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How to
DESIGN EFFECTIVE SUPPORT TO SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

Lessons from Existing Research

January 2024

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What are the necessary design considerations for school leadership training to improve student learning outcomes?

Despite the positive impact that capable, qualified teachers have on learning outcomes in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), many teachers lack the training and support necessary to develop their capacity. Through its holistic three-year EduQuality program, Opportunity EduFinance delivers school leader and teacher professional development and peer coaching to approximately 1,900 schools annually.[1] Over the years, EduQuality has made continuous efforts to ground its program in best practices and lessons learned from other contexts. This evidence brief sets out to answer these critical questions on teacher training and professional development in LMICs. What can we learn from existing research on successful teacher training programs? What makes these programs effective, and how can these lessons be applied in practice to ensure EduQuality continues to improve learning outcomes for disadvantaged students?

Many studies have shown that strong school leadership and management has a significant impact on student learning outcomes (Crawfurd, 2017; Sampat et al., 2020; Mbiti et al., 2019; Carneiro et al. 2020; Cimini et al, 2020). This is particularly true in the low-cost private school (LCPS) settings that EduQuality focuses, as these school leaders have more autonomy to hire and train teachers and implement school policies than they would in public school settings (Scur et. al., 2018). Despite their importance, many studies show that school leaders lack the necessary skills and access to training for strong management practices (World Development Report, 2018; ACDP, 2013; Sampat et al., 2020). Further, in many cases initiatives to support school management are not effective and do not see any positive changes to management skills or learning outcomes (Muralidharan and Singh 2018; de Hoyos et al., 2019).

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[1] Opportunity International Impact Report, 2022

This evidence brief reviews the literature to synthesize the conditions necessary for school leadership and management support to improve student learning outcomes. It discusses three considerations for school management interventions and considers the implications for applying these findings to policymaking and program design in practic for teacher training interventions and the implications for applying these findings to policymaking and program design in practice.

1. **Focus school leaders training on teacher development and coaching**

2. **Use student-level data to improve school leader accountability systems**

3. **Build parent capacity to engage in school management**

1. Focus school leaders training on teacher development and coaching

To improve learning outcomes, school leaders training should focus on effective tools and strategies for building teachers' capacity. As one study highlights **"Whether an education input is a physical item, such as a tablet or textbook, or a process, such as school management and leadership, it will improve learning only if it directly improves the quality of teacher-learner interactions."** (World Development Report, 2018, pg. 150).

Research indicates that one of the most effective ways school leaders can improve learning outcomes is by developing teachers through coaching and regular feedback (Sampat et al., 2020; World Development Report, 2018; Cimini et al., 2020). Rather than focusing on general oversight, audits, or administration, the most effective school leaders training programs include topics such as how to give effective feedback to teachers, utilizing classroom observation to improve teacher performance, and methods

for teacher coaching and mentorship, all of which emphasize the teacher-student relationship (Nannyonjo, 2017; Fryer, 2017; Cimini et al., 2020; Grissom et al., 2013; Sampat et al., 2020; World Development Report, 2018).

School leadership training that focuses on teacher professional development has a strong impact on learning outcomes. For example, Nannyonjo (2017) discusses the National College for Effective Leadership (NCEL) Effective Principals' Training Program implemented in Jamaican public schools. The training program emphasizes how to implement teacher professional development, including principals providing feedback to teachers, organizing teacher professional development activities and opportunities for teachers to collaborate, and developing teacher goals. The program was highly effective in positively impacting school leader behavior, teacher perceptions, and learning outcomes (Nannyonjo, 2017).

Other studies have also highlighted how professional development for school leaders can have a positive effect on teacher development and intrinsic motivation (Hallinger and Lee, 2014; Cimini et al., 2020). For example, in a study of the Flemish Association for Development Cooperation and Technical Assistance's (VVOB's) professional learning networks (PLNs) for school leaders in Rwanda, Education Development Trust (2017) found that after school leaders participated in PLNs, teacher motivation also significantly improved. As the study shows, professional development sessions resulted in school leaders giving more responsibility to teachers, encouraging more collaboration between teachers, and allowing teachers to express their ideas more openly as equal colleagues rather than in a hierarchical format. Further, the training encouraged school leaders to use classroom observation as a tool for teacher professional development, rather than for harshly judging teaching quality. As the study highlights *"After participating in PLNs, [headteachers] no longer observed lessons as police officers, but as counsellors" (*Education Development Trust, 2017, pg. 15). The impact the school leaders training had on teacher motivation and development was a critical component to its success (see case study on page 6). (Bush et al. 2021).

"We can see the progress that is being made in the classrooms every day. The teachers are motivated and very committed to putting into practice each of the processes and strategies learned with EduQuality."[2]

– Ms. Sandra
A school leader in Guatemala, on teacher progress and motivation gleaned from classroom observations.

Implications for policy and practice

▶ **Consider incentives for school leaders:** Practitioners implementing school leaders training should consider accompanying training with incentives, such as salary increases, grants, or other linkages to financial support, to help motivate behavior change (Sampat et al., 2020). Besides monetary incentives, studies also show that training programs that offer official certifications or qualifications can also motivate school leaders to implement better practices (Okoko, Scott & Scott, 2015). Incentives for school leaders can help address some of the challenges that researchers and practitioners alike have recognized when it comes to motivating school leaders to apply lessons from their training on top of existing administrative workloads (Lassibille, 2016; Pont et al., 2008).

▶ **Allow sufficient time for learning new skills and provide ongoing support:** Practitioners should consider ongoing methods of training and support to develop school leaders over time, rather than planning for one-off trainings. School leaders are often selected not based on their leadership skills but based on their longevity as a teacher, meaning that many lack the fundamental skills necessary to succeed in their roles (Asuga and Eacott, 2012, Adelman and Lemos, 2020). As such, many school leaders will require ongoing training, coaching, and support to gradually learn new skills.

[2] https://edufinance.org/latest/blog/2024/school-leaderreflections-on-usaid-catalyze-edufinance-impact

2. Use student-level data to improve school leader accountability systems

Many studies find that supporting school leaders in their use of student-level learning data can have a positive impact on learning outcomes (Sampat et al., 2020; de Hoyos et al., 2019; de Hoyos et al., 2015; World Development Report, 2018). In many cases, government entities that administer tests do not clearly provide test scores to school leaders, or school leaders are not equipped to understand, analyze, or interpret results. Research indicates that when school leaders can clearly visualize how their management decisions have a direct impact on learning data, this provides a strong incentive for school leaders to devote more time and resources to incorporating new practices (de Hoyos et al., 2015; Sampat et al., 2020).

Randomized studies in Mexico and Argentina have demonstrated that simply providing school leaders with straightforward and timely data on student learning outcomes led to significant improvements in test scores. In addition to improving test scores, the study in Argentina found that school leaders who received data on student learning outcomes were more likely to make changes in curriculum or teacher feedback than those who did not (de Hoyos et al. 2019). Furthermore, students in the treatment schools were also more likely than the control group to report that their teachers used improved instructional strategies such as explaining topics, engaging students in discussion, writing on the blackboard, or summarizing the material at the end of every lesson.

Ensuring that school leaders not only receive data on student learning outcomes but also understand how to translate this student data into tangible school improvement plans and clear goals can have a powerful impact on learning outcomes (de Hoyos et al., 2015; Crawfurd, 2017). In Colima, Mexico, de Hoyos et al. (2015) examines a government program that publicly disseminated student-level data and supported the lowest performing schools in developing school improvement plans, which resulted in improved outcomes in those target schools. While the government provided no additional inputs, the intervention included a school-level diagnosis of test results, identification of weaknesses within specific subject areas, and support from technical advisors in developing a school improvement plan with clear goals. The authors argue that "the diagnostic feedback that came about through the design of the school improvement plan gave the schools the tools and knowledge they needed to take action and set goals themselves" which was critical to improving learning outcomes.

A similar example in Brazil found that the *Jovem de Futuro* program had positive impacts on student learning outcomes (Barros et al., 2019). The program trained school leaders in evidence-based participatory planning, monitoring implementation of the plan, analyzing student-level results, and using these results to adjust and redesign elements of the improvement plan if needed (Barros et al., 2019).

Other examples of effective support to school management in Uganda (Crawfurd 2017; EPRC, 2016) and Venezuela (Allcott and Ortega, 2009) show how student-level data is incorporated into every aspect of school management, from curriculum design, incentives for teachers, implementing school improvement plans, and parental engagement.

Implications for policy and practice

▶ **Encourage governments to disseminate student testing data in a timely manner:** In many contexts, governments oversee national exam data but do not disseminate this to school-level administrations in a timely manner or at all (Elacqua et al., 2014). Policymakers should encourage education ministries to, at a minimum, share student testing data with schools. If feasible, governments should also be encouraged to accompany this data with more tangible support for school improvement plans.

▶ **Leverage LCPS's management autonomy to encourage use of student learning data in decision-making:** Studies find that opportunities to use student data to improve accountability is particularly strong for LCPSs, as private schools often have more autonomy to enact management changes than public schools (Scur et al., 2018). The practice of decentralized decision-making – often referred to as school-based management (SBM) – has had strong evidence of impact and is thus being adopted in many public schools worldwide (Krishnaratne, White & Carpenter, 2013). LCPS sole proprietorships that already operate in this way can capitalize on the opportunity to enhance school-based accountability mechanisms, such as the use of student-level data for decision-making.

▶ **Provide sufficient autonomy for non-state actors in education to adapt management practices**: It is important that any initiatives to improve school-based accountability via information provision also be accompanied with sufficient autonomy for school leadership to act on new information they receive, and flexibility to adapt practices as necessary. In addition to sole proprietorships, other forms of non-state education provision may also have more opportunities for autonomous school-based decision-making than in public school systems. Public-private partnerships, private school chains, and chains of faith-based schools all have demonstrated examples of where greater autonomy has led to improved learning outcomes for students (Crawfurd 2017; Aslam et al., 2017; EPRC, 2016; Allcott and Ortega, 2009).

3. Build parent capacity to engage in school management

Lastly, empowering parents and community members to be actively involved in their local school management can effectively improve student learning outcomes (Duflo et al., 2012, Cimini et al., 2020). This parental involvement may include school-management committees (SMCs), which provide parents with real decision-making power in schools, or it may be through informal mechanisms, such inviting parents to collect data on teacher attendance or facilitated parent-teacher meetings (Read and Atinc, 2016). All these interventions aim to strengthen accountability by creating feedback loops between teachers, school leaders, and parents (World Development Report, 2018).

For SMCs to be effective, parents and community members must have the necessary capacity and information to implement decisions. SMCs where parents are granted genuine decision-making authority are often only effective when parents have

higher levels of literacy and education, as this enables them to better understand school policies and outcomes (Conn, 2017). For example, studies in The Gambia (Blimpo, Evans, and Lahire, 2015) and Niger (Beasley and Huillery, 2017) both found that SMCs only improved student learning outcomes when parents had high rates of literacy. As parents in many low-income communities have not received basic education themselves, research is mixed on whether SMCs lead to improved learning outcomes (Conn, 2017).

In communities with lower levels of capacity, research shows that SMCs are more effective when they use a participatory approach and involve parents not only in school monitoring, but also in the design of monitoring tools. For example, one quasi-experiment in Uganda found that this participatory approach to school monitoring successfully improved student test scores and reduced teacher absenteeism (Barr et al., 2012). In the standard treatment, SMC members were given a school scorecard developed by the Ministry of Education and provided training in school monitoring. In the comparison group, SMC members attended dialogue sessions to design their own school scorecard, alongside facilitated discussions on how to define progress, roles, and objectives. This participatory approach saw a much greater impact on student learning outcomes when compared to the standard approach that is typical of many SMCs (Barr et al., 2012).

Other studies have found that simply providing parents with more information on learning outcomes via school-level or student-level report cards has had a positive impact (Andrabi et al., 2017; de Hoyes et al., 2015; Baum et al., 2014; Mbiti 2016). For example, in Pakistan, Andrabi et al. (2017) found that the provision of school and student-level "report cards" to parents successfully increased test scores in both public and low-cost private schools. Not only do information campaigns increase accountability and feedback loops, but they also give parents more experience in community monitoring and help prepare them for more advanced decision-making roles in the future. Information sharing can act as a critical first step towards more active parental involvement in school management and can pave the way for successful school management committees in the future.

[3] https://edufinance.org/latest/blog/2024/school-leaderreflections-on-usaid-catalyze-edufinance-impact

Implications for policy and practice

▶ **Design school engagement strategies tailored to the parent community capacity levels:** SMCs can be effective tools for improving learning outcomes, but require adequate skills, information, and capacity. Practitioners should consider employing rigorous baseline assessments to determine the needs and capacity of community parents prior to supporting or guiding the implementation of SMCs. In low-capacity communities, "low stakes" accountability mechanisms (World Development Report, 2018) are often more effective, such information campaigns or facilitated parent-teacher meetings. In short, supporting the creation of feedback loops between parents and schools is critical, but these interventions must be tailored to the community's capacity to effectively improve learning outcomes.

▶ **Create policies that facilitate direct dissemination of information about a school's performance to parents:** In addition to information-sharing campaigns targeting parents at the grassroots level, governments can also play a role in ensuring data on student learning outcomes is disseminated to parents. Government-led policies that facilitate direct dissemination of information about a school's performance to parents – for example, in Mexico (de Hoyes et al., 2015) – are found to significantly improve learning outcomes.

Research in Practice:
How Does EduQuality Apply Lessons from Research to Program Design?

EduQuality strives to incorporate lessons from research into its existing activities and future program planning. The Pathways to Excellence (P2E) guide was designed as a key component of EduQuality, and aims to address challenges in school quality by equipping school leaders with the tools necessary to assess and improve their school's progress across 18 key domains.

The P2E guide incorporates each of the three design considerations outlined above to support school leaders to create a school environment that is most conducive to improving student learning outcomes. In 2023, Opportunity EduFinance released a report *Pathways to Excellence: Assessing EduQuality school*

progress in quality improvements that found schools leaders were also improving in these practices between the first and second years of the EduQuality program.[4]

1. **Focus on Teachers:** As highlighted above, one of the most effective ways school leaders can improve learning outcomes is ensuring leaders give effective feedback to teachers, utilize classroom observation to improve teacher performance, and provide regular professional development support to teachers. EduQuality school leaders have made strong improvements in these areas, with more than 95% of school leaders conducting regular

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[4] Opportunity EduFinance, 2023. *Pathways to Excellence: Assessing EduQuality school progress in quality improvements.* https://edufinance.org/publications/research-and-learning/pathways-to-excellence-assessing-eduquality-school-progress-in-quality-improvements/.
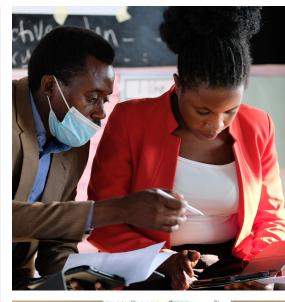
classroom observations, and 83% of schools observing teachers at least once a month.[5] EduQuality school leaders are also becoming more responsible in providing feedback and professional development for teachers. In Year 2 of EduQuality, 95% of schools provide professional development support to the staff, an increase of 9 percentage points from Year 1, and 72% of schools provide individual feedback to teachers at least twice per term.[6]

2. **Utilize Student-Level Learning Data:** EduQuality school leaders are trained in various types of learner assessments, as well as how to utilize data from student-level assessments to adapt and improve teaching. In the second year of EduQuality, 68% of schools report using assessment results to re-teach areas that were not well understood, an increase of 13 percentage points from Year 1. Further, 71% of school leaders report teachers use assessments to identify learners in need of support, an increase of 29 percentage points from Year 1. Schools that do not consider assessment results also fell from 28% to 13%, a positive result.[7] These improvements represent ways of utilizing student-level data in order to adapt teaching, that has been shown to improve student learning.

3. **Engage Parents:** Lastly, parent and community engagement is a key component of P2E, and is another area in which EduQuality school leaders are improving. EduQuality schools have been widely successful in strengthening their community and parental engagement, with 95% reporting that parents are actively involved in the school. School leaders also note that parents participate in wider school life, such as extra-curricular activities and special events (71%, up from 59% in Year 1). The majority of schools also have parent-teacher associations (PTAs), and most PTAs actively support school leaders by offering recommendations for improvement.[8]

Overall, our assessments of school leaders show how EduQuality partner schools have made strong improvements in these areas during their time participating in the program. In the coming years, EduQuality will continue to apply lessons from research in effective, impactful school leader professional development.

For more information on EduQuality's work in teacher and school leader training, visit: https://edufinance.org/what-we-do/education-quality

To view the *Pathways to Excellence* assessment report, visit: https://edufinance.org/publications/research-and-learning/pathways-to-excellence-assessing-eduquality-school-progress-in-quality-improvements/

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[5] Ibid, pg. 70
[6] Ibid, pgs. 59–61
[7] Ibid, pg. 74
[8] Ibid, pgs. 18–19

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