

What is Systems Change?

A quick guide for education changemakers



What

A Shift in Structures, Relationships, and Mindsets¹

Systems change involves **deep shifts in how systems are organized and operate**, often requiring rethinking long-standing assumptions. It focuses on transforming:

- Structures like governance, policies, and resource flows
- Roles and relationships among stakeholders
- Power dynamics, cultural norms, and feedback loops that sustain barriers
- Mindsets and expectations that shape what is prioritized or ignored

These shifts address root causes rather than symptoms—tackling what creates and sustains inequities across education systems.



How

Recognizing Interconnected Systems²

Systems are **dynamic and complex**, made up of people, structures, and practices linked by feedback loops. Change happens when:

- Elements and actors are realigned toward shared goals
- Feedback loops and relationships are used to create ripple effects
- Cross-sector collaboration helps address deeply embedded inefficiencies
- Change is recognized as nonlinear and adaptive, requiring flexibility and learning
- Solutions are context-specific, shaped by the unique political, economic, and social conditions of each system

¹ Williams & Hummelbrunner, 2011; Meadows, 2008; Gonzalez, Aiken & Gosciak, 2021

² Kaffenberger & Spivack, 2022; Meadows, 2008; Gonzalez, Aiken & Gosciak, 2021; Pritchett, 2015



How

Aligning and Adapting Systems³

Systems change is an intentional process of **reshaping how a system functions** to achieve better outcomes and reduce persistent barriers. It involves:

- Shifting policies, routines, and relationships that shape daily operations
- Promoting coherence across actors, strategies, and goals
- Aligning resources, practices, and mindsets toward a shared purpose
- Redesigning structures to support adaptability and responsiveness
- Encouraging collaboration that leads to actual shifts in power and decision-making
- Using real-time feedback to support continuous learning and adjustment
- Addressing norms, incentives, and hidden power dynamics



Results in

What Success Looks Like⁴

You can recognize systems change by its **durability, reach, and adaptability**. When successful, it results in:

- Sustainable improvements that continue beyond a project or funding cycle
- Scalable impact that grows and reaches more people
- Resilient systems that adapt to shocks and disruptions
- Embedded practices and policies that make progress durable over time
- Alignment across subsystems and hierarchies to enable more coherent, connected action

Remember, context matters!

There is no universal blueprint for systems change. Every education system is shaped by social, economic, and political conditions, and meaningful change must be adapted to the unique realities of each setting.

³ Cabaj & Tamarack Institute, 2019; PCI Reflective Evaluation Framework, 2017; Sengeh & Winthrop, 2022; Barton, Ershadi & Winthrop, 2021; Pritchett, 2015; RISE Programme, 2021; Lynn & Coffman, 2024; Foster-Fishman, Nowell & Yang, 2007; Kessler, 2021; Hopkins & Ferris, 2014

⁴ Kessler, 2021; Robinson, Wyss & Hannahan, 2021; Cohen & Kim, 2022; Gonzalez, Aiken & Gosciak, 2021; Sengeh & Winthrop, 2022