

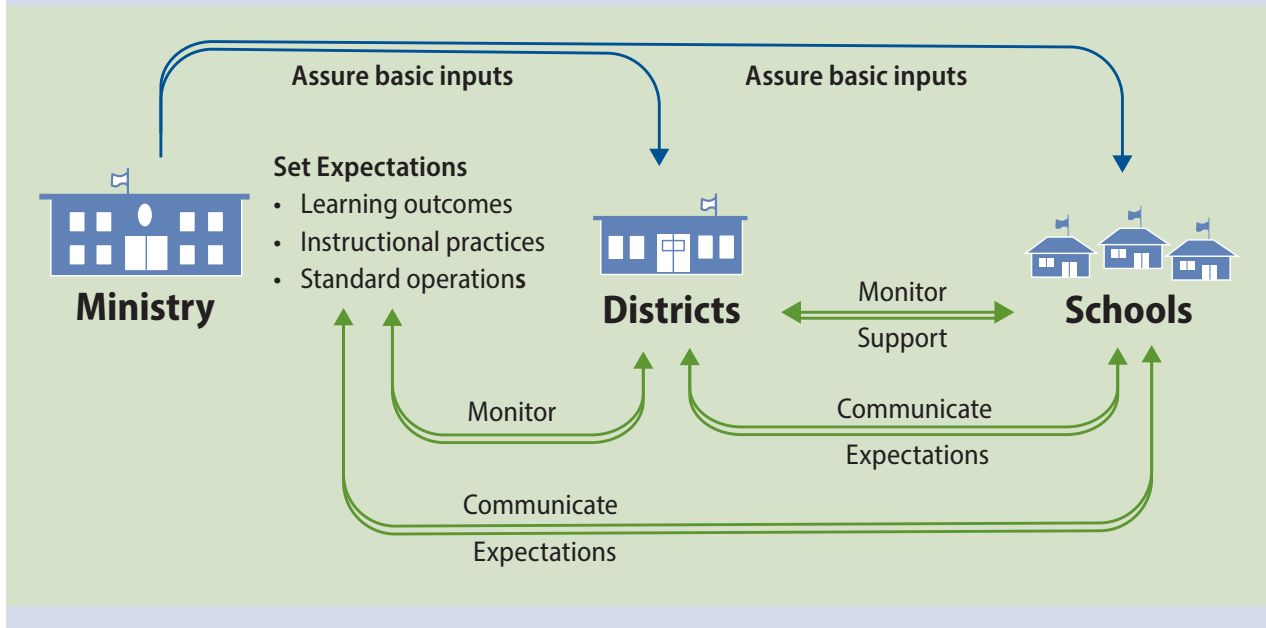
Strengthening Education Institutions

Ministries of education are responsible for a wide range of policies and activities that constitute and administer a country's education system. RTI's approach to strengthening education institutions focuses on improving the core functions that add value to teaching and are central to achieving the system's foremost mission: ensuring that schools are helping students learn.

Understanding Education Systems' Core Functions

Three key education systems functions set the stage for successful teaching and learning:

- Setting and communicating expectations for teachers and students
- Monitoring progress against those expectations
- Providing targeted support, especially to struggling schools, teachers, and students.



Education systems produce positive learning outcomes when they are “coherent for learning.”¹ Setting and communicating expectations related to learning and the actions that support learning are central to establishing this coherence.² Accountability is another core attribute of education systems that produce satisfactory levels of learning.³ Accountability requires monitoring of progress toward established expectations and must go two ways—schools must be held accountable for their performance,

and systems must be held accountable for providing the necessary basic inputs. Schools and teachers, however, will vary greatly in how well they are able to use those inputs to improve learning outcomes. Monitoring therefore must not only track who is or is not making progress, but also target support. Without appropriate, targeted support, many schools, teachers, and students will not improve. There are tangible ways in which education systems fulfill these three key functions, identified in the text box below.

Examples of Evidence That an Education System Is Performing the Core Functions Needed to Support Improved Teaching and Learning

Setting and communicating expectations

Goals of the system, expressed in terms of measurable improvements in learning outcomes, known by actors throughout the system (i.e. when asked, people can say what the learning improvement goals of the system are).

Curriculum that provides specific expectations regarding what children should know and be able to do at specific points (i.e. each term, each grade). If the curriculum does not have this precision, then some other statements regarding learning outcomes standards should apply. Actors throughout the system must be able to say what those expectations are or at least where the expectations are stated.

Expectations for teachers regarding what they must do instructionally to help students achieve the desired learning outcomes (teacher standards focused on instructional practice and behaviors, not on teacher characteristics), and actors throughout the system who can state what those core expectations are.

Expectations for principals regarding their instructional support roles, and actors throughout the system who can state what those core expectations are.

Actors at each level of the system who can state how they are expected to support schools/principals/communities in achieving the desired outcomes.

Monitoring

Periodic assessment of learning outcomes at the classroom and school levels using objective criteria of performance (i.e. not just teachers’ subjective judgments about student performance) and evidence of the outcomes of those assessments.

Use of learning outcomes data at the school level—periodic discussion of how students are doing and about which students are/are not meeting expectations, and evidence of the data used in those discussions.

Monitoring (continued)

Monitoring of teacher performance at the school level regarding their progress implementing the curriculum and their use of specific instructional practices, and evidence of teacher performance data (i.e. from observations).

Monitoring of school performance—how principals are supporting teachers, how teachers are applying instructional practices, and student outcomes, as well as examples of reports that document these areas of performance.

Aggregation of data at the subnational and national levels on percentages of students/teachers/schools that are or are not meeting expectations and examples of reports that capture these kinds of aggregated data.

Support

Evidence regarding provision of basic instructional inputs—materials for teachers and students, training for teachers, ongoing follow-up and responsive support to teachers (when they have questions or need additional help to apply training/use materials); data showing the percentages of schools that received materials, percentages of teachers who participated in training, etc.

Additional opportunities organized at the school level for students who are falling behind (remedial/extra course work).

Mechanisms in place and evidence of their use to recognize teachers/students/schools that are performing well with respect to specific learning outcomes.

District/sub-district levels using data on school performance to orient provision of support, and evidence that schools/teachers/students needing more support are given extra attention/resources/help.

National-level review of needs across schools/districts, with decisions regarding how to allocate resources and support reflective of what that review reveals.

In many education systems, these functions are too often lacking or only partially attempted.

Expectations are often communicated through policy and planning documents, in vision, mission, and goal statements as well as in training curriculum and other documents. However, setting expectations in specific enough terms to monitor progress and communicating them to the various actors are two things most systems fail to do.

Monitoring of school quality typically does not generate trackable data about the degree and quality of implementation of specific instructional changes, nor does it provide actionable data on student performance.

Many schools and teachers go months, if not years, without receiving any outside support. When it is available, support is too often confused with inspection, or is focused on school administration and not on targeting and helping teachers implement specific instructional strategies.

RTI's Approach to Strengthening Core Support System Functions

Helping systems address shortcomings in these core functions is the focus of our approach to institutional strengthening.

Importance of Behavior Change

Fulfilling these three core functions requires recognizing the importance of organizational culture and drawing on behavioral change strategies to bring about system improvements.

In the educational context, the normative environment of the education system and the beliefs, attitudes and sense of self-agency of system actors influence which functions are or are not performed well.

RTI works to understand how these behavioral factors interact with the other system characteristics to determine how well the system fulfills the core functions. Our process engages key personnel throughout the education system in an examination of the current situation, with an eye toward planning specific interventions to enhance the system's ability to better perform the core functions.

Our Three-Stage Approach

Stage 1

Participatory Situational Analysis

What

- Document review and key informant interviews
- Initial picture of capacity strengths and weaknesses
- Identification of priorities (within core functions)

Stage 2

Qualitative Assessment of Factors Impacting the Core Functions

Why

- Identify factors inhibiting system capacity, related to:
- Individual intentions
 - Technical and operational constraints
 - Organizational culture, normative environment and beliefs
 - Political/Institutional constraints and incentive/disincentives

Stage 3

Develop Strategies to Strengthen Systems

How

- Joint review with key counterparts and stakeholders
- Joint planning of first phase interventions

Stage 1. A Participatory Situational Analysis

Helps project teams and stakeholders identify priority areas for deeper examination and intervention, and to take stock of existing policies and practices in relation to the three core system functions through a four step process:

Step 1. Planning meetings with central ministry leadership.

Step 2. Review of relevant policies and documents.

Step 3. Follow-up interviews with stakeholders and officials at each level of the system.

Step 4. Synthesis of findings to identify priorities for further examination and support.

Stage 2. Qualitative Assessment of the Factors Impacting the Core Functions

Findings from Stage 1 indicate strengths to be built upon and areas of observed weaknesses that need institutional strengthening. Stage 2 seeks to determine why deficiencies exist in these areas and what constraints will have to be addressed to improve system capacity. The team therefore facilitates a series of self-assessments and focus group discussions that aim to uncover the following four factors

that relate to how individuals in the system perform (or don't) the desired behaviors:

- **Intentions** of the respondents to perform the behavior
- **Technical and operational capacities and constraints** at key points in the system, and the availability of resources to perform the behaviors
- Underlying **organizational culture and norms** and the beliefs and attitudes they foster in relation to the behaviors
- **Political and institutional issues** that may promote or inhibit the desired behaviors.

Stage 3. Develop Strategies to Strengthen Systems

Following the qualitative assessment, the field team organizes a plenary conference or workshop with Ministry officials, selected district officers, supervisors and support officers, school heads, teachers, and school management committee/parent-teacher association representatives.

The purpose of the workshop is to review the findings and emerging issues, and develop plans and strategies to strengthen systems and address key behavioral, technical, cultural, or political constraints. The workshop should include structured and interactive sessions that will a) discuss the purpose, rationale, and framework of the assessment; b) present and discuss the findings; c) identify priority areas for support; and d) develop specific action

items and strategies to address key underlying issues and constraints.

The agreed-upon plan will specify how to address the key constraints, be they related to intentions, technical and operational capacity, organizational norms, individual attitudes and beliefs, or institutional politics. By repeating the assessment carried out in Stage 1 at a later point in time, we can assess the degree to which fulfillment of the core functions has (or has not) improved—thus monitoring the impact of our strategies for system strengthening.

References

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- ³ Bruns, B. et al (2011). Making Schools Work: New evidence on accountability reforms. Washington, DC: World Bank.

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