggests students need to succeed. But many of the countries with the strongest student performance also have strong teachers' unions. There seems to be no relationship between the presence of unions in a country, including and especially teachers' unions, and student performance. But there may be a relationship between the degree to which teachers' work has been professionalised and student performance. Indeed, the higher a country ranks on the PISA league tables, the more likely it is that the country works constructively with its teachers' organisations and treats its teachers as trusted professional partners.

In Ontario, Canada, the government signed a four-year collective bargaining agreement with the four major teachers' unions in 2014. In reaching the accord, the ministry was able to negotiate items that were consistent with both its education strategy and the unions' interests, thus providing a basis for pushing forward the education agenda while creating a sustained period of labour peace that allowed for a continuous focus on improving education.

I have observed that the nature of the relationship between governments and teachers' unions often reflects the work organisation in education. A highly industrialised work organisation, where the government focuses on prescribing

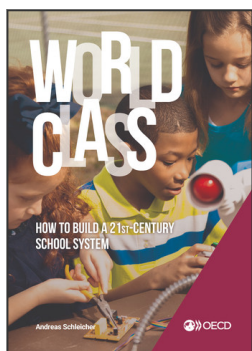
and justifying, and where teachers are expected to do the same work that their counterparts decades ago did, and for similar pay, inadvertently encourages unions to focus on pay and working conditions. That, in turn, tends to lead to stakeholder relationships that are top-down and antagonistic.

By contrast, a highly professional work organisation, where the government enables and offers incentives to teachers, and where the teaching profession is characterised by diverse careers, ownership and innovative ways of working, is conducive to developing a strategic, principled and professional working relationship between the government and unions. In that sense, every education system gets the teachers' unions it deserves.

So in the wake of the results from the PISA 2009 assessment, the US Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, Fred Van Leeuwen from Education International (the international federation of teachers' unions) and I organised the first International Summit on the Teaching Profession. Secretary Duncan had been a great supporter of PISA and international collaboration on education, in general, and he knew that implementing change on the ground would always hinge on engaging teachers' organisations. The idea was to bring together ministers and unions from around the world to address issues that are difficult to tackle nationally, often because of entrenched stakeholder interests. We felt that it was time for governments, teachers' unions and professional bodies to redefine the role of teachers, and to create the support and collaborative work organisation that can help teachers grow in their careers and meet the needs of 21st-century students. Since then, we have invited ministers and teachers' union leaders from the best-performing and most rapidly improving education systems each year in a unique global effort to raise the status of the teaching profession.

Of course, both ministers and union leaders had had many international meetings before, but what makes the International Summit on the Teaching Profession unique is that they are sitting next to each other. They can listen to ministers and union leaders from other countries who might have successfully broken the stalemates in which they are stuck in their own country. In fact, one of the ground rules that we established was that no country could join the summit unless it was represented by both the minister and the national union leader. Consensus might be too ambitious

a goal for these summits, but a lively – not to say provocative and passionate – discussion has proved extremely valuable for everyone involved.



From:
World Class
How to Build a 21st-Century School System

Access the complete publication at:
<https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264300002-en>

Please cite this chapter as:

Schleicher, Andreas (2018), "Making education reform happen", in *World Class: How to Build a 21st-Century School System*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264300002-5-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. 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 or the Centre français d'exploitation du droit de copie (CFC) at contact@cfcopies.com.