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# European ideas for better learning:

## The governance of school education systems

Produced by the ET 2020 Working Group Schools

**EUROPEAN COMMISSION**

Directorate-General Education, Youth, Sport and Culture  
Schools and multilingualism

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## 1. Introduction



On behalf of the European Commission, I am delighted to present this new report on the governance of school education in Europe.

Schools face a range of changing educational demands - from learners, society and the labour market. To help them in their response, EU education ministers recently concluded that there is a need for contemporary approaches to teaching and learning and to the governance of school education systems.

The European Commission is committed to continuing support to EU Member States in raising the quality of schooling for all learners. In our 2017 'Communication on school development and excellent teaching' we outlined how EU support can contribute to better and more inclusive schools; to enhanced support to teachers and school leaders; and to education systems that are more effective, equitable and efficient overall.

This report by the *ET2020 Working Group on Schools* is a prime example of the potential for working together across Europe to identify solutions to shared challenges. It affirms the importance of peer learning between European countries and stakeholder organisations, as practised under *Education and Training 2020*. Representatives of education ministries and stakeholder organisations state that this is a key way of supporting and inspiring policy development. The principles and messages in this report seek to be relevant to and adaptable by all education systems whilst recognising that each of them are different and complex. More broadly, this report sets out a vision for school education systems that can help define shared values, cooperation and mobility within a European Education Area.

I invite all policy makers, education specialists, and educators to be inspired by its many examples and ideas.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Themis Christophidou'.

Themis CHRISTOPHIDOU  
*Director-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture*

## 2. A vision for European school education systems

The ET2020 Working Group Schools (2016-18) was given the mandate to develop ideas and share policy-making practices concerning the governance of school education systems to promote equity and excellence with a focus on supporting school and teacher development.

Policy-making in education should aim to create the conditions for multiple stakeholders to jointly initiate development and improvement, and for balancing school- and system-led change. Experiences from across Europe confirm that this will make it more likely that policies have a sustainable impact.

Whilst focusing on policy-making processes, the Working Group emphasises that action at any level should be taken with the ultimate goal of improving the learning process and learning outcomes of **all young people**.

### 2.1 Key challenges

The work responds to a number of challenges in key areas of school education governance:

**Quality assurance for school development:** Balancing autonomy and accountability is a significant and ongoing challenge for education systems that strive for improvement across many areas. Policy makers recognise an urgent need to improve the interplay between quality assurance mechanisms that are external and internal to schools, to a) allow schools to adapt to the changing needs of learners and b) ensure proper feedback and flow of information that enables evidence-informed action across the system.

**Continuity and transitions in learner development:** Learner pathways can become fragmented in a number of ways, risking underachievement and possible dropout from school. Policies need to a) ensure that learner pathways are sufficiently flexible, and b) create the conditions that provide appropriate guidance and support to all learners and supporting stakeholders.

**Teachers and school leaders in schools as learning organisations:** Teachers have a crucial role in supporting learner development and are key change agents in school development. However, they are under significant pressure from many different areas of the education system. There is a need for policies that a) promote teacher collaboration, autonomy, and distributed leadership within professional learning communities, and b) motivate and engage of all actors to make change happen.

**Networks for learning and development across school education systems:** Effective relationships and communication help an education system achieve its objectives. Maintaining positive interaction amongst many different stakeholders is a challenge but networking offers a great potential for this. A deeper understanding of the purpose and nature of networks for innovation and implementation is crucial for the positive and sustainable impact of any action.

## 2.2 Creating the conditions for change

The Working Group explored each of these four key areas of governance in depth and set out guiding principles for policy development, based on recent research and experiences from national contexts. These principles are further illustrated with specific examples from countries, which members of the Working Group shared in order to critically reflect on how different approaches have been put into practice, and with what results. This peer learning process has enabled the policy messages to be relevant and adaptable to all national contexts, whilst recognising the diversity and high complexity of education systems across Europe.

Education systems are complex and operate at national, regional and local levels (vertical interaction). Within them, schools both function as distinct organisations and connect to each other or other types of organisation (horizontal interaction). Each education system can be characterised by its specific composition: by the policy instruments and measures used, and by the distribution of power and interaction of actors across different levels.

Increasingly, national governments are shifting greater control to the local level while maintaining responsibility for the quality – referring to the effectiveness, efficiency and equity – of the overall system. National policy mechanisms may include different types of support. They use direct interventions, such as regulations, or indirect interventions, such as frameworks that may be adapted to local conditions.

Interaction across different levels of governance supports peer learning and development in education. It is important that policies support equity and inclusion but also allow flexibility to meet the diverse needs of learners in schools both within and outside of mainstream education. Policy-making needs to involve all relevant stakeholders in order to achieve this and create shared ownership and accountability. Equally, in order for systems to evolve effectively - and to support schools in their development – they need high quality feedback loops and a flow of information to support evidence-informed action. Both are crucial for the motivation and engagement of all actors in order to encourage change to happen.

### An approach to school education governance

Through the guiding principles for policy development and recent case study examples, which were developed under four themes (see Section 4 and the four thematic reports), the Working Group describe a broad approach to governance that school education systems should strive for. This is expressed in the following points that policy makers are invited to consider.

- ◆ A **clear vision for quality** in education with **shared values** concerning school, teacher and learner development;
- ◆ A learner-centred approach to decision-making in order to create **meaningful learning experiences** and **environments** that contribute to the development of the whole child;
- ◆ **Collaborative** decision-making processes, involving the trust and supported dialogue of a range of stakeholders at all levels of the system, and fostering a **sense of ownership, responsibility and accountability**;
- ◆ Developing schools as **learning organisations** that support effective decision-making and become contexts for a process of inquiry and **continuous development** at local level;
- ◆ Policies that support highly **competent and trusted professional communities**, recognising teachers and school leaders as key change agents, promoting shared leadership, collaboration and innovation, and investing in capacity-building that will motivate their continued development to ensure high **quality teaching and learning**;
- ◆ Generating and using different **types of data** in different parts of the system, which can help to better identify strengths and areas for improvements;
- ◆ Making **well-timed** policies, meaning that they directly respond to evolving needs across the system, with focused implementation processes of an adequate duration, and a coherence with other current policies, for sustained and renewed change.

### 3. Learning organisations within learning systems

Improving the experiences and outcomes of all learners should be the central pursuit of school education policies. Therefore, it is prudent to examine what is needed at school level and, at the same time, the conditions that can be created at policy level.

Understanding **school education as a learning system** directly responds to the challenges of complexity and improvement as it is based on collaboration and communication between horizontal and vertical connections. Horizontal connections may be between regions, between schools, or between a school and the wider community. They may be based on formal or more informal arrangements. Vertical connections are often hierarchical, such as between a school and the inspectorate. There are degrees of authority in these relationships, the level of which can influence how the work is initiated and carried out.

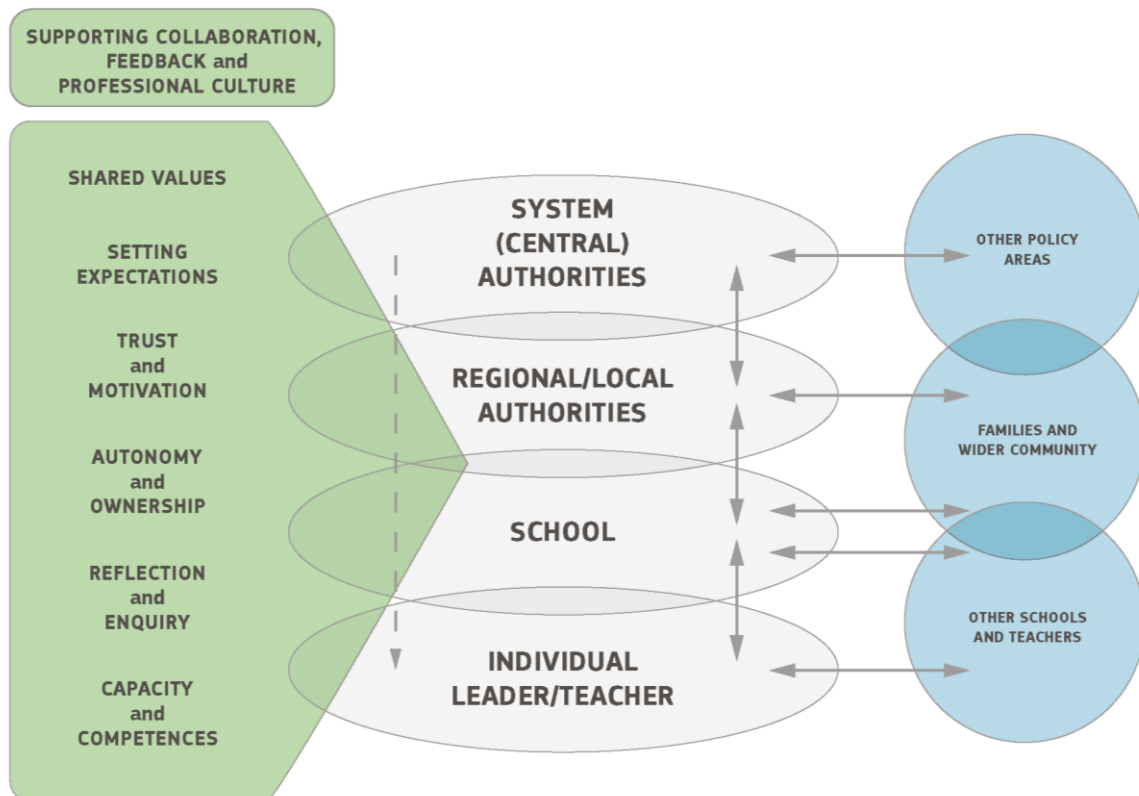


Figure 1: Vertical and horizontal relationships within school education systems with an approach to governance

Strengthening and exploiting these connections helps to organise collective intelligence in order to understand and act upon what is - and what needs to be - happening in different parts of the system. Networks and feedback loops are particularly important mechanisms for this. A learning system promotes a long-term step-by-step approach to school education development, with



piloting, reflection and feedback, in order to ensure the sustainability and legacy of education policies. Across Europe, the role of central government is increasingly focused on supporting and enabling change at local level, rather than prescribing it.

Within this system are **schools as learning organisations**.

These encourage and enable teachers and school leaders to improve both their pedagogical and their organisational practices concurrently through local collaborative research, networking and continued professional development. Developing the capacity and role of teachers and school leaders is essential for schools to provide a clear strategic vision and leadership that guides and fully supports teaching and learning, and which enables effective communication with other practitioners and stakeholders.

Such schools do not exist in isolation; they are linked and embedded within a learning system where decision-makers can learn from the developments that are taking place in and around schools.

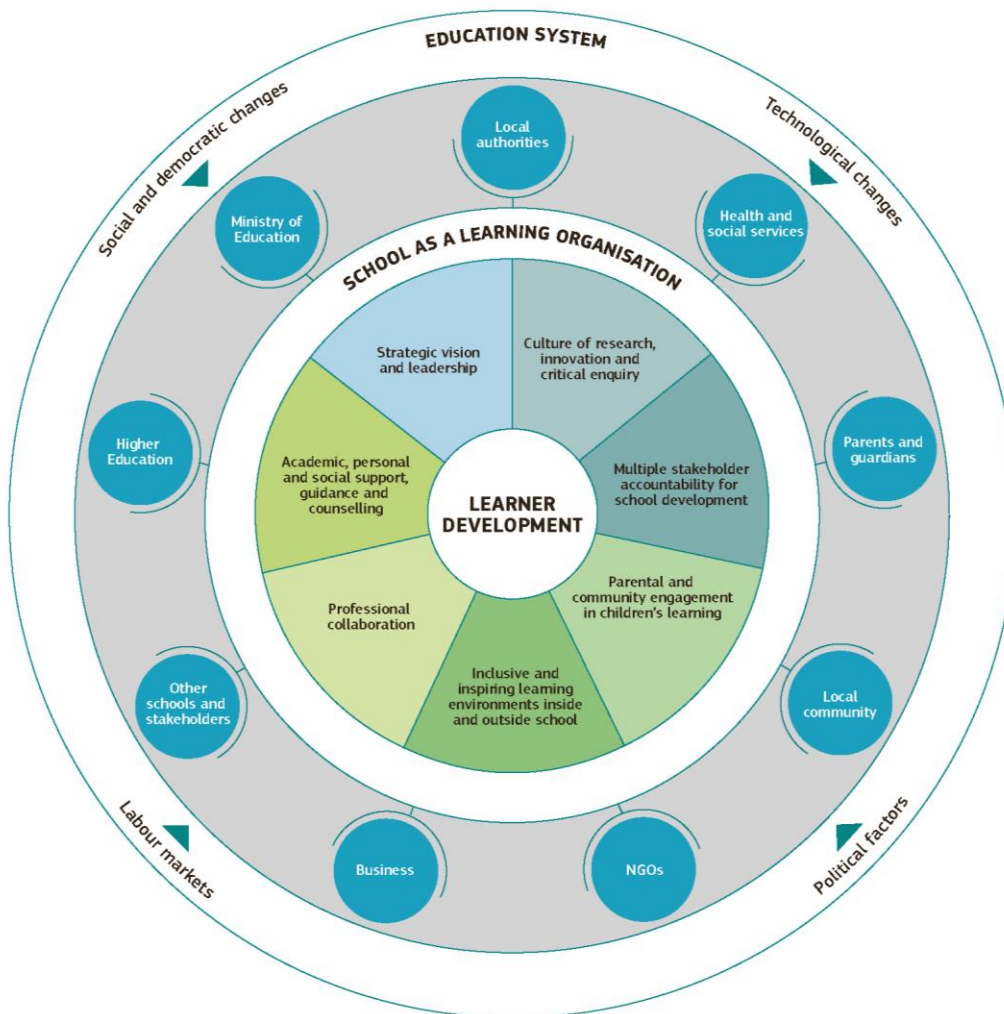


Figure 2: The different elements of schools as learning organisations. This was developed in several contexts: the thematic work on Teachers and School leaders using a similar OECD/UNICEF (2016)

model; the Study on Supporting school innovation across Europe (European Commission 2018); and Working Group discussions on the aims and activity of education systems.

### 3.1 Policy action within school education as a learning system

In the context of school education as a learning system, policy action takes a critically reflective approach. This section describes the main features of that process and how key elements can be examined in response to a number of key questions.

It is important to first define a **vision and values** for school education.

➤ **Key question(s)**

- i. What are the strategic goals of a new or revised policy action and how does this action contribute to an overall national approach to raising the quality of learning experiences and outcomes?

A process then begins as a cycle of investigating what is happening within the system and making decisions based on that evidence. This cycle is dependent on the stakeholders within the system and their capacity to act, their creativity, the collaboration between them, their confidence, and the coherence of the action with other initiatives.

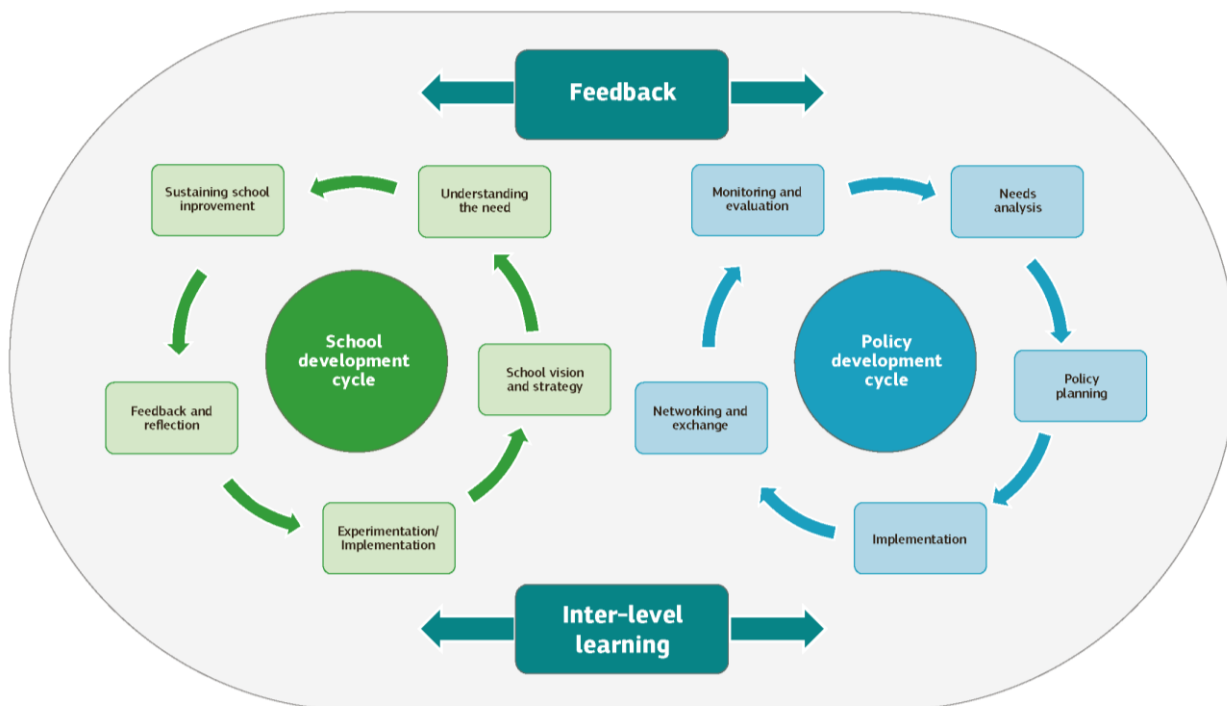


Figure 3: The twin cycles (processes) of development at school and system level, developed from the Study on Supporting school innovation across Europe (European Commission 2018)

Taking effective action in school education requires considering three key elements of the system: the **structure, mechanisms and actors** (stakeholders).

## Structure

Any system should consider its structure, such as **horizontal and vertical links** between teachers, school leaders, authorities, and other actors, and the **flow of information**.

### ➤ Key question(s)

- ii. Who is responsible for each action at national, regional and local levels? How do the actions relate to each other?
- iii. How will consistency across regions and schools be supported?
- iv. How do the different actions contribute to improving learning outcomes?

## Mechanisms

Specific mechanisms – meaning the **tools and processes** that work on both school organisation and pedagogical practice – should be versatile and carefully selected to operate in specific or a range of different contexts. They should take into account the impact on the system structure (see above) and the **work and relationships** of the system actors.

### ➤ Key question(s)

- v. Which mechanisms are the most appropriate to develop this area of education?
- vi. What types of incentives are used to encourage change?
- vii. How will different mechanisms relate to each other to generate synergies and to prevent inconsistency of objectives?
- viii. How do the different mechanisms reinforce the concept of continual learning and development (by teachers, schools)?

## Actors

It is important for policy makers to consider how to build trust between stakeholders and a positive attitude towards school development, in order to encourage a more **participatory culture**. Particular attention may need to be given to 'mediating' actors who are leading, facilitating, or linking in the middle within the system; for example between school staff and local authorities.

### ➤ Key question(s)

- ix. Which stakeholders should be (more) actively involved in reviewing existing, or developing new, action?
- x. What competences are needed for actors to effectively and efficiently a) implement change and b) achieve feedback and evaluate results?

## 4. Four thematic areas of policy development

Responding to the key challenges in four areas of school education (see 2.1), the Working Group undertook an in-depth consideration of system structures, mechanisms and actors (see 3.1).

A teal oval containing the white letters 'QA'.

**Quality assurance for school development:** policy approaches to improve the interplay between quality assurance mechanisms that are external and internal to schools.

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**Continuity and transitions in learner development:** policy approaches to ensure learner pathways are sufficiently flexible to create the conditions to provide appropriate guidance and support to all learners.

A teal oval containing the white letters 'TSL'.

**Teachers and school leaders in schools as learning organisations:** policy approaches that promote teacher collaboration, autonomy, and distributed leadership within professional learning communities.

A teal oval containing the white letter 'N'.

**Networks for learning and development across school education systems:** a deeper understanding of the purpose and nature of networks for innovation and implementation, and the participation of stakeholders at different levels of the system.

### How to read the thematic reports

Each report sets out guiding principles for policy development within a context of recent research in a specific area of governance of school education. These principles are further illustrated with examples from countries, as shared and discussed by representatives of European ministries and stakeholder organisations - the members of the Working Group. The content comes from a series of meetings held in Brussels, literature reviews, research (member self-reporting), and Peer Learning Activities (longer meetings supporting members in collaborative critical review of their systems).

The reports are primarily designed for those making and shaping policies with an impact in and on education systems. They take a broad perspective on the governance of school education systems, taking into account not only structures, but also relationships, capacity, culture and accountability at multiple levels. Country examples are presented not only as success stories but also as part of ongoing development. They are offered as both illustration and inspiration.



## Quality assurance

There is a need for greater coherence and synergy in quality assurance – that is, the effective interplay between internal and external mechanisms (tools, processes and actors) of quality assurance – in order to ensure that they best serve school development and innovation and allow schools to adapt to the changing needs of learners.

External mechanisms may include national or regional school evaluations and/or large-scale learner assessment. Internal mechanisms may include school self-evaluation, staff appraisal and classroom-based learner assessment. These mechanisms have different but complementary purposes. Ideally, they are part of a coherent, integrated approach in which the different mechanisms support and reinforce each other. They will provide data on aspects such as school climate; the well-being and professional development of all members of the school community; effective teaching and learning; and the impact of innovations. Quality assurance is also important for accountability; and well-functioning education systems have mechanisms to support and balance vertical and horizontal, internal and external accountability.

Conditions for effective quality assurance for school development include ensuring ownership of the process through meaningful dialogue and actions, and supporting opportunities for 'out of the box' thinking and creativity. The challenge for school education systems is to develop and sustain professional learning communities and cultures to support school development, with an emphasis on improvement more than quality 'control'. Whilst the focus is on the governance of school education systems, the ultimate aim of quality assurance is to ensure that learners have the best learning opportunities possible.

### Guiding principles

1. **COHERENCE:** Systems should strive over time to achieve balance and coherence across different mechanisms that have been developed to meet the demands and expectations of stakeholders working within schools and in the wider school education system.
2. **PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES:** Quality assurance policies should support professional learning communities to make best use of quality assurance data for school and system development with the ultimate goal of ensuring the best learning opportunities for all learners.
3. **TRUST AND SHARED ACCOUNTABILITY:** Trust and respect between and among internal and external actors are fundamental for effective evaluation and school development.

4. **SUPPORT INNOVATION:** Schools leaders and teachers need opportunities to take considered risks in order to innovate and develop. Careful attention to data on the impact of innovations, including potential unintended outcomes, is essential.
5. **SHARED UNDERSTANDING AND DIALOGUE:** Quality assurance approaches should support the development of a common language and shared understanding among internal and external actors that the fundamental purpose of evaluation is to support school development.
6. **NETWORKS:** Networks between schools and with local and wider communities can support collective engagement, build social and intellectual capital and spark new synergies across school systems.
7. **BUILDING CAPACITY FOR DATA:** Investments in building capacity of key actors to generate, interpret and use data, are crucial.
8. **DIFFERENT DATA FOR BALANCED VIEW:** Different types of data - both quantitative and qualitative, and gathered over time - are necessary for a balanced understanding of school development and learner progress. These data should communicate authentic narratives of schools and provide the information necessary to support decision-making both within schools and across school systems.





## Continuity and transitions

Learner pathways can become fragmented in a number of ways, risking underachievement and possible dropout from school. Transitions between levels and types of schools require consideration, as they can be a moment where problems arise or may reveal symptoms of other issues. However, if these pathways are sufficiently flexible and provide appropriate guidance and support, learners can encounter different ways and contexts of learning which can have a positive impact on their development.

Support to learner development can be formal or less formal and can take place within or outside the school. Regardless of context, a clear policy 'vision' and action needs to balance key priorities for each learner. This is in order to help them develop the necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes for an active role in work and life in society - both now and in the future. At the same time, the aim is to support the personal development of the individual and their relationships with others - taking into account their aspirations and building on their strengths.

There are key ways in which policy action can support continuity in learner development: bridging transition points between levels of education and facilitating transition between types of education; effectively generating and sharing data with appropriate mechanisms (how to measure and communicate); and using and reporting data analysis in an appropriate way and by different stakeholders to support learner decision-making. Being 'inclusive' as a system does not mean solely taking a universal approach to all learners. Taking an individualised approach to all learners is a basis for inclusiveness. It is also important to invest in targeted support to learners with additional needs, including those at particular risk.

### Guiding principles

1. EARLY YEARS: High quality learning experiences should be available to all children from the beginning of their lives as a foundation for lifelong learning<sup>1</sup>.
2. LEARNER AND PARENT CHOICE: Pupils and families should be supported with guidance and participatory decision-making in navigating pathways between levels and types of school education, and between school and future education and employment.
3. INTER-INSTITUTION COLLABORATION: Systems should have structures and mechanisms to support collaboration across institutions and between actors, focusing on transitions between levels and types of education.

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<sup>1</sup> European Union Council's (2009 /C 119/02) strategic priorities for lifelong learning, include: (a) The personal, social and professional fulfilment of all citizens, and (b) Sustainable economic prosperity and employability, whilst promoting democratic values, social cohesion, active citizenship, and intercultural dialogue.

4. **TEACHING AND LEARNING:** Appropriate curricula and teacher pedagogical approaches should help bridge transitions and foster learners' growing sense of responsibility for their own competence development and future lives in society.
5. **ACCESS AND INCLUSION:** Systems should ensure sufficient flexibility to include and integrate pupils who enter or leave at different stages, or who have difficulty in accessing formal education.
6. **SHARING DATA:** Relevant learner data should be shared between institutions in both directions, as part of an ongoing dialogue to ensure continuity and progression in learning and continued support for competence development.
7. **DIFFERENT TYPES OF DATA:** Information from quantitative and qualitative assessment and reporting mechanisms should be used to help construct a holistic understanding of learner development and progression.
8. **APPROPRIATE LEARNING CONTEXTS:** Supportive, varied and inspiring learning environments and contexts – relevant to the stage of development and different learners – should be created and reviewed.
9. **SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL SUPPORT:** Schools should have the capacity to engage with different stakeholders to provide social and emotional support to learners, including during the period of transition between levels of education.
10. **SUPPORT TO 'AT-RISK' LEARNERS:** Targeted strategies and resources should be used to identify and support vulnerable learners at the earliest opportunity – this school information should also be fed back at regional/national level to support policy-making and strategic investment for pupils at risk.





Teachers and school leaders are central to the learning process in schools. However schools are organised, and whatever curricula are taught, pupils are ultimately dependent for their competence development on the expertise, energy, inspiration and imagination of the adults to whom they are entrusted. Teachers can be motivated by this privileged responsibility, but it is not an easy challenge and societal and governmental expectations are demanding. There may also be tension between, on the one hand, the autonomy vested in teachers and school leaders, and, on the other, the accountability that might be expected of them.

Although set within a national or regional framework of governance for the education system, teachers and school leaders ultimately work in their local context. They have a real and immediate setting for their work, which also extends beyond school into the local community, including parents and employers and support services. Policies should therefore aim to enable them within these environments by promoting and supporting team learning and collaboration among all staff, with an emphasis on peer-learning and distributed leadership. The wide range of policies and regulations that shape the working environment and effectiveness of these professionals extends beyond curricula, guidelines on learner assessment or school funding. It also includes initial teacher education, recruitment, professional development and career pathways, none of which can be considered in isolation.

The personal and collective identities that teachers and school leaders form are also critical. If teachers and school leaders feel trusted and respected, and feel fully integrated into the wider education system, they may be more motivated to collaborate and improve that system, at local level, and potentially beyond.

## Guiding principles

1. **EDUCATION AS A LEARNING SYSTEM:** Education should be an inclusive learning system with a key role for teachers and school leaders.
2. **COHERENCE OF POLICIES:** Policy-makers should aim to achieve coherence across the system, aligning different policies directly affecting teachers and school leaders and embedding them in wider school policies, to serve the ultimate objective of ensuring high quality education for all learners.
3. **SHARED VISION AND UNDERSTANDING:** Shared vision and understanding, which consider national, regional and local perspectives and priorities on school policy, give direction to the work of schools as learning organisations and to the systems by which they are supported.

4. **SETTING EXPECTATIONS:** Clear expectations for the engagement of teachers and school leaders that can be set through frameworks, such as standards, competence frameworks and curricula, help to define roles within learning organisations.
5. **SCHOOL LEADERS AND TEACHERS SHAPING LEARNING SYSTEMS:** School leaders and teachers should be acknowledged and respected for their expertise and their contribution to developing the education system at different levels.
6. **PROFESSIONAL CULTURE:** Education systems can help schools develop professional working and learning cultures that motivate teachers and school leaders.
7. **RESEARCH, REFLECTIVE PRACTICE AND ENQUIRY:** Policies should support a culture of research, reflective practice and enquiry-based learning at school.
8. **PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCES, CAPACITY AND AUTONOMY:** Teachers and school leaders should be supported in their professional development, autonomy and growth in a continuum spanning all phases of their careers.
9. **LEADERSHIP COMPETENCE:** Systems should provide opportunities for school leaders and teachers to develop leadership competences that support them in strategic thinking and planning.





## Networks

Networks are a way for different actors and levels of school education systems - policy makers, schools, school education leaders, teachers and a range of stakeholders - to promote and support school development. They can help these stakeholders to address and potentially solve problems concerning the education of young people in collaborative and flexible ways. They are important sites of co-responsibility and shared accountability.

Understanding how these professional networks function, and identifying the important elements to consider, can help to better realise network goals, identify opportunities for networking across school education systems, and contribute to a broad and embedded culture of learning. This culture values – and is dependent on – trust and motivation, as well as confidence, communication, collaboration, and critical (self-)reflection. At school level, in particular, it depends on having satisfactory conditions and status for teachers and an acknowledgement of the demanding nature of teaching. Networks should not exist for their own sake: they depend on mutualism and action driven towards shared goals. It is important to use evidence for their appropriate creation and development so that action has the greatest impact possible.

### Guiding principles

1. **GOALS:** a shared vision is needed to inspire the cooperation of different actors, in the interest of school development. Clear shared goals should be defined the first stage in network development, in order to engage the appropriate actors in an appropriate structure. Goals may be redefined as the network evolves.
2. **AUTONOMY, ACCOUNTABILITY & FLEXIBILITY:** pay attention to the decision-making capacity, agency (ability to act) and perceived control by different actors. Flexibility may encouraged increased activity. Self-assessment may help identify or motivate new network actors; help existing members identify their own needs; and contribute to network development with an increased sense of ownership.
3. **MOTIVATION & BENEFITS:** an open and supportive environment supports inter-school and inter-professional exchanges. Balance interests within and between different system levels, as friction and competition between schools or other actors can undermine the cohesiveness of networks. It is important to demonstrate that the inputs (in time or resources) are proportionate to the outputs.
4. **ROLES:** Promote cooperation between teachers: a) providing time for dedicated activities, b) assuring recognition; c) giving them a voice, and d) assuring a climate of trust. Clarify positions - this may be different to their daily professional tasks or simply not a conscious awareness. Effective distribution of leadership is particularly important.

5. CAPACITY-BUILDING: teacher collaborative competence should be developed through ITE and CPD. There should be both horizontal and vertical cooperation, taking care not to overload particular actors. Mediators between network points may need specific support.

6. CROSS-SECTORAL WORKING: identify points of shared interest and align policy development cycles of different areas. Evidence-based policymaking and practice requires connections with and between teacher-led experimentation, and expert pedagogical research.

7. NETWORK DEVELOPMENT: networks should be flexible. Understand that they may be temporary or longer term, and may exist as an initial phase in establishing and embedded a culture of collaboration. They may also make lasting connections of which project activity may be one part; guided by the actors. Managing or acting within networks can inform decisions about distribution of resources.

8. IMPACT, QUALITY ASSURANCE & EVIDENCE: Monitoring and evaluation is central to understanding the effectiveness of networks and self-reflection is key to ongoing development. Consider how progress and outcomes will be measured, define key indicators, and to decide how and by whom they will be measured. Appropriate data generated by networks should be taken into account at local and national levels of decision-making.

## 5. Policy guidance in action

### Five examples of responses to educational challenges to inspire policy makers

This section translates the key policy messages from conceptual understanding into scenarios of practical application.

It describes five hypothetical 'policy challenges', each based on one or more real country examples. Each challenge is then followed by a description of the relevant guiding principles and policy measures from the four thematic reports, which policy makers may consider in order to design an approach to a similar challenge. No single scenario attempts to describe all European systems, or even a single system, perfectly. They are offered as inspiration to be adapted to different national, regional or local contexts.

The five examples concern:

1. School development
2. Teacher professional development
3. Support to specific groups of learners
4. Supporting innovation
5. Coherent policy-making and action

Each example highlights specific sections of the thematic reports inviting the reader to explore the policy options in more depth, based on real country examples. These sources are complemented by references to other European work and publications.

## Policy Challenge 1: School development

### The scenario

In this education system, schools that are performing adequately, as evidenced by pupils' learning outcomes, receive a visit from the inspectorate once every five years. Schools that are at risk of underperformance are visited annually and provided with extra support and guidance. At the same time, it is apparent that even in the best schools, learners' performance is stagnant.

The inspectorate reports that there are changes schools could make to help learners achieve their full potential. However, the challenges and possible responses are very varied depending on the region and on the local community. The inspectorate recommends to the ministry to develop policies that support school development in other ways than national (government-led) initiatives.

### ET2020 Working Group Schools – key messages and case studies

While there is a continued role for external quality assurance, for example through inspection or national learner assessments, internal mechanisms can support teachers to take collective responsibility for pupils' learning. By promoting schools as learning organisations, both centralised and decentralised systems can encourage and enable teachers and school leaders to help shape pedagogy and refine current practice through local research and networking. Individual teachers, teaching teams, and entire schools are then less reliant on conventional hierarchies (waiting for change to be initiated from the top down). They are also in a better position to respond to rapid changes of policy and ever-higher quality expectations.

#### Within school

School **self-evaluation** coupled with teacher appraisal helps direct action to those areas most in need of improvement. School self-evaluation can also support cultures of informed risk-taking, as schools develop the capacity to identify areas for improvement and, through joint-enquiry, develop innovative approaches to addressing needs. Schools are able to monitor the impact of innovations and to adjust strategies to develop new school action plans, such as in **France** and **Cyprus** (QA 4.2).

Clarifying expectations towards staff in **competence frameworks or standards** can help make collaboration and a contribution to wider school development the norm. Supporting teachers and school leaders to act as researchers and innovators was one of the aims of the Bulgarian new national educational standards (TSL 4.7, Box 19).

There are other measures to give more **autonomy** to schools, for example by adjusting their curricula or learning environments to be more suited to the needs of pupils. This has been the case with **Portugal's** 'autonomy contracts' and in some of **Spain's** lower secondary schools (CT 4.8).

In order to help drive school development, **school leaders** should be **inspiring** and be able to **set priorities** for themselves and others. A number of countries have developed leadership initiatives, such as **Estonia** who also include mentoring in their programme (TSL, 4.9, Box 30).

## Between schools

The concept of the school as a learning organisation implies that schools can also connect with other schools, enabling co-construction of educational progress. Similarly, professional learning communities view individual teachers as connected within a broader culture of professionals with shared concerns and goals.

Supporting **networking between schools** has been proven to have a positive impact on school and teacher development, and learning outcomes. This is due to the sharing of practices and peer-supported critical reflection based on a local understanding of other schools' circumstances. Examples include the TEIP programme in disadvantaged regions in **Portugal** (N 4.4, Case Study 8) and the SHARE project, partnering lower and higher performing schools in **Serbia** (N 4.4, Case Study 9).

In a number of countries, such as Italy, grouping primary and lower secondary schools can support development particularly around the time of **transition** from one to the other (CT 4.3). Steiner Waldorf Schools offer another example of cooperation between early childhood education and care and primary education, and of the integration of primary and secondary education (CT 4.3, Box 6).

## School and wider community

School development can be supported by the involvement of local community members, including parents, higher education institutions, welfare services, cultural organisations, and businesses. This can be not only by exchanging ideas but also by **sharing resources** and offering **alternative learning environments**. Both **Greece** and **Finland** have a multi-stakeholder approach to learner development (CT 4.2). As part of their own development, schools may need to address the mechanisms and language by which they engage with different actors, particularly parents.

## Schools and the system

Having a **shared vision** is crucial for the system to support school development. By taking into account national, regional and local perspectives and priorities on school policy, such a vision will give direction to the work of schools as learning organisations and to the systems by which they are supported, such as in **Portugal** and **Finland** (TSL 4.3).

**Multiple types of data**, gathered over time, are needed to develop a **well-rounded understanding** of school development across the system. For example, in **Serbia**, the 'School Report Card' uses indicators and a checklist of information gathered by the school (QA 4.8, Box 22). The new model of evaluation in **Montenegro** includes an indicator on the presence of educational innovations (QA 4.4 Box 11).

## Further inspiration

*Study on Supporting School Innovation Across Europe (European Commission 2018)*

## Policy Challenge 2: Teacher professional development

### The scenario

The national Ministry of Education has long had a strong focus on academic excellence for all pupils. Teachers entering the profession have demonstrated their own academic achievements and deep knowledge of both pedagogy and the subject(s) they will teach. They are well prepared through their Initial Teacher Education to teach the curricula.

At the same time, many teachers are facing challenges in their schools and classrooms as they find that learners, for a variety of reasons, are increasingly disengaged, distracted, or in need of extra support. A recent survey reveals that teachers feel less prepared to address their pupils' needs, and are concerned that they are not learning effectively.

Policy makers in charge of teacher development want to decide on measures to improve teachers' capacities, both individually and collectively.

### ET2020 Working Group Schools – key messages and case studies

Increasingly, schools and teachers have both a need and greater autonomy to develop strategies that are appropriate for the needs of their pupils and for the local context. One implication is that professional development to a significant extent becomes local, generated from within the school and its immediate network. The essential objective of Continued Professional Development must be to create a lasting impact on pupils' learning through improved teaching practice as well as efforts to engage learners and meet their individual needs.

Within the area of quality assurance in school education, responses to evaluations – particularly in systems that hold teachers accountable - need to have a strong focus on supporting improvement. They also need to be based on trust and respect between internal and external actors (QA 4.3). Countries may be able to address this by reviewing opportunities and modes of self-assessment.

Developing a **shared vision and understanding** strengthens teachers' and school leaders' ability to develop effective learning and teaching, and to collaborate rather than compete (TSL, 4.3). This may be achieved through open fora or platforms to bring together perspectives from different levels, such as **Finland's** 'Teacher Education Forum' (TSL 4.3, Box 7).

Policy makers might also consider ways to **align teacher policies with wider school (and other) policies**, such as in **Romania** and the **Netherlands** (TSL 4.2, Box 5).

Creating opportunities for staff to innovate, take risks and experiment in a **spirit of inquiry** and open-mindedness are also important. This may include teacher-led sharing of good practice online, such as in **Belgium(Flanders)** (N 4.5, Case Study 11), and within specific areas of teaching



such as digital education in the e-Schools initiative in **Croatia** (TSL 4.6, Box 18). It also may require consideration of the **time available** within teachers' contracted working hours for such professional development activities.

Where teachers receive personalised feedback there can be significant positive impact on learning outcomes, as demonstrated in Latvia (QA 4.2, Box 19).

### Developing competence through collaboration

Teachers and school leaders will also need appropriate competences to take full advantage of this autonomy. Policy action may focus on:

**Teachers collaborating effectively at the school level and with service providers in the community:** A number of countries have implemented targeted support to 'at risk' learners from external services (CT 4.10). Professional networks may also be established to achieve specific goals, including the input of other expertise as in **Slovenia** (N 4.5, Case Study 10).

**Self-gathering and interpreting of data on school performance and developing and monitoring school plans:** Different tools may be developed to support teachers and schools to reflect on specific learner groups, such as the self-evaluation form developed in **Sweden** (CT 4.7, Box 32).

**Teachers engaging in joint enquiry and design interventions to better support learning:** Research, reflective practice and enquiry are encouraged in many countries (TSL 4.7), for example, the use of an ongoing professional portfolio in **Italy** (TSL 4.7, Box 20) or partnerships with higher education institutions for practice-oriented educational programmes as in **Norway** (TSL 4.8, Box 24).

**Supporting the development of visionary, inspirational school leaders, including the ability to inspire and to set priorities for oneself and others:** Competence frameworks, or standards, can help to define roles set expectations for professional learning, such as in **Ireland** and **Slovakia** (QA 4.5 Box 14) and under development in **Slovenia** and **Latvia** (TSL 4.4 and 4.5).

National support bodies for leadership may also be established, such as in **Austria** and **Ireland** (TSL 4.6 Box 29).

### Further inspiration

*Guide on policies to improve Initial Teacher Education (ET2020 Working Group report, 2016)*

*Supporting teacher competence development (ET2020 Working Group report 2013)*

*eTwinning: the European Commission's online teacher community*

*School Education Gateway: the European Commission's online platform for school education*

## Policy Challenge 3: Support to specific groups of learners

### The scenario

A small municipality has seen an increase in the number of newly arrived migrant children and their families in recent years. Local schools have reported that they lack the resources and expertise to meet the language and welfare needs of these children.

When the ministry calls a strategy meeting with municipal leaders, it is revealed that these challenges are echoed by schools and officials in some neighbouring municipalities. They report that even though they have not received as many first-generation migrants, pupils in certain areas of the city are entering lower secondary with literacy levels significantly lower than their peers’.

### ET2020 Working Group Schools – key messages and case studies

As explored principally under the theme of ‘Continuity and Transitions, action at national, regional and local level can be directed to different learner groups: ‘universal’ strategies are for all learners; ‘selected’ strategies for specific groups; and ‘indicated’ strategies for particular individuals.

#### Universal strategies

Evidence shows that **good quality Early Childhood Education and Care** is an important basis for learner development at subsequent educational stages, and that investing early achieves greater returns than at any other educational stage. It is also an environment that supports the integration migrant children, such as in **Norway** where free early education for children from a migrant background is associated with improved outcomes at first and second grade (CT 4.1). Therefore, a review of support for all learners should include early years settings alongside schools, as well as the transition from one to the other, as supported by a specific language-learning network in **Austria** (N, 4.5).

Another broad approach is to create opportunities for **teacher pedagogical exchange**, including on the basic skills of literacy and numeracy. This has proven to be effective in the **United Kingdom** where it is based on a national skills framework (CT 4.3, Box 5) in **Slovenia** where it takes the form of a government-driven network initiative (N, 4.5, Case Study 10).

Policy makers may also review the support to schools regarding the **monitoring of learners’ progress**. A pupil monitoring system in **Belgium(Flanders)** is an example of a testing package with guidelines that can also be an effective part of school self-evaluation (QA, 4.7, Box 20).

Involving stakeholder organisations, consulting European networks, or creating **multi-disciplinary teams** might also be options for this policy scenario. Such contacts can provide a range of expertise and research evidence that can inform decision-making relevant to all pupils (TSL 4.2, Box 4).



### Strategies for specific groups

A cause of low attainment of learners may be that they are leaving and entering school systems at different stages, or have difficulty with accessing mainstream education. Policy responses may vary from separate reception classes for migrant learners, such as in **Turkey**, to specific ‘immersion’ programmes within mainstream schooling, such as in Italy (CT 4.5).

**Cross-school collaboration** may also be supported in order to meet the needs of specific groups of learners, such as the Priority Intervention Educational Territories Programme (TEIP) in **Portugal**, which offers a promising model for school clusters (N 4.4, Case Study 8).

Although intended for selected groups of learners, the challenge remains of how to implement relevant pedagogical approaches nationally, in contexts where schools have little prior exposure to such methods, and where they have not traditionally featured within Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes. There are examples of national centres that have successfully provided **curricula support and teacher professional development**, such as in **Sweden** for newly arrived migrants (CT 4.5 Box 10) and **Greece** (N 4.2, Case Study 3).

### Strategies for individual learners

The quality of relationships with peers, family and teachers, alongside physical and mental health, are all determinants of positive educational outcomes.

Policy measures can secure **access to counselling and specialist support services** and thus to high quality social and emotional support to learners, such as in **Estonia** (CT 4.9, Box 17) and **Slovenia** (CT 4.9, Box 18). Newly arrived migrant learners may have missed periods of schooling and experienced family separation or other traumatic events. Targeted support would need to form part of a strategy to facilitate their inclusion.

Teachers also require support to **work effectively with other actors in the community**, particularly families, such as through the ‘School as Community Centre’ initiative in **Albania** (TSL, 4.5, Box 14). This may be assisted by early identification and intervention processes, such as in **Norway** (CT 4.10 Box 19).

Constructing a **holistic narrative of an individual’s development** may also require the revision of approaches to assessment of and for learning. This may include specific tools such as portfolios, piloted in a number of countries, or a shift to looking beyond academic achievement, such as in the **Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia** (QA 4.8, Box 25).

### Further inspiration

*A whole school approach to tackling early school leaving (ET2020 Working Group report, 2016)*  
*School education for migrants: European Commission [webpage](#)*

## Policy Challenge 4: Supporting innovation

### The scenario

The ministry has recently completed a long implementation of a new curriculum. Whilst it has assured teachers and school leaders that there will be no significant changes in the near future, it is keen to build on some early improvements and maintain a spirit of positive change.

There is new drive to encourage schools and local level actors to take the initiative and provide enhanced learning opportunities. However, the recent implementation involved a number of phases of work which demanded a lot from regional governors whilst some schools and groups and teachers felt neglected.

The ministry instructs a new Innovation Unit to support innovation across the system, in particular the capacity-building of educators.

### ET2020 Working Group Schools – key messages and case studies

#### Across the system

Where innovation has been the focus of initiatives, a number successful system-wide approaches to educational development and progress have all supported **participatory and collaborative** working to achieve their aims. Different examples exist from **Austria, Slovenia** and some major European cities (TSL, 4.1, Box 2).

Networks can support policy formulation and testing and therefore act both as a source of innovation and as a means of dissemination. This could include reaching out to a **range of stakeholders** and including their expertise in a consultation, such as the approach of Ireland's National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (N 4.2) or drawing on the expertise of cross-border networks of schools such as the European Council for Steiner Waldorf Education (N 4.1).

It is clear that local level stakeholders are crucial to the achievement of an effective school education system. If policy makers can harness the capability and enthusiasm of the school workforce, their plans for implementing innovation and progressive change stand a much greater chance of successful adoption. Coherent policies should provide a **stable platform for experimentation**. Engaging a broad range of stakeholders, including social partners, in dialogue and action may help achieve this consistency (TSL 4.2, Box 4) and complement the work in schools, such as via education conferences in **France** (QA 4.6).

In this policy challenge, the ministry has already engaged a new Innovation Unit. There may be other organisations, such as universities and research institutes, that could complement their work with **research and evidence**. This will then underpin the school leaders and teachers in their endeavours to shape their learning organisations. Identifying and recording such evidence of innovation may be initiated by school evaluation procedures, such as the inclusion of a specific innovation indicator in **Montenegro** (QA 4.4, Box 11).

Curriculum development should take account of wider societal and technological developments. Whilst not the only means of innovation, digital tools provide new opportunities for teaching and learning. Systems should also consider their digital strategy for school education, such as in Ireland and other countries (CT 4.4).

## Schools

Given the ministry aims in the scenario, and the historical approach, it may be that the worked of regional authorities can be scaled back and that schools may be granted greater autonomy than in the past.

The **shared ownership** of the responsibility for innovation among relevant stakeholders at local level need not compromise the expectation of accountability. By reviewing and carefully adjusting the role of inspectors and raising the implied trust in the system, the likelihood of cooperation and innovation increases and whilst maintaining a focus on school development planning. Such approaches have been identified in **Hungary** (QA 4.2, Box 9), **Norway** and **the Netherlands** (QA 4.2, Box 10). They illustrate how greater autonomy at school level can be achieved without reducing the schools' responsibility for high quality outcomes.

Networks can support individual schools in their own innovative development, such as in **Switzerland** (N 4.2). They can also support clusters of schools to work **collaboratively**, such as **Portugal's** pilot programmes for Pedagogical Innovation and Curricular Flexibility (N 4.2) or provide the frame for a more complex programme of multi-stakeholder investment and school development, such as the Lighthouse project in Finland (N 4.4, Case Study 7).

## Capacity of local actors

Identifying the **characteristics** and qualities of innovation in teachers themselves – as explored by The Association for Teacher Education in Europe (ATEE) in a research project across eleven countries (TSL 4.4, Box 11) - can help to determine what is appropriate support to develop these innovative qualities. This may be expressed in a **framework**, such as in **Bulgaria** (TSL, 4.7, Box 19).

Encouraging **distributed leadership** may also have a positive impact. This depends on establishing a high degree of shared vision and understanding and is able to break down long chains of command, but, more significantly, the approach better identifies and utilises the skill-set and expertise that individual colleagues can contribute. It may require systematic support and specialists in school development, such as is provided in **Luxembourg** (TSL 4.5 Box 14).

Networks may also directly connect innovative teachers who may feel isolated, and provide additional professional development opportunities, such as in the **Netherlands** (TSL 4.5, Box 16).

## Further inspiration

*Study on Supporting School Innovation Across Europe (European Commission 2018)*

## Policy Challenge 5: Coherent policy-making and action

### The scenario

In recent years there have been a number of different priority areas in education together with changes of ministry organisation under successive governments. As a consequence, education policies – although having some positive impact - have typically been developed independently, and not necessarily with other parts of the education system or other policy areas in mind.

The priority for the new government is to consolidate existing initiatives whilst continuing to improve the competence development and learning outcomes of all pupils in all regions, including their well-being and other non-cognitive aspects of learning.

The ministry is under pressure to deliver certain objectives with a restricted budget at the same time as trying to maintain and improve a working relationship with and between education stakeholders (local and regional authorities, school leaders, teachers, pupils, parents, unions and other external partners).

### ET2020 Working Group Schools – key messages and case studies

Coherence in this context refers to three aspects:

- i. Coherence of governance; i.e. across regional and local authorities and leaders
- ii. Coherence of practice; i.e. the peer learning that takes place between stakeholders to share and develop approaches while also supporting school autonomy and flexibility
- iii. Coherence of information; i.e. the different data that can be generated are aligned and can reinforce and support each other to improve an understanding of what is happening

These are also interdependent: modes of governance can support peer learning and data feeding back from local to national level can support future policy decision-making. National data can also support quality and equity of provision.

It is important to note that as well as a shared vision, as identified in **Finland** (QA, p. 4.7), flexibility (rather than tight alignment or conformity) is necessary to allow schools to adapt policies to their own local needs, and to encourage innovation that can ultimately support coherent policy action across diverse contexts. Stakeholder collaboration and engagement is also vital to a shared understanding of the policy aims, to ensure that policies and implementation reflect on-the-ground needs and are positively accepted.

### Coherence of governance: regional structures and mediating stakeholders

A first step might be to improve the coherence of governance across the regions by identifying and supporting a leader or leaders to develop, deliver and act upon a shared vision. One example is the recent introduction of county governors to co-ordinate sub-networks of municipal leaders in

Norway (N 4.3, Case Study 4). A 'leading from the middle' approach like this can help bridge between central authorities and school organizational and pedagogical practices.

Where there are existing well-functioning regional structures, these may support an efficient and coherent approach for new purposes, such as in **Sweden** for an emerging Continued Professional Development initiative (N 4.3, Case Study 5). Local leaders might also be recruited for special tasks, for example in **Austria** where 'regional leaders' are co-ordinating different approaches and stakeholders that will reduce the need for special education schools (TSL 4.1, Box 2).

Further local adaptation of policies and initiatives may be developed through partnerships with stakeholders internal and external to schools. Eurocities, for example, provides platforms to foster cooperation and exchange among partners: school boards, providers of Initial Teacher Education, research institutions, trade unions, youth organisations, and others (N 4.6, Case Study 12). The benefits of horizontal co-ordination are evident here, even where there may be a variety of goals, and there is an increased chance of such work influencing policy development.

Clustering of schools may have a more direct impact on developing school governance, as seen in **Estonia, Italy** and also in the **United Kingdom** where regional co-ordination and investment were added to enhance an existing initiative to grant schools more autonomy (N 4.3).

### Coherence of practice: supporting peer learning

Driving towards a widespread improvement of competence development will require a coherent approach to reforms of teaching and teacher preparation, assessment, and learner pathways from primary to lower and upper secondary school. Supporting peer learning between multiple stakeholders with specific expertise will be beneficial, such as for learners at risk of early school leaving, literacy, or improving the pathways to Vocational Education and Training (N 4.6). Such expertise can also achieve coherence by feeding into future policy development.

A broad drive to improving learners' competence development may require many schools and teachers to develop innovative approaches to teaching and learning. Curricula may provide guidelines, but flexibility to adapt to local contexts and pupils' needs will also be important. In the **Netherlands**, a funded national network connects innovative teachers with like-minded colleagues from other schools (TSL, 4.5). **Slovenia** also supports networks for school management and teacher learning within the context of national education projects (N, 4.6).

### Coherence of information: generating and using different data

The data generated in evaluation processes can support teachers to identify what is working well and where improvement is needed in teaching and learning processes. External evaluators may aid this process to support improvement at school level. For coherence, there may be frameworks and reporting structures in place to streamline and gather information and to ensure alignment with internal school evaluation, such as in **Belgium(Flanders)** (QA 4.7, Box 20).

Sharing data concerning the transition of pupils between levels of schooling, such as in **Estonia** and **Ireland** (CT 4.6, Box 12), is a prime example of where local level actors require support but at the same time can feed back useful information to build a broad, national understanding at policy



level. Central co-ordination can also minimise the burden on schools, such as in **Spain, Belgium(Flanders) and Greece** (CT 4.6). Coherent mechanisms can evaluate on both micro and macro levels and ensure complementarity of information, with a sufficient detail for each level, such as in **Iceland** (QA 4.1 Box 2). For data that are made public, issues such as data protection and the impact on stakeholders require consideration.

Finally, complementary data and analysis can be gained by policy makers collaborating with other research bodies, such as in **Finland and Slovenia** (CT 4.7, Box 13). Integrating such perspectives can provide added value to coherent policy-making and action.

### Further inspiration

*Descriptions of National Education Systems, including Ongoing Reforms and Policy Developments 2013-2015* (Eurydice [webpages](#))

*Compendium of policy measures in education and training* (European Commission [online database](#))

