

## Leading a collaborative learning culture through middle tier reforms in Rwanda



© EDT. Sector-level professional learning community in northern Rwanda.

To improve teaching and learning outcomes, teachers and head teachers need whole-system support to build professionalism and enhance their practice. Roles at the middle tier of education systems, or those professionals working between the school and central level, offer unique capacities to facilitate collaboration, broker knowledge, scale innovations, and provide instructional direction to school-level practitioners.

This research, conducted as a collaborative partnership between IIEP-UNESCO and Education Development Trust (EDT), explores how middle-tier instructional leaders can become a nexus for change to improve the quality of education. It focuses on highlighting promising practices globally and is designed to draw out insights and lessons for both policy-makers and practitioners.

IIEP and EDT conducted case studies in five jurisdictions – Delhi (India), Jordan, Rwanda, Shanghai (China), and Wales – where new roles have been created or existing roles re-oriented towards coaching and support. The studies explored the professional practices and perceived impacts of instructional leaders, and the enabling factors present in the systems in which they work.

This country note shows how new ‘leader of learning’ middle tier roles have been created in Rwanda to harness the skills and motivation of the highest-performing serving head teachers in the country, to support the professional development of their peers.

### BOX 1

#### Methodology

This case study is based on 10 remote interviews and a remote focus group conducted in August 2020. This group represented all types of participant in the highlighted programme, but COVID-19-related school closures and limitations prevented data collection from teachers affected by this initiative. The case study draws on programme monitoring and evaluation data, programme documentation, and other ongoing research from EDT that explores teacher collaborative learning.

#### Country context: the BLF programme and existing middle-tier structures in Rwanda

Launched by the Rwandan Ministry of Education (MINEDUC) in 2017, the Building Learning Foundations (BLF) programme aims to improve learning outcomes in English and mathematics in all public and government-subsidized primary schools.

Strengthening school leadership is one of three pillars or foundations across the programme. To support this foundation, MINEDUC, alongside Education Development Trust (EDT), developed a new middle-tier role called ‘leaders of learning’. Leaders are recruited from existing experienced head teachers in high-performing or continually improving schools, and act as change agents to lead teaching and learning improvement beyond their own school. They do this by working across their locality to offer professional development support to peer head teachers. Two levels of leaders, namely national leaders of learning (NLLs) and local leaders of learning (LLLs), have been created to align with existing Rwandan district- and sector-wide structures. The key purpose of the role is to facilitate collaborative professional learning among head teachers and to support the continuous improvement of teaching and learning standards across schools.

These changes are in the context of extensive decentralization in the education system in Rwanda over the last 15 years. Following local governance reforms, 30 districts are primarily responsible for delivering education services across the country. Staff at this level of the education system include three district education officers (DEOs) in each district (MINEDUC, 2018). Two NLLs are also selected for each district – a total of 60 nationally. Beneath the district level, the education system is divided into 416 administrative sectors. Each sector has sector education inspectors<sup>1</sup> who support DEOs (MINEDUC, 2018). In conjunction, one LLL is selected for each sector – a total of 416 nationally.

### **Programme overview: Bringing head teachers into the middle tier**

The design of the LLL role was inspired by international evidence and models of system leadership, which emphasize the importance of serving practitioners facilitating professional learning, offering on-the-job and highly contextualized support to peers (for

example, Hargreaves and Fink, 2000). This allows system leaders to act as role models and help solve real-world problems (Education Commission, 2019; Rutayisire, 2020). Recently developed policies in Rwanda seek to expand the role of head teachers further, from leaders focusing on administration to leaders playing a significant role in teacher professional development and school performance (MINEDUC, 2018). In 2014, the Rwandan government developed a set of professional standards for head teachers that included creating a strategic direction for their school and leading teaching (Rwanda, 2014).

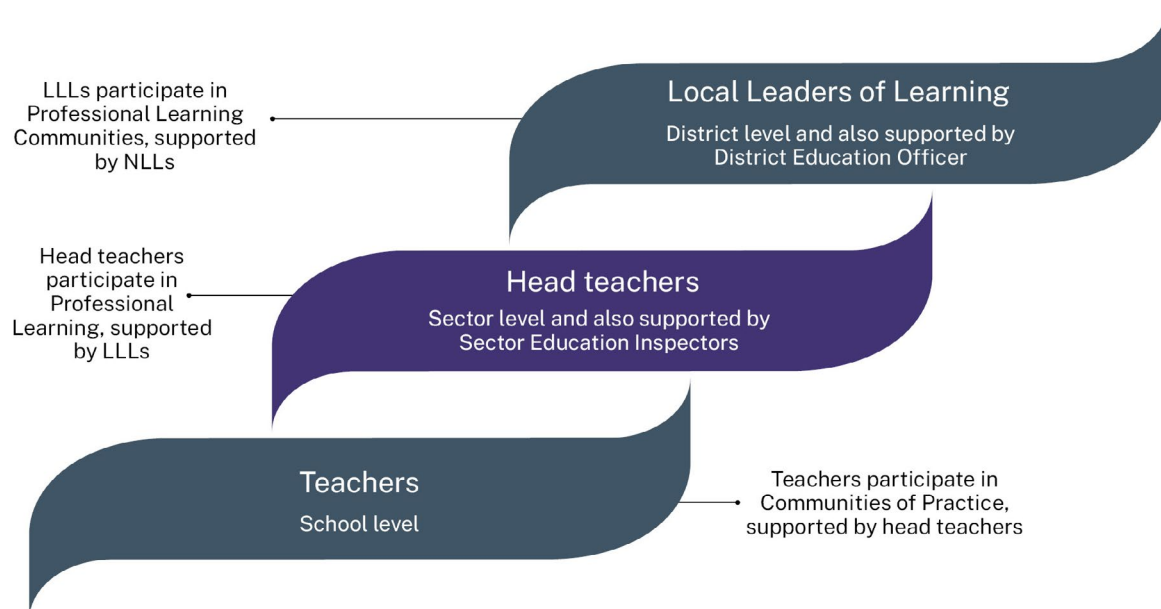
The NLL and LLL roles help meet these standards by creating a system of peer support for head teachers through both coaching and leading professional learning communities (PLCs). These PLCs, established as part of the reform, aim to gather groups of peers at both school and district level, thereby providing a forum for peer support, challenge, and problem-solving, as well as allowing LLLs to ‘think together’ (Pyrko, Dörfler, and Eden, 2017). One of the main objectives of the PLCs is to support head teachers to run successful communities of practice for teachers.

At the district level, NLLs and district officials facilitate a PLC termly that discusses improvement priorities and potential issues for all LLLs in their district. At the sector level, LLLs and sector officials facilitate a PLC for all head teachers in the sector that focuses on school improvement practices. In addition to PLCs, LLLs are trained to deliver coaching. NLLs typically have coaching sessions with the LLLs in their district, while LLLs identify a new head teacher or one working in a challenging school to provide one-on-one coaching.

NLLs and LLLs are both recruited from existing experienced head teachers in a selection process that looks at performance and practice in schools. This includes a review of criteria such as student exam scores, holding a position as a head teacher for at

<sup>1</sup> Role previously known as sector education officers.

**Figure 1. A triple-helix design: professionals at all levels are engaged in collaborative professional development**



least three years, and demonstrated ability and appetite for collaborative leadership. The selection process includes a school visit from a selection committee (which includes the DEO, an existing NLL, and the sector education inspector) who interview the candidate before making an appointment. Nominees remain as serving head teachers and do not receive any additional pay or compensation for participating as LLLs – the motivation for involvement is the opportunity for professional development to both improve both their own performance and that of their peers.

One innovative element of this programme is the extensive training provided to all LLLs. Both NLLs and LLLs complete an accredited professional development course, which leads to a recognized qualification in leadership. The one-year course, co-designed and delivered with the University of Rwanda, aligns with national leadership standards and aims to develop the skills, knowledge, and confidence of LLLs. At the end of the course, participants must submit a comprehensive portfolio that provides evidence of their new skills and knowledge. Thereafter, ongoing professional development occurs through the PLCs and coaching sessions mentioned previously.

### Impacts on the Rwandan system

As part of a larger set of programming and reforms aimed at improving leadership in Rwandan schools, the LLLs programme has brought a range of positive impacts. They include:

*Wider impact on school leadership, teacher, and student outcomes.* Head teachers' instructional leadership capacity has improved, which is a key success measure for the work LLLs do with head teachers. The programme tracks head teacher competency aligned to national school leader standards, and monitoring data shows important gains in head teacher competencies over time. This includes a jump

*Attending PLCs, I've learned the importance of analysing and planning together with teachers and other stakeholders sharing our goals and objectives. Because of this, in 2019 national performance was 100% and we were in first place in government-aided school performance tables. (Head teacher)*

from 41 per cent of head teachers achieving the competency standards at baseline in February 2018 to 66 per cent achieving them at a progress check in March 2020, based on data from school monitoring reports (FCDO, 2020).

*Building a learning community across and within schools.* Respondents all described how the PLCs had been sources of support and skill development for participants. LLLs specifically noted the opportunity to see and hear what is happening in other schools as a standout attribute of the PLCs. Between these and coaching sessions, deeper relationships formed not only between head teachers at different schools, but also between head teachers and sector and district officials. Newly formed learning communities started emerging at school level, with head teachers seeming to become more open and facilitative with their own teachers.

*They used to say: 'I'm the head teacher and you are the teachers and you cannot tell me what to do when I am the head teacher'. But through the PLCs and through the local leaders of learning, they have now understood that they have to cooperate with the teachers and that it helps to be a team. (Sector education officer)*

*Collaborative working focused on school improvement challenges.* Utilizing this newly established collaborative environment, school leaders began tackling issues that had been plaguing their schools. For example, one LLL shared that 'if one head teacher is facing a big challenge, all the others can support them with how to ... solve [it]'. Examples of the kinds of problem the PLCs have dealt with ranged from innovative ways to increase the use of English in schools, to ways to organize library access for children, to how to better use and collect data.

*Improved use of data for school improvement plans.* The use and collection of data for school improvement drove the initial focus of these PLCs. One LLL shared a common type of scenario that they would discuss: 'In our own sector, we have [examination] pass rates of two schools which differ, although both have 40 qualified teachers each. What makes school A's pass rate 70 per cent, and the other 30 per cent?'. This focus on data and constructive peer challenge has influenced how head teachers develop school improvement plans, with one district official noting that planning had improved substantially.

*COVID-19 response.* Leaders of learning proved pivotal in organizing the Rwandan response to the COVID-19 crisis at school level. For example, PLCs provided a flexible structure to convene head teachers to plan for school re-opening. NLLs and LLLs further introduced virtual PLCs of head teachers through various platforms. Going a step further, the Rwanda national government wanted to focus on equity in its back-to-school campaign and heavily utilized PLCs to work through problem-solving discussions. BLF programme monitoring data in spring 2021 showed that 72 per cent of schools nationwide had established a system for identifying vulnerable children who were at risk of dropping out.

### **Challenges faced in implementation**

While the early indications are promising for leaders of the learning programme, there are of course challenges and several areas that could be strengthened in the future. The first challenge is the portfolio-based mode of assessment required as part of the accredited professional development course. The assessment was designed to evaluate changes in leadership practices as opposed to assessing the theoretical understanding of NLLs and LLLs. In the first year's cohort, many had never completed this kind of practical assignment before and needed extra support to complete their final portfolios. Subsequent cohorts were offered additional support, leading to better results.



A second challenge involved fully integrating and engaging DEOs into the programme. While these officials deepened their engagement and understanding of the programme over time, the DEOs still struggled to find enough time to attend and engage with PLCs. Lastly, sustainability was an important question in many respondents' minds. Questions revolved around whether the roles would be sustainable without expert inputs provided from the BLF programme staff once funding ends, and whether it would eventually become necessary to compensate LLLs for their additional responsibilities. These questions are being actively addressed. In collaboration with MINEDUC sustainability plans are being considered for the LLL roles and PLC structures.

### Takeaways

The LLL programme can offer key lessons for other middle-tier leadership reforms. While all systems will need to consider their own unique objectives and context, the following takeaways offer policy-makers some reflections on critical success factors.

#### *1. Ensuring close alignment with the national vision for reform*

The new NLL and LLL roles are closely aligned with the strategic direction of the Rwandan education system, including national leadership standards and a vision for increased collaboration at district level. The shared vision of improving teaching and learning through strengthening leadership has helped the education system in Rwanda to begin to move towards a new self-improving model.

#### *2. Ensuring complementarity between middle-tier roles*

Offering school-based staff the right blend of oversight and capacity-building is a typical challenge faced by middle-tier professionals. By complementing – and not competing or overlapping with – the traditional monitoring role of district level professionals such as DEOs and inspectors, LLLs filled a key gap in the Rwandan system. However, as in other education systems internationally, there are opportunities to further improve and promote collaboration across roles at the middle tier.



© EDT. High-performing head teachers are trained to become National and Local Leaders of Learning. They convene professional learning communities of head teachers, supporting them to solve local challenges.

### 3. *Recognizing the importance of professional learning at the middle tier*

The design and delivery of a recognized, accredited professional development course in leadership for learning has reinforced the view of leadership as a professional skill. The emphasis on the assessment of professional practice (through assessed portfolios), over the assessment of knowledge, has been a significant change and learning opportunity for University of Rwanda staff, as well as participants. Over time, the development of more regular and targeted support to participants has proven helpful, alongside encouragement for them to make sure that they are building portfolios as they go through the course.

### 4. *Emphasizing professional practices and clearly defined, measurable competencies*

The development of evidence-based, progres-

sive leadership competencies provided a clear framework for what leaders were collectively to achieve and how new leadership skills and competencies could support national teaching and learning reforms. It also constituted a tool for measurement as leadership competencies are assessed as part of BLF's regular monitoring, which offers formative evaluation and feedback to leaders.

### 5. *Recognizing the power of collaboration and collective problem-solving*

This study highlights how middle-tier actors can play an important enabling role in the development of a culture of school improvement through collaboration. There was a strong sense that head teachers can learn from other head teachers, as well as an increased openness to sharing a school's problems and challenges and engaging with others to find solutions.

#### Author

David Childress, Charlotte Jones

#### Contacts

For more information, please contact:

Barbara Tournier  
Programme Specialist  
[b.tournier@iiep.unesco.org](mailto:b.tournier@iiep.unesco.org)

Tony McAleavy  
Education Director, EDT  
[research@educationdevelopmenttrust.com](mailto:research@educationdevelopmenttrust.com)

[iiep.unesco.org/en/instructional-leaders](http://iiep.unesco.org/en/instructional-leaders)  
[edt.org](http://edt.org)

#### References

- Education Commission.** 2019. *Transforming the Education Workforce: Learning Teams for a Learning Generation*. New York, NY: Education Commission.
- FCDO (Foreign and Commonwealth Development Office).** 2020. *Annual Review: Learning for All*. April 2020. London: FCDO.
- Hargreaves, A.; Fink, D.** 2000. 'The three dimensions of reform'. In: *Educational Leadership*, 57(7), 30–33.
- MINEDUC (Rwandan Ministry of Education).** 2018. *Education Sector Strategic Plan 2018/19 to 2023/24*. Kigali: Ministry of Education.
- Rwanda.** 2014. *Professional Standards for the Development of Head Teachers in Rwanda*. Kigali: Rwanda.
- Rutayisire, J.** 2020. 'Professional collaboration: The experience of a system leadership model in Rwanda'. Unpublished paper.
- Pyrko, I.; Dörfler, V.; Eden, C.** 2017. 'Thinking together: What makes communities of practice work?'. In: *Human Relations*, 70(4), 389–409.