

Intervention cluster

The school systems that have been successful in improving select an integrated set of actions from the menu of the interventions appropriate to their level of performance (see below). These improving systems appear to be careful in maintaining the integrity of the interventions; the evidence suggests that during each performance stage they select a critical mass of interventions from the appropriate menu and then implement them with fidelity. This is akin to the discipline of an exercise regimen – for the participant to be successful they need to be consistent in all its aspects, including diet and exercise, and in practicing these aspects regularly. The systems that have been unsuccessful in trying to improve may carry out the same types of interventions that successful systems undertake – but there appears to be one critical difference, that they are not consistent, either in carrying out the critical mass of interventions appropriate to their performance stage, or in pursuing them with sufficient rigor and discipline.

We have identified two different types of interventions carried out by improving school systems: the first set of interventions are those that are appropriate to a particular performance stage; the second set of interventions applies equally during all stages, but manifests differently in each stage.

1. Stage-dependent interventions: it's a system thing, not a single thing. These sets of interventions vary from stage to stage. Each set is discrete and is sustained throughout the stage.
 - Poor to fair: the interventions in this stage focus on supporting students in achieving the literacy and math basics: this requires providing scaffolding for low-skill teachers, fulfilling all basic student needs, and bringing all the schools in the system up to a minimum quality threshold.
 - Fair to good: at this stage the interventions focus on consolidating the system foundations; this includes the production of high quality performance data, ensuring teacher and school accountability, and creating appropriate financing, organization structure, and pedagogy models.

- Good to great: the interventions at this stage focus on ensuring teaching and school leadership is regarded as a full-fledged profession; this requires putting in place the necessary practices and career paths to ensure the profession is as clearly defined as those in medicine and law.
- Great to excellent: the interventions of this stage move the locus of improvement from the center to the schools themselves; the focus is on introducing peer-based learning through school-based and system-wide interaction, as well as supporting system-sponsored innovation and experimentation.

We further observe a correlation relationship between a system's performance stage and the tightness of central guidance to schools. Improving systems “prescribe adequacy but unleash greatness.”⁶ Systems on the journey from poor to fair, in general characterized by less skilled educators, tightly control teaching and learning processes from the center because minimizing variation across classrooms and schools is the core driver of performance improvement at this level. In contrast, the systems moving from good to great, characterized by more highly skilled educators, provide only loose guidelines on teaching and learning processes because peer-led creativity and innovation inside schools becomes the core driver for raising performance at this level.

2. Cross-stage interventions: common but different
The cross-stage interventions comprise a group of six actions that occur with equal frequency across all performance stages, but manifest differently in each one. These six interventions are: revising the curriculum and standards, ensuring an appropriate reward and remunerations structure for teachers and principals, building the technical skills of teachers and principals, assessing students, establishing data systems, and facilitating improvement through the introduction of policy documents and education laws.

Contextualizing

School systems that sustain improvement over the longer term have learned both how to navigate the challenges of their context and to use their context to their advantage. The leaders of these systems

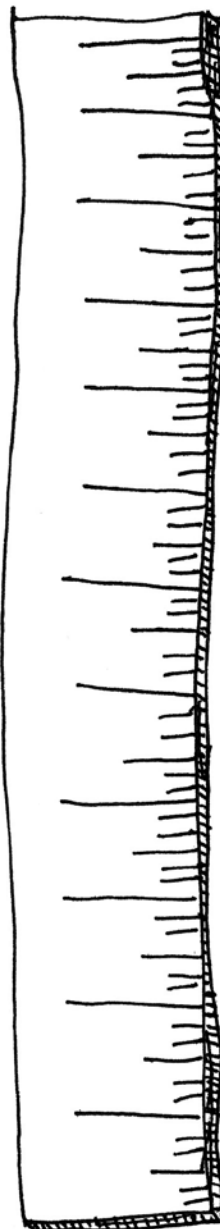
tailor the three types of interventions required to their system's performance stage and circumstances. Contextualizing is all about the tactics the system leaders use in tailoring the set of the interventions needed on their performance journey to their specific context. Our research shows that the system leaders' prime aim in contextualizing the interventions is usually to gain the requisite support of the various stakeholders for the interventions being made.

In talking to leaders and architects of the improving systems, it appears that one of the biggest choices facing school systems when contextualizing their interventions is to what degree an intervention should be mandated and to what extent should persuasion be used. The systems we studied have adopted different combinations of mandating and persuading to implement the same set of interventions. These choices appear to be based on four contextual attributes: 1) the desired pace of change; 2) whether the desired change is a "non-negotiable" for the system reform; 3) the degree to which there are stark winners and losers as a result of the change; and 4) the credibility and stability of the system leadership and national government, and the historical and political context.

Sustaining

The sustaining practices of the new pedagogy are characterized by the internalization of teaching practices. They are not merely about changing the explicit structure and approach of the system, but about how teachers think about teaching. In the words of Lee S. Shulman, professional pedagogues recognize "an implicit structure, a moral dimension that comprises a set of beliefs about professional attitudes, values, and dispositions."⁷ We have found that there are three ways that improving systems commonly do this: by establishing collaborative practices between teachers within and across schools, by developing a mediating layer between the schools and the center, and by architecting tomorrow's leadership.

Many systems in our sample have created a pedagogy in which teachers and school leaders work together to embed routines that nurture instructional and leadership excellence.⁸ They embed routines of instructional and ➔



leadership excellence in the teaching community, making classroom practice public, and develop teachers into coaches of their peers. These practices are supported by an infrastructure of professional career paths that not only enable teachers to chart their individual development course but also make them responsible for sharing their pedagogical skills throughout the system. In general, collaborative practices shift the drive for change away from the center to the front lines of schools, helping to make system improvement self-sustaining.

As the school systems we studied have progressed on their improvement journey, they seem to have increasingly come to rely upon a “mediating layer” that acts between the center and the schools. This mediating layer sustains improvement by providing three things of importance to the system: targeted hands-on support to schools, a buffer between the school and the center, and a channel to share and integrate improvements across schools. As our sample systems have moved through their improvement journey, a number have chosen either to delegate responsibility away from the center to a newly created mediating layer located between the central educational authority and the schools themselves (e.g. school clusters or subject-based groups), or have expanded the rights and responsibilities of an existing mediating layer (e.g. school districts/regions).

The third element commonly witnessed in sustaining school system improvement is the continuity of the system’s leadership. This plays an important role in ensuring that the priorities, drive, mindset and resourcing of change is sustained across leaders. All systems need to somehow traverse smoothly from one leader to the next, so that change becomes evolutionary in nature. The most successful systems actively foster the development of the next generation of system leadership from within, ensuring that there is a continuity of purpose and vision in sustaining the system’s pedagogy and improvement.

Ignition

The question many might well ask at this point is, “How do we get started?” The starting point for every system embarking on an improvement journey is to decide just how to overcome the present

inertia. Across our sample systems, the impetus required to start school system reforms – what we call ignition – resulted from one of three things: the outcome of a political or economic crisis, the impact of a high-profile, critical report on the system’s performance, or the energy and input of a new political or strategic leader.⁹ We find that fifteen out of our 20 studied systems had two of these ignition events present prior to the launch of their reform efforts.

Of the three, however, the injection of new leadership appears to be by far the most important factor: all 20 of the systems studied here have relied upon the presence and energy of a new leader to jumpstart their reform program. New technical leaders were present in all of our sample systems, and new political leaders present in half. These new leaders tend to follow a common “playbook” of practices upon entering office. Once installed, they have staying power: the median tenure of the new strategic leaders is six years and that of the new political leaders is seven years, thereby enabling continuity in the reform process and development of the system pedagogy. This is in stark contrast to the norm. For example, the average tenure for superintendents of urban school districts in the U.S. is nearly three years; the tenure of education secretaries in England is just two years on average, similar to that of education ministers in France.

It is clear from what we have said here that while there is no single path to improving school system performance, the experiences of all 20 improving school systems – both the “sustained improvers” and the “promising starts” – have strong commonalities in the nature of their journeys. We hope this analysis will provide system leaders with the opportunity to rigorously assess where their system is on its path to improvement and to what extent they are already making use of the appropriate set of interventions – and whether there might be the opportunity to do things differently.

What follows in the main part of the report explores each of the various dimensions of the school system performance journey in more detail. The report is divided into four chapters: interventions, contextualizing, sustaining, and ignition. ■