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Leveraging the potential of the middle tier to improve education outcomes

The role of a capacity assessment framework

The Learning Generation
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High-Level Steering Committee

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About this study

This position paper is part of the project 'The missing middle: harnessing the power of the middle tier for learning', which seeks to examine the potential of middle-tier structures and actors to enhance management for improved learning outcomes and drive policy implementation. This paper highlights critical knowledge gaps and introduces an analytical framework for conducting capacity assessments at the middle tier.

As part of the project, country-level middle-tier capacity assessments are being undertaken to gain insights into the functioning of local education authorities. These assessments gather information on mandates, staffing, role profiles, collaboration practices, and approaches to recruitment, training, and support. They also examine how the middle tier supports teaching and learning, focusing on data utilization, teachers' professional development, and cross-level collaboration within the education system. The objective is to evaluate the capacity of middle-tier staff and structures to drive learning improvements and achieve broader system goals, offering stakeholders a foundation for identifying challenges and proposing practical solutions to enhance effectiveness. In 2024, IIEP began a middle-tier capacity assessment in Pakistan and plans to expand this work to other pilot countries in 2025/2026.

The project also builds on an ongoing collaboration between IIEP and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) on institutional capacity assessments. The Institutional Capacity Assessment Framework developed by those two institutions as part of the SDG4 Education 2030 High Level Steering Committee's work plan (Functional Area 1) has been tailored for middle-tier implementation, with both organizations working together to refine the framework and further develop and consolidate the research tools. After application in several contexts and additional improvements, the methodology is expected to be made publicly available.

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DEO	district education office
DIET	District Institute of Education and Training
D-WMS	Development World Management Survey
GES	Ghana Education Service
GPE	Global Partnership for Education
ICAF	Institutional Capacity Assessment Framework
IIEP	UNESCO International Institute for Educational Planning
LEA	local education authority
LGI	Learning Generation Initiative
LMIC	low-and middle-income countries
MMDA	Municipal, Metropolitan, and District Assembly
MoES	Ministry of Education and Science (Latvia)
NGO	non-governmental organization
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
PSLE	primary school leaving examinations
RISE	Research on Improving Systems of Education
TDC	Teacher Development Coordinator
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund

Executive summary

The middle tier of an education system acts as a bridge or network, connecting schools to each other and to the system's goals, and facilitating communication and exchange between teachers, schools, and central education authorities. It serves as the connective tissue between central and local governments within decentralized education systems, embodying both national and local education goals. The middle tier contributes to both policy design and implementation by providing local insights to shape national policies and contextualizing education policies to meet local needs. It can be critical in scaling and sustaining education reform.

However, in many cases, the vision for an effective middle tier does not align with the everyday realities experienced by local education officers. In low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) – where its impact on education quality could be transformative – the middle tier faces significant challenges. It is often underutilized, fragmented, under-resourced, and lacking support, limiting its potential to improve education quality.

There has been little investigation into how to address the institutional and capacity constraints that have an impact on the entire spectrum of middle-tier responsibilities, including leadership and management functions, and affect education outcomes. Linked to this, there is a lack of data, tools, guidance, and standardized approaches available to education planners to aid in designing the middle tier and diagnosing constraints. This gap hinders governments from fully leveraging the potential of their middle tier to improve learning outcomes and other education goals.

This study seeks to address this specific gap by showing how mapping middle-tier functions and assessing the capacity of individuals and institutions through a structured framework can systematically examine constraints, categorize challenges, and identify improvement strategies. As a position paper, it reviews the literature on the middle tier, explores the roles and challenges inherent in the middle tier, and outlines how capacity assessments can reveal gaps and opportunities to unlock its potential.

The term 'middle tier' refers to the subdistrict, district, or regional levels of education systems. **The middle tier encompasses the organizational structures and the individuals working within these, which sit between the school and central government levels**. Middle-tier structures and actors are intermediaries in the system, tasked with implementing and monitoring national education policies at the local level.

This executive summary highlights several key messages grounded in evidence that point to the potential use of a capacity assessment framework to help governments harness the potential of the middle tier.

Key message 1: A strong middle tier is critical for effective learning systems

Drawing on available research, the paper starts by summarizing the middle tier's **potential to enhance education outcomes**, through:

- **Providing instructional leadership** through support for school and teaching improvement; promoting professional collaboration; data-driven accountability and monitoring.
- **Promoting system coherence,** ensuring alignment and consistency across the education system, and strengthening connections between middle-tier offices and schools.
- **Translating policy into practice, promoting equity, and scaling up good practices** by breaking down policies into actionable and locally relevant steps, providing implementation support to

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teachers and head teachers, promoting equity by aiding struggling schools, and scaling successful initiatives into broader systemic practices.
- **Promoting professional collaboration** through encouraging team-based approaches, networks (with inter-school and inter-district collaboration), and distributed leadership.
- **Providing better teacher support and management,** promoting equitable teacher allocation, targeting resources where they are most needed, and providing incentives, as well as mentoring and professional development.

Key message 2: Major evidence gaps remain around the functioning of the middle tier and ways to assess its effectiveness

While the potential of the middle tier is recognized, it is still not entirely clear how best to leverage this potential. This paper highlights the main evidence gaps and emphasizes the necessity of gathering reliable data on the functioning and effectiveness of the middle tier to assess its capacity and develop evidence-based strategies.

The paper identifies three major **evidence gaps** relating to the middle tier:

- **Limited understanding of middle-tier structures and actors.** Not enough is documented about the 'who', 'what', and 'how' of the middle tier, and there is a lack of attention given to management functions. Data are generally lacking on staff composition and allocation across middle-tier education structures and the practices of those offices. We found no research on gender and the middle tier. In fact, the middle tier remains somewhat of a 'black box' in terms of available information. Therefore, this paper stresses the lack of tools, technical guidance, or standards of comparison for middle-tier capacity assessments.
- **Complexity of measuring the contribution of the middle tier to learning outcomes.**There is a significant gap in quantitative research linking specific middle-tier practices to learning outcomes, primarily due to the complexity of establishing a causal relationship between the middle tier and student performance. Most of the existing literature consists of qualitative case studies and descriptions of best practice; these often lack generalizability due to their context-specific nature and limited empirical evidence. The paper underscores the need for more robust studies to better understand and leverage the potential of the middle tier.
- **Limited information available on successful strategies to enhance the effectiveness of the middle tier.** The literature tends to focus on analysing the challenges faced in the middle tier, with little investigation into how to address these capacity issues.

Key message 3: We have identified seven core leadership and management functions needed to improve education outcomes

The paper offers a classification of middle-tier leadership and management, by identifying seven core functions that are consistent across diverse contexts and collectively contribute to education delivery and outcomes. It posits that when the middle tier performs these functions effectively, education outcomes are enhanced. While these functions remain consistent, their execution varies depending on the level of autonomy and agency afforded to middle-tier staff and structures, affecting to what extent the middle tier primarily serves as a facilitator or assumes a more proactive role as a driving force for change.

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The seven leadership and management functions are:

1. **Leading teaching and learning.** Middle-tier professionals play a crucial role in translating large-scale learning reforms to the local level by shaping instructional infrastructure, supporting instructional leadership, and adapting strategies to meet local needs, ultimately enhancing student outcomes and fostering continuous improvement.

2. **Managing financial and material resources.** Middle-tier professionals are responsible for allocating and monitoring finances and material resources for schools, ensuring equitable distribution and efficient use of funds, while addressing disparities. Their roles often extend to budget planning, financial oversight, and supporting school leaders, all of which significantly impact education quality and equity.

3. **Managing human resources.** In many contexts, middle-tier professionals contribute to human resource management in education by strategically allocating teachers and school leaders, addressing staffing needs, and implementing policies to ensure equitable distribution. They also handle recruitment and promotions, and support teacher management systems, playing a crucial role in adapting to sociodemographic changes and improving workforce management.

4. **Ensuring accountability and support.** Middle-tier managers historically focused on school quality, accountability, and supervision, bridging the gap between school operations and district governance. Effective accountability involves not only monitoring but also support mechanisms and building the capacity of schools to improve, fostering a balance between oversight and support.

5. **Collecting and utilizing data.** Middle-tier professionals play a pivotal role in collecting and using data within education systems to enhance student performance, instructional quality, and resource allocation for equity, balancing accountability with support to foster professional development and continuous improvement.

6. **Engaging the wider education community.** The middle tier fosters partnerships among schools, parents, and communities. By facilitating communication and organizing initiatives, it enhances community involvement and support for marginalized groups, strengthening the broader educational ecosystem.

7. **Promoting equity and inclusion.** As a cross-cutting priority, equity and inclusion underpin all middle-tier functions. Leveraging their proximity to local contexts, middle-tier actors can identify hidden inequities and implement targeted interventions to address them effectively.

Key message 4: A capacity assessment framework used with the middle tier can help to gather information on its functioning and inform potential improvement strategies to better leverage its impact

While measuring the contribution of the middle tier to improved learning outcomes is complex, a capacity assessment can help to address the two other gaps identified: the limited understanding of middle-tier structures and actors, and the limited information available on successful strategies to enhance the effectiveness of the middle tier.

The capacity assessment framework is composed of nine ‘levers’ that impact how the middle tier fulfils its functions, as summarized on the following page.

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1 **Institutional and organizational structures fit for purpose:** Ensures that middle-tier structures have clear frameworks defining authority, accountability, and multidirectional communication channels, and adequate resources, which are essential for efficient coordination and achieving organizational and system-level goals.

Read more

2 **Clarity of roles and responsibilities:** Emphasizes the importance of clearly defined and aligned roles and responsibilities for middle-tier organizations and their staff to prevent task duplication and ensure coherent operations.

Read more

3 **Competent and motivated staff:** Highlights the need for transparent recruitment, clear career progression, relevant professional development, and attractive career incentives to maintain a motivated and capable workforce.

Read more

4 **Effective public financing:** Assesses the availability and coherence of financial and material resources, and the autonomy of middle-tier actors in budget management.

Read more

5 **Strong learning culture:** Fosters a learning culture within the middle tier by promoting continuous professional learning, collaboration, and innovation among schools and middle-tier organizations, all of which are crucial for adapting best practices and improving learning outcomes.

Read more

6 **Comprehensive school improvement support system:** Assesses the extent of support provided by the middle tier in school improvement planning through professional development, data-driven planning, and collaborative learning opportunities to provide consistent and holistic support for school improvement.

Read more

7 **Effective use of data and research evidence:** Ensures that middle-tier personnel have access to data and evidence, and use them effectively in informed decision-making and strategy development.

Read more

8 **Stakeholder engagement in policy-making and implementation:** Enquires about the active involvement of various stakeholders in policy development and execution, enhancing education outcomes through effective communication and collaboration.

Read more

9 **Cross-sector collaboration for inclusion and well-being:** Assesses the level of integration and cooperation among sectors such as education, health, and social services to provide comprehensive support that accounts for students' diverse needs and enhances overall well-being.

Read more

View the framework in detail

Executive summary

Key message 5: Systematic collection of data and evidence on successful middle-tier strategies is essential to guide further improvement

This paper uses the nine levers as an analytical lens to identify and categorize the challenges faced by middle-tier actors and structures in performing their functions. By mapping evidence from the literature against these nine key levers, the paper shows how the capacity assessment framework aligns with research findings and highlights practical examples of promising practices from various LMICs. These challenges and good practices offer valuable insights into gaps and weaknesses within current middle-tier systems. For some levers, such as institutional fit and staffing, more data are available, while for others, such as data use and cross-sector collaboration, the evidence is less robust.

Although examples of promising practices are limited, the paper highlights a few that show the potential of the middle tier when it is adequately supported. However, the paper emphasizes the need for more systematic collection of data on successful middle-tier strategies to guide further improvement. It also reflects on emerging findings from pilots of the capacity assessment framework in Latvia and Pakistan.

The capacity assessment methodology will continue to be improved through application in different countries before being made publicly available. It is hoped that the increase in data, and the identification of strategies to improve the middle tier, will shine a light on this critical part of education systems and enable its full potential to be realized in order to scale and sustain education reforms and ultimately improve education outcomes for all children.

1. Introduction to the middle tier: the underleveraged support system

An education system's largest investment and greatest lever for change is its workforce (Education Commission, 2019). While teachers and school leaders tend to be the representative figures of this workforce, in all education systems there are other actors who play a pivotal role in shaping the system's institutional context and performance. One such group, and the focus of this paper, is the 'middle tier' (Childress et al., 2020; Education Commission, 2019; Tournier, Chimier, and Jones, 2023).

As countries worldwide strive to improve student learning outcomes, the crucial role of the middle or intermediate level of education systems is often overlooked, especially in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). For teachers and school leaders to reach their full potential and effectively enhance learning for all students, they require a supportive environment where problems can be solved collaboratively and effective initiatives are recognized, encouraged, and scaled. Evidence shows that the capacity for such support lies within the middle tier of education systems.

The middle tier refers to the intermediate actors, structures, and relationships within an education system that operate between the school and central levels. These entities perform functions both vertically, between these two layers, and laterally, across different education structures and other actors involved in education. This middle tier is crucial due to its specific position within the education system, enabling it to network with local-level actors and position itself at the heart of the learning ecosystem. Local education officers work across a range of functions, including finance, human resources, instructional leadership, and school improvement (Childress et al., 2020; Tournier, Chimier, and Jones, 2023).

However, persistent barriers – including institutional, organizational, and individual constraints – continue to impede the full realization of the middle tier's potential, ultimately affecting student learning outcomes. These constraints, such as unclear or overlapping roles and responsibilities, lack of training, and insufficient resources, all limit the middle tier's effectiveness.

In recent years, the impact of the middle tier on education management and learning outcomes has attracted increased attention. Across many contexts, the ongoing challenge of improving student achievement has raised questions about the efficiency and effectiveness of education management in 'education delivery' – particularly the role of local education officers in policy implementation, creating optimal learning conditions, and shaping school leadership and classroom teaching practices to improve outcomes. Additionally, concerns about the successful implementation of education reforms have highlighted the middle tier's critical role in translating policies into actionable strategies – adapted to local needs – at the school and classroom levels, and in driving and sustaining meaningful change.

These concerns have highlighted the multidirectional nature of the middle tier's role and the need also to take a more bottom-up approach to policy-making and planning, in which local education authorities (LEAs) not only ensure implementation of national-level policies but also inform central authorities of emerging needs and challenges, as well as identify and disseminate good practices and innovations that can feed back into policy, planning, and reform design.

Emerging evidence shows that strengthening the role of the middle tier is essential for building a robust education system that effectively supports school leaders and teachers. However, despite the increasing attention on the middle tier, many countries lack practical solutions and tools to evaluate

1. Introduction to the middle tier: the underleveraged support system

the effectiveness of its structures and actors. This deficit hinders the ability of countries to fully realize the middle tier's potential and improve learning outcomes and to achieve other education system goals.

This paper calls for a closer examination of middle-tier constraints, along with strategies to better support and harness the potential of the middle tier in driving education reform. To achieve this, it advocates for implementing capacity assessments at the middle tier. The capacity assessment framework developed by the UNESCO International Institute of Educational Planning (IIEP) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and presented in this paper aims to fill the current gap in tools for assessing capacity at this level and identifying targeted solutions, enabling the middle tier to fulfil its functions more effectively.

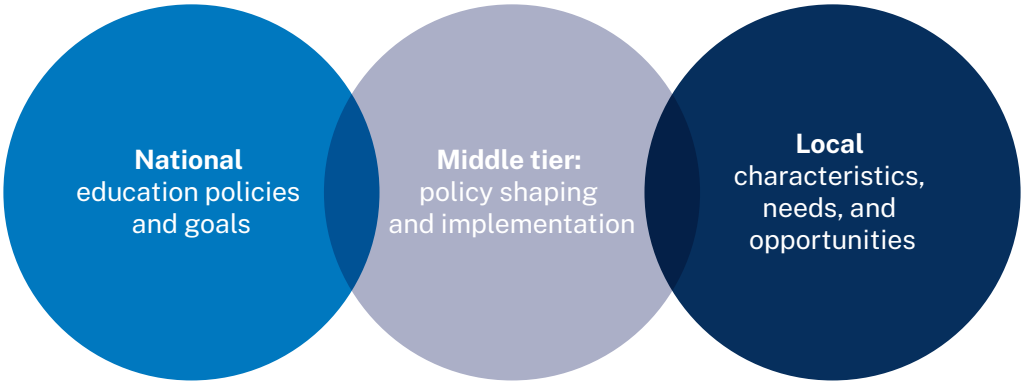
1.1. What is the middle tier?

Here, the term 'middle tier' refers to the subdistrict, district, or regional levels of education systems. The middle tier encompasses the organizational structures – such as LEAs – and the individuals working within these, which sit between the school and central government levels. Middle-tier structures and actors are intermediaries in the system, tasked with implementing and monitoring national education policies at the local level (Hargreaves, 2023; Tournier, Chimier, and Jones, 2023: 19).

The middle tier of an education system is often described as being like a bridge or a computer network, connecting schools to each other and to the system's goals, and facilitating communication between teachers, schools, and central education authorities (Chapman, 2019; Mourshed, Chijioke, and Barber, 2010). This tier acts as the connective tissue between central and local governments within decentralized education systems, embodying both national and local education goals. The middle tier can contribute to both policy design and implementation, providing insights from local context to shape national policies, and shaping national education policies to meet local needs and opportunities (*Figure 1.1*).

While the middle tier's exact configuration varies across countries, its common functions are to oversee the implementation of national education policies, facilitate the coordination of education delivery and policy across system levels, and provide support to schools and teachers.

Figure 1.1. The middle tier, a bridge between national education goals and local insights



Source: Authors.

1. Introduction to the middle tier: the underleveraged support system

1.2. Evolving perception of the middle tier: from compliance monitoring to change agents

Since the 1990s, many education systems have been decentralized, recognizing the role of the middle tier in implementing central government policies, managing relationships between the government and schools, and ensuring accountability.[1] In LMICs, during this process, the middle tier has mainly been seen as a compliance monitor, but this perception is evolving to recognize the middle tier as a driving force for change.

Decentralization aims to enhance efficiency and foster bottom-up accountability by moving decision-making closer to beneficiaries. However, evidence shows mixed results, with some regions within countries experiencing a decline in public service quality due to low capacity at state level (Galiani, Gertler, and Schargrodsky, 2008; Hanushek, Link, and Woessmann, 2013). This has prompted researchers to investigate the role of mid-level bureaucrats in ensuring the quality of service delivery (see, e.g., Aiyar and Bhattacharya, 2016; Aiyar, Dongre, and Davis, 2015; Barber, Whelan, and Clark, 2010; Cilliers, Dunford, and Habyarimana, 2022; Pepinsky, Pierskalla, and Sacks, 2017; Rasul and Rogger, 2018; Rasul, Rogger, and Williams, 2021).

In LMICs, decentralization often focuses on increasing school autonomy and school-level programmes, with less emphasis on the middle tier (Asim et al., 2023: 356). In contrast, high-income countries focus more on the evolving roles and mandates of the middle tier. While the role of bureaucrats has at times been seen as ensuring policy implementation and accountability (Honig, 2008; Peurach et al., 2020), some recent research emphasizes the potential of bureaucrats in supporting teaching, learning, and school management (Greany and Higham, 2018; Hargreaves and O'Connor, 2018; Honig and Pritchett, 2019). Other research and analysis have also indicated that an over-reliance on compliance and accountability from the middle tier can undermine teacher professionalism and limit the agency of school personnel (Greany and Higham, 2018).

Studies in high-income countries also highlight a shift from accountability to support, with middle-tier practices focusing on school improvement, instructional leadership, and problem-solving. In some high-performing systems, the middle tier has evolved from merely connecting levels to leading innovative strategies at the core of the education system, acting as a driver of change when granted enough autonomy and capacity. As Asim et al. (2023) point out, in higher-income contexts, investment in the middle tier since the early 2000s has contributed to improved teaching and learning outcomes in schools. Yet, in most LMICs, the contribution of the middle tier has until recently been omitted in discourses on education quality improvement.

As some middle-tier structures in high-income countries have matured, analysis has shown that in high-performing systems, where capacity is strong and where the

1 The extent of decision-making power and accountability mechanisms of the middle tier vary depending on the type of decentralization reform, such as deconcentration or devolution. 'In the deconcentration model… a shift within education administration redistributes responsibility from central to lower levels, broadening the role of the DEO [District Education Office, equivalent to middle tier], as it is the direct representative of the ministry of education at local level.… In the model of devolution… responsibilities and authority are transferred to elected representatives at regional or district level rather than to bodies within education administration. In such a framework, DEOs face dual accountability: as part of the local administration, they are directly accountable to local government, while as education professionals in charge of implementing and monitoring the education policy in the district, they are accountable to the central ministry of education' (IIEP-UNESCO, 2017: 2)

1. Introduction to the middle tier: the underleveraged support system

middle tier has autonomy and agency, there can be a further shift to leading 'from' the middle as opposed to leading 'in' the middle (Hargreaves and Shirley, 2020). However, the vision for middle-tier leadership does not always align with reality in some countries. In many systems the middle tier faces serious challenges in its efforts to lead from the middle and have a positive impact on education outcomes. Many of these challenges relate to the institutional and organizational environment that enables middle-tier actors to carry out their functions and lead change successfully. There has been very limited exploration of these constraints and how to address them. This paper seeks to fill this gap by highlighting existing evidence and proposing a practical approach to support better leveraging of the middle tier.

1.3. Background

This position paper builds on the ongoing work of IIEP and the Learning Generation Initiative (LGI, formerly the Education Commission) on the education workforce and middle tier of education systems, integrating perspectives from both organizations in the framing of this research. It also incorporates elements from the IIEP collaboration with the OECD on capacity assessments (IIEP-UNESCO, 2022a; IIEP-UNESCO et al., 2021; OECD, 2024)

Previous collaborative efforts of IIEP, the Education Development Trust, and LGI focused more narrowly on instructional leadership roles in the middle tier, where the most available evidence has emerged to connect middle-tier actions with impacts on teaching and learning outcomes. The paper *Change Agents: Emerging Evidence on Instructional Leadership at the Middle Tier* (Childress et al., 2020) specifically highlighted and analysed the potential of those middle-tier roles that work directly with schools and teachers to improve learning outcomes. Previous work culminated in a synthesis report titled *Leading Teaching and Learning Together: The Role of the Middle Tier* (Education Development Trust and IIEP-UNESCO, 2023), which explored the professional practices and positive impacts of middle-tier instructional leaders via five country case studies.

This present paper also draws on ongoing research and work by LGI and IIEP at the country level providing technical support to governments around education workforce management. For example, the LGI report on delivery approaches in Ghana – *Management and Performance in Mid-Level Bureaucracies: Evidence from Ghanaian Education Districts* (Boakye-Yiadom et al., 2023) – explores how district education offices (DEOs) approach policy implementation and evaluates their performance.

In addition, this work on the middle tier is combined with previous IIEP work on capacity development and institutional capacity (De Grauwe and Haas, 2022). Originally developed by IIEP, the framework and methodology for this approach were recently updated in collaboration with the OECD. These assessments evaluate the capacity of education systems and provide actionable guidance to countries to help them strengthen their systems, with the ultimate goal of improving schools and student learning. By identifying strengths and challenges, these analyses offer concrete, tailored recommendations to drive systemic improvements.

As explained in *Chapters 4* and *5*, the paper applies the updated IIEP/OECD capacity assessment framework developed as part of the SDG4 Education 2030 High Level Steering Committee's work plan (Functional Area 1) specifically to the middle tier, testing its applicability and addressing the absence of tools to evaluate middle-tier capacities

1. Introduction to the middle tier: the underleveraged support system

and identify targeted solutions. The exercise aims to facilitate reflection on institutional, organizational, and individual constraints while highlighting good practices within education systems. These practices often coexist with challenges within the same system, as the capacity of LEAs can vary widely. This variability provides significant opportunities to learn from successful practices both within and across systems. By leveraging insights from successful practices, the framework aims to guide strategies for enhancing and optimizing the role of the middle tier in driving quality improvements to education in LMICs.

1.4. Objectives and scope

This paper's starting point is that the middle tier of education systems occupies a key position in addressing pressing challenges in education, such as improving teaching practices (which can lead to improved learning outcomes) and implementing reforms effectively.

The goal of this paper is to provide a case for rigorously assessing the capacity of the middle tier as a way to help address existing gaps in evidence and support countries to leverage the middle tier for improved education outcomes. We posit that truly leveraging the middle tier's potential requires a deeper exploration of the specific systems in which middle-tier actors work, looking at the structures, processes, and relationships to identify and address constraints that affect the impact the middle tier can have.

This paper takes a special interest in the middle-tier structures and actors of LMICs, given the gap in currently available evidence. It is primarily aimed at policy-makers, practitioners, researchers, and development partners working with the middle tier in LMICs, advocating for greater attention to the role of the middle tier and offering an approach to gathering evidence and driving action.

The paper aims to offer a new approach to analysing the middle tier's effectiveness through a capacity assessment framework. To achieve this, the paper sets the following objectives:

- *Revisiting the potential of the middle tier and reflecting on research gaps*: We summarize evidence on the potential of the middle tier and highlight existing gaps in the research that focuses on this level.
- *Classifying functions*: While assessing the middle tier's direct impact on learning outcomes is complex, evaluating its functioning and effectiveness – how it operates – is more straightforward. To set the stage, we classify the middle tier's primary functions to provide a comprehensive overview.
- *Introducing the capacity assessment framework*: This framework evaluates a system's ability to perform key functions effectively, addressing previously identified gaps. We define its levers and provide guidance on the data to be gathered for its application at the middle tier. Additionally, we review documented challenges and constraints at the middle tier and, where available, share evidence-based improvement strategies.
- *Reflecting on the practical applications of the framework*: Finally, we provide insights with examples from countries where the tool has already been used.

The structure of this paper follows the logical progression of the objectives outlined above:

- *Chapter 2* begins with a review and analysis of the potential contribution of the middle tier in addressing the learning crisis. It concludes with a candid discussion of the gaps in understanding of the middle tier and the challenges in building quantitative evidence about its impacts.
- *Chapter 3* identifies the seven main functions of the middle tier, based on the literature.

— *Chapter 4* presents the rationale for a capacity assessment framework applied to the middle tier, its main characteristics, and the nine levers that constitute its analytical framework. It also discusses known constraints and challenges, as well as strategies implemented in countries to improve the middle tier.
— *Chapter 5* concludes the paper with a call for increased research and attention to address long-standing constraints affecting the middle tier, identify practical solutions, and develop effective strategies to unlock the middle tier's full potential. It also examines the practical application of the capacity assessment framework, drawing on recent pilots conducted by IIEP and the OECD in Pakistan and Latvia. These examples illustrate how the framework can be adapted to different contexts, serving as a powerful resource to inform policy-making.
— *Appendix I* presents real-world examples and descriptions of various countries' middle-tier structures.

1.5. Methodology

This paper highlights the need for a capacity assessment framework and examines how it can be applied. This approach necessitates a broad review of the literature, helping to map the existing research on the middle tier, clarify concepts, identify gaps, and suggest future research directions, as well as summarize and interpret the literature on the constraints faced by the middle tier. This paper is not a systematic literature review, but an interpretative overview which can support the development of the capacity assessment approach. The research reviewed is juxtaposed with previous and ongoing capacity assessment work conducted by IIEP (see De Grauwe, 2009; De Grauwe and Haas, 2022).

While we have prioritized country examples from 2015 onwards, in specific cases where information is particularly scarce we have included earlier studies dating back to 2009. The review draws primarily on English documents, in addition to some in French and Spanish, and includes sources from public administration, planning, education management, and leadership. It also considers grey literature such as working papers, evaluations, and internal project documents.

The paper draws on research from a diversity of contexts. Although the focus is on middle-tier systems in LMICs, much of the existing research stems from high-and upper-middle-income countries. Where applicable, examples and policies from these contexts are cited to show potential strategies and impacts relevant to the middle tier.

In terms of limitations, one challenge to assessing the impact of the middle tier on learning outcomes is the lack of quantitative research available. Even where emerging quantitative research on the middle tier exists, there are limitations to directly attributing the impact of the middle tier on learning outcomes (Walter, 2018: 10), as will be further explained in *Chapter 2*. This explains why most of the literature reviewed was not quantitative.

Similarly, qualitative studies on the middle tier have several limitations, with two kinds of publications predominating the reviewed literature. The first type consists of case studies addressing the role and behaviour of the middle tier in the implementation of education reforms or pilot initiatives. In most but not all cases, the studies indicate the research methods and process underlying the results. The second type includes a range of publications that could be classified as 'best practice' literature, which describe what the most 'successful' districts or other middle-tier units do to enhance

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the system and practices of instruction. In some instances, but certainly not all, this prescriptive literature ('what district leaders should do') relies solely on the results of case studies and surveys. In other cases, the scientific evidence underlying the 'good practice' is not even addressed.

1.6. Terminology

The term used to refer to the middle tier varies depending on context. Commonly, the middle tier is referred to as a 'district' in peer-reviewed English-language literature, though other terms such as 'block', 'division', or 'LEA' are also used. Terminology may differ further based on administrative structures, geographical jurisdictions, and levels, with terms such as 'state', 'province', 'region', 'municipality', 'cluster', 'meso level', or 'intermediate level' appearing in various contexts. These distinctions often reflect the administrative frameworks of specific countries, which may include multiple middle-tier levels within subnational structures.

The terms 'institutional factors', 'organizational factors', and 'individual factors' are important to define here. *Institutional factors* refer mainly to the policy, legal, and regulatory frameworks that set the parameters according to which education systems are to be managed, as well as considerations that may impact their effective application. *Organizational factors* cover the main managerial functions that stem from the application of the policy, legal, and regulatory frameworks, and, as such, constitute those areas where education managers will have greatest leverage. *Individual factors* primarily concern the qualifications, practices, and behaviours, as well as the professional development, of middle-tier staff; these all have an impact on how effectively staff fulfil their roles. Additionally, environment-related factors, while by nature generally falling beyond the scope of the middle tier, nevertheless have an impact on the effectiveness of decision-making and should therefore be carefully considered and accounted for.

Middle-tier structures, encompassing organizations and associated processes, often operate under the jurisdiction of ministries of education or local elected governments. Structures and professionals within them sit within a wide institutional landscape. In some cases, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) support schools either on behalf of or in partnership with the ministry of education. Although the literature reviewed in this paper, along with some examples provided, occasionally references non-governmental actors, the proposed capacity assessment framework is specifically designed for government-led education structures. Nonetheless, government entities may choose to involve their collaborators in the exercise. For the purposes of this paper, the terms 'middle-tier structures' and 'middle-tier actors' are used interchangeably.

Middle-tier structural names can also be decided by their associated professional agency, such as the inspectorate or quality assurance division, as is the case in many French-speaking African countries. Although the terminology can vary based on a country's historical and developmental context, the responsibilities of the middle tier generally remain consistent: directing, monitoring, and supporting schools in a more contextually informed and localized manner than is possible at the central level. Therefore, the term 'middle tier' encompasses not only a position within the education system but also the actors and structures that compose this level.

In much the same way that the terminology varies for middle-tier structures themselves, the names of role holders at this level can also depend heavily on the system or

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context. Middle-tier administrators could hold a variety of titles, including inspectors, superintendents, circuit managers, or principal supervisors. Other titles for middle-tier personnel could signify more specific duties, such as data analyst, human resources coordinator, or pedagogical adviser, to name a few. Despite this variation in labels, every system has some type of above-the-school but subnational administrative structure, and within this structure are actors with cross-school responsibilities.

Also, it is important to briefly highlight a key distinction in our terminology to properly frame the scope of this paper's focus. The middle tier referred to in this publication is different from what are often referred to as 'middle leaders' found at the school level. Specifically, this paper does not focus on middle leadership or management roles within schools, such as subject leaders, team leaders, or department heads, as explored in various other studies (see, e.g., Bennett et al., 2007; Farchi and Tubin, 2019; Grootenboer, Edwards-Groves, and Rönnerman, 2015).

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This chapter takes stock of research and perspectives on the potential of the middle tier to contribute significantly to effective education systems. However, even with a growing literature base, there remain gaps in understanding and analysis of the middle tier, especially in LMICs. The last section of this chapter provides a candid look at where some of these gaps occur.

The middle tier can play a crucial role in addressing the learning crisis (*Box 2.1*) by influencing instructional leadership and promoting system coherence and a supportive environment (Global Education Monitoring Report Team, 2024). The purpose of the first section is to briefly highlight this potential by drawing on available research findings, before identifying gaps in the next section.

BOX 2.1

What is the 'learning crisis'?

In LMICs, education policy and practice are increasingly focused on enhancing the quality of educational services in response to the large number of children who now access education but do not have the basic literacy and numeracy skills expected for their age (UNICEF, UNESCO, and World Bank, 2021; World Bank, 2019a). Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, 53 per cent of children in LMICs could not read and understand a simple text by age 10; however, this has since risen to nearly 70 per cent, or 7 out of every 10 children (UNICEF, UNESCO, and World Bank, 2021). Researchers estimate that in the very poorest countries of the world, 90 per cent of children are not able to read with comprehension when they reach the end of primary school. The struggle to attain fundamental literacy and numeracy skills during the early grades and learners' diminishing prospects of catching up as they advance through school are some of the key drivers of what is now recognized as an ongoing learning crisis (UNICEF, UNESCO, and World Bank, 2021; World Bank, 2019a).

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2.1.1. Providing instructional leadership

Instructional leadership refers to activities 'dedicated to supporting teachers and school leaders in their practice and professional growth' (Tournier, Chimier, and Jones, 2023). It plays a crucial role in fostering excellence in teaching practices within schools. Previous work in the paper *Change Agents* (Childress et al., 2020) identified several key elements of instructional leadership that can lead to positive impact for schools and educators, including the following:

— **Support for school and teaching improvement:** Most tangibly, instructional leadership can develop teachers and head teachers through direct support targeted at improving their practices. Middle-tier instructional leaders can provide more readily accessible and ongoing support than one-off training courses. This may come in the form of observations, feedback, coaching, or training sessions. Research has shown that this type of support can have positive benefits for teachers and student learning outcomes, especially in comparison to middle tiers that provide strict oversight and accountability measures (Eddy-Spicer, Ehren, and Bangpan, 2019; Education Commission, 2019).
— **Professional learning communities:** Middle-tier instructional leaders can promote and foster opportunities for teachers and school leaders to collaborate with their peers. Research has begun to suggest that professional collaboration

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can have positive effects for both teachers and students (Darling-Hammond, Hyler, and Gardner, 2017; UNESCO, 2017). Roles for the middle tier in this process range from offering logistical support and helping facilitate the exchange of ideas, to providing accountability that networking actually occurs, to offering professional expertise and feedback (Rossignoli et al., 2020). Instructional leaders can also leverage expertise by pairing school leaders and teachers from struggling schools with counterparts in high-performing ones (Childress et al., 2020; Elwick and McAleavy, 2015).

BOX 2.2

What effective districts do to improve learning

A number of authors have explored the characteristics of successful school districts, primarily in high-income contexts (Anderson, 2006; Leithwood, 2013; Murphy and Hallinger, 1988). The lists of what effective districts do to improve learning outcomes have not changed much over the years. Below are practices and characteristics developed by Anderson (2006). Although it cannot be assumed that these practices are directly translatable to low-income countries, they provide a foundation on which to build the nascent evidence base in those contexts.

1. System-wide focus on student achievement and the quality of instruction.
2. System-wide sense of efficacy.
3. Commitment to system-wide performance standards.
4. Development/adoption of system-wide curricula and approaches to instruction.
5. Alignment of curriculum, teaching and learning materials, and assessment to relevant standards.
6. Multimeasure accountability systems and system-wide use of data to inform practice, to hold school and local system leaders accountable for progress and results.
7. Targeted and phased focuses of improvement.
8. Investment in instructional leadership development at the school and district levels.
9. System-wide job-embedded professional development support for teachers.
10. System-wide and school-level emphasis on teamwork and professional community.
11. Positive collaboration between local educators and local governance authorities.
12. Strategic engagement with government reform policies and resources.

— **Data-driven accountability and monitoring:** Pedagogical researchers have emphasized the value of high-challenge, high-support scaffolding, an approach in which educators set ambitious learning goals for students while providing substantial support to help them succeed (Athanases, 2012; Larkin and Richardson, 2013; Wilson and Devereux, 2014). This principle applies equally to teachers and school leaders and to middle-tier staff. When teachers face high demands with little support, they may experience isolation and helplessness, leading to demotivation and disengagement. Conversely, teachers and school leaders who encounter high expectations paired with strong support are more likely to be motivated to improve their teaching, collaborate with peers, and engage with new materials. Instructional leaders can leverage data and research to foster accountability that

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actively propels teachers and schools towards established targets and goals. Drawing parallels with medical practice, middle-tier leaders can 'diagnose' challenges and 'prescribe treatments' based on research, evidence, and their own professional expertise (Naylor, Jones, and Boateng, 2019). By doing so, they make data more meaningful for teachers and school leaders, enabling the development of practical improvement strategies tailored to real-world contexts.

2.1.2. Promoting system coherence

It is important to note that quality instructional leadership can only occur if the support in place is coherent – that is, middle-tier staff are properly trained and qualified, and there is **consistency across the entire system**.[2] Pritchett (2015: 35) notes that 'interventions will often work to improve learning results when 1) there is enough system coherence to produce a drive for better results, and 2) the intervention is consistent with the existing coherence'. Conversely, even effective interventions will have little impact on learning outcomes if the system is not aligned and consistently working towards established goals (Pritchett, 2015). A common example of misalignment in education systems occurs when curriculum reforms are not supported by corresponding changes in assessments.

While policy reforms to address the learning crisis have traditionally been centred on individual inputs or actors, especially teachers (e.g. training programmes, incentive structures, performance evaluations), the inability to alleviate the crisis has highlighted the **necessity for broader systemic change** (Education Commission, 2019; Fullan, 2015; Leithwood, 2013; Pritchett, 2015). This requires a shift from a sole focus on inputs and individual actors to a comprehensive understanding of the entire educational ecosystem and the interacting factors influencing learning (Education Commission, 2019; Gibbs et al., 2019).

Beyond their instructional leadership roles, middle-tier actors play a critical role in ensuring system alignment and addressing the learning crisis through their work as managers. Interventions are more likely to succeed if they are aligned in terms of information, motivation, delegation, and finance (Pritchett, 2015). Another way to say this is that while classroom teaching matters most, the classroom level does not exist in isolation: understanding how system administration, management, and leadership affect what happens in the classroom is a precondition for addressing the learning crisis at scale. Achieving this requires coordinated efforts at levels above the school to effectively support teaching and learning within classrooms.

Importantly, education systems largely already have the pieces in place – in the form of local education offices and personnel – to fully embody a systems approach without a complete overhaul of their existing structures. However, the optimal utilization of these resources often requires strategic adjustments and potentially targeted investments. Strengthening connections between middle-tier offices and schools may require additional financial resources to be directed at specific activities such as reducing caseloads, enhancing transport, or providing

2 The shift to whole-system reforms has been underscored in recent global education and development strategies, including the *World Development Report 2018*, the *Learning Generation* report, the Global Partnership for Education's *Results Framework*, and the *Reimagining Our Futures Together* report. All these publications emphasize that to bring about sustainable change, reform must go beyond targeting isolated components of the education system and move towards systems thinking (GPE, 2023a; International Commission on Financing Global Education Opportunity, 2019; International Commission on the Futures of Education and UNESCO, 2021; World Bank, 2018).

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material resources that facilitate teaching and learning support.

To take full advantage of these important – and often underutilized – resources as part of a systems approach to education, there is a need to understand not only the different structures and actors at each level, but also their relationships with each other and how they can work together. By focusing on leveraging the capacity already within the system while addressing key bottlenecks through targeted investment, a systems approach can be both practical and transformative.

2.1.3. Translating policy into practice, promoting equity, and scaling up good practices

Closely linked to the issue of system coherence is the challenge of translating policy into practice. While governments develop policies through education plans or specific reforms, weak implementation often undermines their intended impact. While poor policy design may contribute, the quality of implementation is increasingly recognized as a critical factor. Fullan (2015: 24) highlights the role of the middle tier in fostering 'greater overall system coherence' by aligning broader system goals with local needs and contexts.

In practice, a disconnect frequently exists between central education authorities and teachers. Policies often fail to address the realities faced by teachers, compromising system coherence and the effectiveness of reforms. Middle-tier leaders are uniquely positioned to bridge this gap by translating policies into actionable steps for schools and advocating for teacher feedback to inform adjustments. Acting as mediators and advocates, these leaders establish a feedback loop that incorporates educators' experiences into policy design – a practice shown to enhance teacher motivation and job satisfaction (OECD, 2014). This two-way communication ensures that policies stay relevant and responsive to schools' actual needs.

At the micro level, within classrooms and schools, middle-tier actors can be pivotal for effecting meaningful change by ensuring that teachers and head teachers not only understand new policies and strategies but also receive the support and resources necessary for successful implementation. By effectively communicating updated policies or curricula, middle-tier leaders can foster a common vision across all levels of the education system. Since pre-service teacher development programmes have limited capabilities for disseminating these changes (Popova, Evans, and Arancibia, 2016), middle-tier agents are essential in aligning all stakeholders.

Additionally, middle-tier leaders, working across districts or regions, have a unique perspective for promoting equity, innovating new ideas, and identifying 'bright spots' – successful initiatives that can be shared and scaled to benefit all teachers.

Middle-tier leaders can play a key role in promoting equity by supporting weaker school leaders and prioritizing resources for struggling schools (Barber, Whelan, and Clark, 2010). Their success depends on management skills, budgeting, and motivation. They can also facilitate exchanges between high- and low-performing schools, as seen in the London Challenge and similar initiatives in Ho Chi Minh City and Rio de Janeiro (Elwick and McAleavy, 2015). In the USA, strong districts have helped close achievement gaps by reallocating resources to underperforming schools (Leithwood, 2013).

Isolated curricular or pedagogical innovations are unlikely to generate system-

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wide improvements unless effectively disseminated. Middle-tier leaders can play a crucial role in promoting these bright spots, ensuring their adoption across schools to create a more significant impact. Furthermore, the middle tier can be instrumental in sustaining and scaling good practices introduced through national policies or donor-funded programmes initially targeted at a subset of schools. Often relied upon by donors for programme implementation, middle-tier leaders can ensure that targeted innovations extend beyond specific schools, embedding them into broader systemic practices.

BOX 2.3

Street-level bureaucrats: from contextualization to policy improvisation

Lipsky developed the concept of street-level bureaucrats in 1980, identifying public service frontline workers as key links in the implementation of national policies at the local level. Working in the fields of health care, social services, education, and law enforcement, these frontline actors orchestrate the implementation of national policies with the power of discretion and coping mechanisms, adapting policies to local needs, context, and resources (Lipsky, 2010). More recent research goes further, stressing the importance of the context, in particular for developing countries that face issues of state weakness, lack of resources, unequal resource distribution, and corruption (Lotta et al., 2022). In such contexts, frontline working conditions are characterized by 'greater uncertainty and ambiguity because of the politicized nature of bureaucracy… limited formalization of working procedures… and the extreme scarcity of basic resources' (Lotta et al., 2022: 4).

Referring to 'public service gaps', researchers highlight that 'what is required of street-level bureaucrats exceeds what is provided to them for the fulfilment of their tasks' (Hupe and Buffat, 2014: 556). This causes street-level bureaucrats to develop alternative ways of delivering in their role, shifting from policy implementation to policy improvisation (Lotta et al., 2022: 6). In areas with limited state capacity, street-level bureaucrats are called to be practical to create better policies and solve problems more flexibly for the communities they serve (Eiró and Lotta, 2024).

Eiró and Lotta (2024: 73) go further, stressing the relevance of decisions taken by street-level bureaucrats to the specificity and needs of each local context: 'It is possible… that other norms are more effective and legitimized by citizens for distributing resources according to values that are more important to the individuals involved in these encounters… going beyond the formalities can be a way to get things done on a context where there is a lack of state capacity' (Masood and Nisar, 2022), and a bureaucracy embedded in the communities where it serves may make better policies (Bhavnani and Lee, 2018; Lotta and Marques, 2020; Pepinsky, Pierskalla, and Sacks, 2017). Moreover, bureaucrats guided by informal rules can engage in flexible problem-solving, thus improving the quality of services (Mangla, 2022).'

However, further research is needed to investigate the specific roles of middle-tier actors and the bureaucratic cultures that influence decision-making and support for adopting and scaling education innovations. Ongoing studies, such as Research on Scaling the Impact of Innovations in Education at the Brookings Institution's Center for Universal Education, are exploring these dynamics.

Middle-tier actors have a significant capacity to ensure that policy decisions are relevant to local needs, especially when they are accountable to local elected authorities

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with autonomy in certain education areas. The response to the COVID-19 pandemic underscored their ability to address the educational challenges that arise from health crises (IIEP-UNESCO, 2022b, 2022c). By translating policy into practice at both micro and macro levels, middle-tier actors can align the vision and objectives of centrally designed reforms with the realities and contexts of schools and classrooms. In fact, an emerging body of literature is examining the role of street-level bureaucrats across sectors, particularly in the Global South, focusing on the discretion, abilities, and coping mechanisms these individuals employ in implementing policies locally (Hupe and Buffat, 2014; Lipsky, 2010; Lotta et al., 2022). *Box 2.3* illustrates how street-level bureaucrats develop coping mechanisms and emerge as problem-solvers in contexts where state capacity is limited.

2.1.4. Promoting professional collaboration

Professional collaboration lies at the heart of coherent education systems. By fostering teamwork across different levels and education professionals, systems can better align to address complex challenges and improve learning outcomes. This section explores how team-based approaches, networks, distributed leadership, and targeted teacher support can create a more cohesive and effective education workforce, ultimately also supporting both system coherence and better translation of policy to practice.

Team-based approaches

Emerging evidence suggests that supporting learners with team-based approaches that involve different professionals working together across levels of the education system – including the middle tier – can improve learning and other education outcomes (Education Commission, 2019).

Drawing on systems thinking, social network theory, and the evidence for team approaches in the health sector, the Education Commission's (2019) *Transforming the Education Workforce* report put forward the concept of 'learning team approaches': this involves groups of education professionals and relevant actors outside the system (such as parents, communities, and health workers) collaborating to deliver education effectively and address specific challenges. This aligns with Elmore's (2004) research arguing that distributed expertise within an organization and effective use of external expertise are essential elements of improvement, which is a continuous process requiring different combinations of knowledge and skills at successive development stages.

Thus, learning team approaches move away from the current education workforce model built around 'one teacher to one classroom' in which teachers work in relative isolation, undertaking many roles with limited support to try to meet the diverse needs of learners. Learning team approaches help the education workforce – including the middle tier – to collectively focus on supporting students, ensuring that the unique skills and experiences of a wide range of adults working together can address the diverse needs of each learner.

For example, in Bangladesh, the English in Action programme focused on facilitating collaboration between teachers and district staff for instructional support, and the district was identified as a key driver of the programme's success. Collaboration with district officials (Upazila staff) and other education professionals not only strengthened learning outcomes at the classroom level, but improved technical skills at the district level as well (Li et al., 2015).

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Networks

Networks and peer learning models are a form of collaboration that have attracted increasing interest since the turn of the century for their potential role in educational change. While there is a lot of evidence about effective collaboration at the school level, there is less known about inter-school, inter-district, and multilayered collaboratives (Rincón-Gallardo and Fullan, 2016). However, there is some evidence suggesting that the middle tier can foster collaboration between schools for improved learning. In Australia, for example, regional network leaders improve lateral learning among schools by promoting and managing specific goals and strategies with school principals (Barber, Whelan, and Clark, 2010).

Peer learning can be an especially important tool for leveraging middle-tier support for rural and hard-to-reach areas, which often receive less attention and lag behind their urban counterparts. While evidence from LMICs is limited, research from the USA suggests that the middle tier can support improvement in school leadership for rural areas through coaching in communities of practices. Researchers have found that the 'multiple layers of community reduced isolation and distributed knowledge among a diverse group of leader-learners' (Klar et al., 2020: 554).

Distributed leadership

Collaborative network and team-based approaches align with the literature on distributed leadership, which conceptualizes leadership as a multilevel distributed process involving many individuals and organizations that share responsibility and accountability for education outcomes (Spillane and Ortiz, 2019). Evidence shows that leadership from a broad range of roles, emerging at different system levels, can support deep, collaborative learning (Dumont, Benavides, and Istance, 2010) and drive shared decision-making (Katz and Earl, 2010).

In distributed leadership models, the middle tier can play a crucial role in facilitating communication, coordination, and alignment between different levels of leadership and across various departments or teams in education. This form of 'collective leadership' can also strengthen individuals' agency and autonomy, which can help drive innovation and growth while maintaining stability and efficiency (O'Sullivan and Mac Ruairc, 2023). Importantly, leadership in the middle tier also has a wider scope of influence than leadership that is limited to schools. While the effects of school leaders on teachers is averaged across all students in a school, leaders in the middle tier, who usually work with a larger number of teachers and schools, can have a multiplier effect for system improvement (Sampat, Nagler, and Prakash, 2021).

2.1.5. Providing better teacher support and management

The role of middle-tier managers extends beyond instructional support to ensuring that teachers work in optimal conditions for effective teaching. When middle-tier structures are weak or absent, the consequences can include inefficient allocation of resources and teaching staff, which undermines education outcomes. A robust middle tier is particularly vital in addressing the growing challenges of teacher shortages and retention.

Regions such as sub-Saharan Africa and southern Asia are acutely affected by teacher shortages and require millions of additional educators to meet rising demands. Teacher shortages are further exacerbated by high attrition rates, with up to 40 per cent of teachers leaving the profession within their first five years in countries including Canada,

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the UK, and the USA, for example (Gallant and Riley, 2014; UNESCO and International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030, 2024). Such trends highlight the urgent need for better teacher support and management.

Middle-tier managers can play a pivotal role in mitigating these challenges by offering coaching, mentoring, and accountability mechanisms that contribute to strong teacher induction programmes and continuing professional development (Naylor, Jones, and Boateng, 2019). Such support helps teachers feel more prepared, valued, and capable of handling the demands of the classroom.

In addition to enhancing teacher support, middle-tier managers are instrumental in addressing the inequitable distribution of teachers across schools. Inequitable teacher allocation often deepens disparities in education quality and outcomes, leaving under-resourced schools and vulnerable communities further behind. By ensuring a more balanced and strategic deployment of teaching staff, middle-tier managers can help reduce these inequities and promote a more equitable education system.

Moreover, middle-tier managers can contribute to elevating the teaching profession. By advocating for a new social contract for education, as proposed by the International Commission on the Futures of Education and UNESCO (2021), they can promote teaching as a collaborative, innovative, and rewarding career. This reframing can make the profession more attractive and sustainable for future educators.

2.2. Research gaps and challenges in understanding the middle tier

While the initial part of this chapter highlights the potential of the middle tier as noted in the literature, realizing this potential is not without challenges (see *Chapter 4*). To fully understand the role of the middle tier, two main types of data are essential: data on the middle tier's functioning and data on its impact on learning. Unfortunately, such data are either scarce or inadequate, which also leads to a lack of evidence on challenges faced by the middle tier and strategies to optimize the middle tier's role in education systems.

This section examines three dimensions of the data gaps relating to the middle tier: firstly, the limited understanding of middle-tier structures and actors; secondly, the complexity of measuring the contribution of the middle tier to learning; and, finally, the limited information available on successful strategies to enhance the effectiveness of the middle tier.

2.2.1. A black box: limited understanding of middle-tier structures and actors

There is a limited understanding of middle-tier structures and actors, including their roles, their responsibilities, and how they function within education systems. This lack of clarity makes it challenging to design and implement effective interventions that strengthen this crucial layer.

Limited data on the who, what, and how

Despite its critical role, information about the organizational design of and professionals operating at the intermediate level of education systems remains sparse. Fundamental questions – such as establishing the number of staff working at this level, their share of the workforce, and how they are recruited and trained – remain unanswered. A 2022 review by the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) highlights this gap, noting that education workforce tools rarely address non-teaching staff, with school principals being a partial exception (GPE, 2022: 23).

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In most LMICs, data on the middle tier are neither systematically collected nor utilized to support workforce planning and development. Collecting and analysing such data is an essential first step towards unlocking the potential of this middle tier. In practice, central education systems rarely have access to timely, high-quality data about middle-tier staff, especially in low-income countries where public service staff records may be incomplete or outdated. Without a comprehensive understanding of the structures in place, their roles and responsibilities, and the number of personnel within them and their areas of expertise, central-level planners risk encountering issues such as shortages of staff to fulfil key functions and overlapping roles and responsibilities – challenges explored further in *Chapter 4*.

Additionally, little is known about how middle-tier staff use data, drive learning initiatives, collaborate across the system, or navigate the specific challenges they face. To date, this information has not been systematically gathered and remains largely a 'black box'. Understanding the everyday practices of local bureaucrats, their decision-making processes, and organizational culture is essential to addressing implementation failures and institutionalizing reforms. Service delivery reforms succeed or fail not only because of policy design, innovation, and leadership, but also based on how the middle tier interprets and executes reforms. The interaction between reform objectives and daily practices is a vital yet underexplored factor in understanding public institutions and service delivery outcomes (Aiyar, Dongre, and Davis, 2015).

Neglect of managerial roles

Research on middle-tier management professionals in education has primarily focused on instructional leadership, often sidelining the critical administrative and managerial roles that have a significant impact on education quality. This imbalance is compounded by a lack of technical guidance to support the effective design, planning, and functioning of middle-tier structures and roles (Leithwood, 2013). In the Global South, the neglect is even more pronounced, despite the pivotal role middle-tier managers play in linking policy to classroom practice. Addressing this gap is essential for improving the coherence and effectiveness of education systems.

Middle-tier management is not merely about administrative oversight; it is a complex process that relies on the interdependence of actors, processes, tools, and data. This interplay is critical to achieving the broader goal of improving learning outcomes. IIEP has long highlighted the importance of education management, with Sack and Saïdi (1997: 22) reporting that management can improve teaching and learning by improving the 'institutional environment in which teachers and schools operate' instead of leaving teachers to fend for themselves in the classroom.

In the context of education, management involves several critical functions, including:

- providing the mandatory basics (e.g. buildings, salaried and qualified educators, sufficient learning materials);
- overseeing a range of resources (financial, personnel, data, and information);
- guiding the changes and reforms that can improve teaching and learning.

These functions are carried out not only at the central ministerial level but also at the subnational or middle-tier level, where managers are vital for ensuring the operational strength and functionality of the entire education system. As Adelman and Lemos (2021: 1) argue, 'student learning is unlikely to improve at scale without better

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management' (see *Box 2.4*). Ministries of education also recognize this, as illustrated by the following extract from the education sector plan for Guyana:

> *Those responsible for delivering educational services have the capacities to improve learning outcomes. This system-level factor is a precondition for reform of the education system and indicates that there will be little improvement in learning, if the individuals charged with delivering the educational services, whether these are staff within the central and regional ministry departments, NGOs, or contractors, do not have the skills, knowledge or incentive to improve learning, and also if the organisations within which they work are not structured and resourced to make effective use of their skills and commitment to improving learning outcomes.* (Guyana, 2023: 72)

BOX 2.4

Improving teaching and learning with quality education management in Latin America and the Caribbean

Adelman and Lemos make the call for better education management very clearly in their 2021 assessment of education systems in Latin America and the Caribbean, stressing that good management can enhance student learning by scaling up initiatives that improve teaching and learning:
'Student learning is unlikely to improve at scale without better management… Correlational evidence from within and across countries in the region and globally, coupled with a growing number of impact evaluations, show that higher-skilled managers and the use of more effective management practices can improve teaching and learning. Evidence from across countries participating in the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) supports this idea: moving from the bottom to the top quartile of school management quality is associated with around an additional three months of schooling for one year alone. Furthermore, because individual managers or management systems affect relatively large numbers of teachers and students, the marginal cost per student of effective interventions can be very low while the internal rate of return is very high' (Adelman and Lemos, 2021: 1–2).

Although quantitative research data on this topic are somewhat limited, there is emerging evidence suggesting that various management functions and practices in the middle tier positively influence learning outcomes. A few teams of researchers have sought to quantify the effects of middle-tier management practices on education outcomes in low-income countries:

- Empirical analysis in Zambia indicates that Grade 9 English performance across districts can be significantly, positively, and moderately influenced by more competent district-level management (Walter, 2018). Walter adapted the Development World Management Survey (D-WMS), originally developed by Lemos and Scur (2016), to the Zambian context and found that the management practices of DEOs, including operations, monitoring, personnel management, target setting, and leadership, are positively correlated with national Grade 9 exam results.
- A study on middle-tier managers in Tanzania (Cilliers, Dunford, and Habyarimana, 2022; Cilliers and colleagues also adapted the D-WMS) revealed that management accounted for 10 per cent of the variation in test scores, even

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after controlling for socio-economic factors and historical exam performance. Practices such as school visits, the implementation of teacher incentives, and performance reviews were predictive of better district exam results.

Lack of evidence on women's participation in middle-tier leadership roles

It is widely acknowledged that women in leadership roles across politics, health, and business have a positive impact on society (Bergmann, Conto, and Brossard, 2022; Chattopadhyay and Duflo, 2004; Dhatt et al., 2017). Increased political representation of women is linked to more effective public service delivery, especially in education and health (Chattopadhyay and Duflo, 2004). Women leaders are also recognized for their responsiveness to marginalized groups and their positive impact on students, particularly girls (Bergmann, Conto, and Brossard, 2022; Education Development Trust, 2022). Emerging research in education indicates that women leaders advance gender equality in policy (Global School Leaders, 2024).

Recent research has increasingly focused on the representation of women in school leadership positions. In high-income countries, women account for 53 per cent of the total number of school leaders, compared to only 26 per cent in low-income countries (Global School Leaders, 2024). Across 14 Francophone countries, only 22 per cent of students were in female-led schools (Bergmann, Conto, and Brossard, 2022). In several Latin American countries, the proportion of female teachers averages 73 per cent, while female school leaders make up only 62 per cent. Although female participation in schools is high, it significantly decreases at the middle tier (Elacqua et al., 2025).

Evidence also suggests that women in management positions are often better qualified than their male counterparts and excel in teacher management practices (Martínez, Molina-López, and De Cabo, 2021). In Chile, female school leaders outperform males in most evaluated teacher management practices (Weinstein et al., 2023). In West and Central Africa, they are also more likely to encourage and positively address teacher attendance issues. Additionally, evidence from various contexts indicates that schools led by women tend to achieve better education outcomes for children (IIEP-UNESCO, 2023c; Játiva et al.; UNICEF Innocenti and Ministry of Education, Lao People's Democratic Republic, 2020).

Despite the growing evidence of women's contributions in leadership positions generally, and at the school level in particular, our research did not identify studies examining women's participation in or impact on middle-tier leadership roles in education. This is a notable gap that needs to be addressed.

2.2.2. Measuring contributions to learning: a complex challenge

In addition to the lack of basic quantitative data on middle-tier actors and structures, another difficulty lies in measuring the middle tier's contribution to learning. Methodologically, demonstrating the chain linking the middle tier to learning outcomes is difficult, as middle-tier actors do not interact directly with the teaching and learning process, in contrast to teachers and school principals, or with more measurable inputs such as teaching resources or the school environment (Barber, Whelan, and Clark, 2010). The indirect nature of the work of middle-tier actors, combined with the interplay of multiple variables across the education system, complicates efforts to evaluate their effectiveness in improving learning outcomes, posing a significant challenge.

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Correlational studies – such as randomized controlled trials – struggle to produce rigorous evidence on the middle tier's influence on learning, mainly because of the indirect relationship between middle-tier characteristics and pupil learning. Quantitative studies are also not able to elucidate the complex interplay (communication, collaboration, alignment, etc.) of middle-tier roles and actors at the classroom and school levels. The relatively few existing studies on this subject generally do not offer evidence of causal relationships in a strict sense but rather reveal correlations or 'positive associations' between certain characteristics or practices endemic to the middle-tier management of education and specific indicators pertaining to teaching and learning.

BOX 2.5

Why establishing causal links between middle-tier management and pupil learning outcomes is difficult: example from Zambia

'Quality of management at District Education Offices in Zambia, as measured by a context-specific adaptation of the Development World Management Survey, is positively correlated with pupil performance across districts. This suggests that not only management quality at the school level, but also management quality at the superseding administrative level is an important input into education systems. However, this positive association does not provide evidence of a causal relationship – both differences in management quality and pupil performance between districts may be driven by other factors. For example, districts with poor infrastructure may be staffed with both less qualified administrators and less qualified teachers where the former are responsible for lower management quality and the latter are responsible for lower pupil performance, without any causal link between management at the DEO and pupil performance. Hence, this study calls for further research on the effect of management in the public administration of education on pupil learning' (Walter, 2018: 10).

Walter (2018) aptly illustrates the methodological dilemma of establishing causal links between middle-tier management and pupil learning outcomes, referencing a case study on the impact of middle-tier education management in Zambia (see *Box 2.5*). Other research also underscores the intricacy of establishing causal relationships between isolated factors of district management and pupil learning outcomes. Analysing a decade of data involving all public school students and school districts in the US states of Florida and North Carolina, researchers found that 'only a small piece of the pie that represents all the influences on student achievement' could be connected to the district (Whitehurst, Chingos, and Gallaher, 2013). Financial compensation for district leaders is high, with many being paid more than the chief state school officers who oversee the entire systems in which they serve. Despite the centrality of school districts in all the ways described, very little is known from existing research about how important they are to student achievement relative to other institutional components for delivering education services, including teachers and schools. Neither is information available on the size of the differences in effectiveness among districts or whether there are districts that show exceptional patterns of performance across time, for example moving from low- to high-performing. Whitehurst, Chingos, and Gallaher (2013) attempted to fill these information gaps by analysing 10 years of data involving all public school students and school districts in Florida and

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North Carolina, finding that school districts account for only a small proportion (1 to 2 per cent) of the impact on student achievement. The authors emphasized the need for longitudinal studies to better comprehend the effect of district policies and actions on changes in instructional processes and outcomes.

2.2.3. Limited literature on strategies to ensure an effective middle tier

Although the middle tier has the potential to play a critical role in enhancing teaching and learning outcomes and effectively implementing new policies, there is limited literature on how best to design and leverage strategies to maximize this potential. Without a robust evidence base, education systems struggle to identify best practices, adapt successful models, and scale up interventions that could improve the functionality and impact of middle-tier actors and structures.

Since the late twentieth century, decentralization in education administration has attracted significant interest, leading to numerous reform programmes, policies, and studies. However, research has predominantly focused on the implementation and impact of decentralization policies, as well as identifying capacity gaps and bottlenecks (see Lugaz and De Grauwe, 2011). Unfortunately, since the early 2010s there has been little investigation into how to address these capacity issues and constraints, resulting in their continued persistence.

At the same time, the global emphasis on enhancing education quality and achieving better learning outcomes has spotlighted key factors affecting the front line of instruction. School leadership and teaching practices are increasingly researched, especially in LMICs facing severe learning crises. Recent studies have explored training and support for principals and teachers, while some have also examined the middle tier's role in providing instructional support and leadership (Childress et al., 2020; Global Education Monitoring Report Team, 2024; Global School Leaders, 2024; Sampat, Nagler, and Prakash, 2021).

For teachers and head teachers to reach their full potential, they need support from their hierarchy and an environment where effective initiatives are recognized, encouraged, and scaled. This essential support should come from the middle tier. However, if constraints persist at that level, it becomes difficult to integrate the various elements of the education system effectively, making the middle tier the 'weak link' in the educational chain.

Our analysis highlights the challenges of directly assessing the middle tier's impact on learning outcomes. However, it is more feasible to evaluate its functioning and identify strategies to enhance its effectiveness. This paper focuses on precisely these objectives: 'opening the black box' of information on the middle tier to address some of the key research gaps and to help identify improvement strategies.

3. Leadership and management functions of the middle tier

The previous chapter highlighted the potential of the middle tier to enhance education outcomes, particularly in LMICs. Despite its importance, there is a lack of comprehensive evidence on how the middle tier operates and its overall impact on learning outcomes. While evaluating its direct influence on learning is inherently complex, gathering reliable data on its functioning and effectiveness is both feasible and essential. Such data would help in assessing middle-tier capacity and inform the development of evidence-based strategies to fully leverage the middle tier's potential.

To evaluate the functioning and effectiveness of the middle tier, this chapter begins by identifying the key areas where it exercises leadership, extending beyond the instructional leadership discussed in *Chapter 2*. We identify seven key functions that are common across various contexts. These functions may differ depending on the level of autonomy and agency granted to LEAs, ranging from compliance monitoring to adopting a more dynamic 'leading from the middle' approach, where middle-tier leaders actively shape education policies.

BOX 3.1

How have other studies defined middle tier functions?

To provide more context around the perceived functions of the middle tier, the following studies provide summaries of how other source material defines them.

The "missing middle" of education service delivery in low-and middle-income countries (Asim et al., 2023)

- Monitoring, supervision, inspection, and data collection from schools.
- Facilitating school accountability through school-based management interventions, such as school improvement plans, engagement with school management committees, and data dashboards.
- Coaching and mentoring teachers, including ensuring instructional coherence.
- Professional development of school leaders, including development of professional learning communities.

Understanding the middle tier: comparative costs of academy and LA-maintained school systems (Bubb et al., 2019)

- Finance: allocating finances, accounting, financial monitoring, finance returns, intervening in financial issues, audit allocating grants, bidding for grants.
- Accountability: monitoring standards, school improvement, complaints, external reviews, governance support and intervention, liaison with ministry of education agencies;
- Access: admissions and appeals, curriculum, special education needs, educational welfare, place planning, buildings and grounds.
- People: recruitment, training and development, initial teacher training, newly qualified teacher induction, human resources.

Leading from the middle: its nature, origins and importance (Hargreaves and Shirley, 2020)
Leading 'in' the middle:

- Improving performance of students.
- Providing coherence and connection.
- Implementing initiatives.

Leading 'from' the middle:

- Transforming learning and wellbeing.
- Building collective responsibility for teaching and learning.
- Taking initiative to develop solutions for overcoming challenges.

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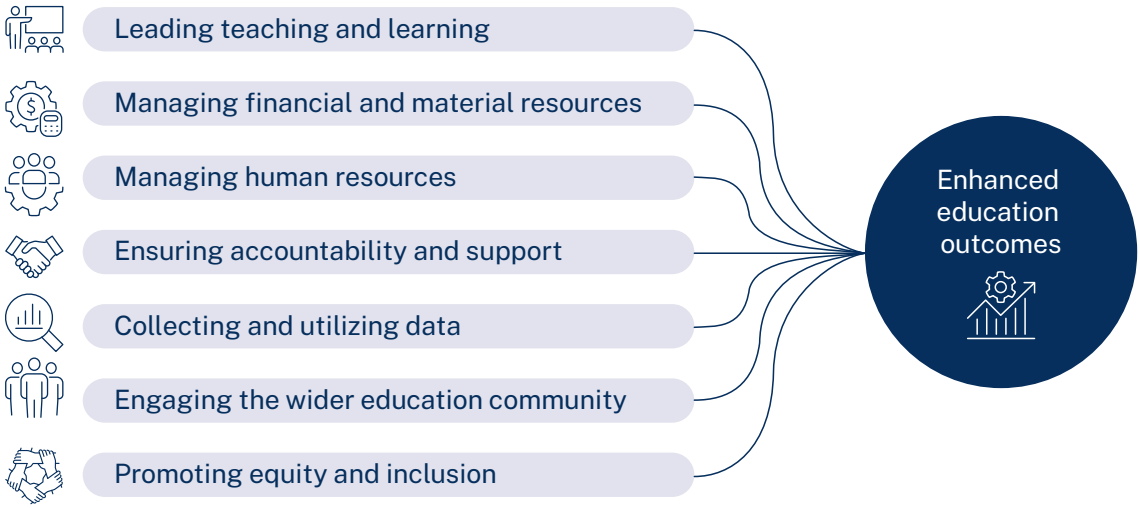
The design of the middle tier in education systems varies widely due to factors such as institutional and governance structures and the level of decentralization, which affect its autonomy. Despite these differences, the functions of the middle tier are similar across contexts. *Box 3.1* presents the scope of middle-tier responsibilities according to various studies, which appear to agree on the middle-tier roles of monitoring, accountability, and professional development. However, they offer distinct suggestions about the middle tier's roles in financial management, access and learning, and infrastructure.

Based on the existing literature reviewed for this paper, seven key middle-tier leadership and management functions are identified (*Figure 3.1*), though more evidence is needed to fully understand their current roles. The underlying theory of change is that when these functions are adequately carried out, they contribute to enhanced education outcomes. This classification is proposed in order to offer a more comprehensive 'at-a-glance' overview of the various leadership functions of the middle tier.

Figure 3.1. Main leadership and management functions of the middle tier



Source: Authors.

The following sections explore each function in detail, providing real-world examples to illustrate their application. These functions are presented in no particular order, as they are not ranked by their share of workload or importance.

3.1. Leading teaching and learning

Given its proximity to schools and mandate to support teachers and school leaders, the middle tier can support translation of large-scale learning reforms to the local level. In this way, the middle tier can shape an 'instructional infrastructure' or 'instructional core' through a wide variety of activities across functions, including 'curriculum policy frameworks, external assessment of student performance, provision of learning materials, monitoring of classroom instruction and policy requirements for teacher education and licensure' (Cohen, 2011; Fleisch, 2016:

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442). In some contexts, districts can either replace or adapt centralized strategies if they do not fit with local realities. For example, district leaders in South Africa developed a new literacy strategy after the centrally run, expert-led process failed to achieve the desired outcomes (Fleisch, 2016).

Recent research has shifted its focus towards the middle tier's responsibility for 'instructional leadership', highlighting the pivotal role played by middle-tier actors who directly assist teachers and school leaders in enhancing instructional coherence, ultimately aiming to improve student outcomes (Childress et al., 2020). Common roles within this domain include teacher trainers, mentors, itinerant coaches, pedagogical coaches, cluster coordinators, and system leaders, all of whom work within schools to support fellow educators in neighbouring institutions (Education Development Trust and IIEP-UNESCO, 2023).

For example, in Delhi, the Teacher Development Coordinator (TDC) programme was launched in all government schools in 2017, laying the foundation for supporting teachers. In this programme, mentor teachers – currently serving as classroom teachers – volunteer to help develop teaching practice across several schools. They organize professional learning sessions, provide formative feedback to teachers based on classroom observations, and act as role models for teaching methods and best practices. In Rwanda, meanwhile, leaders of learning – currently serving as head teachers – have a specific responsibility for developing collaborative professional practices at both school and middle levels of the education system. National leaders of learning facilitate professional learning communities to support head teachers to run communities of practice for teachers in their own schools. Interviewees report the development of a collaborative culture, providing a space where teachers and head teachers share successful strategies and 'think together' to find solutions to their issues.

3.2. Managing financial and material resources

Middle-tier professionals often have some level of responsibility when it comes to allocating and monitoring finances and material resources (e.g. textbooks) for schools (IIEP-UNESCO, 2017). This can include ensuring equitable distribution of resources and monitoring expenditure throughout the financial year to ensure that funds are used efficiently and effectively or to address specific challenges and disparities among schools or departments.

For example, as fee-free education systems become more widespread, there has been a growing use of school grant policies. In these contexts, district officers often find themselves tasked with monitoring and managing how schools utilize these grant funds, which often represents an evolution from their original mandate and changes the way they are perceived by schools (De Grauwe and Lugaz, 2016; IIEP-UNESCO, 2017).

Middle-tier leaders may also track spending against budget allocations, identify discrepancies or overspending, and take corrective action as needed. Depending on the administrative setup, these responsibilities may be carried out at central or at middle-tier level. These responsibilities often include guiding and supporting school leaders in budget management, as well as offering training or resources to improve financial stewardship and management of workforce salaries. In some contexts, middle-tier officials also fundraise and manage their own resources. This is an important and often overlooked responsibility of the middle tier, as having enough funding and the skills to manage budgets effectively is key to enabling most

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of the middle tier's functions. In the case of South Africa, the district manages funds to support instructional supervisors visiting schools and to procure equipment and external services (South Africa, 2018).

Depending on the level of decentralization in a country, middle-tier officials may also participate in the initial stages of central budget planning, working closely with top-level administrators to assess the financial needs of the schools or departments under their purview. They may gather input from school leaders, teachers, and other stakeholders to identify priorities and develop budget proposals that align with education goals. In several high-income countries, the responsibility for education budgets rests almost exclusively with the middle tier. In Finland and Ontario, Canada, a per-student formula helps dictate district spending, and their ministries of education have limited influence over budgetary decisions (Bubb et al., 2019).

3.3. Managing human resources

Another core function of the middle tier is the management of human resources in the education system and coordination of various actors. The recruitment and promotion of teachers and school leaders – including advertising vacancies, screening applicants, conducting interviews, and overseeing promotions – are often the responsibility of the middle tier. In the Philippines, decentralization reforms have empowered division superintendents with authority over these processes, tasking them with forming committees to handle recruitment and hiring decisions (IIEP-UNESCO, 2017).

Middle-tier officials help identify sociodemographic changes that increase the need for teachers, such as rising student enrolment or an ageing workforce. In some contexts, the middle tier is also responsible for strategically deploying teachers and school leaders to schools within their jurisdiction (IIEP-UNESCO, 2017). Middle-tier officials assess the staffing needs of each school, considering factors such as the number of students, subject demand, and special education requirements. This is the case in Lesotho, Uganda, Sri Lanka, Mali, and Guinea, where middle-tier personnel contribute to education workforce allocation to ensure equitable distribution of teachers (UNESCO and International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030, 2024).

Middle-tier officials can play a crucial role in promoting equitable teacher allocation to rural, hard-to-reach, or underserved areas. They can implement policies providing incentives – such as financial support, professional development, or housing assistance – to help attract and retain teachers in these areas. In countries with teacher shortages, they can support alternative certification programmes, partner with universities to expand teacher education, and implement retention initiatives.

Yet, in many contexts middle-tier actors do not have the final say in who gets hired, or where they are deployed, despite their support throughout the process. In Tanzania and Ghana, for example, the deployment of teachers sits with the central government, while middle-tier officials lead the development of teacher contracts and support new teacher registration (Asim et al., 2024; World Bank, 2021).[3] In Lesotho, Uganda, and Sri Lanka, middle-tier actors provide support during teacher and school leader recruitment processes but lack the authority to make final hiring decisions. In Mali, Guinea,

3 In Ghana, teacher deployment is handled by the central government's primary implementing agency, the Ghana Education Service (GES).

3. Leadership and management functions of the middle tier

and Benin, officials in the middle tier offer recommendations for teaching and principal positions, which are then typically confirmed by ministries of education (IIEP-UNESCO, 2016, 2017).

However, it is important to stress that decentralized teacher selection and deployment systems may increase the workload of district and school leaders, and can be ineffective where capacity is lacking. Several countries in Latin America have moved to a centralized management system, for increased efficiency, coordination, and transparency (Aguilera et al., 2023: 5–6). Indeed, there are pros and cons for the centralization of recruitment and allocation. While local teacher hiring can have advantages – such as recruiting local language teachers and being more responsive to school needs – research evidence generally supports central management as a more effective approach. Indeed, while middle-tier offices play a role in workforce support and professional development, they are not always best placed to manage teacher hiring and allocation directly. In some contexts, devolving these responsibilities to the middle tier has led to clientelism, inefficiencies, and inequitable teacher distribution due to capacity constraints. Instead, keeping recruitment and allocation processes centralized can help ensure transparency, efficiency, and equitable teacher deployment (Elacqua et al., 2022). Careful consideration must therefore be given to working out the most appropriate level at which to delegate these functions.

3.4. Ensuring accountability and support

Historically, middle-tier managers have focused primarily on school quality, accountability, and supervision, intending to either evaluate or support school leaders and teachers (Carron, De Grauwe, and Govinda, 1998). Middle-tier functions related to accountability typically involve oversight and management responsibilities that bridge the gap between school-level operations and district-level governance. These functions ensure adherence to established policies and regulations while maintaining accountability across various aspects of education. Examples of specific accountability functions might include attendance monitoring, data management and reporting (explored more in the next section), school improvement plans, testing administration and analysis, and developing and enforcing policies on inclusion and discrimination (Baghdady and Zaki, 2019).

A comprehensive examination of accountability interventions within LMICs revealed limited effectiveness when such reforms, primarily led by middle-tier personnel, focus solely on supervision and high-stakes monitoring. Instead, the review highlights the crucial role of multifaceted strategies such as support mechanisms, capacity-building initiatives, fostering ownership of school improvement priorities, and providing constructive feedback (Eddy-Spicer, Ehren, and Bangpan, 2019; Education Commission, 2019). At the same time, systems that have no or a weak accountability structure can demotivate teachers and school leaders, and make them feel unappreciated or unimportant (Bennell and Akyeampong, 2007; UNESCO and International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030, 2024).

In some contexts, school inspection systems split control and support functions into distinct roles, such as an accountability officer versus a pedagogical adviser, with the latter having no role in conducting formal appraisals, as is the case in Botswana, Kenya, Lesotho, and Namibia (Childress et al., 2020; De Grauwe, 2007). It is important to note that although some countries have formalized job descriptions for middle-tier staff working in support and development functions, other roles are often not clearly defined or available,

3. Leadership and management functions of the middle tier

which results in overlapping and conflicting responsibilities (Childress et al., 2020). This can lead to difficulties in balancing support, accountability, and administrative functions, as will be discussed later.

3.5. Collecting and utilizing data

In addition to providing schools, principals, and teachers with accountability and support, middle-tier professionals also play a pivotal role in how data are collected and used within education systems. This involves a role in routine data collection, such as through annual school censuses, but middle-tier actors are also responsible for using different types of data (such as on school resources, or teacher and student performance) to identify where targeted support is needed.

In high-performing systems, the effective use of data is central to evaluating and enhancing student performance and the quality of instruction, as well as ensuring equitable allocation of resources to where they are most needed. This involves a balanced approach to accountability and support, where data are used not just for oversight but also to foster professional development and instructional improvement (Jensen et al., 2016; Leithwood, 2013). In these contexts, middle-tier personnel utilize data to assist school leaders by offering local benchmarks and performance metrics, alongside broader school improvement strategies. They also help school leaders interpret data to identify issues.

Consistent, ongoing support from middle-tier professionals has proven to be a key factor in enabling school leaders to effectively use data. By fostering a data-informed culture, middle-tier leaders enable schools and teachers to make evidence-based decisions that drive continuous improvement, ultimately benefiting students and the broader education system (Donohoo, Hattie, and Eells, 2018; Leithwood, 2013).

In Rio de Janeiro, the district was able to help schools identify struggling students and provide them with support. As a result, a highly successful catch-up programme was put in place. Using the data to identify functionally illiterate students, and the remedial classes that followed, helped the reform achieve a 97 per cent functional literacy rate among sixth graders, 2 per cent above their target (Elwick and McAleavy, 2015).

The Big Results Now programme in Tanzania, a major reform initiative led by the Ministry of Education, emphasized top-down accountability measures, including the collection of school ranking data from the primary school leaving examinations (PSLE). Schools were ranked based on their previous year's PSLE test scores, with rankings shared at both national and district levels. District education officers collected and shared this assessment information with school leaders via an online portal. The officers then held meetings with school leaders to discuss strategies for improving their schools' rankings. In some districts, district education officers conducted training sessions on remedial and exam preparation. The programme's results indicated that schools at the bottom of the rankings showed yearly improvements in their average PSLE scores, likely due to the increased pressure to improve (Cilliers, Mbiti, and Zeitlin, 2021).

3.6. Engaging the wider education community

The middle tier also plays a vital role in supporting relationships between schools and external actors. Acting as a liaison between schools, community authorities, parents, and stakeholders from the wider community, the middle tier facilitates communication, coordination, and engagement. This can involve organizing meetings, disseminating report cards, and forming partnerships to ensure that parents have the

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necessary support to help with their children's education both within and outside of school. Furthermore, collaboration with political actors, including local elected authorities, community leaders, and civil society organizations, has been shown to contribute to strengthening teaching and learning outcomes (IIEP-UNESCO, 2017).

For example, in Pakistan and Kenya the promotion of community participation falls under the specific responsibilities of the middle tier. This includes community involvement in supervisory activities during school board and parent–teacher association meetings (IIEP-UNESCO, 2017).

Evidence from UNICEF research in Zambia under the Data Must Speak project shows that positive deviance schools (schools that showed better learning outcomes than other schools in similar contexts receiving equivalent resources) had richer collaboration among the district, school management, and the broader community, leading to stronger engagement and support systems for teachers and learners (UNICEF Innocenti – Global Office of Research and Foresight, UNICEF Zambia, and Ministry of Education Zambia, 2024).

3.7. Promoting equity and inclusion

Although listed as a function in its own right, it is important to acknowledge that promoting equity and inclusion is a responsibility of the middle tier that cuts across all functions. Equity and inclusion are not separate box-ticking exercises but rather a set of assumptions and principles that underlie how all the functions are performed. This is important, as middle-tier actors' proximity to local contexts uniquely positions them to address inequities that may otherwise be hidden in national data collection and reporting.

Local elected authorities, through their education offices, often have more detailed knowledge about local issues relating to inclusion and equity, as well as greater autonomy and the ability to partner closely with local ecosystems of actors to implement interventions targeting the identified issues.

In France, for example, assistance with homework and, more specifically, help in learning to read and write are provided by municipal staff and voluntary organizations. Cities have adopted a positive discrimination approach by reducing the prices of school meals for the most disadvantaged pupils in one city, or by providing access to extracurricular activities in another. As stressed by the president of the French National Association of Directors and Managers of Education in Cities and Local Authorities, 'an education policy must be based on the context of its municipal area and respond to the needs of a particular population and local specificities' (Lugaz and Chimier, 2021).

4. Capacity assessment framework for the middle tier

This chapter examines the application of a capacity assessment framework to the middle tier. Given that improved education outcomes rely on middle-tier functions being carried out effectively, this framework offers a structured approach to enhancing middle-tier performance. It identifies nine key levers to assess how well the middle tier is equipped to fulfil its roles. Optionally, stakeholders can use the framework to grade their systems, identifying the functions requiring improvement.

This approach not only provides actionable insights for strengthening middle-tier capacity but also highlights good practices within education systems. Importantly, these good practices often coexist with challenges, as the capacities of LEAs can vary significantly within a single system. Such variability presents valuable opportunities to learn from successful practices both within and across different systems, fostering continuous improvement.

4.1. Rationale for a capacity assessment framework at the middle tier

As highlighted in *Chapter 2*, data on the functioning of the middle tier and its impact on learning outcomes are scarce. The 2022 GPE study, which analysed education workforce diagnostics and tools, emphasized that existing tools lack comprehensive data on 'education workforce categories providing pedagogical/professional and administrative support to teaching and learning, especially those at the intermediate levels' (GPE, 2022: 23). Developing a capacity assessment framework for the middle tier is essential to filling this knowledge gap and guiding evidence-based improvement strategies.

The framework will explore the internal dynamics of the middle tier through nine key levers that enable it to successfully fulfil its functions, as well as provide a better understanding of everyday practices among middle-tier actors. It will aim to answer questions such as: Who works in the middle tier? How are these individuals trained and recruited? How do they drive learning efforts and influence policy-making? How do they use data and collaborate with other levels of the education system?

The framework will provide ministries of education with a foundation for evidence-informed decisions and strategies to strengthen middle-tier management. It will also help in identifying locally relevant practices that can be replicated or scaled. On a global scale, developing a capacity assessment framework for middle tiers can enhance the knowledge base about these structures and the personnel within them.

4.1.1. What is 'capacity'?

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) defines capacity as 'the ability of individuals, institutions, and societies to perform functions, solve problems, and set and achieve objectives in a sustainable manner' (UNDP, 2010: 2). Distinctions can be made in terminology, where *competence* is an individual attribute, *capability* an organizational attribute, and *capacity* a combination of the two (De Grauwe, 2009: 48).

Capacity development focuses on strengthening these competencies and capabilities. According to the UNDP, capacity development is 'the process through which individuals, organizations, and societies obtain, strengthen, and maintain the capabilities to set and achieve their own development objectives over time' (UNDP, 2008: 4). De Grauwe (2009: 53) defines capacity development as 'any activity which aims explicitly at strengthening [an administration] so that it can better achieve its development objectives by having a positive and sustainable impact'. Capacity

4. Capacity assessment framework for the middle tier

development may have impacts on both individual officers and the organizational and public administration aspects of an education system (De Grauwe, 2009).

Framework projects developed to understand the capacity of public administrations seek to achieve several objectives. First, they aim to clearly analyse the functioning and effectiveness of education administrations (De Grauwe and Haas, 2022). Secondly, frameworks that assist in establishing capacity can contribute to evidence-informed policy-making for good governance (OECD, 2020). Finally, they can help countries and education systems identify capacity gaps to reach development objectives (UNDP, 2008: 5).

4.1.2. Why 'capacity assessment'?

Capacity analysis and capacity assessment serve different purposes. While capacity analysis aims to diagnose institutional challenges and inefficiencies, capacity assessment seeks to measure existing capacities against desired levels, setting a baseline for monitoring and evaluating progress over time (UNDP, 2008: 5).

In the context of capacity analyses, the goal is to conduct a comprehensive diagnosis to understand challenges, bottlenecks, and inefficiencies, and to suggest improvement strategies based on good practices (De Grauwe and Haas, 2022: 3). With capacity assessments, the framework allows countries to evaluate their performance across various levers, with gradings ranging from 'Latent' to 'Advanced', using diverse data sources. The framework can be customized to focus on specific levers based on the user's objectives. It evaluates the middle tier's effectiveness and incorporates a visual assessment grid (e.g. a spider or radar chart) to highlight strengths and weaknesses across levers. This allows countries to visualize areas needing improvement at a glance.

4.2. Using the framework

The framework is flexible and adaptable, offering three key advantages: it can be implemented at both central and decentralized levels, tailored to specific dimensions of interest, and used as an assessment framework. For instance, the OECD applied the framework in Latvia across central and municipal levels, focusing on five key levers. Similarly, in Pakistan, the framework was adapted for middle-tier implementation, focusing on five levers and involving stakeholders such as school leaders and teachers. Additionally, gender-specific questions were incorporated into the data collection process. Preliminary findings from these analyses are discussed in *Chapter 5*.

We recognize that countries and education systems already have many tools and frameworks, such as education sector analyses, to evaluate their systems. Rather than being an additional task, the capacity assessment of the middle tier should complement and integrate with existing analyses.

One of the framework's key strengths is its adaptability to the specificities of each country's administration and middle-tier organization. It is designed to allow stakeholders at both the national and local levels to identify the most relevant aspects of the assessment framework – the levers – on which to focus. Due to the middle tier's unique position between the central and local levels, its adaptation and use require discussions among all three categories of actors: central, middle tier, and local.

Moreover, careful consideration must be given to the choice of respondents. Participants can be selected across functions, or alternatively the decision can be made to gather insights from specific role holders with particular functions. For example, it may not be feasible to interview role holders who span across all seven functions. Instead, it may be decided to

4. Capacity assessment framework for the middle tier

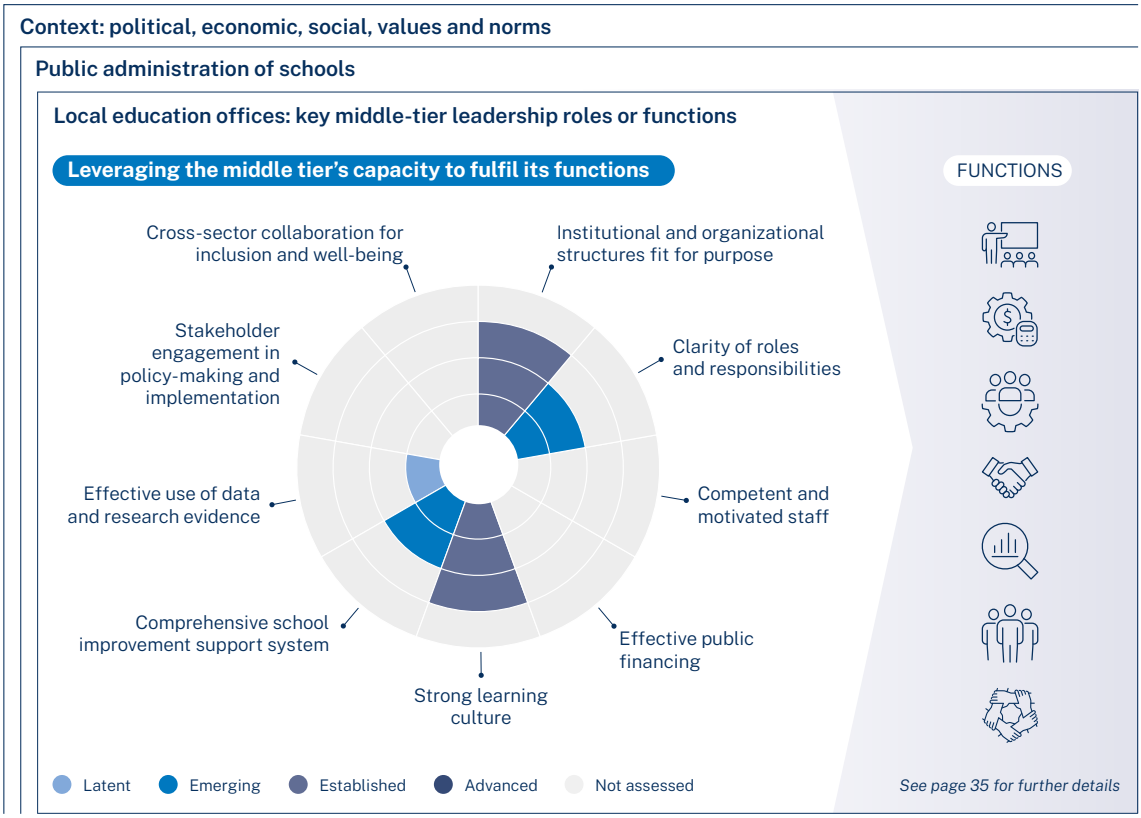
focus on role holders involved in financial and material resource management to gain specific insights into those aspects, or to focus on instructional leaders or human resource managers, depending on the area of interest. These decisions will also affect the number of levers to be investigated.

The insights gained and the resulting policy recommendations should be broadly discussed with education stakeholders and collectively agreed upon for implementation. These insights may include, for example, the need to create professional development programmes for middle-tier actors, revise job descriptions and organizational charts, or reform fund procurement mechanisms at the middle tier.

To facilitate action, these recommendations can be organized into an action map and work breakdown structure, with clear assignment of responsibilities and a defined timeline.

Governments can choose to use the framework solely for analysis or go a step further by incorporating the assessment component. While the framework may initially focus on the analysis dimension, the ultimate goal is to use it as a comprehensive assessment framework (see *Figure 4.1*). Through learning from its implementation in various countries, the framework will continually be improved, identifying key criteria that define a successful middle tier.

Figure 4.1. Middle tier capacity assessment framework



Source: Adapted by the authors for the middle tier from OECD, 2024 (based on IIEP-UNESCO et al., 2021, ch. 13).

4. Capacity assessment framework for the middle tier

Figure 4.1 shows an illustrative example of a country using the capacity assessment framework. In this case, the fictitious country focused on five levers, with certain areas left unranked (shown in grey). The assessment revealed that one lever ('Effective use of data and research') was ranked as Latent, while two ('Clarity of roles and responsibilities' and 'Comprehensive school improvement support system') were ranked as Emerging, and another two ('Strong learning culture' and 'Institutional and organizational structures fit for purpose') as Established. None of the levers was ranked as Advanced.

4.3. Background and evolution of the current capacity assessment framework

This project builds on the institutional capacity assessment framework presented in the *Education Sector Analysis Methodological Guidelines*, volume 3 (IIEP-UNESCO et al., 2021). This framework has been implemented in various countries around the globe and has proven its merits (De Grauwe and Haas, 2022; UNESCO, 2020).

IIEP has partnered with the OECD to revise the capacity assessment framework, as part of the implementation of the SDG4 Education 2030 High Level Steering Committee's work plan for strengthening the institutional capacities of education systems to use data and evidence for policy, planning, and implementation (Functional Area 1).

The revised framework addresses areas that were insufficiently recognized in the earlier version. For instance, greater emphasis is now placed on the use of data and research evidence for policy-making and planning. The revised framework also highlights the importance of fostering a strong learning culture within organizations and building a comprehensive improvement support system to help schools enhance teaching quality and student learning outcomes.

The technical support provided by IIEP and the OECD in this area – along with other policy-related support and developments in the literature, including other capacity analysis frameworks – has informed and should continue to inform the refinement and application of the framework. Work by the OECD on learning organizations and school improvement support systems played a significant role in shaping the new levers (Kools and Stoll, 2016). Similarly, shifts in public administration thinking, particularly the paradigmatic transition associated with the New Public Governance movement, have contributed to its evolution. This movement emphasizes principles such as organizational learning, trust, systems thinking, and networking, all of which are reflected in the revised framework.

The framework and associated data collection instruments – interview guides and questionnaires – are evolving and will continue to improve through collaboration between IIEP and the OECD. These refinements, driven by applications in diverse contexts, aim to finalize a publicly available methodology.

4.4. Nine levers for analysing, assessing, and strengthening the middle tier

The capacity assessment framework for the middle tier is based on nine levers, outlined below, which serve to strengthen the middle tier and improve its ability to effectively fulfil its functions. While some overlap between the levers is inevitable, information gathered from one lever may prove valuable for analysing others. *Table 4.1* provides a non-exhaustive overview of the types of information to be collected under each lever.

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Each lever is accompanied by a box illustrating the challenges and constraints identified in existing literature, with practical examples from various countries, particularly LMICs. These examples, gathered through a non-systematic literature review, are not exhaustive but serve to highlight commonly cited issues. While the focus is on LMICs, many of these challenges also exist in higher-income countries. The literature provides more examples for certain levers (such as institutional structures, as well as competent and motivated staff), while fewer references are available for others (such as data availability and use, cross-sectoral collaboration, and learning culture). In addition to challenges, this section highlights promising practices, though their availability in the literature also varies, with more examples for roles, responsibilities, and staff competence, and fewer for other levers.

Table 4.1. Examples of what the framework gathers insights on

Click on the levers to learn more

Lever	What the framework gathers insights on
Lever 1 Institutional and organizational structures fit for purpose Ensures that middle-tier structures have clear frameworks defining authority, accountability, and multidirectional communication channels, and adequate resources, which are essential for efficient coordination and achieving organizational and system-level goals.	• Existence and application of institutional and policy frameworks • Access to sufficient resources (human, financial, technological) to complete tasks and objectives • Formal mechanisms for horizontal and vertical coordination • Coherent staff allocation • Autonomy in decision-making
Lever 2 Clarity of roles and responsibilities Emphasizes the importance of clearly defined and aligned roles and responsibilities for middle-tier organizations and their staff to prevent task duplication and ensure coherent operations.	• Clear mandate, objectives, or standards • Roles and responsibilities are clear to staff and match their work assignments
Lever 3 Competent and motivated staff Highlights the need for transparent recruitment, clear career progression, relevant professional development, and attractive career incentives to maintain a motivated and capable workforce.	• Effective recruitment processes • Skills or experience to achieve assigned tasks • Availability of relevant continuing professional development • Career and performance incentives • Staff turnover • Job satisfaction, work–life balance, and well-being
Lever 4 Effective public financing Assesses the availability and coherence of financial and material resources, and the autonomy of middle-tier actors in budget management.	• Authority in budget design and management • Levels of funding and disbursement • Capacity in fund management and disbursement

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Lever	What the framework gathers insights on
Lever 5 Strong learning culture Fosters a learning culture within the middle tier by promoting continuous professional learning, collaboration, and innovation among schools and middle-tier organizations, all of which are crucial for adapting best practices and improving learning outcomes.	• Shared vision and alignment around system goals • Professional development plan • Collaborative opportunities for working and learning within and across education offices • Culture of enquiry, experimentation, and innovation
Lever 6 Comprehensive school improvement support system Assesses the extent of support provided by the middle tier in school improvement planning through professional development, data-driven planning, and collaborative learning opportunities to provide consistent and holistic support for school improvement.	• Roles and responsibilities for school improvement planning, appraisal, and support are clear • Data and research evidence are used for planning and targeting school improvements • Opportunities for school-to-school collaboration and peer learning communities • Knowledge-brokering • Access to digital learning infrastructure
Lever 7 Effective use of data and research evidence Ensures that middle-tier personnel have access to data and evidence, and use them effectively in informed decision-making and strategy development.	• Roles and responsibilities for school quality monitoring are clear • Access to relevant, user-friendly, and timely data on learning assessments and school quality monitoring • Access to relevant research evidence • Data capacity analysis and skills • Frequency of data use • Purpose of data use
Lever 8 Stakeholder engagement in policy-making and implementation Enquires about the active involvement of various stakeholders in policy development and execution, enhancing education outcomes through effective communication and collaboration.	• Stakeholder engagement among school communities and local actors • Participation in local-level planning and implementation processes • Formal implication and consultation in national plan preparation and implementation
Lever 9 Cross-sector collaboration for inclusion and well-being Assesses the level of integration and cooperation among sectors such as education, health, and social services to provide comprehensive support that accounts for students' diverse needs and enhances overall well-being.	• Mechanisms for intersectoral collaboration between education, health, employment, social services, and urban development • Development of joint activities • Focus on gender, minorities, and disability

4.4.1. Lever 1. Institutional and organizational structures fit for purpose

Appropriate institutional and organizational structures ensure that all organizations work effectively towards realizing system-level objectives. They define authority, accountability, and multilevel communication channels, avoiding task duplication and clarifying roles across organizational levels and units. This enables efficient coordination and ensures that all units work effectively towards their own objectives and broader organizational goals (OECD, 2024).

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Without such structures, organizations risk role confusion, duplication of tasks, and communication breakdowns, leading to inefficiencies and failure to meet objectives. For structures to succeed, clear mandates, effective coordination, sufficient staffing, continuity, adequate resources, and autonomy in financial and resource management are essential. This also includes analysing and identifying missing structures that might be needed for the system to work in a more effective way (Bryson, George, and Seo, 2024; De Grauwe et al., 2011: 142–149; Ehren and Baxter, 2020; George, Walker, and Monster, 2019; Healey and Crouch, 2012; OECD, 2019: 135–183; Provan and Kenis, 2008).

Contradictory, overlapping, competing, or conflicting mandates can emerge among different levels or bodies of an education system and result in duplication of tasks, gaps in responsibilities, inefficiencies, or confusion of priorities for middle tier leaders and personnel. Research conducted in India, Sri Lanka, and Nepal noted that middle tier staff had some overlapping responsibilities with the teaching workforce, creating confusion and inefficiencies, which ultimately led to the diminished effectiveness of teacher support and development initiatives (Gibbs et al., 2019; Pillay et al., 2017; Sethunga et al., 2016). In South Africa, research indicates that the provincial offices often misinterpreted and overstepped their official mandate by imposing on the district offices 'frequent and unplanned initiatives… District Officers regarded these as resulting in competing priorities, hence hindering their strategies' (Mthembu, 2018: 184).

Multiple lines of accountability can occur under devolution frameworks, where education officers belong to the local government administration while being in charge of implementing the national education policy. They fall under a double system of accountability (UNESCO, 2017: 2). This is also a challenge in deconcentration frameworks, where the middle tier is the representative of the central ministry of education at the local level. In this case, some decisions are shared between the central and local levels, which creates confusion. This issue has been raised in Lesotho: 'The implications of these dual lines of command are, on the one hand, a certain amount of confusion among staff of the District Education Office and, on the other hand, a continued reference among many staff members to the central level personnel, which could represent an impediment to a policy of decentralization' (De Grauwe et al., 2011: 121).

Insufficient staffing and incoherent allocation of staff can prevent middle tier staff from achieving their functions. This is a simple matter of numbers: there are often insufficient personnel to complete or oversee all objectives and tasks. In Senegal, inspectors faced ratios as high as one inspector per 320 teachers, far exceeding recommended levels and limiting their ability to provide adequate support (IIEP-UNESCO, 2023b). In South Africa an Education Sector Report found that districts were 'not optimally organised', with districts having responsibility for various numbers of schools – either more or less than the national norm (South Africa, 2016a).

Insufficient access to financial and material resources also impacts the ability of middle tier staff to undertake their tasks. For example, funding shortages for transportation can significantly hinder personnel from regularly visiting schools, which is essential for fulfilling their roles in accountability, support, and leading teaching and learning. This may also further perpetuate inequality in certain systems or regions. In Zimbabwe, district officials were found to visit rural schools only once every four years, compared with the national average of every two-and-a-half years (Education Commission, 2019). Given insufficient funding, some district officials

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might be incentivized to target those schools with more resources where they might be paid per diems to visit. There may also be a lack of office space or equipment (such as computers, software, phone service, and so on) that officials need in order to complete their jobs. In Ghana, a combination of material and financial shortages constrained the middle tier's core functions. Middle tier personnel lacked fuel for school inspections, computers for data analysis, and funds for rewarding high-performing schools (Boakye-Yiadom et al., 2023).

The framework will seek to gather insights into whether LEAs are adequately set up to fulfil their functions from an institutional and organizational point of view. The institutional perspective focuses on the broader structural and governance frameworks that define and support the functions of an organization. Here, the focus is on whether the institution has the necessary mandates, authority, and connections with other institutions or government bodies to carry out its functions effectively. The organizational perspective looks at the internal structures, processes, and autonomy in decision-making. It ensures that the systems and resources are in place for smooth and effective functioning on a day-to-day basis.

The framework will gather insights on: the existence and application of institutional and policy frameworks; access to sufficient resources (human, financial, technological) to complete tasks and objectives; formal mechanisms for horizontal and vertical coordination; coherent staff allocation and adequate recruitment processes; and autonomy in decision-making.

BOX 4.1

Promising practice – ensuring that there are enough middle-tier staff to support teachers in Delhi

The Teacher Development Coordinator (TDC) programme in Delhi provides an interesting example of an education system creating new roles to supplement insufficient staffing at the middle tier.
Beginning in 2015, the Delhi government placed a heavy emphasis on education, enacting a number of reforms and new programmes, and doubling education budget allocations (BBC, 2015; Sisodia, 2019). A new initiative in the middle tier emerged among these reforms – the TDC programme. As part of the programme, practising teachers are selected to take middle-tier roles as 'mentor teachers', working in a small group of schools to lead professional learning sessions and provide feedback to teachers based on classroom observation.
However, planners quickly realized that working with even a handful of schools meant that mentor teachers would be responsible for supporting hundreds of teachers. So a new role was developed at the school level – the TDC. TDCs are practising teachers who also work to further implement the goals of mentor teachers and facilitate a collaborative working environment that focuses on teaching and learning. By working in conjunction with mentor teachers, TDCs can provide support and professional learning opportunities for a much wider pool of teachers than mentor teachers could on their own.

Source: Tournier, Chimier, and Jones (2023); Childress (2023).

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4.4.2. Lever 2. Clarity of roles and responsibilities

For middle-tier staff to take strategic action, their priorities must be clearly indicated. Research shows that without this clarity, they may resort to setting ad hoc priorities and adhering strictly to formalized rules, rather than taking the initiative to foster instructional improvements or support (George, Walker, and Monster, 2019; IIEP-UNESCO et al., 2021). Ensuring that roles and responsibilities are clearly defined, achievable, and aligned with staff tasks, while granting autonomy and agency, is essential. This clarity prevents task duplication, overlap, and gaps, ensuring seamless operations across different units and governance levels within the organization or education system (OECD, 2024).

This lever also looks at whether the roles and responsibilities of organizations are clear to the staff within them and to other organizations, and whether organizations' activities exceed their remit. This helps to identify where there are overlaps or duplications of roles and responsibilities both within and beyond organizations (Bryson, George, and Seo, 2024; IIEP-UNESCO et al., 2021; Jung, 2011; Klijn et al., 2015; Sack and Saïdi, 1997; Yang, Watkins, and Marsick, 2004). Typically, mandates formalized in legislation or policy documents are used to clarify the roles and responsibilities of different organizations within the broader system (Bryson, George, and Seo, 2024). Alignment of roles and responsibilities across the system is essential to address potential conflicts or overlaps (Burns and Köster, 2016) between organizations who might offer similar services, and it is important to keep in mind that these might change, formally or informally, over time (Klijn et al., 2015). This might be especially relevant where the roles and responsibilities of the middle tier might be unclear, or might overlap with those of the central and local levels.

Unclear priorities and standards can mean that middle-tier staff often default to administrative tasks or ad hoc priorities rather than engaging in strategic instructional leadership. For example, Block Education Officers in the state of Bihar in India were facing multiple unprioritized job expectations, ranging from monitoring schools for academic performance to providing infrastructure needs. This led some personnel to overfocus on administrative tasks such as ensuring attendance at training sessions instead of engaging in strategic instructional leadership or teacher training modules (Aiyar, Dongre, and Davis, 2015).

Inconsistent vision and standards can prevent the middle tier from understanding what 'good' looks like and tracking progress on learning outcomes. In some contexts, education departments (at national, provincial, and/or district levels) operate without any formalized national education quality targets or benchmarks which could provide them with guidance for action towards instructional improvement and related support services. In Cambodia, for instance, the lack of guiding materials in certain districts has led to ambiguity and confusion regarding the functions of the middle tier (Kelsall et al., 2019).

Unclear responsibilities can lead to confusion about work assignments. For the middle tier to be effective, staff need to share a common understanding of who is responsible for what (Adelman and Lemos, 2021; Boakye-Yiadom et al., 2023). A recent study from Ghana found that 'On average, close to 60 per cent of deputy directors have the same understanding as their director as to who is responsible for monitoring and supervision of schools. However, this proportion drops to less than 20 per cent of deputies when it comes to identifying teacher recruitment needs' (Boakye-Yiadom et al., 2023: 31). Job descriptions do exist in many countries, but no systematic analyses were found that

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examined the extent to which they are operational or reflect the reality of roles.

Administrative overload can occur in countries where administrative tasks are prioritized. Middle-tier officials may spend a significant portion of their time on activities such as budget management, facilities maintenance, and compliance monitoring. Even in offices which encourage a focus on teaching and learning, however, administrative tasks are frequently given higher priority over instructional leadership or school improvement functions (Childress et al., 2020; Sampat, Nagler, and Prakash, 2021). This could be because they are more straightforward, quicker to measure, and thus an easier way to illustrate that district staff are 'making progress'. In Kenya, teacher tutors spent only 40 per cent of their time with teachers, dedicating 60 per cent to administrative tasks (Piper and Zuilkowski, 2015).

The framework will gather insights on participants' perceptions of whether their job descriptions accurately reflect their roles and responsibilities, and whether organizational roles and responsibilities are clear and respected.

BOX 4.2

Promising practice – aligning visions between schools and the district in South Africa

In South Africa, research found that school principals used different instruments and had a different vision for improving teaching and learning from that of district personnel. This led to misunderstandings and frustration, especially for the principals. To address this, one district successfully put in place procedures – including regular weekly meetings to discuss topics such as curriculum management and leadership roles – that fostered communication and mutual understanding between the DEO and school principals about instructional targets and approaches (McLennan et al., 2018).

4.4.3. Lever 3. Competent and motivated staff

The effectiveness of the middle tier in education hinges on the quality and motivation of its staff, which can be affected by recruitment, initial training and professional development, and career progression. Without competent and motivated personnel, local education offices may struggle to fulfil their functions effectively and positively influence teaching and learning (Dogaru, 2015; OECD, 2012, 2023b). This issue is not about individual blame but systemic challenges such as poor candidate selection and lack of career incentives. Transparent recruitment, accessible and ongoing professional development, and attractive career incentives are strategies to maintain a motivated and capable workforce. Job satisfaction, work–life balance, and well-being are also important but often neglected.

Lack of job stability of middle tier staff is a challenge despite research from the USA showing that job tenure and stability over several years constitutes one of the main characteristics of 'effective' district leaders (i.e. leaders of districts with high or significantly improving levels of student performance). A meta-analysis of data on US school districts found that the tenure, or stability in terms of length of service, of district leaders is positively correlated with student achievement (Waters and Marzano, 2006). Research from Pakistan showed that district officials often served in their roles

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for extremely short periods of time (3 months to 1.5 years). As a result, the 'unpredictable tenures of officials and key education managers remains a major impediment to effective oversight of service delivery at the local levels' (World Bank, 2019b: 9).

Missing or lack of adherence to recruitment standards can mean that middle tier personnel lack 'quality' or 'competency'. Often, middle tier staff are former teachers that have been selected or promoted rather than specially recruited or trained for supervisory or advisory roles. While teaching experience can help with instructional leadership responsibilities, other middle tier tasks require different skill sets. In many of the reviewed case studies on the middle tier in low- and lower middle-income countries (Pakistan, Lao PDR, Kenya, South Africa, the state of Bihar in India), district and subdistrict professional staff do not have the skills required for effective monitoring and related work in planning or data management.

Other issues in selection and recruitment stem from political appointments, an often informal (non-publicized) selection procedure for middle tier personnel. External interference in recruitment is cited as one of the major reasons why circuit managers in South Africa are considered the weakest link in the country's education quality management chain (Bantwini and Moorosi, 2018). DEOs is Nepal have strictly limited authority over teacher recruitment due to political pressure and union influence. Teachers' unions, linked to political parties, protect teachers from accountability, making it difficult for DEOs to manage performance and enforce discipline (Pherali, Smith, and Vaux, 2011: 10).

There is often **inadequate professional development for the middle tier.** In many countries, access to middle tier jobs, especially positions of inspectors or pedagogical advisors, are conditional on completing some form of recognized training. However, the capacity of these training programmes often lags behind the rapidly growing needs in many low-income countries. For example, a study from Laos found that 6 of the 18 advisors interviewed had not received any initial training despite already working in the position for three years or longer (Childress et al., 2020; UNICEF, 2016). Findings from Ghana showed that School Improvement Support Officers who had more years of professional experience and had completed role-specific training provided more effective support (UNICEF Innocenti – Global Office of Research and Foresight, UNICEF Zambia, and Ministry of Education Zambia, 2024). Unfortunately, limited research, data, and information is presently available on the training that various middle tier staff in low- and middle-income countries receive (in terms of content, duration, certification, effectiveness, and so on).

Limited career incentives and low motivation and job satisfaction are prevalent amongst middle tier staff. In Guyana, 'district and school leadership positions are not sufficiently based on performance, leading to low motivation. Leadership positions are primarily based on qualifications and years of service; demonstrated performance and appraisals play a minor role in promotions and continuity in positions' (Guyana, 2023: 23). Research in India found that middle tier officials felt like mere messengers, passing directives from the state to schools. This sense of powerlessness in the hierarchy led to low motivation and job satisfaction (Aiyar and Bhattacharya, 2016). Several governments have invested in policies and programmes aimed at improving the efficacy and quality of middle tier management. However, many have often failed to make a difference in the behaviour of middle-tier managers or in learning outcomes (Aiyar, Dongre, and Davis, 2015; Muralidharan and Singh, 2020). Researchers posit that the programmes failed because they did not

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address the day-to-day working conditions and incentives of middle tier education professionals, and the professionals did not understand the purpose of the reforms.

The framework will assess whether organizations have effective recruitment processes in place, employ adequately qualified staff, support professional development, offer performance incentives, and maintain low staff turnover along with high job satisfaction and well-being (Caillier, 2016; Gouëdard, Kools, and George, 2023; Hansen and Høst, 2012).

BOX 4.3

Promising practice – RISE Indonesia: political dimensions of a competent middle tier

A recent study from the Research on Improving Systems of Education (RISE) programme in Indonesia found that the lack of institutional constraints on district heads' discretionary power over bureaucratic appointments allows them to 'use local bureaucracy as a political machine to reward friends or punish enemies… this kind of politicisation of the bureaucracy will weaken bureaucracy. Political imperatives to reward political support often become a fertile ground for elected politicians to set aside competence in making employment decisions, thus leading to the rise of less competent individuals in the state bureaucracy' (Arif et al., 2023). Conversely, the authors found that constraints on district heads' discretionary power over bureaucratic appointments allowed for greater development of local capacity required to address learning deficits and respond to other education challenges.

In one of the four districts studied, Nagari, the local political norm stipulated that district heads have regular meetings with traditional leaders (KAN) or consult them on important issues. This allows the KAN leaders to exert some influences not only on policy-making processes but also on bureaucratic appointments. A bureaucrat may contact a KAN leader when facing an unreasonable rotation plan by the district head. In response, KAN leaders will usually use their influence on the district head or members of the local legislature to halt the plan. Such a mechanism makes it more difficult for district heads to use state bureaucracy to support their political interests. Even though the final decision about bureaucratic employment remains in the hands of the district head, they cannot disregard the role of the Advisory Board for Bureaucratic Position and Rank (Baperjakat) in assessing the competence of the candidates for any bureaucratic appointment. The authors conclude that competence and skills did matter in bureaucratic appointments in Nagari, as shown by the development of learning-enhancing policies.

Source: Arif et al., 2023.

BOX 4.4

Promising practice – providing professional development for the middle tier in Ghana through coaching

Coaching and mentoring are other strategies that have shown promise at the school level and could be considered for middle-tier professional development. In Ghana, the Ghana Education Service (GES) and not-for-profit organization Transforming Teaching, Education & Learning provide professional development for the middle tier by using retired education staff (former GES directors) paired with academic supervisors to deliver coaching for all regional education directors (Godwin and Cameron, 2024).

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4.4.4. Lever 4. Effective public financing

The ultimate basis of effective public financing lies in 'how school funding policies can best be designed so that available resources are directed to supporting high quality teaching and providing equitable learning opportunities for all students' (OECD, 2017: 17). Research shows that effective public financing must be supported by appropriate institutional and regulatory frameworks to optimize the roles of all stakeholders in achieving an effective and equitable distribution of resources (Healey and Crouch, 2012). The availability of sufficient, suitable, and coherent financial resources is indispensable for the implementation of middle-tier mandates. This connects with the distribution mechanisms and the autonomy of middle-tier actors in budget design and management. Additionally, decentralization efforts must ensure that local authorities have the capacity and authority to manage their funds effectively, particularly in procurement procedures.

In some cases, **a lack of financial authority and decision-making capacity in terms of education finances** prevents middle tier staff from using their proximity to schools and local issues to make informed decisions. In many contexts, middle tier actors 'do not play a role in defining their own budgets, and are not asked to identify their specific needs' (UNESCO, 2017:4). In Pakistan, for instance, district offices theoretically have near complete autonomy over their financial resources. However, provincial and federal mandates dictate that they must pay salaries and other recurring expenses first, leaving little or no funding for spending decisions at the district level (IIEP-UNESCO, 2017). When distributed to the middle tier, financial and resource management responsibilities can exert significant influence on education outcomes (see *Box 4.5*).

BOX 4.5

Promising practice – districts with authority over resources help close the achievement gap

When distributed to the middle tier, financial and resource management responsibilities can exert significant influence on education outcomes. Examples from the USA show how school districts that have the authority to reallocate resources to support underperforming schools consequentially help close the achievement gap (Leithwood, 2013; Tuchman, Gross, and Chu, 2022).

In Colombia, a study evaluated the impact of the 2001 administrative decentralization reform on education, using difference-in-differences and regression discontinuity methodologies. The findings showed that municipalities that were given full autonomy in teacher hiring, training, and placement; school infrastructure; materials; and school transport saw improvements in school enrolment, student achievement, and teacher quality. Municipal autonomy in resource allocation was associated with a lower proportion of poorly performing students in Spanish and mathematics in grades 3, 5, and 9 compared to students in similar municipalities that did not benefit from full autonomy (UNESCO and International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030, 2024: 101). The results suggest that the efficiency gains from decentralizing responsibilities to the municipalities, rather than the amount of resources managed, were key to achieving better education outcomes (Elacqua et al., 2019, 2025; UNESCO and International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030, 2024).

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The middle tier often has to comply with cumbersome procurement processes. Education professionals often lack the technical capacity for procurement and financial control; one IIEP study in Kenya found that 'the supervisors and/or pedagogical advisors seldom had the required expertise and, as a result, school staff believed that they did not have the legitimacy to undertake this delicate work. In addition, the need to focus on financial control took time away from their core task, namely pedagogical support and supervision, where they were already overstretched. Lastly, the obligation to combine financial control and pedagogical support risked undermining their relationship with the school and, in particular, with the head teacher' (De Grauwe and Lugaz, 2018: 132).

The framework will seek to assess the level of authority middle-tier actors have in designing and using their budgets, as well as the level of control they have over their funds. It will look at whether allocated budgets are aligned with and used to achieve overall goals. The analysis will extend to the actual level of disbursement and the capacity of middle tier actors to disburse funds effectively.

4.4.5. Lever 5. Strong learning culture

The next major lever for a successful middle tier is fostering a strong learning culture within the education system. While much research focuses on professional learning, collaboration, and innovation for teachers, less attention is given to middle-tier personnel, particularly in LMICs. This lever looks at the capacity of middle-tier staff to engage in collaborative working and learning, and to have a culture of enquiry.

A learning culture is an environment that prioritizes continuous learning, knowledge-sharing, personal development, and adaptability. Key characteristics include open communication, continuous improvement, curiosity, innovation, leadership support, and collaborative learning. These attributes create a safe space for feedback and enquiry, with leaders modelling and promoting a commitment to learning. The benefits of a robust learning culture include improved employee satisfaction, retention, and problem-solving capabilities, as well as organizational resilience (Dumont, Benavides, and Istance, 2010; Kools et al., 2020; Kools and Stoll, 2016; Senge, 2006; Yang, Watkins, and Marsick, 2004).

Research highlights the importance of fostering a learning culture among managers and professionals, enhancing their effectiveness in supporting educators and leadership (Anand and Brix, 2022; Kim, 2021; Kim, Watkins, and Lu, 2017; Lee and Jin, 2023). Without quality professional learning, collaboration, and innovation opportunities, middle-tier personnel may struggle to adapt best practices and implement new policies, limiting their impact on instructional leadership and overall teaching outcomes. It is vital to ensure that middle tier personnel not only receive initial training but also have ongoing professional learning opportunities.

The framework will gather insights on whether middle-tier actors: are supported by continuous professional learning; engage in collaborative opportunities for learning within and across education offices; develop a culture of enquiry, experimentation, and innovation; and provide adequate support to principals and teachers.

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BOX 4.6

Promising practice – professional learning communities for district officials in Uganda

For district officials in Uganda, international NGO STiR Education runs quarterly training for those who are responsible for ensuring that the STiR programme is delivered to teachers. This training mirrors that of teacher professional learning communities, where district officials look at how leadership or behavioural techniques might be used in order to promote programme delivery. For instance, this might involve exploring 'building a culture of recognition' in the district, taking a concrete example of what that looks like in practice, distilling some success criteria from the example, and then planning how they might use that in their own contexts. They then make a concrete plan for what they will do to deploy the technique and share it with peers for feedback (structured according to the discussed success criteria). They then test their plan and reflect with their STiR coach on how it went and how to improve it (STiR Education, 2023).

4.4.6. Lever 6. Comprehensive school improvement support system

A comprehensive school improvement support system's primary goal is to ensure that schools receive consistent, holistic, and relevant support, avoiding fragmented efforts and inefficient resource allocation. Research highlights that uncoordinated efforts for school improvement are counterproductive and emphasizes the need for coordinated leadership and systematic approaches to enhance education outcomes (Barrenechea, Beech, and Rivas, 2022; Best and Dunlap, n.d.; Hoachlander, Alt, and Beltranena, 2001; Koh, Askell-Williams, and Barr, 2023). Key components include clearly defined roles for providing school improvement support, coordinated decision-making, and systematic use of data and research to plan and target efforts.

To avoid duplication of efforts, it is important to clearly define the functions of the middle tier in providing school improvement support. While setting policy frameworks and system guidance may be done at the central level, the middle tier could play a prominent role in implementing guidelines, providing teacher support, collecting research and data, and promoting collaborative work and professional learning between schools (King Smith, Watkins, and Han, 2020; Kools and Stoll, 2016).

Some country examples show uncoordinated and fragmented efforts in education systems. In Laos, a variety of agencies and staff provided teacher in-service training in a 'largely ad-hoc, fragmented and uncoordinated' manner, as no clear directives or coordination efforts clarified who had the ultimate responsibility to do so (UNICEF, 2016: 13–14). In Pakistan, the implementation of the Minimum Standards Education Quality Reform has been hindered by the lack of implementation frameworks or benchmarks, preventing provincial and district administrators from providing support at the school and classroom level. This demonstrates how systemic issues can impede education reforms and improvements (Usman, 2020).

The framework will seek to gather insights into: roles and responsibilities for school improvement planning, appraisal, and support; data and research evidence used for school improvement planning; opportunities for school-to-school collaboration and peer learning communities; and knowledge-brokering and overall coordination.

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BOX 4.7

Promising practice – comprehensive instructional infrastructure in South Africa and comprehensive middle-tier reform in Guyana

In South Africa, the Gauteng Department of Education played a key role in leveraging comprehensive school improvement support (Lever 6) and teacher development (Lever 5) through the Gauteng Primary Language and Mathematics Strategy between 2010 and 2014. The programme focused on improving instructional practices with quality learning materials for students, scripted lesson plans, and instructional coaching for teachers, grounded on and supported by change-management initiatives. The DEO was pivotal in local implementation and oversight, with the provincial minister of education championing the initiative and a team of five dedicated staff managing daily operations (Fleisch, 2016).

From 2025 to 2028, the Ministry of Education in Guyana will launch a comprehensive reform of the middle tier aimed at improving district and school leadership. Supported by GPE grants, this reform is encapsulated in a partnership compact that serves as a systemic overhaul (GPE, 2023b). The primary objective is to enhance the effectiveness of the middle tier through professional development, including the establishment of a leadership academy. This initiative will also involve revising job descriptions, career paths, and office organigrams. Additionally, there will be a focus on revising the resource allocation formula for districts and schools, and improving collaboration and coordination both between decentralized levels and horizontally at the local level. The ultimate goal is to ensure that all children in Guyana, particularly the most disadvantaged, have access to education.

4.4.7. Lever 7. Effective use of data and research evidence

The seventh lever for middle-tier effectiveness is the availability and use of data. While high-income countries often have integrated data management systems, many LMICs lack such infrastructure, hindering effective management and support. Challenges include inadequate infrastructure and personnel lacking training. Effective data use is crucial for informed decision-making and strategy development in teaching and learning. Research shows that access to high-quality data and research evidence is essential, yet **lack of access to data, or the skills and tools to utilize data effectively**, is common among middle tier personnel (Manyengo, 2021; OECD, 2022; Yigezu, 2021). For example, there are parts of Tanzania where internet connectivity is unreliable, making it difficult to develop and maintain networks that provide updated data to middle tier planners and managers (Manyengo, 2021). In Ethiopia, the Education Management Information System (EMIS) has offices in each district that coordinate the manual collection of data to populate the database. School heads must fill in hard copies of templates about their staff, and then this information is sent to the Ministry of Education. This lengthy process has led to inaccuracies and delays in updating the system (Yigezu, 2021).

Other systems may struggle with **low-quality or inaccurate data**, with little means of verifying its validity. Inaccurate information limits the ability of the middle tier to develop realistic and feasible plans for improvement.

Cultivating a culture that values research and data use and providing resources for data analysis and evidence-based decision-making are vital (OECD, 2022). Many education systems are still lacking a shared understanding of research evidence and the 'thoughtful engagement' that it entails, as well as the basic conditions to use it (OECD, 2023b).

4. Capacity assessment framework for the middle tier

BOX 4.8

Promising practice – digitizing and aggregating data for district use in Zambia

The Teaching at the Right Level programme in Zambia aggregated learning data at classroom, school, zonal, district, and provincial levels. By moving from a fully paper-based to a digital spreadsheet-based system, the turnaround time for data to arrive at the province was reduced from 30 to 10 days, which put zones and districts in a much better position to target their mentoring activities, saving them time and transport costs (VVOB Education for Development, 2021).

BOX 4.9

Promising practice – districts using tablets to support student data collection in Kenya and data dashboards to track progress in Australia

Curriculum support officers in the Tusome programme in Kenya made regular classroom visits using tablets to provide instruction support and to upload data on student reading progress and teacher practice. This allowed DEOs to generate an aggregate picture of their district's progress compared with other districts, as well as comparative data on their own schools. This degree of classroom-level monitoring, support, and data collection was unprecedented in Kenya and represented a shift in prevailing norms under which teachers and education officials typically work in sub-Saharan Africa (Piper et al., 2018).
In South Australia, education leaders at the district and state levels used data to create a more tailored support system for 500 schools in their district. Each school leader could access a dashboard with performance metrics, helping them understand their school's progress alongside other schools in terms of performance and growth. To avoid competition, the state did not publish these results but used them internally to provide customized support for the schools – a new approach that replaced the previous median-based model (McKinsey, 2024).

Use of data and research also includes the various components of assessment and evaluation, from student assessment, and teacher and school leader appraisals, to school evaluation and system-level monitoring, which should form a coherent whole (OECD, 2013). It should be clear what the roles and responsibilities of the middle tier are in terms of the design and delivery of data, and whether instruments are aligned at all levels.

With a shift to decentralized education systems, and an increase in the provision of data, there is a risk of data collection being duplicated, or the data not being used. Centralized and user-friendly education data and information systems can ensure that data is easily accessible and can be shared among stakeholders at different levels.

The framework will gather insights on access to timely and relevant data and research evidence, the capacity and skills to analyse such data, the kind of data used and its sources, and the frequency and purpose of data use.

No matter the quality, amount, or timeliness of data in a system, this valuable information resource will go underutilized if middle-tier personnel do not have the skills to analyse and use data effectively. Unfortunately, there is very little evidence on the capacity of the middle tier to use data. There are also few examples showing what kind of training and professional development can enhance middle-tier competences in data analysis and use. *Box 4.10* provides one promising example from Brazil.

4. Capacity assessment framework for the middle tier

BOX 4.10

Promising practice – training districts to use data for school improvement

Jovem de Futuro, Instituto Unibanco's three-year training programme in Brazil, aims to help school and district leaders align goals and use data for school improvement planning. The programme includes extensive training hours for regional, district, and school leaders, focused on increasing student learning and graduation rates, setting performance targets, and developing school action plans. Leaders are trained to collect and use data effectively, including optimizing the education management platform for access via mobile devices (Vinha et al., 2020). Evidence shows that the programme has led to a 30 per cent increase in student learning and improvements in test scores for maths and Portuguese. It is also considered cost-effective, at about 5 per cent of public expenditure per student (Paes de Barros et al., 2019). School leaders reported increased confidence in using data for planning and felt supported through peer exchange opportunities (Vinha et al., 2020).

BOX 4.11

Promising practice – district data technicians in the Dominican Republic and peer learning communities to support data use in Rwanda

Middle-tier professionals need data to help design and implement quality professional learning opportunities for teachers based on their needs. In the Dominican Republic, for example, established district technicians use data on teaching practices and other factors to help design plans of support for teachers and principals (Morales Romero, 2018; UNESCO and International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030, 2024).

The Building Learning Foundations programme in Rwanda aimed to develop strong leaders at all levels of the education system. A key outcome was enhancing school leaders' belief in the importance of data for school improvement. 'Leaders of learning' were recruited from among experienced head teachers in high-performing or continually improving schools, and acted as change agents to lead teaching and learning improvement beyond their own school. They did this by working across their locality to offer professional development support to peer head teachers. Two levels of leaders, namely national leaders of learning and local leaders of learning, were created to align with existing Rwandan district- and sector-wide structures. These leaders of learning organized monthly peer learning communities at district and sector levels. These peer learning communities helped to support data use, which empowered participants to collaborate on strategic plans and focus on holistic data collection. This approach provided a comprehensive understanding of student performance and school progress. District education officers noted improved planning quality and increased confidence among head teachers in implementing activities (British Council, n.d.; Tournier, Chimier, and Jones, 2023).

4. Capacity assessment framework for the middle tier

BOX 4.12

Promising practice – the 'Shawara Karatu' initiative in Niger, using data at the district level to improve learning

Drawing from an analysis of education quality management practices in six African countries, the IIEP-UNESCO education quality management programme documented several root causes impeding the use of data at the district level, including a 'just reporting up' approach, absence of strategic vision for data use, lack of trust in assessment data, and data stored in non-usable formats.

In response to these challenges, the 'Shawara Karatu' initiative was piloted in two districts of Niger. Meaning 'dialogue and consultation on education' in the Hausa language, Shawara Karatu promotes a data-driven approach to district-level decision-making through a three-step strategy:

1. Taking stock of data: District officers conduct a comprehensive review of all available data, including student learning assessments, school records, inspection reports, and any other relevant information. This analysis helps identify key strengths, weaknesses, and areas for improvement in the district's education system. To ensure that the data are usable, preliminary work focuses on enhancing data collection methods and formats.
2. Organizing a dialogue forum: A forum convenes a diverse group of stakeholders – government officials, teachers and school heads, community leaders, and representatives of parents – to discuss the findings from the data analysis. Through open dialogue, participants collaboratively design an action plan tailored to address the district's unique challenges.
3. Implementing the local action plan: The action plan is executed with specific roles assigned to each stakeholder. A coordination committee oversees the implementation of the plan, ensuring proper resource allocation and support. This process includes regular monitoring and evaluation to track progress and adjust strategies as needed.

By fostering a culture of data use and local ownership, the Shawara Karatu initiative empowers district officers to make informed decisions and implement customized interventions that address the specific needs of their communities. The initiative follows a cyclical process, with dialogue forums scheduled at regular intervals (e.g. each semester). These forums serve as opportunities to review progress, share updates, and reflect on lessons learned. Based on the latest data and feedback, stakeholders refine the action plan, identify new priorities, and set goals for the next phase of implementation.

Source: IIEP-UNESCO, 2023b.

4.4.8. Lever 8. Stakeholder engagement in policy-making and implementation

Stakeholder engagement in policy-making and implementation refers to the active involvement of various stakeholders, such as schools, universities, unions, district authorities, parents, community members, and political actors, in the development and execution of education policies and delivery. This engagement is crucial for enhancing education outcomes through effective communication, coordination, and collaboration (Bryson et al., 2013; OECD, 2020; Schleicher, 2018).

Research shows that middle-tier professionals play a key role in facilitating this engagement by organizing meetings, promoting community participation, and supporting the participation of marginalized groups (De Grauwe et al., 2011; Lugaz and Chimier, 2021;

4. Capacity assessment framework for the middle tier

UNESCO, 2020; Viennet and Pont, 2017). At the school level, middle-tier officials may also be involved in the management of education, for example through participation in school boards or councils. Their efforts help build stronger support systems for teachers and learners.

Effective districts often exhibit positive collaboration between local educators and governance authorities, and strategically engage with government reform policies and resources. Additionally, collaboration with political actors, including local elected authorities, community leaders, and civil society organizations, has been shown to strengthen teaching and learning outcomes (IIEP-UNESCO, 2017). This comprehensive approach ensures that diverse perspectives are considered, leading to more inclusive and effective education policies and practices.

The main issues faced by middle-tier actors in strengthening community and parents' involvement in education include lack of parent engagement and participation, lack of skills and understanding of roles and responsibilities within parent–teacher associations and school management committees (Lugaz et al., 2010), and lack of soft skills of middle tier actors in working with the community (Renbarger et al., 2024).

The framework will explore how the middle tier creates stakeholder engagement among school communities and local actors. It will seek to gain insights into middle-tier participation in local- and national-level planning and implementation processes.

BOX 4.14

Promising practice – strong stakeholder engagement in India

In Bihar, India, the district magistrate played a crucial role in engaging stakeholders to implement the Teaching at the Right Level remedial education programme. Committed to equity in learning, the magistrate developed a partnership with a civil society organization to introduce the Teaching at the Right Level approach in schools within the district. He also garnered the support of central and district education officials, as well as local political leaders, to ensure the integration of the programme into the formal education system (UNESCO and International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030, 2024).

4.4.9. Lever 9. Cross-sector collaboration for inclusion and well-being

Cross-sector collaboration involves the integration and cooperation of various sectors such as education, health, social services, and community organizations. Research shows that this approach is particularly valuable for promoting inclusion in education and enhancing overall well-being. It ensures synergy among all sectors contributing to a child's development (Gerdes et al., 2020; OECD, 2023a; Patana, 2020). By integrating services from different sectors, schools can provide comprehensive support that addresses students' diverse needs, including educational, health, psychological, and social services. This holistic approach helps address barriers to learning and promotes the overall well-being of students.

Cross-sector collaboration for inclusion and well-being is particularly relevant for the middle tier: its unique role in the education system, at the crossroads of central authorities and the local ecosystem of actors, makes

4. Capacity assessment framework for the middle tier

it the best place to ensure coordination of education interventions with other sectors, in a whole-of-system approach (Burns, Köster, and Fuster, 2016). Coordination of all actors contributes to making care services more accessible, and leads to alignment and coherence of policies and practices over time (Burns, Köster, and Fuster, 2016). Unfortunately, administrative and cultural barriers hinder the integration of education with other social services (Patana, 2020).

The framework will explore how middle-tier actors collaborate with other sectors such as health, social services, employment, and urban development. It will assess who the partners are, what the collaboration and communication mechanisms are, and the types of activities developed for the benefit of schools and children, particularly in the areas of gender and disability.

BOX 4.14

Promising practice – partnering outside the education sector in Rwanda

The City of Kigali, Rwanda, and its Department of Education, coordinates and partners with civil society organizations and NGOs to implement inclusive education initiatives, such as youth and girls' empowerment, training of teaching and non-teaching staff on special educational needs, and financial support for low-income students (IIEP-UNESCO, 2023a).

5. The way forward: leveraging the capacity assessment framework for middle-tier improvement

Built upon the IIEP and OECD Institutional Capacity Assessment Framework (ICAF) developed as part of the SDG4 Education 2030 High Level Steering Committee's work plan for strengthening the institutional capacities of education systems to use data and evidence for policy, planning, and implementation (Functional Area 1), the capacity assessment framework addresses the unique roles and challenges of the middle tier. Its purpose is to generate comprehensive data on the 'who', 'what', and 'how' of the middle tier, enabling the development of evidence-based improvement strategies. By outlining the key functions and mandates of the middle tier, the framework identifies nine levers for analysis.

The framework can be tailored to each context: each country will be able to adapt the levers according to the characteristics of its education system and the needs of assessment. The objective is twofold: to conduct a thorough analysis of the functioning of the middle tier, and to assess the effectiveness of the middle tier. For that purpose, the framework will evolve as it is implemented in different countries. These practical applications will help identify key criteria to assess the effectiveness of the middle tier in any context.

Latvia was the first country to pilot the assessment approach. IIEP expanded the trial to Pakistan, and at the time of this report's release, it is also being extended to Kenya and Guyana. It is anticipated that the experiences and lessons learned from these pilots will lead to further adjustments to the ICAF, the methodological tools, and the presentation and visualization of assessment findings. The main lessons learned from using this tool are presented in *Section 5.1* for Latvia, while preliminary findings for Pakistan are shared in *Section 5.2*.

5.1. An institutional capacity assessment of the education system in Latvia

The ICAF is part of a joint effort by the OECD and IIEP to strengthen education systems worldwide, in line with the SDG4 Education 2030 agenda. Based on the priority needs of the Latvia Ministry of Education and Science (MoES), the OECD was invited to conduct an institutional capacity assessment of the country's education system. The assessment focused on the MoES, four national-level agencies, and the municipal departments of education, and examined five out of the nine institutional capacity assessment levers. The goal was to identify strengths and challenges, and provide recommendations to improve the roles, responsibilities, and overall capacity of these organizations in monitoring education quality and strengthening support for school improvement. The ultimate aim was to improve teaching and learning in all schools and education institutions in Latvia.

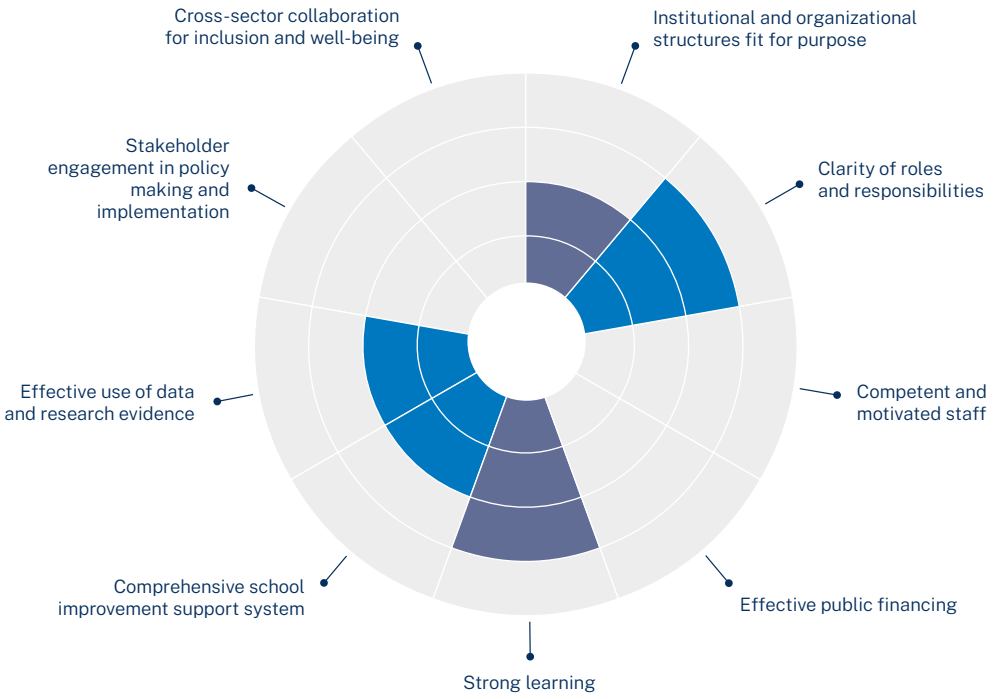
The assessment used a mixed-methods approach, including reviewing data and policy documents, interviews with representatives from the national-level agencies and selected municipalities, online surveys shared with all staff, and additional data from previous OECD surveys in which Latvia participated. The mixed-methods approach allowed for deepening and triangulation of findings and recommendations that were validated through a strong stakeholder engagement process and an international peer learning event.

Using the ICAF and expanding on it in selected areas (OECD, 2024), the OECD team assessed each of the five levers using a four-point scale under which levers are ranked as Latent, Emerging, Established,

5. The way forward: leveraging the capacity assessment framework for middle-tier improvement

and Advanced (as described in *Chapter 4*) to show the progress made and remaining work to be done for the lever in question. The team drew from the analysis of all data and information collected through the mixed-methods assessment. The assessment results were summarized in an initial institutional capacity assessment snapshot (see *Figure 5.1*).

Figure 5.1. Initial institutional capacity assessment snapshot of the Latvian education system



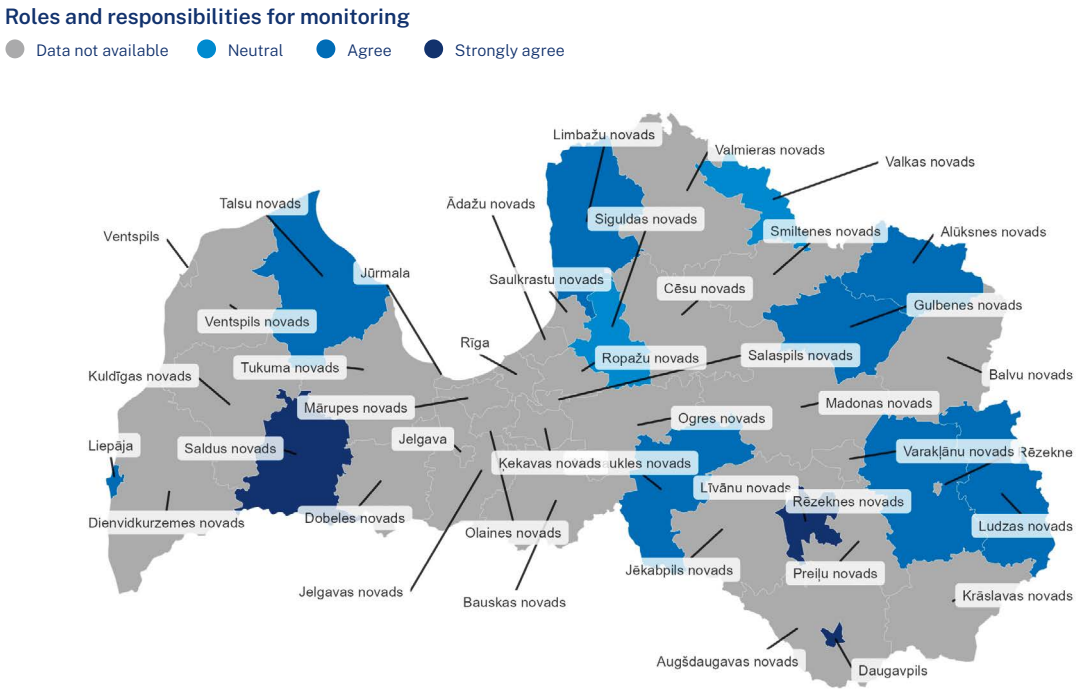
Source: Adapted from OECD (2024).

The lever 'Institutional and organizational structures fit for purpose' was found to be in an Emerging stage of development. The findings showed that there was limited coordination and data sharing, workload challenges, and overlapping functions among the education organizations. The assessment results supported the MoES plan of establishing a quality management board with oversight to streamline operations, improve coordination, and better align policy initiatives.

The lever 'Clarity of roles and responsibilities' was found to be in an Established stage of development. The findings showed that roles and responsibilities for education quality monitoring and improvement support were generally clear but not always respected, which led to some organizations working over and above their mandates. Additionally for the middle tier, recent amendments to education law clarifying municipal roles were not yet well understood by all staff and stakeholders, risking confusion and inaction (see *Figure 5.2*).

5. The way forward: leveraging the capacity assessment framework for middle-tier improvement

Figure 5.2. Clarity of roles and responsibilities for education quality monitoring in Latvia, by municipalities



Source: OECD (2024).

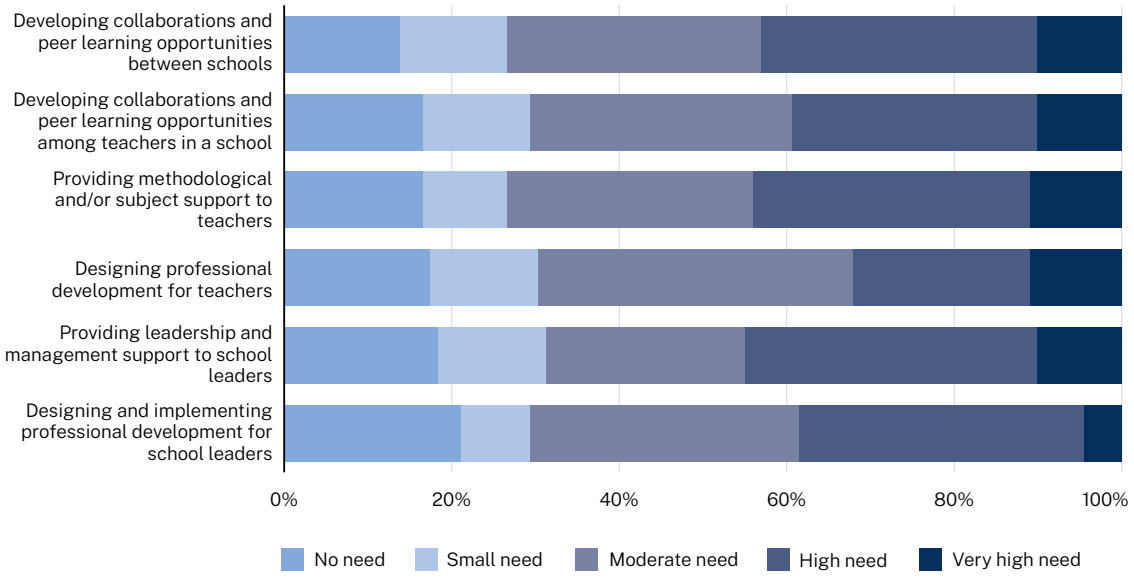
Note: *Figure 5.2* shows the responses to the survey statement 'The roles and responsibilities of my municipal Department of Education for education quality monitoring and/or for education quality management are clear to me'. This was answered using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 'Strongly disagree' to 'Strongly agree', with the responses then normalized into corresponding categories. Scores ranging from 1.0 to 1.8 were categorized as 'Strongly disagree'; scores from 1.8 to 2.6 as 'Disagree'; scores from 2.6 to 3.4 as 'Neutral'; scores from 3.4 to 4.2 as 'Agree'; and scores from 4.2 to 5.0 as 'Strongly agree'. For municipal-level reporting of the survey data, a 20 per cent response rate threshold was defined, which was met by 13 municipalities.

The lever 'Effective use of data and research evidence' was found to be in an Emerging stage of development. The findings showed that the Latvian education system possessed the capability to utilize standardized student assessment data for effective monitoring and decision-making, although the current reporting format of central exams limited its use for system-level monitoring over time.

The lever 'Comprehensive school improvement support system' was found to be in an Emerging stage of development. The draft conceptualization of the school improvement support system in Latvia was found to be a valuable reflection tool for stakeholders, but still needed clearer definitions of support types and providers. The assessment also highlighted the crucial role of municipal departments of education in the country's school improvement support system, but their capacities varied significantly. There were also notable differences across municipalities in the numbers of staff providing school improvement support (compared to the numbers of schools they serve), with these staff reporting high professional development needs for tasks that are at the core of their daily duties (see *Figure 5.3*).

5. The way forward: leveraging the capacity assessment framework for middle-tier improvement

Figure 5.3. Professional development needs of municipal school improvement officers



Source: OECD, 2024.

The lever 'Strong learning culture' was found to be in an Established stage of development. The findings showed that while the MoES and national agencies seemed to be developing as learning organizations, progress had been unequal. Similarly, the municipal departments of education were advancing but often struggled to effectively engage with parents, schools, and other stakeholders. The assessment also found that there was limited data sharing and collaboration among municipalities, despite their having much to learn from each other's experiences and good practices.

The application of the OECD and IIEP capacity assessment framework to the Latvian education system has shown that it can be a powerful and enriching tool for countries striving to improve their education systems. The full report provides more details on the findings and specific recommendations for improvement. This report will be valuable not only for Latvia but also for the many countries that are looking to strengthen the institutional capacity of their education systems.

5.2. A middle tier capacity assessment of education districts in Pakistan (preliminary findings)

Adapting the ICAF, IIEP conducted a study to assess the capacity of the middle tier in five education districts in Pakistan, specifically from the provinces of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Punjab, and Sindh. The capacity assessment sought to map existing capacities and constraints, including highlighting strengths and areas for improvement under five out of the nine assessment levers: institutional and organizational structures fit for purpose, clarity of roles and responsibilities, competent and motivated staff, effective use of data and research evidence, and strong learning culture.

The study used a mixed-methods approach, including reviewing data and policy documents, key informant interviews, focus group discussions, and online survey questionnaires. For a more holistic view of the middle tier in Pakistan, the study also included participants from the governance levels directly above and below the education

5. The way forward: leveraging the capacity assessment framework for middle-tier improvement

districts – the provinces to which the districts report and the schools that the districts serve. Several limitations were encountered during data collection, including internet access issues and the survey length being challenging for busy officials. To address these challenges, interviewers underwent skills training on objectivity and interview protocols before conducting the in-person survey interviews, and the data were later uploaded into an online database. Even with the anonymity disclaimers, a lack of survey culture may have also led to biased responses. The interviews and focus group discussions allowed the research team to triangulate their findings and gain deeper insights for a more accurate assessment of the middle-tier capacity of the education districts in Pakistan.

The preliminary research findings (*Table 5.1*) highlight several critical areas that are important for the effectiveness of middle-tier education offices and staff in Pakistan.

Table 5.1. Preliminary findings of the middle tier capacity analysis in Pakistan

Lever	Preliminary findings
Institutional and organizational structures fit for purpose	• Institutional and organizational structures need strengthening to support a specialist middle-tier education management cadre. • Human, financial, and technological resources are lacking and not fit for purpose. • Some horizontal coordination structures at the district and provincial levels exist but should be formalized and reinforced. • There is a need to enhance and streamline opportunities for vertical coordination structures between the provincial, district, and subdistrict tiers.
Clarity of roles and responsibilities	• There is overlap in some office mandates and roles, leading to duplicated efforts and reduced operational efficiency. • Some ambiguity contributes to gaps in the allocation of roles and responsibilities. • The administrative burden on district staff limits their ability to support teaching and learning, which is also affected by the limited autonomy of middle-tier managers in planning and financial decisions.
Competent and motivated staff	• Middle-tier managers in Pakistan have extensive teaching and school-level experience but limited formal management training prior to taking up their new roles at the district level. • Despite having the required skills and experience, district education managers reported a lack of available job postings and political intervention as barriers to their career placement and progression. • Tenure insecurity, unclear progression, and lack of incentives for middle-tier staff impact job performance and motivation. • Middle-tier staff need to be provided with relevant and sustainable continuing professional development. • Better empowerment strategies and an enabling environment are needed for female middle-tier managers to perform their roles effectively.

5. The way forward: leveraging the capacity assessment framework for middle-tier improvement

Lever	Preliminary findings
Effective use of data and research evidence	• Although efforts have been made to design data systems, middle-tier managers tend to use their own administrative data and do not collect data on learning outcomes, teaching practices, or teacher training. • Various education management information systems create overlap and confusion. • Current aggregated data is sometimes irrelevant and untimely in relation to daily tasks in the middle tier. • Lack of capacity for middle-tier managers to analyse and interpret data at the district level is an identified challenge, and staff report a large training need for this.
Strong learning culture	• There is limited data sharing and collaboration within and among education districts in Pakistan, despite their having much to learn from each other's experiences and good practices. Although there are efforts to share school data, no stakeholder receives regular monthly updates, and this becomes even less frequent for external stakeholders. • There are existing mechanisms on interdepartmental coordination that can be built upon to develop a culture of data sharing and learning. • There is a need to devise a continuing professional development plan and learning opportunities for middle-tier education managers. • Attempts have been made to foster a culture of enquiry, experimentation, and innovation among the middle tier but should be strengthened. • Some strategies are in place to support principals and teachers in their corresponding district, but these should be further incentivized.

Moving forward, the research team will continue data analysis to ensure comprehensive assessment and provide clear actionable recommendations for the identified challenges. The findings will be validated with the Pakistan Ministry of Education and relevant stakeholders, and will be used to develop a roadmap outlining priorities, strategies, actors, and timelines.

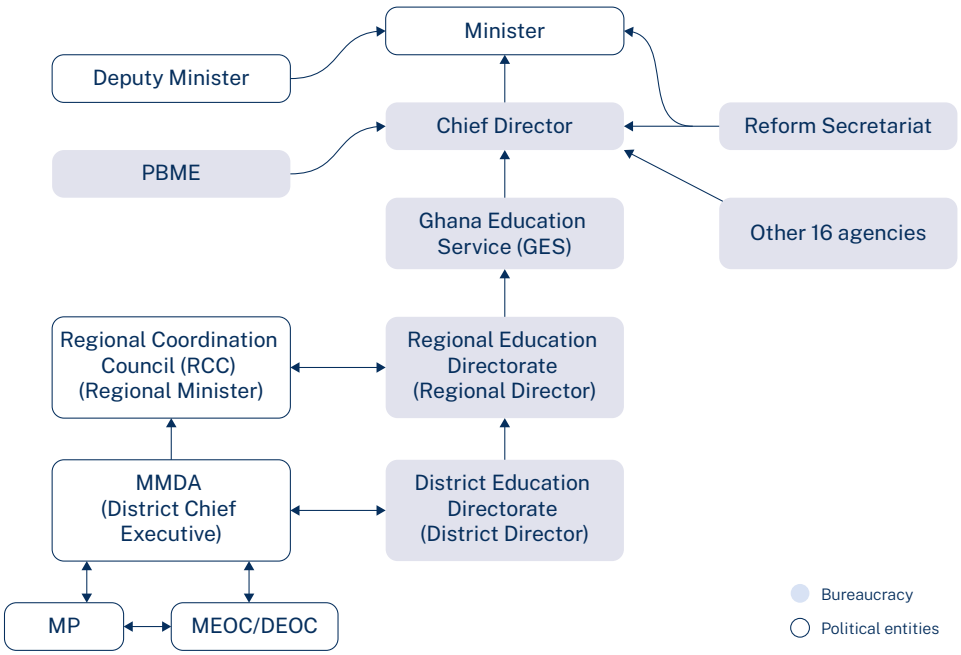
The capacity assessment framework can significantly aid governments in analysing and assessing their middle tier by providing a structured approach to identifying strengths and gaps. By leveraging the framework, governments can generate comprehensive data on the roles, functions, and challenges of the middle tier, enabling the development of context-specific strategies to address identified gaps. The framework helps users develop tailored assessments that reflect the unique characteristics of each education system, ensuring that improvement strategies are relevant and effective. Through practical applications and continuous evolution, the framework will help governments build robust, evidence-based plans to enhance the capacity and effectiveness of the middle tier in their systems, ultimately leading to improved education outcomes.

Appendix I. Illustration of the middle tier in different settings

The common functions of the middle tier may align across systems and contexts, but the structures and overall complexity may vary greatly depending on the size and administrative setup of a country. This appendix provides several country snapshots to illustrate similarities and differences in the design and functions of the middle tier. LMICs were selected based on the extent of publicly available data on their education system structure and middle-tier design.

Ghana

Figure A.1. The Ghanaian education system



Source: Boakye-Yiadom et al., 2023.

The education system in Ghana operates across four administrative tiers: national, regional, district, and school. At the national level, the Ministry of Education oversees 17 national agencies, each with specific legislative mandates. The Ghana Education Service (GES) serves as the primary implementing agency, managing staff at regional, district, and school levels, including regional and district directors, and teachers and school leaders. The GES plays a central role in directing education funding and activities, including teacher deployment and school funding. Regional education offices, headed by regional directors, oversee district offices funded by the GES, which operate under their direct supervision (Boakye-Yiadom et al., 2023; Ghana, 2018).

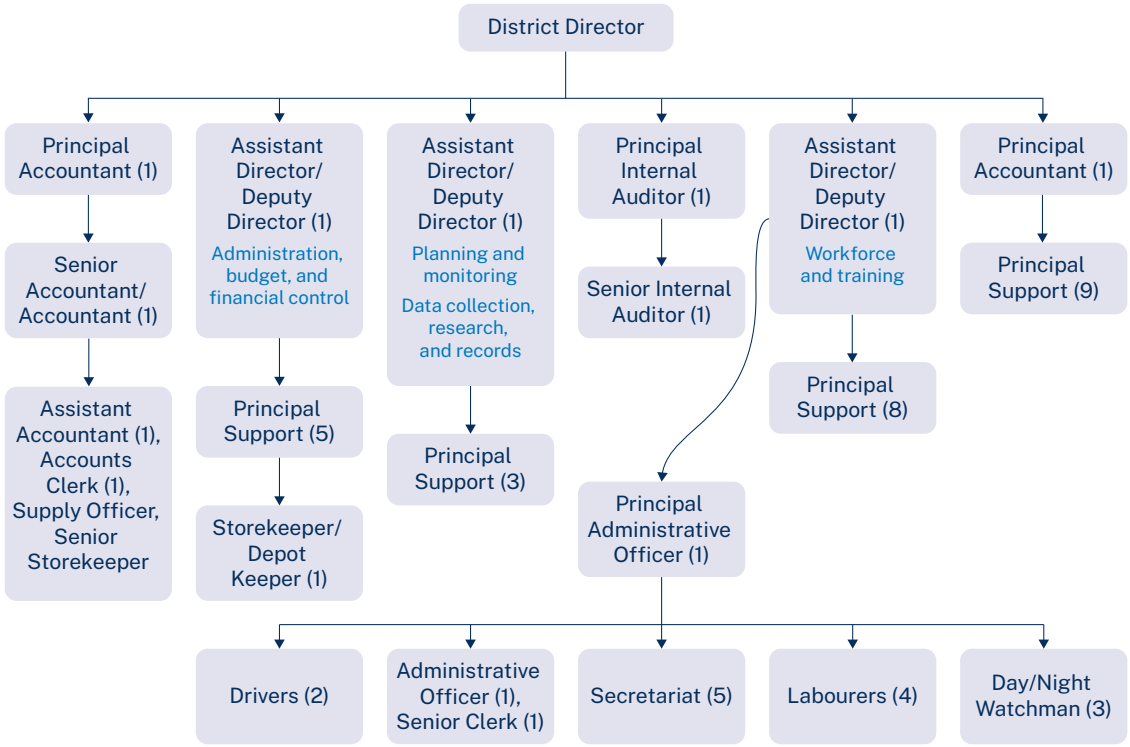
DEOs are managed by a district director and four deputy directors (for finance and administration, planning and statistics, human

Appendix I. Illustration of the middle tier in different settings

resources and training, and monitoring and supervision). Of the four deputy directors, those for human resources and training and for monitoring and supervision have primary responsibility for conducting school-facing tasks and are supported by staff such as basic education officers, school health and education programme coordinators, and school information support officers (each of which is assigned a set of schools in a 'circuit' and is tasked with monitoring and supporting these schools).

DEOs collaborate with the primary local administrative authority in each district – the Municipal, Metropolitan, and District Assembly (MMDA) – through district education oversight committees, although limited funding constrains their functions. The Ministry of Education collaborates with MMDAs to implement programmes, primarily funded by the District Assemblies Common Fund. Districts are pivotal in policy implementation, with middle-tier staff such as circuit supervisors and subject coordinators responsible for monitoring, supporting, and training teachers and school leaders. DEOs engage directly with schools, providing training, monitoring, and assistance in areas such as leadership, literacy, and school improvement planning (Boakye-Yiadom et al., 2023; Ghana, 2018).

Figure A.2. Organigram of a DEO in Ghana

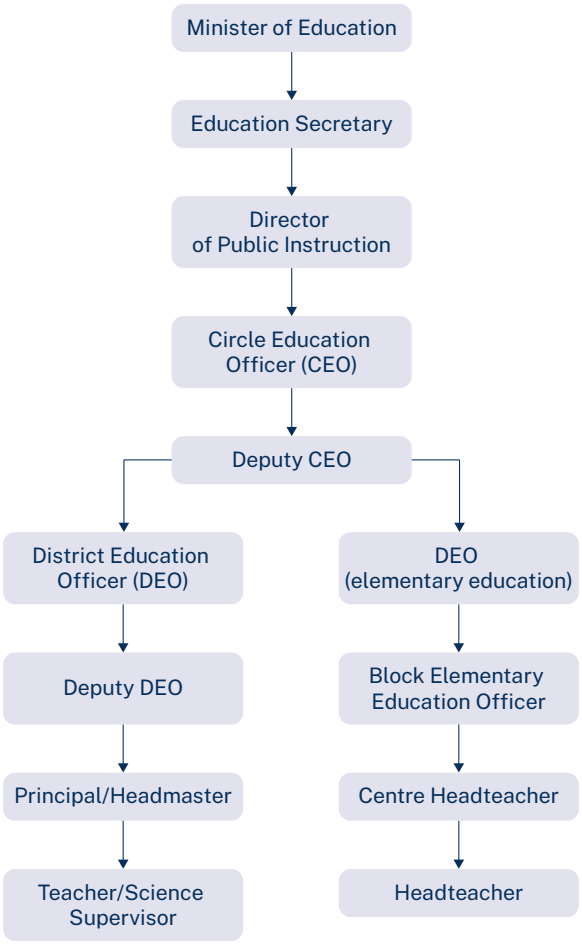


Source: Ghana Education Service (GES), 2020.

Appendix I. Illustration of the middle tier in different settings

India

Figure A.3. The Indian education system



Source: CIET, 2012.

In India, education services are overseen by each state with a structured hierarchy. At the state level, the minister of education – appointed by the chief minister and accountable to the legislature – holds the highest authority. Supported by a deputy minister where applicable, the minister formulates policies in consultation with the cabinet, with the secretary of education and the directorate of education aiding in policy formulation and implementation. Below this level, district education officers are pivotal in implementing education programmes and policies, ensuring smooth operations within their districts (India, 2009). Within the district office, there is a primary district education officer who heads the DEO and reports to higher-level authorities, and there are also block- and cluster-level officers who support schools on a day-to-day basis. District officers oversee various functions, including school recognition, grants, sports competitions, school supervision, and policy implementation (Education for All in India, 2020).

Appendix I. Illustration of the middle tier in different settings

Following the 1986 National Education Policy, which emphasized decentralization and community participation, a new district-level training structure, the District Institute of Education and Training (DIET), was established nationwide to better support district officers, school leaders, and teachers. DIET officials sit in the DEO and conduct training programmes for teachers with the support of district staff in the block resource centres and cluster resource centres to monitor pedagogical activities. They also work with state-level officers to develop curricula aligned to national policies. While all states have also implemented the Panchayati Raj system – which empowers local bodies with education responsibilities up to the secondary level, further bolstering decentralized education management – the degree of autonomy and functions differs between states. DEOs further enhance community participation in education planning and administration at the grassroots level, ensuring the enrolment and retention of children in schools, monitoring teacher attendance, and mobilizing additional resources for schools (India, 2009).

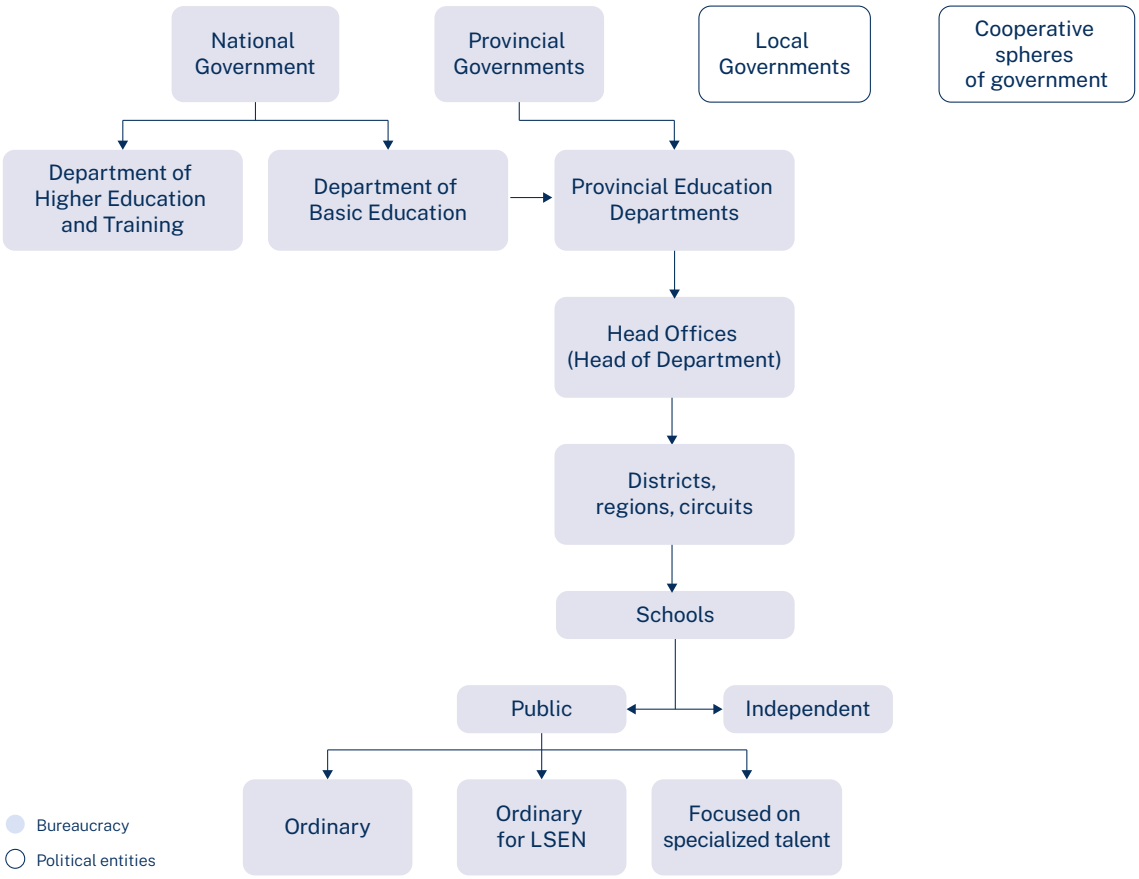
South Africa

In South Africa, the Department of Basic Education shares responsibilities with provinces for basic schooling and early childhood development, with each provincial department directly financing and managing its schools. District offices in each province are supported by circuit offices and act as intermediaries between provincial head offices and education institutions, collaborating with school principals and educators to enhance educational access and provide management and professional support in line with provincial plans. Each province has a head of department overseeing all district education officers, with DEOs led by a district director and subdivided into circuits headed by school information support officers (previously called circuit managers). Subject advisers within circuits facilitate curriculum implementation and offer guidance to school leaders and teachers (South Africa, 2016b).

District directors' roles and responsibilities are set by the provincial heads of department and focus on planning, support, oversight, and accountability within the education sector. District officials manage teams, supervise circuits and institutions, implement policies, and advocate for learners' welfare. Additionally, they may be entrusted with specific responsibilities by the provincial heads of department, such as educator appointments and asset management. Recently, there has been a transition at the provincial level towards a more collaborative team-based culture that aims to optimize capacity and performance, emphasizing coaching and mentoring roles for district officials to foster continual improvement in the educational environment (South Africa, 2016b).

Appendix I. Illustration of the middle tier in different settings

Figure A.4. The South African education system



Source: Beckmann and Bipath, 2016.

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