



Middle Tier for Foundational Learning

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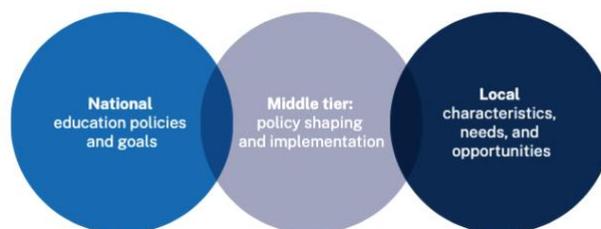
About this research note

Recognition of the importance of the middle tier in ensuring quality education has grown in recent years. Global studies have explored the challenges and opportunities of leveraging middle-tier personnel to improve education delivery and outcomes.^{1,2,3,4,5,6} Given an increased focus on how to scale and sustain improvements to foundational learning in education agendas, more research aims to understand the contribution of the middle tier to ensuring all students achieve foundational skills. This is especially important in constrained funding environments, where it is necessary to illustrate the impact of investments in the education workforce. This brief contributes to the emerging literature by highlighting evidence on the role of the middle tier in advancing foundational learning in low- and middle-income contexts. It begins by defining the middle tier, then reviews current evidence on how the middle tier supports foundational learning, and concludes with considerations for policy and practice and introduces the Learning Generation Initiative’s (LGI) work on strengthening the middle tier.

What is the middle tier?

The middle tier refers to the subnational structures and personnel that sit between the central and school levels in education systems. It functions as a connective layer linking national priorities to local realities.*

While the specific configuration of the middle tier varies across contexts, it generally serves as an intermediary between system-level policy and classroom practice. Middle-tier personnel often interpret policy, coordinate across schools, provide professional support to school leaders and teachers, and relay information from schools to higher levels of the system to inform planning and decision-making.



Source: Tournier et al. (2025).⁵

Why is the middle tier important for improving foundational learning?

Middle-tier personnel play an important role in determining whether education reforms are implemented, sustained, and scaled. Their proximity to schools enables them to support improvements in teaching and learning, adapt reforms to local contexts, and influence implementation quality in ways that centralised policy alone cannot. Although middle-tier officials exist in most education systems, they are often underutilised and not sufficiently supported. As a result, reforms may remain fragmented, unevenly implemented, or confined to isolated initiatives or pilots. Emerging research increasingly points to effective leadership, management, and pedagogical support from the middle tier as essential for sustaining improvements in learning outcomes and moving reforms beyond isolated pilots.^{3,5,7,8}

“Student learning is unlikely to improve at scale without better management. Individual interventions can succeed in the short run, but virtually any initiative or program – from coaching classroom teachers to providing school meals – requires effective management by public education systems.”⁹

Across education systems, the middle tier performs leadership and management functions that shape how education is delivered and reforms are implemented.^{5,6} These functions operate across several domains of system performance and represent the main mechanisms through which the middle tier influences learning outcomes.

* These subnational structures have various designations, including province, region, district, and cluster among others.

Table 1: General functions of the middle tier

Leading teaching and learning	Supporting instructional improvement through mentoring, coaching, and professional learning communities for teachers and school leaders, with particular attention to early literacy and numeracy reforms.
Managing financial and material resources	Identifying staffing needs, supporting equitable deployment, and strengthening workforce capacity, particularly in underserved areas, even where final authority over hiring and placement remains centralised.
Collecting and using data	Collecting, interpreting, and using data on school performance, resources, and learning outcomes to inform targeted support, improvement in teaching and learning, and prioritization of foundational learning needs.
Managing human resources	Overseeing and supporting the allocation and use of financial and material resources, including school grants, budgets, and learning materials, to promote efficiency and equity.
Ensuring accountability and support	Monitoring school performance and compliance with system requirements while providing guidance and support to enable school-level improvement.
Engaging the wider education community	Facilitating collaboration among schools, families, communities, local authorities, and civil society to strengthen engagement, learner wellbeing, and shared responsibility for learning outcomes.
Promoting equity and inclusion	Embedding equity and inclusion across all functions by identifying disparities, tailoring support to local contexts, and targeting learners most at risk of falling behind in foundational skills.

How can the middle tier support foundational learning?

Foundational learning typically refers to basic literacy and numeracy skills, which are seen as the foundation for a life of learning in school and beyond. Some understandings of foundational learning also involve social and emotional growth, cognitive development, and civic engagement, which underpin future learning.¹⁰ The middle tier can influence foundational learning through multiple functions, including those shown in Table 1. Some recent research focuses particularly on *pedagogical leadership* – middle-tier practices that directly support improved teaching and learning in schools. These activities are often undertaken by school-facing roles such as supervisors, quality assurance officers, pedagogical coaches, and teacher mentors.³

Although there is robust evidence on interventions that improve early-grade literacy and numeracy, relatively few studies specifically isolate the middle tier’s role. This reflects its function as an enabling layer within education systems, shaping implementation quality and coherence rather than directly delivering instruction. As a result, much of the evidence focuses on intermediate outcomes such as teacher practice, school improvement, and system functioning. Based on existing evidence, two middle-tier functions emerge as particularly relevant for improving foundational learning: providing school-based pedagogical support and ensuring evidence-driven accountability through professional collaboration. The sections below highlight evidence across these functions and conclude with insights on the enabling factors for middle-tier effectiveness.

Providing school-based professional learning

The strongest evidence linking the middle tier to foundational learning improvement concerns its role in providing instructional support in schools. However, there is no consensus on how the middle tier can do so most effectively. Some studies suggest that rather than coaching all teachers directly, the most effective middle-tier personnel tend to focus on strengthening pedagogical leadership among school leaders and creating conditions for teacher collaboration. Evidence from multiple contexts shows that instructional practice improves when

middle-tier officials support school leaders to observe classrooms, facilitate pedagogical discussions, and organise teacher collaboration at scale.^{3,5,6,11} Findings from UNICEF's *Data Must Speak* initiative suggest that districts that work closely with school leadership teams – supporting principals to prioritize instructional time, use performance data, and address operational challenges such as teacher absenteeism – are often associated with stronger learning outcomes.⁴

Additionally, this role often involves supporting the structures that sustain professional learning, such as organizing school clusters, training mentors, aligning collaboration schedules, and reinforcing curriculum priorities. In systems where the middle tier already faces heavy administrative demands, sustained instructional support is often more efficiently delivered by school-based leadership and peer coaches, with the middle tier playing a coordinating and quality-assurance role.¹²

There is also evidence that illustrates the potential contribution of direct instructional engagement by middle-tier personnel as part of a package of support within a specific reform. In Jordan, supervisors were trained to integrate evidence-based supervision into teacher lesson observations and coaching, strengthening foundational literacy instruction.¹³ In Ghana, combining district-led teacher training with regular classroom observations from head teachers and support from circuit supervisors significantly improved student learning outcomes.¹⁴ In Delhi, India, middle-tier personnel helped teachers translate policy directives into classroom routines, highlighting the importance of sustained instructional engagement rather than one-off training.¹⁵

Country spotlight: Rwanda

A mixed-methods study of two high-performing districts found strong alignment among political, technical, and administrative personnel around foundational literacy as a shared priority. Middle-tier officials reinforced expectations through **frequent school visits, coordinated messaging, and collaborative problem-solving with head teachers and inspectors**. Rather than providing instructional coaching themselves, the middle-tier personnel focused on prioritisation, coordination, and reinforcement of norms around instructional quality, while school leadership teams provided day-to-day pedagogical support.¹⁶

Ensuring evidence-driven accountability through professional collaboration

The extent to which the middle tier can support foundational learning depends heavily on the availability of timely learning data. When such information is available, it can strengthen alignment around shared goals, enable feedback for improvement, and help officials prioritise support for schools with the greatest needs.^{17,18,19,20} Conversely, the absence of reliable learning data may lead to misaligned priorities and underinvestment in foundational skills.^{21,22,23}

Adaptations of Teaching at the Right Level across sub-Saharan Africa illustrate how strengthening middle-tier capacity to use learning data can support foundational learning. In Nigeria, Ghana, and Zambia, district officials have been trained to interpret student assessments, use dashboards to track progress, and participate in data review meetings linking learning data to instructional planning.^{24,25,26} However, using data to inform decision making is not sufficient. Poorly designed monitoring systems can produce unintended consequences, even when driven by evidence. In Tanzania, a nationwide reform that publicized school rankings improved learning outcomes among lower-ranked schools but increased dropout rates, suggesting that data-driven accountability without adequate support can harm vulnerable learners.²⁷ Systematic reviews similarly find limited effects when supervision focuses narrowly on sanctions or compliance.²⁸ In contrast, middle-tier personnel tend to be more effective when they cultivate supportive relationships with schools and frame their role as enabling improvement rather than enforcing compliance.^{3,29} Approaches that combine evidence-driven monitoring with

coaching, feedback, and collaborative problem solving are more likely to influence teacher practice and sustain instructional improvement.³

Country spotlight: Tanzania

Experimental evidence shows that improving the flow of learning information to middle-tier officials can contribute to early-grade literacy gains by shaping priorities and support for instructional improvement. Ward education officers **received brief SMS messages summarising inspection findings and offering tailored instructional recommendations for specific schools**. Although the intervention did not increase school visit frequency, head teachers reported more focused follow-up on literacy instruction, increased organization of teacher workshops, and more consistent attention to classroom practice. The intervention was also highly cost effective, highlighting the potential of low-cost information systems to influence middle-tier behavior when designed to support problem solving rather than compliance.³⁰

Enabling middle-tier support at the system level

Effective middle-tier engagement depends on whether personnel are equipped and empowered to provide instructional and professional support. Studies from Ghana, Kenya, Lesotho, Uganda, and South Africa show that middle-tier officials often face heavy workloads, insufficient training, and logistical constraints that limit their ability to support schools.⁹ A recent synthesis on how to support middle-tier officials in foundational learning reforms concluded that they must be 1) equipped with relevant training and resources to fulfil their responsibilities, 2) connected to shared foundational learning goals and priorities, 3) informed with evidence on foundational learning progress, and 4) empowered to adapt and make decisions to support foundational learning.¹⁸ Evidence from Pakistan and India suggests that middle-tier officials engage more meaningfully in instructional support when national learning goals, credible data, and performance incentives are aligned.³¹ In Ceará, Brazil, strong political commitment to foundational literacy combined with diagnostic assessments and coordinated state-municipal collaboration enabled local leaders to prioritise early-grade learning. Municipalities such as Sobral achieved sustained improvements through clear literacy targets and consistent monitoring.³²

The broader literature suggests additional institutional and system factors that are key to enabling middle-tier support, such as mandates that are fit for purpose, clarity of roles and responsibilities, and effective public financing.⁵ Where system coherence is weak – reflected in fragmented mandates and poor alignment between national priorities and local realities – middle-tier personnel often default to administrative compliance rather than instructional support. Conversely, when job descriptions, incentives, and reporting structures align around instructional goals – and administrative burdens are streamlined – middle-tier personnel are better positioned to act strategically rather than reactively.⁷

Country spotlight: Kenya

The Tusome (“Let’s Read”) national structured pedagogy program provides a large-scale example of enabling effective middle-tier collaboration with schools. Between 2015 and 2022, Tusome combined revised instructional materials, teacher training, and continuous support, which significantly improved early-grade reading outcomes. A key design feature was redefining Curriculum Support Officers’ (CSO) roles to prioritise instructional support through regular school visits, classroom observation, and pedagogical feedback. CSOs received practical training, tablet-based coaching tools, and travel reimbursements to enable frequent school engagement, while incentives were linked to verified instructional observations rather than compliance reporting. Although Tusome’s learning gains cannot be attributed solely to middle-tier action, the program demonstrates how clear mandates, aligned incentives, and sustained support can enable middle-tier personnel to reinforce early-grade literacy instruction at scale.^{33,34}

Considerations for policy and practice

Improving foundational literacy and numeracy at scale requires deliberate attention to the middle tier as an enabling layer within education systems. While middle-tier engagement alone cannot generate learning gains, foundational learning reforms are difficult to implement, sustain, or scale without strengthening middle-tier functions related to school-based instructional support and evidence-driven monitoring and professional collaboration. These findings suggest several priorities for policy and practice:

1. **Prioritise foundational learning within middle-tier responsibilities:** Embed explicit responsibility for early-grade literacy and numeracy within middle-tier mandates, routines, and performance incentives. This can include responsibilities for coordinating professional learning structures and directly providing instructional support for teachers and school leadership teams.
2. **Clarify roles and strengthen middle-tier capacity:** Define clear mandates for the middle tier that include foundational learning, streamline administrative workloads, and ensure middle-tier personnel have the time, resources, skills, and authority needed to support foundational learning.
3. **Provide the middle tier with actionable learning data:** Provide middle tier personnel with timely and actionable learning data they can use in instructional support and follow up with teachers and school leadership teams directly. Middle tier officials also need adequate training and tools (such as dashboards) to ensure they can use data effectively.
4. **Align data-driven accountability with professional collaboration:** Ensure monitoring is guided by norms of professional collaboration, including coaching, feedback, and joint problem solving rather than relying primarily on inspection or sanctions.

See our research on the middle tier



<https://go.edc.org/LT-FL>



<https://go.edc.org/PMT>



<https://go.edc.org/MT-SA>

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