Five Big Steps to Sustainable Change

Establishing Partnerships with Ministries of Education

A Whitepaper
by Dr Mark Stout, Andrew Tidswell, & Lisa Katz
As nations work to improve their education systems to better prepare students for an increasingly complex and competitive world, they face many operational and programmatic challenges. Nations must grapple with fundamental issues such as identifying funding sources, providing safe, clean facilities, building educator capacity, and providing adequate instructional resources. Many nations know they must improve their curriculum and instructional programs in order to provide an innovative, forward-thinking education that prepares students with the knowledge and skills needed to thrive in a global economy. Yet, the breadth of challenges can be so daunting that visions of systemic change too often go unrealized. Without coordinated support, the myriad of organizations involved in these efforts - non-profits, international agencies, inter- and intra- government collaborations, and ministries of education - oftentimes face bureaucratic challenges that exacerbate the factors that impede change.

Jaime Saavedra, Global Director of the Education Global Practice at the World Bank Group and former Minister of Education of Peru, contends that there are several critical factors to successful education reform: well-designed policies and programs; quality and commitment of the workforce; and a common vision for education reform amongst all stakeholder groups, including policy makers, executives, unions, businesses, teachers, and parents (Saavedra, 2017). Similarly, Andreas Schleicher posits that large-scale education improvements require broad support from policy makers, capacity development, proper governance, use of performance data, continuous improvement loops, and comprehensive approaches to reform (Schleicher, 2018).

At Discovery Education, we have found that sustainable change occurs when the right combination of partners collaborate in the right sequence. Our “Big Five” Steps can be entered at any point in a process, but the overall effort is most effective when a Ministry is considering large scale change.

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- Theme Statement, Education World Forum, 2020

The Challenge of Sustainable Change

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1. Determining the Right Plans to Create Sustainable Change

Ministries of Education are incredibly complex multi-layered public institutions with many different stakeholders demanding accountability. Even when a comprehensive plan is developed to create sustainable improvements, and every last stakeholder has had their say, it can still be a challenge to predict whether or not a reform effort (even if that is the correct term) will actually deliver on the promises established by the new initiatives. This is where a third-party, independent set of experienced and practical eyes can help. Partnerships with private companies that are experts in practical curriculum and instructional program design can more effectively lead to the delivery of sustainable professional learning programs for educators.

Discovery Education specializes in this type of partnership. As a global leader in standards-based digital content for K-12 classrooms, Discovery Education works with partners to transform teaching and learning with award-winning digital textbooks, multimedia content, professional development, assessment tools, and the largest professional learning community in the world. The company is built upon the premise that access to dynamic learning experiences should not be dependent on a student’s location and is committed to partnering with ministries of education, school organizations, and other like-minded corporations to captivate students, empower teachers, and transform classrooms with customized solutions that accelerate academic achievement. Serving more than 5 million educators and 51 million students, Discovery Education services are available in approximately half of U.S. classrooms and primary schools in the U.K., and more than 90 countries around the globe.

The Discovery Education team is collaborative and mission-driven, continuously looking for innovative ways to enhance our services and expand our positive impact on the education universe. As a partner in a global landscape, we offer a unique combination of being a recognized industry leader with global reach along with the excitement of operating as an entrepreneurial start-up focused on innovation and growth. The Discovery Education team includes experts in curriculum design, standards development, change management within large and small school systems, and national policy experience. When paired with a Ministry or education system that has a framework for reform, the Discovery Education team can help transform plans into real actions for sustainable change.
2. Building Together

As mentioned earlier, successful components of systemic reform efforts include essential elements, the first of which is to set the direction through a long-term vision for student learning that is well-articulated and research-based (Schleicher, 2018). But how does a Ministry official know if a plan for systemic reform will create sustainable change?

Discovery Education staff approach new partnerships by beginning with a thorough needs assessment and analysis to ultimately inform a plan of action for sustainable change. Discovery Education staff first seek to understand the vision of the Ministry and the challenges impeding education reform efforts. Questions to consider may include the following:

- What are the goals of the national education initiative?
- How well aligned are these goals to those of the government?
- What are the time constraints for establishing change that will last?
- What is the level of expertise among teaching staff and administrators?
- What kind of support is there among the teaching staff and community for change?

A thorough analysis of the state of the educational system allows the partnership to identify the gaps between current programming and the future vision. Discovery Education uses rubrics specifically created by curriculum content and design experts to analyze the state of curriculum in comparison to international benchmarks. This analysis begins with a thorough document review of existing standards and curricular resources, allowing all parties to establish a baseline of educational expectations. Another critical part of the analysis is data gathered from surveys, focus groups, and site visits with school staff, parents, and students.

In a recent analysis process with a partner nation, for example, Discovery Education found strong support among parents, students, and teaching staff to improve the educational system; frustration with the national testing program; and a lack of consistent professional learning opportunities for teachers. These findings helped catalyze the need for change by including multiple stakeholder’s voices.

This kind of exhaustive analysis is not limited to initial conversations. Working closely together is key to moving from frameworks and theories of change to practical solutions for teachers in classrooms. For example, when building curricular resources, localization requires close collaboration amongst partners. This localization process involves more than simply translating existing material into the native language of the country. Imagery in texts may need to be adapted to local standards and cultural norms. Images that may seem innocuous to some cultures could be considered offensive to others. In addition, efforts should be made to include references that are familiar to students. If landforms are being studied in an earth science program, then using local examples will allow students to see their familiar surroundings as important and worthy of study. In mathematics, there may be different forms of notation, currency, and forms of measurement. The application of mathematics in situations like local or global economics (trade, bartering, etc.) requires a closer look at customs and norms of the region. Social studies, language arts, and the fine arts can present particular challenges related to cultural familiarity, norms and values around the world. Establishing a process for content development that focuses on collaborative localization is another way Discovery Education works to build change together.

A valued partner with practical experience in creating sustainable change provides a Ministry a trusted backstop before implementing costly, potentially unproven, plans.
Alongside the program development work, Discovery Education staff establish positive relationships with stakeholders to engage in collaborative decision-making and ensure that all parties feel their voices are heard and ideas valued. Schlesinger notes that building consensus and engaging teachers in the design process are both essential elements to the success of reform efforts. (Schlesinger, 2018). Discovery Education works with Ministry staff to develop a shared understanding of the vision for change. This involves cultivating relationships with stakeholder groups through classroom visits, examination of student artifacts, participation in curriculum and cultural awareness workshops, and common bonding experiences such as celebrations, dinners, and cultural events. Care is taken to understand cultural norms such as the time allotted for personal and spiritual activity (lunch, coffee, prayer), communication patterns, and decision-making processes. Interpreters and facilitators who understand the language of education are engaged in order to avoid misunderstandings. Regular face-to-face contact between Ministry staff and Discovery Education partners becomes a mainstay of the relationship.

Ministry staff, educators, parents and community members are not the only stakeholders who require regular and effective communication. Often other groups such as local or national non-profits, NGOs or corporate funders are part of the ecosystem. Just as education ministries are complex and involve different layers of accountability and investment, the overall landscape of education reform needs to be considered. For example, in one recent project, Discovery Education set up a series of meetings with various international NGOs and local professional learning groups to ensure consistency of messaging. With this same project, Discovery Education invited participants from other groups (UNICEF, USAID, World Bank) to attend teacher training and other professional learning sessions. Investing in these relationships has led to increased awareness for all parties involved, which ultimately benefits the Ministry in navigating complex reform efforts.

During instructional and curricular reform efforts, some issues can be complex to solve; and Discovery Education works with partners to develop solutions that address the root of the problems, rather than quick fixes workarounds that provide short-lived wins at best. For example, if teachers suffer from low pay and poor morale and they have low expectations for students, a comprehensive solution may be needed, such as the development of a professional growth program that culminates in a certification, financial incentives, and more rigorous standards supported by adequate resources and training that ultimately shift the culture and the teachers’ beliefs about student capacity.

3. Investing in Multiple Relationships
4. Preparing Educators for Success

One of the greatest challenges for any reform effort is insufficient resources and capacity (Schlesinger, 2018). Professional Development or Professional Learning, designed to transform practice, is a fundamental part of the education change process. Effective professional development for educators and administrators in schools requires high quality support programs, aimed directly at inspiring educators to make changes by giving them the skills to implement and embed new approaches into their classrooms and schools.

Professional development experts Darling-Hammond, et al., identified seven research-based best practices in professional development that result in changing both teacher practice and student outcomes. Effective professional development

• focuses on content,
• incorporates active learning,
• supports collaboration,
• uses models of effective practice,
• provides coaching and expert support,
• offers feedback and reflection, and
• is of sustained duration.
(Darling-Hammond, et al., 2017)

Discovery Education’s professional development programs are steeped in these best practices. In collaboration with several industries of Education, Discovery Education has developed a number of scalable professional development programs which effectively combine the international expertise and overview of a private sector organization, with the vision and local knowledge of the individual ministries. This has included creating adaptable, ongoing programs where tens of thousands of teachers across a whole nation are provided with locally-focused professional development designed to realize the Ministry’s vision. In this model, regular face-to-face professional development sessions are combined with the mentoring and coaching of teachers, underpinned by online communication and support. These programs are delivered by local experts who are trained and developed by Discovery Education specialists to gain a deep, research driven understanding of the pedagogies and practices that support the Ministry’s vision. This approach empowers the local experts to provide sustainable support in their home language, with true cultural understanding, but connected to a global perspective and program goals. In one partnership, every teacher who is implementing the new national curriculum has engaged in professional learning experiences designed to give them the confidence, skills, and knowledge to implement a whole new approach.

Other examples include nations where teachers have been supported to pilot new digital learning experiences, including using digital Techbooks® mapped to local curriculum standards, or to teach coding to primary age students as part of a new digital skills curriculum. These programs also make use of the combined efforts of the local Ministry of Education, Discovery Education, and local professional development specialists.
5. Engaging the Community

Stakeholders in addition to classroom teachers are fundamental to the success of any change program. The private sector can deliver rich and effective support in assisting ministries to ensure that parents, students, politicians, and the general public are able to understand and share their vision. Discovery Education has broad experiences in creating and organizing thought leadership events which help to articulate these changes and create opportunities for authentic, ‘hands on’ experiences. This includes immersive events for education officials or parents and families such as conferences, STEM clubs, camps and family nights. One recent example was the development of a National Coding Competition designed to engage over 17,000 students to learn how to code and create their own apps. This culminated in a face-to-face final event, where students collaborated with one another to design code and build a prototype device to run the finished apps. This supported the Ministry’s vision of creating a generation of collaborative entrepreneurs equipped to contribute to economic growth and progress in their nation over the next 30 years. The competition itself helped to communicate this to parents and the wider community, authentically showing the true value of this vision and the impact it has on current students.

Conclusion

Nelson Mandela once stated: “Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.” It is indeed a powerful vehicle to provide for a productive, well-informed citizenry and a sustainable future. Public-private partnerships can help education ministries plan for large-scale educational reforms and implement them with fidelity. Education ministries can find the support they need to realize their visions of reform through the expertise and resources of private partners that specialize in these efforts. Therefore, it is critical to open conversations around such endeavors, as the deep, lasting reform of educational systems is best achieved through such collective global efforts.

The OECD Global Competency Framework (2018) quotes Veronica Boix Mansilla from Harvard University as she reflects on the future of education around the world: “it’s about the habitual orientation toward connecting the local and the global.” If the role of government is to build and sustain a safe and economically-viable country with global citizens equipped with the skills and understanding to contribute to the development of society on a whole and their own community in particular, then education lies at the heart of this role. Progressive governments and their education ministries hold this vision. The bold and the brave ones also acknowledge that the best way to effect the changes they need is to adopt a partnership model. Discovery Education is well positioned to connect ministries to the expertise, content, professional development and thought leadership they need to realize their national visions by connecting the local and the global.
 Works Cited


