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# Promising practice: government schools in Vietnam – key findings



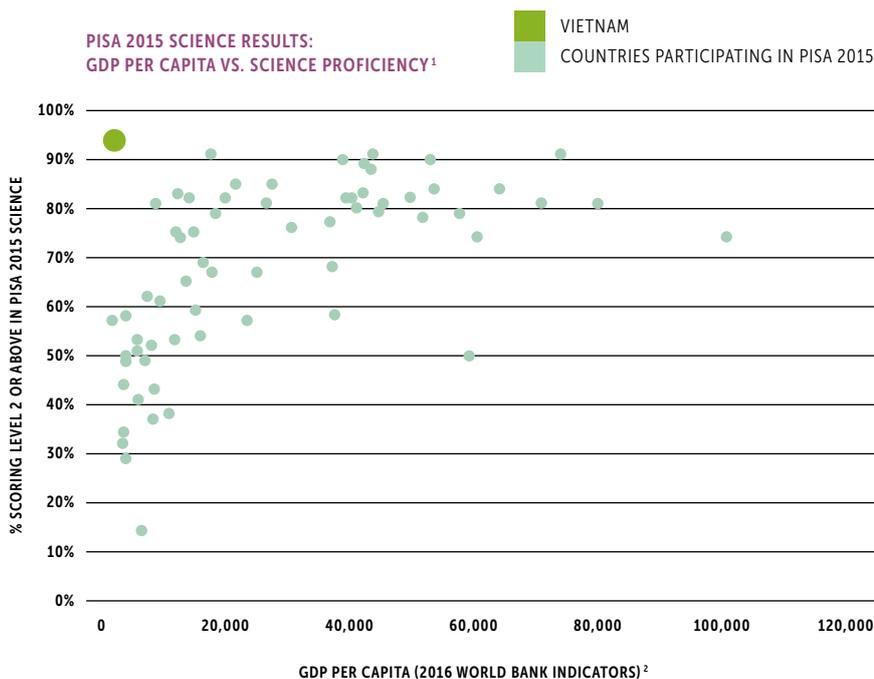


# A developing country achieving world-class results

Vietnam is an extraordinary educational success story. The world began to pay attention to the effectiveness of the Vietnamese school system when the OECD published the 2012 PISA student tests. Vietnamese students did well in all subjects and performed particularly well in science, ranking eighth globally out of sixty-five participating jurisdictions, despite the fact that Vietnam was, in economic terms, the poorest of all the participating countries. Vietnam repeated this astonishing achievement in 2015.

Using one PISA measure Vietnamese students in 2015 did better than those from all other participating countries in the world. In the chart below, the percentage of students in each country achieving basic proficiency in the PISA science test in 2015 is mapped against national income. Look at the extreme top left of the chart – there’s a large dot which indicates something surprising: the poorest participating country got the best results in the world. And that country was of course Vietnam.

Using one PISA measure Vietnamese students in 2015 did better than those from all other participating countries in the world



<sup>1</sup> OECD. (2016). PISA 2015 results: excellence and equity in education (Volume I). Paris: PISA, OECD p.320

<sup>2</sup> <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD> for the World Bank reference

Success in PISA isn't the only indicator that something extraordinary has happened in Vietnam. Over the last two decades the University of Oxford Young Lives project has been tracking the education of children in four countries: Peru, India, Ethiopia and Vietnam. The Oxford researchers were astonished by what they found in Vietnam. This is what they said about the academic performance of Vietnamese Fifth Grade students:

*'Pupil performance in Vietnam is truly exceptional. Around 19 out of every 20 ten year-olds can add four-digit numbers; 85% can subtract fractions and 81% are able to find x in a simple equation.'*<sup>3</sup>

Vietnam has also made great gains in improving access to education. Primary and lower secondary enrolment is close to universal, and upper secondary enrolment has made dramatic gains, from 27% in 1993 to over 70% in 2014.<sup>4</sup> The government of Vietnam has managed simultaneously to increase both participation and outcomes. Learning from Vietnam is clearly important in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals and the emphasis on the need to address both enrolment and quality issues.

The government of Vietnam has managed simultaneously to increase both participation and outcomes

## A case study in effective policymaking

Education Development Trust and our partner, the Vietnam Institute of Education Sciences, have spent the last two years undertaking fieldwork in Vietnam, trying to understand how the Vietnamese government has developed such an effective basic education system. We looked at all the available data, examined government policy documents over the last 30 years and talked, not only to experts, but also to hundreds of ordinary people – teachers, headteachers, parents, local officials – in four contrasting provinces, from the biggest cities to the most remote rural areas. You won't be surprised to hear that we concluded that the causes of the Vietnamese success were complex. It's not just about good schools and good teaching. Vietnam also benefits from a culture that values education. There are many ambitious parents who see success at school as a means of escaping poverty and they transmit their ambition to their children. These things make a difference. But we concluded that these cultural factors alone cannot explain the Vietnamese success story. The government has made some smart decisions. The achievements of the school system are the result not just of cultural factors but also of good policymaking.

Our report has been well-received by experts. Andreas Schleicher of the OECD has responsibility for the global PISA tests. He has emphasised that our analysis is important because of the light we have shed not only policy, but also on the effective *implementation* of policy:

*'Vietnam's PISA results have shown the world that quality and equity in education can rapidly improve; this report reveals what lies behind this success, not just in terms of the policies and practices that Vietnam has prioritised, but also by showing how these have been sequenced and successfully implemented.'*

<sup>3</sup> Boyden, J. (2013). What can Vietnam's excellent schools teach us about education quality and equality? [<https://oxfamblogs.org/tp2p/what-can-vietnams-excellent-schools-teachus-about-education-quality-and-equality/>] (accessed April 2018) <sup>4</sup> Dang, H.A.H. and Glewwe, P. (2017). 'Well begun, but aiming higher: a review of Vietnam's education trends in the past 20 years and emerging challenges'. RISE Working Paper 17/017, December. London: DFID. p. 41



# Five factors that made a difference

Our analysis led us to identify five key characteristics of the Vietnamese system that contributed to the high-quality outcomes:

## 1. Purposeful policy

### Education as a national priority

The government of Vietnam has consistently stated, over many years, that school education is a national priority. At least 20% of public expenditure is devoted to education each year. This sum is supplemented by cash and in-kind contributions from parents, businesses and other community members under a policy called 'socialisation'. The motivation behind the decision to make education a priority was economic. The government believed, and believes, that the scale and quality of the education system will determine the economic success of Vietnam.

### The government's plan of action

The government of Vietnam has been consistent not only in identifying education spending as a priority, but also in the way the money has been spent. Since 2000, a twin-track approach has been adopted, seeking to improve both access to school and the quality of learning in schools. The government invested heavily in improving infrastructure and access to schooling in remote areas. Policies specifically target marginalised and disadvantaged groups through providing boarding schools, meal allowance and other financial support to families.

### An effective middle tier

In implementing policy, Vietnam utilises a 'middle tier' that operates as a mediator between policymakers and practitioners. District and provincial offices serve as this middle tier, communicating policies directly to school principals. According to regulations this process is two-way, in what our witnesses called 'the logical system'. As well as implementing policy, schools also provide feedback back up the system to policymakers on the effectiveness of those policies.

1

PURPOSEFUL  
NATIONAL  
POLICYMAKING

2

HIGH LEVELS OF  
ACCOUNTABILITY

3

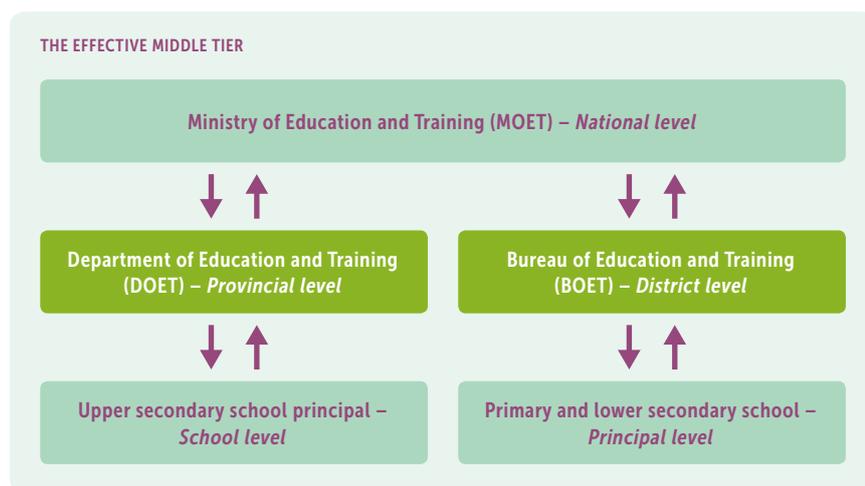
GOOD QUALITY  
TEACHERS AND  
TEACHING

4

SCHOOL  
LEADERSHIP  
THAT FOCUSES ON  
THE CLASSROOM

5

STRONG  
PARTNERSHIP  
WITH PARENTS



### A lively professional and public debate on education

A final key feature of policymaking in Vietnam is the professional and public debate that takes place around policy. Teachers and parents are not afraid to speak openly about their concerns, and many of our witnesses identified the problems they faced implementing policy. The education system is also responsive to an energetic public debate on education policy that is reported widely in the media.

## 2. High levels of accountability

### The accountability of teachers begins with self-review and peer assessment

The classroom performance of every teacher is formally graded on a regular basis through self- and peer review. Our interviewees indicated that the 'subject group' was significant in the way that accountability operates at school level. Teachers within each group, working collectively, check and moderate self-review grades, which are reported to the principal.

### The principal as an in-school inspector

The school principal plays a central role in the accountability process. Our witnesses described how principals received regular reports about each individual teacher from the subject lead. School principals play a direct role in monitoring the quality of teaching through classroom observation of teachers at work.

### Parents are encouraged by the government to hold schools to account

Government regulations state that each government school should have a Parent Board, in addition to Parent Committees at classroom level. These boards are mandated to review the quality of teaching, in addition to responsibility for extra-curricular activities. These same policies also articulate parental responsibilities 'for their children's mistakes and faults'.

### A robust regime of external accountability

The principals we interviewed described frequent regular meetings in which they reported on progress to middle tier officials. In addition, schools are formally inspected at least once every five years. The schools are highly accountable as a result of this external monitoring.

The classroom performance of every teacher is formally graded on a regular basis through self- and peer review

### 3. The quality of teaching and teachers

#### Teachers are respected but underpaid

Many teachers we interviewed made it clear that they were proud to be members of such a highly respected profession. Though teachers consistently stated they were badly paid, they recognised that pay had improved in recent years. Many teachers indicated they supplement their incomes by working after school as private tutors.

#### The teacher workforce is better qualified than before and well regarded by many parents

After 2000 the government systematically sought to raise the pre-service qualification level for all Vietnamese government school teachers and pre-school teachers, while also providing a 'catch-up' series of summer institutes for existing teachers.

#### The subject group is an important mechanism providing informal in-school professional learning

Teachers are expected to design and implement an annual professional development plan for the year, based on feedback from the performance management system. The teachers and principals we interviewed described how informal professional learning took place regularly through the work of the subject group, which provides a forum for professional development based on classroom-level peer monitoring and coaching.

#### Teachers described how they used a mix of traditional and more modern pedagogical methods

Since the 1990s the Vietnamese government has promoted student-centred pedagogies. Many of the teachers and principals we interviewed suggested that the official push for new student-centred practices had in practice been negotiated and modified by teachers, who had created their own mixed-methods approach. This approach draws from traditional and modern teaching methods. Teachers have been enabled to use such discretion as the Vietnamese system permits teachers to make most of the day-to-day decisions about teaching style.

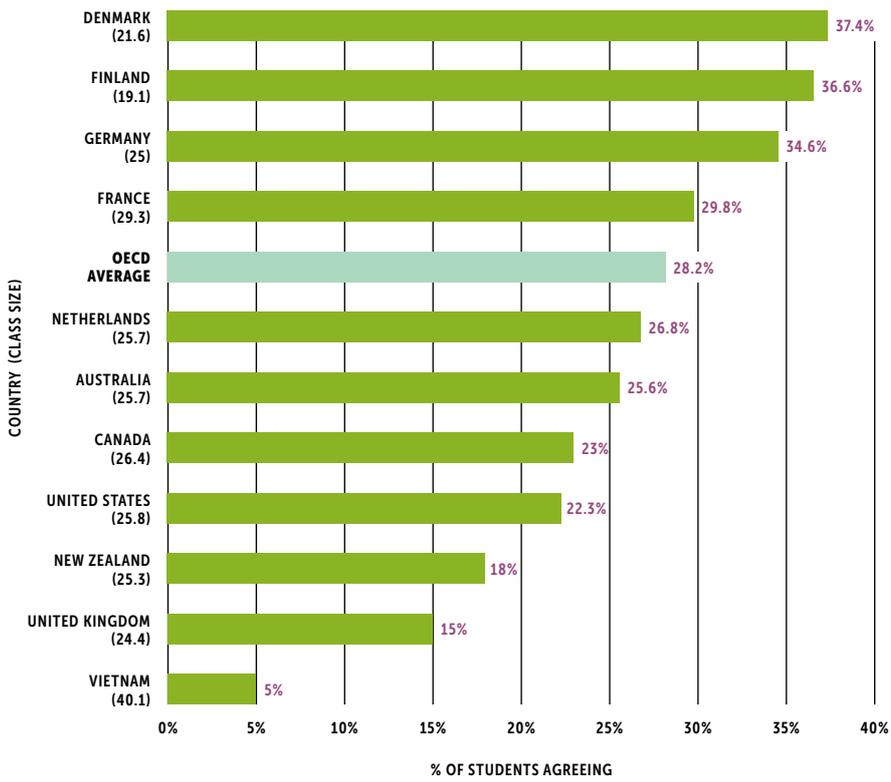
#### High-quality teaching

High-quality individual feedback has been used as an indicator of quality teaching by global researchers. In PISA 2015, students were asked to comment on the level of feedback received from teachers. Only 5% of students in Vietnam stated their science teacher 'never tells' them how to improve their performance. This is particularly impressive given the above average class size of 40.1, which is way above the norm in OECD countries.<sup>5</sup>

Many teachers we interviewed made it clear that they were proud to be members of such a highly respected profession

<sup>5</sup> OECD. (2016b). PISA 2015 results: policies and practices for successful schools (Volume II). Paris: PISA, OECD p.290

PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS WHO STATED THAT THEIR SCIENCE TEACHER 'TELLS ME HOW I CAN IMPROVE MY PERFORMANCE' NEVER OR ALMOST NEVER



#### 4. School leadership that focuses on the classroom

##### **Principals have a clearly defined role as leaders of teaching and learning**

School principal responsibilities are clearly described in school governance 'charters' published by the Ministry. These charters state that the principal is unambiguously the single person responsible for internal management and educational quality. School principals must also maintain their status as teachers, with a minimum commitment to two teaching periods a week. Interviewees from distinct provinces emphasised the time school principals spend in classrooms observing practice, providing feedback on teacher performance (see box below).

##### EXTRACTS OF A TYPICAL DAY AT A PRIMARY SCHOOL IN HANOI

**07:15** Reach the school

**08:00–09:00** Checking the conduct of teaching and learning activities in classes, around the school and in subject rooms (may also combine class observation); checking the operations in specialist rooms.

**09:00–09:20** Reading incoming letters/documents/circulars, scheduling relevant activities

**09:40–10:00** Working with accounts on income and expenditure, approving relevant statements of income and expenditure

**10:00–11:00** Approving outgoing communications, discussing business with relevant departments within the school, i.e. Management Board, General Affairs Executive, Administrative Office, Security and Cleaning Staff...

**14:00–15:00** Checking the conduct of educational activities taking place in school

**15:20–16:00** Reading incoming letters and scheduling relevant activities

**16:00–17:00** Checking the conduct of teaching and learning activities taking place in the school

Interviewees from distinct provinces emphasised the time school principals spend in classrooms observing practice, providing feedback on teacher performance

##### **Principals confidently described their views on the characteristics of high-quality teaching**

We asked school principals in urban and rural schools what qualities they believed school principals needed to possess. All talked of a combination of a strong moral or ethical standing and leadership skills. They also emphasised the need for strong teaching and pedagogical skills.

##### **The Vietnamese model of school leadership is very different from some aspects of 'western' practice**

Principals have substantial in-school power in Vietnamese schools but there are distinct limits to their autonomy and decision making. Above all, they must report on a regular basis to higher authorities outside the school. In staff appointment and financial planning their powers are very limited.

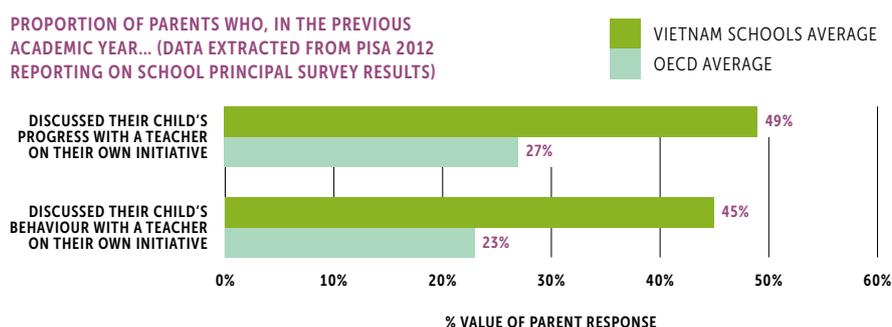
## 5. Partnership between schools and parents

### Parents expressed high levels of satisfaction with the government school system

We asked 350 parents from four different provinces what they thought of their children's schools. Overall, they were positive about the schools and the extent to which these were responsive to their concerns. They respected the skills and professionalism of the teacher workforce. A total of 92% considered the current teacher workforce to be 'good' or 'excellent'.

### Some Vietnamese government schools have good systems to foster parental partnership

Of our 350 surveyed parents, 79% stated they felt listened to by their children's school 'always' or 'most of the time'. Not a single parent agreed with the statement *I never feel listened to*. The PISA data also suggests that parent-initiated conversations about either the behaviour or academic progress of students are markedly more common in Vietnam compared to other OECD country averages.



At school level, parents are expected to make contributions, though this is voluntary and not required from disadvantaged families

### Through the policy of 'socialisation' parents are expected to make additional contributions to their local school

For 20 years the government of Vietnam has pursued a policy known as *xa hoi hoa*, or 'socialisation'. This involved an invitation to service users, local community members and businesses to make financial or in-kind contributions to the cost of running services. At school level, parents are expected to make contributions, though this is voluntary and not required from disadvantaged families. This is both a means of securing additional resources and an expression of the view that service users and local communities, as well as the Vietnamese state, must shoulder the burden involved in ensuring good services. Many principals described how school facilities had significantly improved as a result of these contributions.



# Lessons from Vietnam

**Vietnam provides grounds for optimism. It is possible for developing countries to provide a highly effective basic education system, achieving results in line with some of the richest countries in the world. The story we tell here is consistent with much previous analysis about the characteristics of improving and high performing education systems:**

- 1.** Policymakers have a key responsibility to adopt evidence-informed policies and to be **consistent and persistent** about implementation over the long term, not sapping energy from the system through frequent changes of direction. Implementation in a large school system will benefit from the existence of an effective 'middle tier' which can mediate policy and provide feedback so that, while policies are consistent, detailed implementation can be adaptive in response to the realities of the 'frontline'.
- 2.** Education professionals benefit from a judicious balance of accountability, support and incentives. While there is a role for external accountability, internal accountability systems are also important, including peer review. Parents have a part to play in applying pressure for beneficial change.
- 3.** The quality of the teacher workforce is a key determinant of student outcomes. There is a need to recruit and retain talented people into the teaching workforce. Teachers should be encouraged to use a range of pedagogical techniques, recognising the particular power of engaging student feedback.
- 4.** School leadership is another powerful factor, and the best school principals are 'instructional leaders' who are preoccupied with quality at the level of the classroom. Instructional leaders simultaneously provide challenge and support.
- 5.** If schools can harness the power of parental partnership they can greatly enhance the chances of success as measured by learning outcomes. Parental partnership ideally operates on two levels: parents work together with the teachers of their own children and parents are involved in the governance of schools.

Education professionals benefit from a judicious balance of accountability, support and incentives



PHOTOGRAPHY: BARTCO/ISTOCK (INSIDE FRONT COVER), TRA NGUYEN ON UNSPLASH (P3 – TOP), MELBA PHOTO AGENCY/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO (P3 – BOTTOM), MELBA PHOTO AGENCY/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO (P7), BARTCO/ISTOCK (P10), CUU STUDIO/SHUTTERSTOCK (INSIDE BACK COVER)



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