



Good practice note and policy reflections

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# Evaluation of UNICEF Contribution to Teacher Development and Improved Learning Outcomes

**Good Practice Note 1: Working collaboratively with middle-tier actors on system strengthening efforts and engaging school leaders and communities**



By 2030, substantially increase the supply of qualified teachers, including through international cooperation for teacher training in developing countries, especially least developed countries and small island developing States.

## Role of the Middle-Tier (District, Regional, Sub-national)







National policy



School-level implementation

from compliance administrators → agents of change

### UNICEF Good Practices with Middle-Tier Actors

-  **Scaling:** Expanding technical and pedagogical support
-  **Strengthening:** Building local teacher development systems
-  **Monitoring:** Ensuring accountability
-  **Sustainability:** Fostering national ownership & long-term impact



## Introduction

Teachers are essential to achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4, which commits to ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education for all by 2030. SDG Target 4.c calls for a substantial increase in the supply of qualified teachers, recognising that teachers are key to improving children’s learning outcomes. While there has been progress in the last decade, the supply of qualified teachers remains a pressing concern worldwide fuelled by a range of issues that include the working conditions and status of teaching as a profession as well as issues around teacher capabilities, qualifications and motivations.

This document is one in a series of three good practice notes featuring good practices for designing and implementing programmes to support teacher development for improved learning outcomes. The topics presented in these good practice notes are:

- ▶ Working collaboratively with middle-tier actors on ‘mid-stream’ systems strengthening efforts and engaging school leaders and communities.
- ▶ Advocating for teacher rights and welfare to support education for all.
- ▶ Utilising digital tools to accelerate teacher development initiatives so every child learns.

## Background

The middle-tier of education systems – comprising district, regional or sub-national education representatives – remains a critical yet often overlooked stakeholder. This level plays a pivotal role in translating national policies into practical actions at the school level, effectively bridging the gap between policy design and classroom implementation. Since the wave of decentralization in the 1990s, there has been a shift in the roles of the middle-tier actors: from being primarily compliance administrators to serving as agents of change. The 2025 UNESCO report “Leveraging the potential of the middle tier to improve education outcomes. The role of a capacity assessment framework” presents a description of the potential and the gaps of the middle-tier to strengthen education systems, proposing a framework to assess the institutional maturity or capacity of this sub-national level.<sup>1</sup>

## Good Practices: The Role of the Middle-Tier

UNICEF work on teacher development has recognized the middle-tier as a crucial space particularly in regards improving teacher capabilities. These examples describe the good practices of working with middle-tier actors, reflecting UNICEF significant contributions. They are organized by four roles of the middle-tier:

- ▶ **Scaling technical and pedagogical support.**
- ▶ **Strengthening systems of teacher development locally.**
- ▶ **Monitoring for accountability.**
- ▶ **Ensuring national ownership and sustainability.**

1 Tournier, B., Godwin, K., Cameron, E., & Lugaz, C. (2025). *Leveraging the potential of the middle tier to improve education outcomes: The role of a capacity assessment framework*. UNESCO International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP). <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf00000393642>

**COUNTRIES: RWANDA, CÔTE D'IVOIRE, MADAGASCAR, DOMINICAN REPUBLIC****Middle-Tier for Strengthening Systems of Teacher Development Locally****Context**

Equitable and effective resource allocation and deployment of teachers, materials and operational support is a cornerstone of a strong education system. Through coordination and management, middle-tier actors ensure that schools are adequately resourced according to their specific needs and contexts. Their capacity to inform, adapt, implement, and target resource allocations/deployment, positions them as essential actors in translating policy into practice.

**Role of Middle-Tier in Teacher Development**

Middle-tier actors play a crucial role in managing human and material resources, especially in systems with diverse geographic contexts and infrastructural conditions. Whether through teacher deployment systems, support for transportation, or addressing staffing bottlenecks, their proximity to schools allows for more accurate needs assessment and timely response.

**Good Practices**

- ▶ **Data-driven teacher deployment at the middle-tier is essential to improving working conditions of teachers and to ensuring access to quality education.** The use of teacher management systems and data-driven management at the local level can help ensure equitable allocation of resources. In Rwanda, the Teacher Management Information System, developed with UNICEF support, relies on district-level data inputs to inform national teacher deployment decisions. By tracking where teachers are placed and identifying gaps, the system enables more effective workforce planning, including targeted recruitment and teacher deployment to areas with greater needs. Similarly, in Côte d'Ivoire, the *Programme de Renforcement des Enseignants Multilingues* (PREM) platform enables regional and district offices to identify and reassign teachers based on actual classroom demand. The middle-tier engagement reduced teacher gaps significantly without requiring new hires, highlighting how local-level systems can ensure more equitable and efficient resource allocation.
- ▶ **The middle-tier is key to mobilize and allocate resources, ensuring the effective implementation of teacher development interventions.** Logistical and material support are fundamental for the success and sustainability of these interventions. In Madagascar, regional and district education officers have played a central role in managing the logistics of teacher deployment, particularly in remote and underserved areas. Their involvement extends beyond administrative oversight to include coordinating transportation, facilitating on-site support, and even participating in UNICEF teacher training efforts tailored to local implementation needs. Additionally, supported by UNICEF and within the framework of the *Con Base* programme, middle-tier actors in the Dominican Republic – especially at the regional level – recognized various costs as barriers for teachers to complete the training. All training activities were conducted within district offices to minimize the cost of long-distance travel for educators assigned to hard-to-reach schools and avoid programme implementation disruptions. This practical intervention played a critical role in maintaining continuity and coverage during the rollout of foundational learning reforms.

Ensuring that teachers are effectively deployed and equipped with the right resources is only part of the equation; sustaining improvements in instructional quality also requires robust accountability mechanisms. Middle-tier actors, who already manage allocation and operational logistics, are uniquely positioned to extend this role into monitoring and oversight.

Their proximity to schools enables them not only to track teacher presence and resource use but also to ensure that pedagogical and policy expectations translate into daily classroom practices. This dual function – both supportive and supervisory – reinforces the middle-tier as a pivot force in advancing both equity and accountability in teacher development.

**COUNTRIES: GHANA, DOMINICAN REPUBLIC****Middle-Tier for Monitoring for Teacher Accountability****Context**

In many decentralized education systems, the ability to ensure teacher accountability (particularly around attendance, instructional quality, and adherence to policy) depends not only on national directives but also on the effectiveness of sub-national oversight. The middle-tier plays a pivotal role in connecting national monitoring frameworks to school-level realities. Despite its critical function, this layer is often under-recognized in policy discussions and under-resourced in practice.

**Role of the Middle-Tier in Teacher Development and Accountability**

The middle-tier acts as a bridge between the Ministry and the classroom, translating policies into mechanisms that monitor, guide and support teacher performance. Through systems such as teacher information management databases, routine school visits and real-time dashboards, middle-tier actors help generate data, drive targeted interventions and support schools in improving learning outcomes. Their proximity to schools allows for both accountability and support, grounding national standards in local action.

**Good Practices**

- ▶ **Teacher monitoring systems that are helpful to teachers are key.** Monitoring systems for tracking teachers' deployment and their community engagement, are tools that could limit or enhance teachers work. In Ghana, monitoring systems, supported by UNICEF to address local needs, have become useful tools for the education systems locally. School Improvement and Support Officers (SISOs) conduct weekly visits and contribute to community engagement. Teachers perceive this as useful. *'They come weekly with the SISO, not to find fault but to help us improve,'* says a teacher in Ghana.
- ▶ **Teacher monitoring systems serve as vital bridges between national policy and local classroom practice, reinforcing accountability across education systems.** When well designed, these systems allow national authorities to track real-time implementation of instructional initiatives and hold middle-tier officials accountable for school-level outcomes. Advances in technology and data systems have made it increasingly feasible to connect classrooms with policymakers – often with just a click. For example, in the Dominican Republic, the *Gestión Operativa del Sistema Educativo de la República Dominicana* platform, is a UNICEF designed, managed and funded platform to monitoring system gap. Drawing from UNICEF health sector's learnings, it enables district and regional officers to enter real-time performance data into a national dashboard (including learning outcomes). This provides visibility into how foundational learning efforts are evolving across schools. Periodically, these data inform accountability exercises where district officers report to regional officers, who then report to national authorities (including the Minister of Education), defining clear responsibilities and accountabilities at all levels. Similarly, district-led innovations in Ghana, were originally driven by local stakeholders. The development of local dashboards, originally designed by IT officers with UNICEF support, to monitor foundational learning progress. Their use was later recognized, adopted and scaled nationally. These digital monitoring tools not only enhanced transparency and responsiveness but also empower the middle-tier to become both accountable for, and actively engaged in, driving instructional improvement. *'A local innovation... caught imagination of the national authorities,'* as described by a district level government stakeholder.

While monitoring and accountability mechanisms strengthen the immediate effectiveness of teacher development initiatives, long-term impact requires that these systems be owned and sustained within national structures. Middle-tier actors, already central to linking policy and practice, are also the ones who embed reforms into local routines, institutional frameworks and professional cultures.

Their ability to carry policies beyond pilot phases and across political transitions positions them as pivotal agents of continuity, ensuring that accountability efforts are not one-off exercises but part of a sustained national vision for teacher development.

**COUNTRIES: GHANA, JAMAICA, CÔTE D'IVOIRE, DOMINICAN REPUBLIC**

## Middle-Tier for Enhancing National Ownership and Sustainability

### Context

Sustainable teacher development policies require more than good designs, they depend on the depth of ownership among those responsible for implementation. While national ministries often provide strategic direction, it is the middle-tier education actors that anchors policies or reforms within systems, communities, and classrooms. These actors ensure continuity across political cycles, adapt national policies to local contexts, and institutionalise change through ongoing engagement with schools and stakeholders. The middle-tier actors are key to ensuring national ownership and sustainability from design to implementation.

### Role of the Middle-Tier in Teacher Development and Accountability

Middle-tier actors play a dual role in sustainability: they are both co-creators of policies, programmes, and projects as well as long-term stewards of implementations. Their proximity to schools and their embeddedness in daily system operations make them essential for translating policies into permanent practice. Whether aligning external programmes to national standards, managing teacher data systems, or sustaining school-level mentoring, their contributions could help policies continue beyond the uncertainties of unpredictable external funding or leadership transitions.

### Good Practices

- ▶ **Co-creation and embedded leadership in policy design are crucial for sustaining policies, as middle-tier actors play a pivotal role when meaningfully engaged from the outset.** In Ghana, for example, district and regional officers were involved from the very inception of programmes, ensuring that the Ministry of Education and Ghana Education Service led and contextualized reforms at the point of delivery. Similarly, in Jamaica, the National College for Educational Leadership integrated both national and global content into its teacher training platforms, embedding reform priorities into professional development structures. These cases highlight how co-creation empowers middle-tier actors to adapt policies to local realities, thereby strengthening ownership and long-term sustainability.
- ▶ **Institutionalization through local systems and structures ensures that the operationalization of policies move beyond pilot phases and become embedded in national practices.** In the Dominican Republic, the *Con Base* programme was elevated to national policy through Ordinance 1123 and it is now implemented directly by regional and district technical teams, who report feeling the responsibility and the full ownership of the foundational learning policy and reform. In Côte d'Ivoire, platforms such as PREM and SIRENE for teacher deployment are integrated into human resource workflows and managed by regional and district staff, enabling transparent monitoring of teacher allocation throughout the year. These examples demonstrate how anchoring reforms within existing local systems and legal frameworks strengthens institutionalization, fosters accountability and enhances sustainability and ownership.
- ▶ **Middle-tier actors serve as policy owners and continuity agents, helping reforms endure through political transitions and shifts in external funding.** In the Dominican Republic, teachers and district officers voiced a strong commitment to sustaining the *Con Base* programme even beyond UNICEF support, underscoring their sense of ownership and responsibility. Similarly, in Jamaica, the government progressively assumed budgetary responsibility for early screening and referral systems that were initially donor-funded, embedding them into the national budget. These cases illustrate how middle-tier engagement not only anchors reforms in practice but also safeguards their continuity by bridging the gap between short-term external support and long-term national sustainability.

## Policy Reflections

These examples point to several reflections and takeaways on the role of the middle-tier in teacher development. Indeed, **although the middle-tier is under-recognized, it plays a critical catalytic role.** While national policy sets the vision and schools deliver learning, it is at the middle-tier that ambitions are translated into daily practice. Middle-tier actors act as catalysts, accelerating pedagogical improvement, ensuring resource equity, reinforcing accountability, and rooting reforms for sustainability, specifically:

- ▶ **For continuous professional learning.** Coaching, peer learning, and mentoring anchored at the district or regional level have proven more effective than isolated workshops, embedding professional development within school routines.
- ▶ **For equity and efficiency.** Middle-tier actors can improve equity and efficiency, using localized teacher allocations and data-driven deployment systems, sometimes without requiring new hires.
- ▶ **For accountability with support.** Monitoring platforms, when designed as supportive rather than punitive, demonstrate how the middle-tier can both reinforce national standards and foster teacher professional growth.
- ▶ **For teacher well-being.** Although not always fully captured in the evidence, the middle-tier has the potential to alleviate teachers' administrative burden, enabling them to focus on their pedagogical roles. This, alongside with adequate teacher supply and fair workload allocation, can contribute directly to teacher well-being and better learning environments for children.
- ▶ **For sustainability.** Reforms are more likely to prevail when middle-tier actors are engaged as co-creators from the outset, embedding change into system routines and carrying reforms through political and funding transitions.

## Implication for UNICEF and partners

Strengthening teacher development is less about introducing new tools or one-off projects and more about investing in the catalytic capacities, mandates and ownership of the middle-tier, leveraging UNICEF strong presence on the ground. These efforts, together with community engagement work, are key to identify context-based enabling factors and specify barriers that will allow education systems to support the specific learning needs of the children they serve.

### Policy Takeaways of the Middle-Tier for Teacher Development

- ▶ **Investing in the capacity of the middle-tier.** Equip regional and district professionals with training, coaching and digital tools so that they can move beyond compliance roles to become active supporters of teachers.
- ▶ **Anchoring policies in existing middle-tier systems.** Embed teacher development interventions within established district and regional structures to ensure continuity, avoid fragmentation and institutionalise reforms.
- ▶ **Balancing accountability with support.** Design monitoring and data systems that not only track performance but also provide constructive feedback and professional growth opportunities for teachers.
- ▶ **Strengthening ownership and sustainability.** Involve middle-tier actors as co-creators of reforms and align donor-supported initiatives with government systems and budgets to foster long-term national commitment.

### A Point Worth Considering

Despite the growing discourse around the relevance of the middle-tier, close attention is needed to ensure its transformation from primarily administrative-political functions towards stronger pedagogical and instructional roles to support teachers. This shift is neither minor nor easy and must be acknowledged. It also calls for addressing governance challenges that may compromise effectiveness and trust at this level.

### About the note







The discussion and policy reflections included in this note are the product of further analyses of the thematic experts and the evidence collected that informed the “Evaluation of UNICEF Contribution to Teacher Development and Improved Learning Outcomes” which took place between September 2024 and July 2025. This evaluation, commissioned by UNICEF Evaluation Office, was conducted by a team of external evaluators (Alvin Leung, Andrea L. Esser, Magali Ramos Jarrin, and Paola Vela). Tami Aritomi was the evaluation manager.

The opinions expressed on the policy reflections are those of the author(s) and do not reflect UNICEF official position.

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