

Approaches to Education Systems Change

A Guide for Practitioners

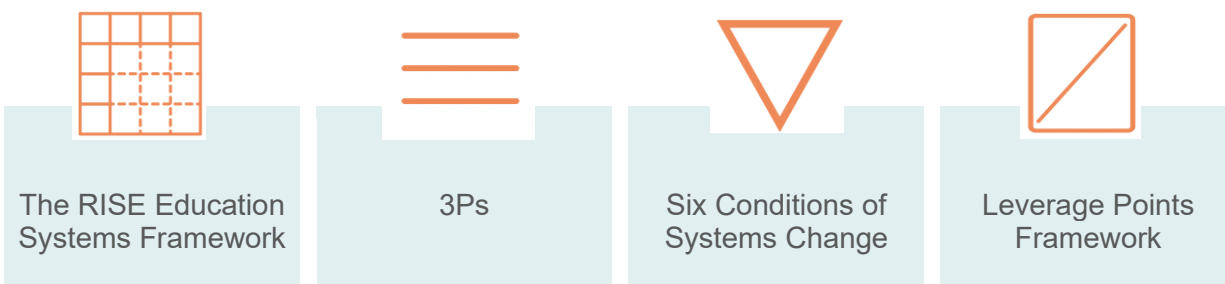
Different Models, Shared Mission

Before jumping to solutions in the education sector, it is vital to pause and reflect: What is truly causing the challenge we seek to address? To answer that, it is important to understand the structures and relationships that shape the system. Systems change work encourages us to zoom out and see the full picture—considering the incentives, policies, people, and often invisible dynamics that influence how the system operates.

There are several systems change models and frameworks available to support this process. While each one offers unique insights, they all share four essential elements:

- They promote a broad and holistic perspective, recognizing that complex problems often do not have single, straightforward solutions. They are guided by exploratory questions that seek to understand how and why change happens.
- They emphasize relationships—among individuals, institutions, and ideas—and examine both the tangible aspects of systems (such as rules and resources) and the intangible ones (such as mindsets, beliefs, and informal norms).
- They draw from a range of methods, with a strong focus on qualitative approaches to uncover nuance, meaning, and local context.

Below is a quick overview of some of our preferred approaches to education systems change. You are encouraged to explore these models, adapt what resonates most with your context, and even develop your own. The most effective approach is the one that reflects your community, your vision, and your goals.





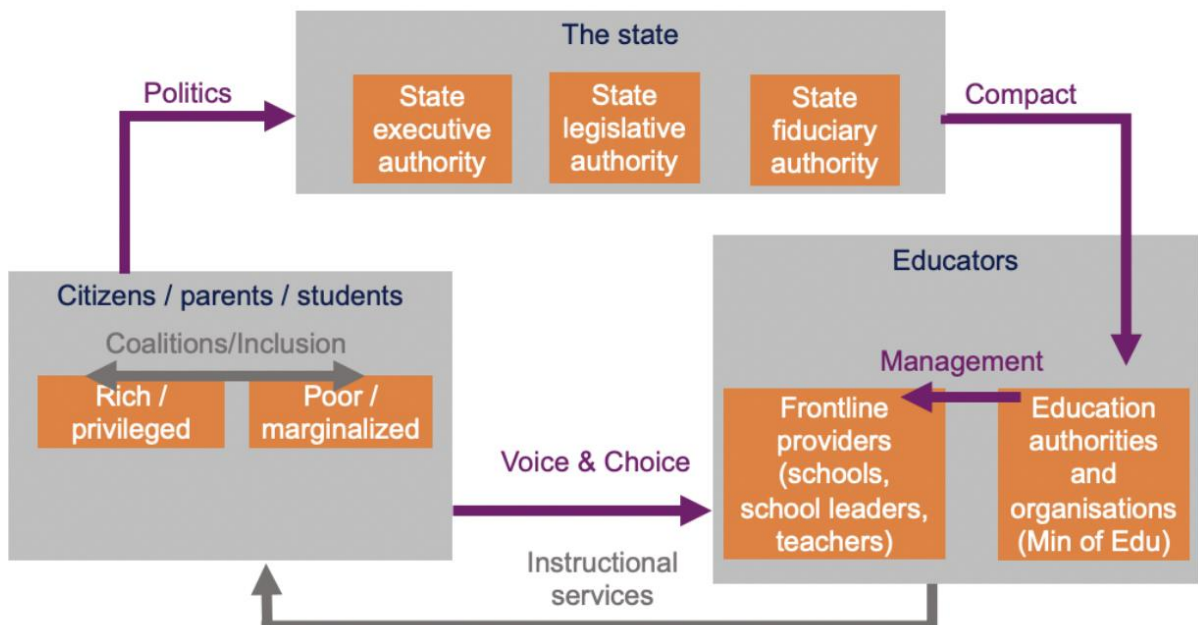
The RISE Education Systems Framework

What is it?

The RISE Framework in education has been developed by The RISE (Relevance, Innovation, Student-Centered, and Equity) Institute, and it outlines how different components of an education system, such as policies, actors, and institutions, must align around the shared goal of improving student learning. In practice, this means analyzing how citizens, government officials, education officials, school leaders, teachers, parents, and students relate to each other and how these interactions shape the overall system. By examining the alignments, coherence, and gaps within these relationships, stakeholders can uncover challenges and pinpoint effective entry points for solutions.

The framework proposes five accountability relationships: delegation, finance, information, support, and motivation.

Figure 1. Relationships and actors in the education system¹



How to use it

To use the RISE framework, changemakers should start by mapping the key actors and elements within the education system. Then, using a 5x4 matrix, stakeholders collaboratively analyze the main accountability relationships between these actors to

¹ From *System Coherence for Learning: Applications of the RISE Education Systems Framework* (p. 6, Figure 2), by RISE Programme, 2022.

identify where they align well and where gaps or conflicts exist. Based on this collaborative diagnosis, targeted interventions can be designed to better align the system and improve learning outcomes.

Table 1. Example of RISE Matrix²

Five elements of each relationship	Principal-agent relationships			
	Politics: Citizens to the highest authorities of the state	Compact: Highest authorities of the state to education authorities	Management: Education authorities to frontline providers (schools, school leaders, and teachers)	Voice & Choice: Service recipients (parents/children) to frontline providers (schools, school leaders, teachers)
Delegation: What the principal wants the agent to do.		Example 1. (a) Executive authority delegates learning improvements	Example 2. (a) Education ministry launches new foundational skills learning initiative	Example 2. (b) Parents prefer and pressure schools and teachers to prioritize preparation for high stakes school leaving exams
Finance: the resources the principal has allocated to the agent to achieve assigned task.				
Information: how the principal assesses the agent's performance		Example 1. (b) Despite delegating learning improvements, Executive authority only monitors information on enrollment rates and teacher attendance		
Support: preparation and assistance that the principal provides to the agent to complete the task.				
Motivation: How the principal motivates the agent, including the ways in which agent's welfare is contingent on their performance against objectives.				

To learn more about the RISE framework, we invite you to check out:

- [System Coherence for Learning: Applications of the RISE Education Systems Framework \(Kaffenberger and Spivack, 2022\)](#)

² From *System Coherence for Learning: Applications of the RISE Education Systems Framework* (p. 8, Table 1), by RISE Programme, 2022.

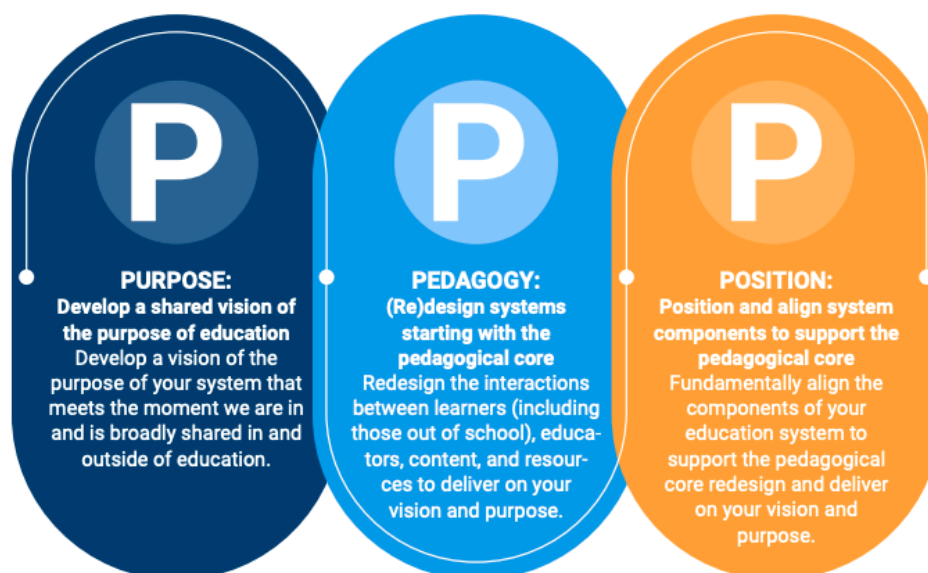
- [Applying Systems Thinking to Education: The RISE Systems Framework | RISE Programme \(Spivack, 2021\)](#)

3 Ps Framework (Purpose, Pedagogy, Position)

What is it?

The 3Ps (Purpose, Pedagogy, Position) Framework, developed by the Center for Universal Education at Brookings, is a structured three-step, holistic approach that helps examine how effectively the visible and invisible elements of an education system work together in harmony. At its core, it recognizes that poor educational outcomes often stem from misalignment among system elements.

Figure 2. The participatory approach to transformation: 3Ps – Purpose, Pedagogy, Position³



How to use it

This framework guides changemakers through a structured, three-step process, one for each "P", to drive effective and inclusive education transformation. It is a highly participatory exercise, so it is important to involve diverse voices, including educators, students, families, communities, and policymakers. In each step, the framework provides conversation starters and reflective questions to help teams move through the process.

³ From *Transforming Education Systems Why, What, and How* (p. 9, Figure 2), by Sengeh & Winthrop, Center for Universal Education at Brookings, 2022.

Below are sample questions—organized by stakeholder group and aligned to each “P”—to support inclusive dialogue and reflection. These were inspired by the *Conversation Starter Tools: A Participatory Research Guide to Building Stronger Family, School, and Community Partnerships*⁴ and are designed to help changemakers spark meaningful conversations within their local context.

Table 2. Sample questions aligned to the 3Ps by stakeholder

Who	Purpose	Pedagogy	Position
Students	What does meaningful learning look like from your perspective?	What helps you feel seen and supported in your learning?	What school resources help or hinder your ability to learn?
Teachers	How do you define success for your students beyond test scores?	What teaching approaches work best to meet diverse student needs?	What support or tools do you need to teach in ways that reach all learners?
School Leaders	What shared goals do you see for your school community?	What practices have you found most effective for engaging every learner?	What shifts in school policies could enable more inclusive practices?
Families	What do you hope your children gain from their school experience?	What kind of learning environment do you want for your child?	What barriers do you see in how schools support children's learning?
Community Members	What aspirations do you have for young people in your community?	What examples have you seen of teaching that works well in your context?	What systems or services outside school impact learners' success?
District Officials	What outcomes are most important to track in your district?	How can instructional supports be aligned to teacher needs?	What changes in funding or staffing would improve learning outcomes?
Ministry of Education Representatives	How can national policies reflect inclusive definitions of student success?	What national standards or guidance best support inclusive teaching practices?	How can system-wide data and accountability better support continuous improvement?

To learn more about the 3Ps framework, please check out:

- [Transforming Education Systems; Why, What, How \(Sengeh & Winthrop, 2022\)](#)
- [2 pager Transforming education systems: Why, what, and how \(Sengeh & Winthrop, 2022\)](#)

⁴ Morris, E.M., Nora, L. & Winthrop, R. (2024). *Conversation starter tools: A participatory research guide to building stronger family, school, and community partnerships*. Brookings Institution.



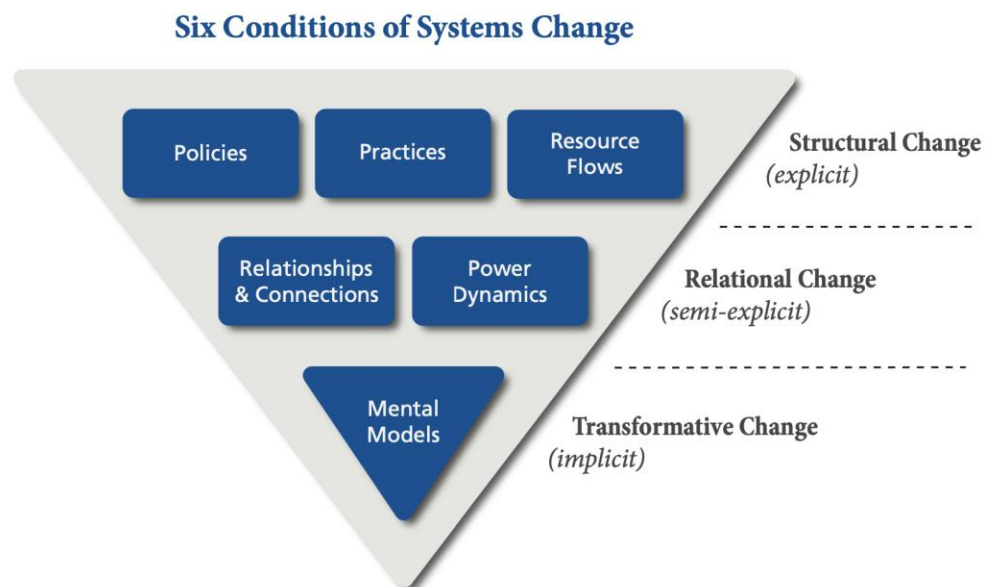
Six Conditions of Systems Change

What is it?

The framework developed by FSG explores six underlying conditions, often invisible, that maintain the status quo in education systems. The six conditions are grouped into three interrelated categories: structural, relational, and transformative. It is important that change makers consider how these conditions might be present in their environment and organizations. The six conditions are:

- **Policies:** The official and unofficial rules or priorities that guide how things get done.
- **Practices:** The everyday actions and activities people and organizations do to make progress or solve problems.
- **Resource Flows:** How resources like money, people, knowledge, and information move around and get shared.
- **Relationships & Connections:** How people and groups communicate and work together.
- **Power Dynamics:** Who has the real control or influence over decisions, whether officially or behind the scenes.
- **Mental Models:** The deep beliefs and ideas that shape how people think and behave.

Figure 3. Conditions that hold the problem in place. ⁵



⁵ From *The Water of Systems Change* (p. 3, Figure 1), by J. Kania, M. Kramer, & P. Senge, 2018, FSG

How to use it?

Once changemakers have a clear problem statement and have engaged a diverse group of stakeholders, they can begin by reviewing each of the six conditions and reflecting on how they currently contribute to the problem. Some questions you might ask include: Are policies outdated? Are resource flows inefficient? Are relationships strained? Keep in mind that these conditions are interconnected, and changing one often affects others. For example, shifting power dynamics might also require changes in resource flows or mental models in order to lead to meaningful, sustainable change.

Next, it is time to define the actions you may take. When identifying potential strategies, it is important to keep in mind that effective systemic interventions address all three levels of systems change: explicit (policies, practices, and resources), semi-explicit (relationships and power), and implicit (mental models).

Figure 4. Example of a working template of the Six Conditions of Systems Change Framework⁶

DIAGNOSIS: ASSESSING INTERNAL SYSTEMS CONDITIONS		
Systems Change Condition	Example (for foundations)	To what extent have your personal actions contributed to the conditions holding the problem in place? To what extent are your organization's actions contributing to the conditions that are holding the problem in place?
Policies	Grant cycles not aligned with rate of change	
Practices	RFP processes that favor certain organizations	
Resource Flows	Insufficient allocation of resources to learning and evaluation	
Relationships & Connections	Siloed programmatic departments	
Power Dynamics	Lack of candor in dialogue between board and staff	
Mental Models	Evaluation orientation does not account for systems change complexity	

To learn more about the Six Conditions of systems change, check out:

- [Kania et al., 2018. The Water of Systems Change](#)
- [The Water of Systems Change: Action Learning Exercise](#)

⁶ From *The Water of Systems Change: Action Learning Exercise* (p. 7), by FSG, 2021



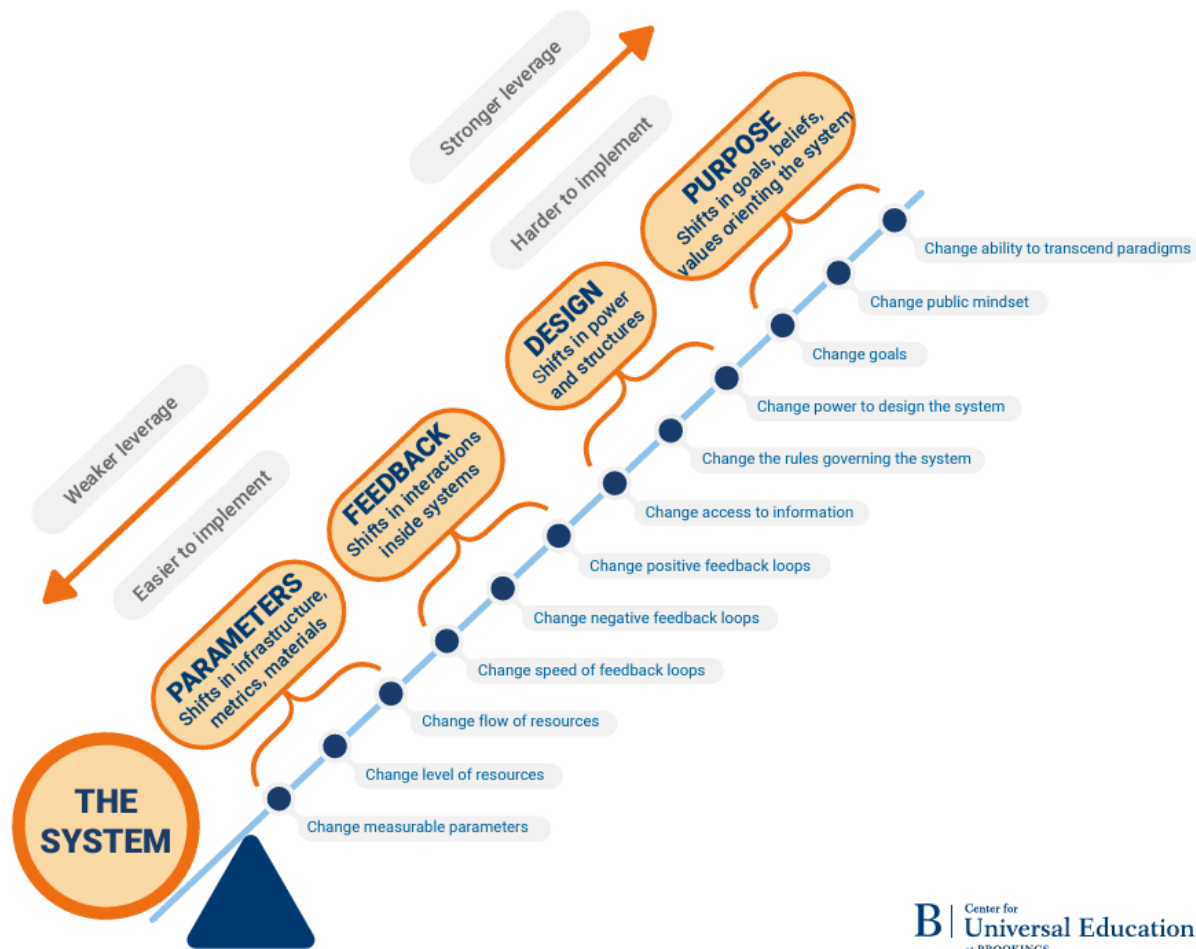
Leverage Points Framework

What is it?

This framework is particularly relevant to making changes in education where entrenched beliefs about learning, equity, and assessment are necessary for reform. It provides 12 systemic leverage points, ranked by their potential to spark change. The main idea is that changes made to the deeper aspects of a system, for example, teachers' beliefs about what competencies are valued, can have a greater impact because they may also influence many other parts of the system. So the deeper we go, the more impact your interventions may have. The 12 leverage points are in order from weaker to stronger leverage:

12. **Measurable parameters:** Small tweaks such as changing tax rates or classroom sizes.
11. **Levels of resources:** The amount the system can absorb before it reaches a tipping point.
10. **Structure of material stocks and flows:** How physical elements move in the system, for example, supply chains or student demographics.
9. **Lengths of delays:** The lag between an action and its effect, for example the time it takes for a new education policy to produce results.
8. **Negative feedback loops:** Mechanisms that resist change and help maintain system balance.
7. **Positive feedback loops:** Loops that reinforce and accelerate trends.
6. **Structure of information flows:** Who has access to information and data, and who does not.
5. **Rules of the system:** Laws, incentives, and punishments that guide behavior.
4. **Power to add, change, evolve, or self-organize system structure:** The system's ability to design itself, grow, innovate, and adapt.
3. **Goals of the system:** What the system is fundamentally trying to achieve.
2. **Mindset or paradigm:** The deep beliefs and assumptions that shape the system.
1. **Power to transcend paradigms:** The capacity to hold multiple perspectives and embrace new ways of thinking, acting, and designing systems.

Figure 5. Leverage Points Framework⁷



How to use it?

To use the Leverage Points framework effectively, changemakers should start by clearly identifying the system you want to influence. Next, map out the system's components, relationships, and feedback loops visualizing how parts interact. Then, analyze the twelve leverage points to determine where interventions will have the greatest impact. The insights generated so far should then be used to design targeted strategies and regularly reflect on how the system is evolving, adapting interventions accordingly.

To learn more about the Leverage Points framework, check out:

- [Leverage Points: Places to Intervene in a System, by Donella Meadows](#)
- [Leverage Points: Places to Intervene in a System Sustainability Institute](#)

⁷ The leverage points framework for system transformation. From *Transforming education systems* (Annex 1), by Brookings Institution, 2022.

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