

Leading Innovation in Education



Leading innovation in education requires creating an environment that encourages creative thinking to solve education challenges and support continuous improvement. Teachers, principals, school counselors, advisors, administrative staff, NGO staff, government ministry officials, and all those in a position to guide actions that improve education and learning outcomes can be innovative leaders.



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What does it mean to lead change in schools and in education systems today?

This brief will explore the importance of leadership for innovation in schools and education systems and provide information to support the development of knowledge, mindsets, and skillsets for those seeking to transform schools, education programs or agencies, and education practice and policy. Although CE International's primary focus is on supporting those who work in pre-primary and primary school settings, many of those who are involved in the education of children at all ages and in various learning settings will find this information interesting and helpful to their own practice.

Today's educational institutions must address many complex issues. Education systems worldwide face challenges that will require dynamic, effective leadership teams, which can include administrators, teachers, and policymakers. These teams must understand change management and be prepared to implement best practices that will benefit children.

In addition, new and creative approaches to education design and delivery will be required in order to meet Goal #4 of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, focusing on access, equity, and quality in education.

While the importance of leadership in education settings has been discussed for many years, an understanding of how to lead innovation generally has not been taught within education leadership programs. Today, it is more important than ever that those in positions of leadership and influence, whether working in a school, an education agency, an international education-focused organization, or a ministry of education, must be able to identify and implement innovations to create better ways of teaching and learning and establish improved practices and policies.

What is innovation?

Innovation is ultimately about finding new and creative ways to solve challenges or problems, or adjusting something that already exists to make it better.

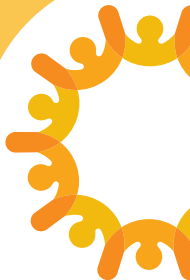
According to the OECD's *Innovation and Growth: Rationale for an Innovative Strategy*,¹ innovation in many sectors, including education, is required for nations to progress and address global challenges. Innovation primarily has been driven by new technologies, the ability to share ideas as a result of globalization, and the need to design education for 21st century learners. Innovation is playing a central role in education today and, "Education policymakers are paying increasing attention to innovation outcomes."

What are some important factors to consider when innovating in the field of education?


All innovations require change, usually in both mindset—*how we think*—and practice—*how we work*. In order to understand innovation, we must understand how change occurs in education. *The Effect of Changes and Innovation on Educational Improvement*² presents the following points that are important to understand when we consider leading change in schools:

- Change takes time.
- A school's capacity for change will vary.
- Change is complex.
- Change needs to be well led and managed.
- Teachers need to be the main agents of change.
- Students need to be the main focus of change.

Those who are leading and guiding the selection and implementation of innovations in education, whether in schools, in large education systems, or throughout an entire ministry of education, must understand the dynamics of change and become versed in approaches to change management.



What are the characteristics of a leader in education innovation?



In today's education climate, education systems need leaders and administrators who can embrace fresh solutions to education challenges and build dynamic and resilient programs. Such innovators often have skills related to entrepreneurship, creativity, ingenuity, and inventiveness.

*Innovative leaders are inventive, daring, resourceful, fearless, resilient, and inspiring, and these qualities help them identify current problems, prescribe improvements for the future, and mobilize stakeholders to collaborate in implementing innovations. They are visionary thinkers committed to increasing access to, equity within, and quality of education. They seek to create peaceful and just societies that place education at the center of human development and progress.*³

Leaders of innovation are also dedicated to creating and celebrating learning environments that prepare children for a changing world. To do so, these leaders help the teachers they guide to embrace change, take risks, and foster creativity in their classrooms. Effective school administrators anticipate and address potential obstacles while creating conditions that allow teachers to collaborate and thus flourish as education innovators. Parental engagement initiatives and community partnerships are also important approaches for such leaders,⁴ as they stimulate creative ideas about curriculum and learning experiences that reflect and support family and community cultures and traditions.

What does it take to lead innovation in education?

*What Makes a School a Learning Organisation?*⁵ points out that effective school leaders create conditions that support a culture of inquiry, exploration, experimentation, and collaboration, encouraging a school environment in which:

- Staff want and dare to experiment and innovate in their practice.
- The school supports and recognizes staff for taking initiative and risks.
- Staff engage in forms of inquiry to investigate and extend their practice.
- Inquiry is used to establish and maintain a rhythm of learning, change, and innovation.
- Staff have open minds about doing things differently.
- Problems and mistakes are seen as opportunities for learning.
- Students are actively engaged in inquiry.

By creating a culture of innovation, leaders inspire others to think differently and share ideas to find impactful solutions to the challenges of today and the future.

How can leadership for innovation in education impact SDG-4?

To meet the challenge of providing an inclusive and equitable education for all, we must confront the global learning crisis by growing more leaders worldwide who will take the initiative to accelerate change. Today, over 260 million children and youth are out of school, and more than half of children globally are not acquiring basic math and literacy proficiency. If we are to meet the 2030 Agenda⁶ goals of ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all, the global education community will need administrators and teacher leaders prepared to think and act differently while inspiring others.

In September 2016, the International Commission on Financing Global Education Opportunity released *The Learning Generation* report.⁷ The report's action plan calls for getting all people into school and learning within a generation in order to eradicate extreme poverty, improve health outcomes, increase life expectancies, and reap many other benefits.

Four education transformations and recommendations were listed in this report for national and international leaders to enact: performance, innovation, inclusion, and finance. Regarding innovation, the report noted, "Successful education systems must develop new and creative approaches to achieving results in order to meet the education challenges ahead."

Recommendations included strengthening and diversifying the education workforce, harnessing technology for teaching and learning, and improving partnerships with non-state actors.

What are some challenges to fostering leadership for innovation in education ?

Many education systems worldwide were designed for eras gone by and have not evolved to address the challenges facing communities today. These challenges include barriers to accessing high-quality education programs and qualified teachers, limited access to technology, gender inequality, and budgetary constraints. While a significant amount of attention has been placed by policymakers on national curriculums, standardized testing, and top-down policy approaches, these changes take time to implement and are often ineffective.

As many school systems are facing severe budget and resource constraints, teacher shortages, and changing student needs, it is necessary to find new ways of bringing change and innovating at local and school levels and to think more creatively and more collaboratively about solving education challenges.



Why is leadership in innovative education important?

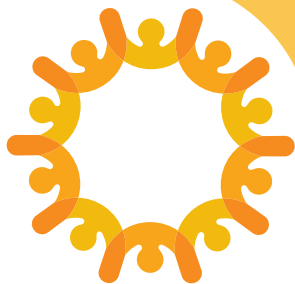
Our education systems must provide access to quality and equitable educational opportunities so all students can reach their full potential. We know that many children do not have such access to stimulating learning environments and we must think innovatively to find solutions to problems that impact children's development and their joy of learning, as that ultimately has implications for a nation's human capital and the global economy.

Also, increasingly urgent issues, such as environmental threats, economic crises, and the recent global pandemic, have highlighted the need for education systems to be flexible and resilient in times of stress to ensure there is no loss in learning for children. With an innovative approach, schools can adjust and adapt to new needs quickly. Innovation lays the foundation for responding to changing circumstances during crises.

In *World Class: How to Build a 21st-Century School System, Strong Performers and Successful Reformers in Education*,⁸ OECD's Andreas Schleicher detailed what needs to be done to encourage more innovation in education systems:

To mobilise support for more innovative schools, education systems need to become better at communicating the need and building support for change. Investing in capacity development and change-management skills will be critical; and it is vital that teachers become active agents for change, not just in implementing technological innovations, but in designing them too.

Education systems need to better identify key agents of change and champion them; and they need to find more effective ways of scaling and disseminating innovations. That is also about finding better ways to recognise, reward and celebrate success, to do whatever is possible to make it easier for innovators to take risks and encourage the emergence of new ideas. One of the most devastating findings from our first survey of teachers (TALIS) was that three in four teachers in the industrialised world consider their workplace an environment that is essentially hostile to innovation. Nothing will change if we don't change that perception.



What are some approaches to developing leadership for innovation?

Education leaders need to be students of innovative methodologies. Human-centered design, a component of design thinking, is one approach to innovation in schools. *Thinking and Acting Like a Designer: How Design Thinking Supports Innovation in K-12 Education*⁹ explains:

Taken together, how designers think and act make for design thinking, a human-centered approach to creative thinking and problem solving. Thinking and acting as a designer and, in turn, employing design thinking are powerful ways to encourage people to become change-makers in education.

The document lists three levels at which design thinking can improve education:

1. Design thinking is used to fundamentally reimagine school models and systems.
2. Design thinking supports change in school culture by transforming how educators work together.
3. Design thinking supports student development of 21st-century skills.

Design thinking is gaining traction worldwide and can be used in just about any scenario, from local schools to local education agencies to Ministries of Education and other education policy entities.

Another WISE research publication, *Developing Agile Leaders of Learning: School Leadership Policy for Dynamic Times*,¹⁰ proposes strategies for developing innovative and agile learning leaders, including teacher leaders, who can respond and adapt to challenges within a distributed model. Jurisdictions should identify who should be the target of leadership development efforts and what capabilities need to be developed.

To coordinate leadership development across a jurisdiction, government leaders, in deep partnership with the profession, need to make explicit what leaders need to be able to know, do and be in order to have an impact on teaching and learning.

Some elements of any framework will be jurisdiction, or place-specific, but common themes in research indicate that two capabilities are vital for agile leadership for learning across contexts.

The first critical capability of a school leader is to develop others' capabilities and the second is to manage complex change. The report notes, "[T]he ability to lead disciplined collaborative inquiry is becoming a key ability in order to steer the collection of, and response to, evidence of impact throughout a change process." Leadership development needs to be embedded, personal, and continuous. Policymaking institutions should serve as facilitators:

Government bodies cannot hope to provide the quality, range and scale of capacity-building activities that are needed to shift leadership for learning across a jurisdiction. Instead, governments must act to help other actors to co-ordinate their activities; help leaders and aspiring leaders to connect with opportunities; and align the system in ways that enable and motivate effective leadership at all levels.

Taking a strategic approach to leadership development is critically important, and design thinking is one strategic tool that education leaders can use as they seek to bring innovation to their programs.

Moving Forward

In conclusion, we need innovative education leaders at all levels around the world in order to address our current learning crisis and meet the goals outlined in SDG 4. We also must quickly change and upgrade our education systems in order to support children's growth and development, develop the human capacity and capital of communities and nations, and help all people develop to their full potential.

Below are a few examples of organizations leading education innovation efforts that may help you as you consider your next steps in leading innovation.

HundrED - This organization recognizes and curates a variety of education innovations around the world.
<https://hundred.org>

Innovation Edge - This innovation catalyst and social impact investor takes a hands-on approach to supporting unconventional ideas that aim to transform early life experiences for children, age 0 to 6, living in poverty. <https://innovationedge.org.za/>

Results for Development's Center for Education Innovations - The Center for Education Innovations is R4D's education flagship initiative, which identifies, analyzes, and connects innovative education programs and approaches around the world. www.educationinnovations.org/

Childhood Education International – *Childhood Education Innovations* magazine
<https://ceinternational1892.org/childhood-education-innovations/>

Notes:

¹ OECD. (2007). *Innovation and growth: Rationale for an innovation strategy*. www.oecd.org/sti/39374789.pdf

² Shen, Y. (2008). The effect of changes and innovation on educational improvement. *International Education Studies*, 1(3), 73-77. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1065412.pdf>

³ Childhood Education International. (2021). *Profile of an innovative education leader*. <https://ceinternational1892.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/ProfileInnovativeLeader.pdf>

⁴ Childhood Education International. (2021). *Habits of an innovative leader*. <https://ceinternational1892.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/HabitsOfAnInnovativeLeader.pdf>

⁵ OECD. (2016). *What makes a school a learning organisation? A guide for policy makers, school leaders and teachers*. www.oecd.org/education/school/school-learning-organisation.pdf

⁶ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. (2015). *Transforming our world: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. <https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>

⁷ The International Commission on Financing Global Education Opportunity. (n.d.). *The Learning Generation: Investing in education for a changing world*. <https://report.educationcommission.org/report/>

⁸ Schleicher, A. (2018). *World class: How to build a 21st-century school system*. <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264300002-en>

⁹ Diefenthaler, A., et al. (2017). *Thinking & acting like a designer: How design thinking supports innovation in K-12 education*. <https://www.wise-qatar.org/2017-wise-research-design-thinking/>

¹⁰ Breakspear, S., et al. (2017). *Developing agile leaders of learning: School leadership policy for dynamic times*. <https://www.wise-qatar.org/2017-wise-research-school-leadership-policies/>



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