

Middle-tier and school leadership:

A modular approach to turn education policy into practice

School principals and middle-tier leaders are the twin engines of education systems. Strengthened together, they translate national policy into better teaching, learning, and student outcomes.



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District leaders in Guyana participate in the launch of the NELA (National Education Leadership Academy)

Why leadership matters at the school and middle-tier level

Even well-designed education reforms can struggle to deliver their intended results. Success often depends on what happens between a ministry's policy and a classroom's daily reality. This is where implementation either takes hold or stalls.

School principals and middle-tier leaders (e.g., subdistrict, district, and regional education officers) are central to closing this gap. However, both groups remain under-prepared and insufficiently supported.

Strengthening school and middle-tier leadership is one of the most powerful and promising ways to make education reform work in practice.

How information flows across the education system



Policy flows down and local realities and evidence flow up

Working hand-in-hand with countries

The UNESCO International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP) supports countries in ensuring that education reforms lead to meaningful improvements in schools and classrooms. Working across all levels of the education system, IIEP helps strengthen school and middle-tier leadership through a gender-transformative approach that promotes more inclusive leadership opportunities. School and middle-tier leadership is at the heart of this work. School and middle-tier leaders drive better learning outcomes and greater educational equity.

Our approach combines:

Evidence-based diagnosis

Identify bottlenecks and align priorities, and ground planning decisions in evidence.

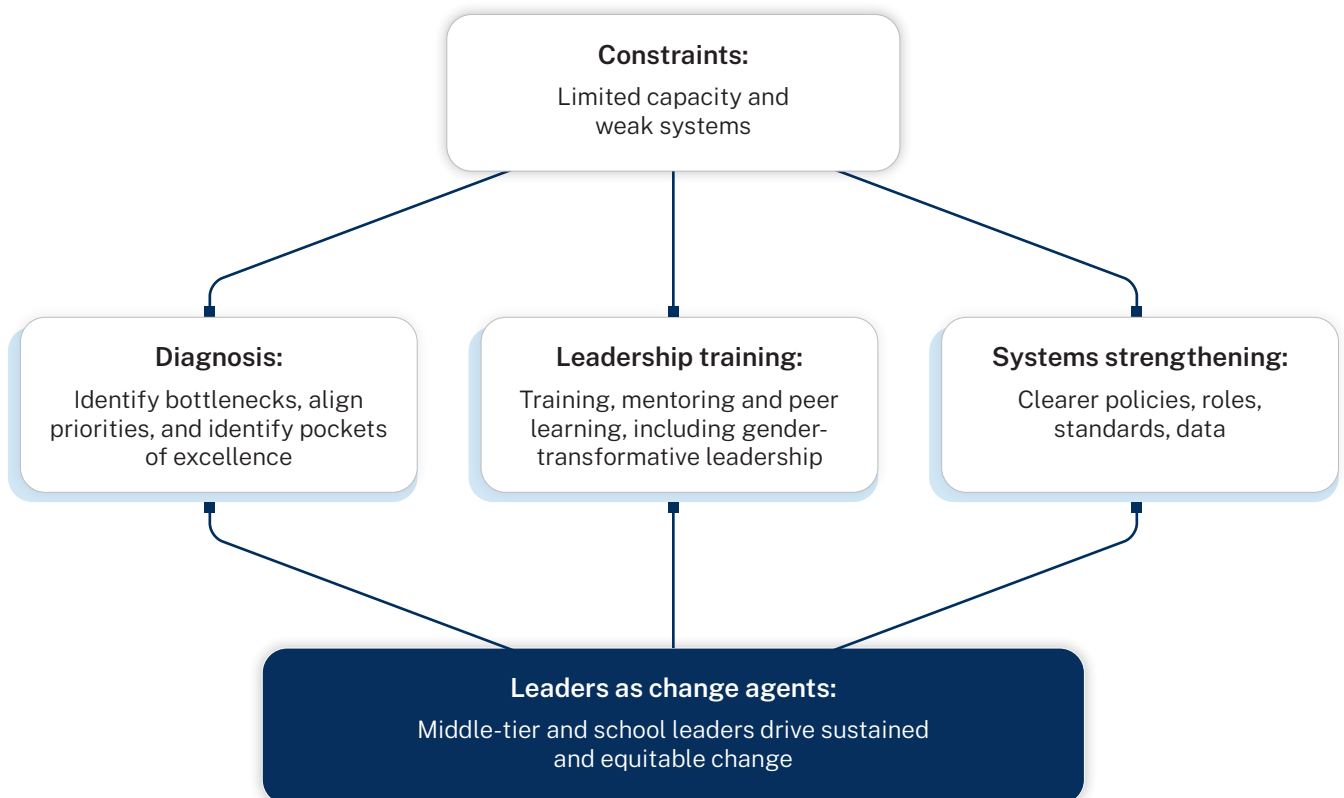
Leadership development

Build the core practices through training, mentoring, and peer learning, and innovative practice-based methodologies including artificial intelligence-supported tools.

System strengthening

Lead change through clearer policy, roles, standards, and data systems.

How we empower the middle tier and school leadership



Three modular components

IIEP offers a flexible approach tailored to countries' priorities, administrative structures, and reform pathways. Three modular components, diagnosis, leadership development, and system-level reform, can be delivered independently, sequentially, or as part of a broader programme. Across all three, IIEP links leadership development with practical data, planning, and management

tools to support effective action. Together, the modules help ministries identify priorities, target the right audiences, and sequence reforms according to their context.

Designed to connect with one another, the modules allow ministries of education to identify priority gaps, select the most relevant module(s), target the appropriate audience(s), and sequence interventions according to their own context.



Module 1 - Diagnosis

Provides an evidence-based, shared diagnosis of leadership and governance gaps and strengths at both the school and middle-tier levels, agreed jointly with the ministry of education.

What we offer

- ▶ School and middle-tier leadership capacity assessment
- ▶ Gender and inclusion diagnosis
- ▶ Evidence-based identification of reform priorities



Module 2 - Leadership development

Builds the skills, confidence, and professional identity of school and middle-tier leaders, anchored in four core practices: setting expectations, focusing on learning, fostering collaboration, and developing people. Strengthens leaders' capacities for planning and implementation by equipping them to use data, lead instructional support, engage communities, manage crises, and promote gender-transformative, inclusive and socio-emotional practices, with particular attention to soft skills.

What we offer

- ▶ National Education Leadership Academy, leadership training programmes, and short-term courses
- ▶ Mentoring and communities of practice
- ▶ AI-supported and digital learning tools



Module 3 - System-level reform

Embeds and sustains leadership gains by clarifying roles, structures, and career pathways, and by strengthening selection, appraisal, and coordination mechanisms for both school and middle-tier leadership. Also builds the operational environment that enables leaders to act effectively.

What we offer

- ▶ Leadership standards, development frameworks, and policies
- ▶ Recruitment, appraisal, and career pathways
- ▶ Planning, governance guidelines, and tools

Work with us

Countries can engage with IIEP at different levels, from targeted technical assistance to a full programme spanning diagnosis, leadership development, and system reform. IIEP can also facilitate peer learning and South-South exchange.

Engagement normally begins with a scoping conversation, followed by the development of a joint roadmap. Throughout implementation, IIEP works alongside national counterparts to develop their capacity and ensure that knowledge, tools, and institutional changes remain part of the education system beyond IIEP's support.

Strengthening leadership at the school and middle-tier level is one of the most cost-effective ways to translate national ambition into classroom reality, precisely because most countries already invest in these layers of their system. The challenge is to make investment count.

IIEP welcomes the opportunity to discuss how this modular offer can be adapted to a specific national context.

Get in touch

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Indicative costing for each module and phase is available on request.

Learn more



The missing middle: harnessing the power of the middle tier for learning



Transforming education in Guyana



Instructional leaders at the middle tier of education systems



Women in Learning Leadership - WiLL



Leading for impact: An IIEP-UNESCO framework for education policy implementation



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