

"Most students in our state enrol in school, but we now need methods by which they will actually learn!"- senior government leader.

"We expect our grantees to measure quality of student outcomes; we would like to explore linking funding to outcomes." - Head of a leading funding agency.

"Excellence is a key value for us in our programs." - CEO of a non-profit organization.

"We need to help the public school system in improving quality."- Industry leader.

As a country we have made significant positive strides in access and enrolment, and in providing basic facilities in schools. The next big challenge in primary schooling is the **quality of education**. As these quotes also suggest, this challenge is now widely acknowledged.

Assessments by independent entities, parent migration to private schools especially in urban areas, active debate generated by non-profits and strong push from funders, have all emphasised the tremendous magnitude of the quality gap and helped create awareness. Over the last few years, a large number of initiatives – led by governments, non-profits and for-profits – have been launched and driven around the country, to improve quality of education. While these are great starting points, in many situations, they have been insufficient for two key reasons.

First, many system leaders (state governments and municipal corporations) rightly question which are the best global experiences to learn from. For example, while we know that Singapore is able to attract students from the top 30% of each graduating batch into teaching, it is unclear whether this will be possible in India. Similarly, we know that New York provides significant autonomy to schools in return for performance; again, the implications for India are unclear.

Second, while some of the current initiatives in India have achieved a great deal, many face challenges on one or more of three key dimensions – scalability, depth of impact, and sustainability.



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This article applies the global learnings on school system transformation developed by McKinsey & Company, along with our experiences in India, to provide a few starting thoughts on what it might take to transform the public school system in your state or district or city.

What We Can Learn From School System Transformations Around The World?

How does a system with poor performance become good? And how does a good system become great? Specifically, what interventions move a system from one stage to the next? Which aspects of this journey are universal and which are specific to your own context? And how does a system ignite and sustain improvement?

These are some of the questions we have attempted to answer in our recent report, "How the World's Most Improved School Systems Keep Getting Better" – based on our experiences in working with school systems over the years, and more specifically, on in-depth research on the transformation journeys of 20 school systems from all over the world, each with a different starting level of performance.

While the full report and the executive summary can be accessed on-line¹, here is a summary of key findings relevant to the Indian context.

First, a system can make significant gains from wherever it starts – and these gains can be achieved in six years or less. For instance, Latvian students in 2006 demonstrated performance that was half a school-year advanced to that of students in 2000. In Long Beach, six years of interventions increased student performance in grade four and five math by 50% and 75% respectively. Some systems have shown significant improvement in even shorter time frames. For example, systems starting from low levels of performance, such as Minas Gerais in Brazil and

Western Cape in South Africa, have significantly improved their literacy and numeracy levels within just two to four years, while making strides in narrowing the achievement gap between students from different socio-economic backgrounds.

Second, and most importantly, each particular stage of the school system improvement journey is associated with a unique set of interventions. Our research suggests the “poor to fair” journey looks very different from the “good to great” journey. At the same time, within each of these stages, there are strong patterns – irrespective of culture, geography, politics, or History. There is a consistent cluster of interventions that moves systems from poor performance to fair, a second cluster of interventions does the same from fair performance to good, a third cluster from good performance to great, and yet another from great performance to excellent.

Poor to fair journeys² focus on getting the basics of literacy and numeracy in place. This typically involves: providing scaffolding or day-to-day support and motivation for low skill teachers and principals through elements like highly scripted and standardized lesson plans and regular coaching; getting all schools to a minimum quality standard through data-gathering systems, use of assessments, and centrally prepared teaching-learning resources; and improving access and enrolment where that is still an issue. On the other hand, systems on the path from good performance to great³ focused on shaping the teaching profession such that its requirements, practices, and career paths are as clearly defined as those in medicine and law.

This suggests that systems would do well to learn from those at a similar stage of the journey, rather than from those that are at significantly different levels of performance. It also shows that systems cannot continue to improve by simply doing more of what brought them past success.

Third, there is too little focus on ‘process’ in the debate today. Improving system performance ultimately comes down to improving the learning experience of students in their classrooms. School systems do three things to achieve this goal – they change their structure by establishing new institutions or school types, or changing system responsibilities; they change their resources by adding more education staff to schools or by increasing system funding; and, they change their processes by modifying curriculum

and improving the way that teachers instruct and principals lead. The public debate often centers on structure and resource due to their stakeholder implications. However, we find that the vast majority of interventions made by the improving systems in our sample (over 70% of the examples) are ‘process’ in nature; and, within this area, improving systems generally spend more of their activity on improving how instruction is delivered than on changing the content of what is delivered.

Fourth, a system’s context does determine how something is done. Though each performance stage is associated with a common set of interventions, there is substantial variation in how a system implements these interventions with regard to their sequence, timing, and roll-out – there is little or no evidence of a “one-size-fits-all” approach to reform implementation. For example, our interviews with system leaders suggests that one of the most important implementation decisions is the emphasis a system places on mandating versus persuading stakeholders to comply with reforms; the systems we studied have adopted different combinations of mandating and persuading to implement the same set of interventions.

How To Think Of A Transformation Approach For A State, City Or District In India?

As mentioned in the beginning of this article, India’s public school systems face significant gaps in quality of education, as measured by third party assessments and also acknowledged by government and industry leaders. Further, even though enrolment levels are high, we face challenges with respect to retention of students, which is also partly related to quality.

Given this situation, we believe that the interventions used in “poor to fair” journeys are likely to be most relevant for us in the near term, with some states and cities potentially undergoing “fair to good” journeys soon.

Therefore, a cluster of five interventions are likely to be most relevant in the Indian context: low stakes, regular, third party based student assessment and “light touch” performance management (i.e. use of transparency, support and positive incentives); teacher support through standardized pedagogy toolkits and field-and-forum based training and coaching; developing headmasters into school leaders with the explicit role of managing student outcomes, field-and-forum based training and coaching, and gradual movement

to instructional leadership or coaching of teachers; selective use of technology, especially in administrative activities and teacher training; and systematic private participation with strong accountability.

These are broad interventions that, we believe, are likely to be most relevant for India as a whole. The specific transformation design for each state or city will of course vary based on the context. Further, as our global research also shows, there are important contextual considerations for how to start and implement such a transformation.

The rest of this section captures a few key design principles to keep in view while thinking of a school system transformation approach for your state, city or district.

A structured diagnostic, including a view of student learning: As is obvious from the learnings above, it is important to first get a clear view of what the school system's starting point is. This requires a structured fact-based qualitative diagnostic – that includes input and outcome parameters – through analyses, interviews, and observations. A third-party-based assessment of student learning outcomes is a critical part of such a diagnostic; this is particularly important given that we do not have any standardised national assessment of student competencies at different levels.

Well-prioritized basket of inter-linked interventions: Many of the education reform efforts in India have swung to one of two extremes – either trying to drive reform with just a single initiative or trying to do too many things. Instead, based on the diagnostic of the system, it is critical to identify the “minimum combination of inter-linked interventions” that will lead to improvement at scale, in a significant and sustained manner. For example, if headmasters are expected to play a significant managerial role in the school, their administrative workload may need to be reduced by using an MIS system. If teachers are being trained on a certain new pedagogy, headmasters may need enough understanding of this, to be supportive of it and motivate teachers to use it.

A minimum combination of scale, depth and sustainability in a reasonably short time frame: As suggested earlier, many interventions in India have fallen short on one of these three dimensions. For example, there are several high quality models (e.g. after-school centres, vocational programs for senior students, community involvement drives, even full schools, etc.) run by NGOs on

a small scale. The small scale of such initiatives, in addition to the sometimes higher costs and unique resources utilised by them, render them non-replicable in the broader system. On the other hand, there are a few large scale efforts (e.g. basic literacy drives, large scale remediation programs, etc.) run by both governments and NGOs that have achieved scale but with limited depth in terms of extent of change in learning outcomes or quality. Finally, many non-government initiatives have struggled to integrate into the system and many government initiatives have faced the phenomenon of “stopping when the program ends” or “stopping when there is a government change”. The transformation design needs to take these three factors into account clearly: **Scale:** a big enough early pilot, X% of the system covered in 2-3 years and a time-bound plan to cover the rest; **Depth:** focus on early measurable changes in behaviours and practices even in the first year of a program, appropriate pedagogy and enough classroom support to ensure significant change in quality of student outcomes in at least select levels and themes in 3-4 years; **Sustainability:** use of a range of options; e.g. a partly autonomous “institution” for carrying the reform forward, strong frontline buy-in through a few quick wins and focus on capability-building, structured program management, active leveraging of donors and reputed external persons as catalysts and for accountability and building the reform into the system's on-going budget.

The district as the unit of reform, but with strong state alignment: From our experiences in India, we believe that the optimal “unit” of reform would be the district (or in the case of big cities, the city itself). This would mean that the transformation design - what interventions, sequence and roll-out plan, design of each intervention such as the detailed method for on-the-field coaching for teachers, and so on – is owned at the district level, with implementation driven tightly at the block and school level.

However, it is critical that the state government provides the mandate for and is strongly aligned with the transformation initiatives, and in fact, treats it as a “pilot” that can be customized and rolled out state-wide. For example, if the teachers in the pilot district are being trained in a certain manner, the SCERT of the state needs to recognize this alternative model as a strong experiment that it could possibly adopt across the state. This is particularly critical in the case of policy-related interventions (e.g. changes in recruiting norms) or initiatives with significant implementation

synergies (e.g. assessment of student learning is best done throughout the state at the same time).

Multi-pronged partnership approach: India has the great advantage of a rich fabric of civil society organizations and a strong and growing base of international donors and corporate philanthropy arms. However, very often, in our reform efforts, the roles of different possible entities are either unclear or not in line with their biggest strengths. For school system transformation in a state, district or city, a multi-pronged partnership with clearly defined roles would work most effectively. **The government** provides the mandate for the reform, key decisions, ownership and support from key officers, and over 90 per cent of the funding through its regular budgets. A set of potential **funding partners** bring “catalytic funding” – less than 10 per cent of the cost, but allowing the 90 per cent to be used effectively, especially in the early stages of a transformation – become part of a steering group for both support and

accountability, and provide inputs into the overall direction of the transformation. A set of potential **implementation partners or experts** bring expertise on specific themes, on-the-ground delivery of specific elements, and capability-building in the system on technical aspects. Finally, a potential **program management unit** ensures consistent program design, the use of best practices, strong program management, tracking of outcomes, system capability-building, and elements of long-term sustainability.

Improving the quality of student outcomes is a critical priority for school systems across India. Global school system transformations, especially those starting from situations similar to ours, show both the inspiring possibility of achieving this in a reasonably short time frame, and the need for a systematic and well-designed approach. With such focused efforts, we can be hopeful that Indian states and cities can move on from the current achievements of access and enrolment, to the next horizon of high quality education.

References

1. http://www.mckinsey.com/client-service/Social_Sector/our_practices/Education/Knowledge_Highlights/How%20School%20Systems%20Get%20Better.aspx
2. Examples of systems that have made this transition include: Chile (from 2001 onward), Minas Gerais in Brazil (2003 onward), Western Cape in South Africa (from 2003 onward)
3. Examples of systems that have made this transition include: Singapore (from 1988 to 1998), Hong Kong (from 1989 to 1999), Boston (from 2006 onward), Long Beach from 2005 onward

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