

Systems Change Principles in Practice

Education Changemakers Around the World

Systems change can sound abstract, but it becomes real when we look at the deeper patterns behind how we work—how decisions are made, who is included, and what gets prioritized. This resource introduces ten guiding principles¹ that reflect the values and behaviors driving meaningful education transformation. Grounded in global examples, these principles offer a practical starting point for anyone—whether in classrooms, communities, ministries, or cross-sector partnerships—who is working to make systems more inclusive, durable, and responsive.

1. Embracing Complexity

Change happens through cycles of learning, adaptation, and feedback. Embracing complexity means planning for emergence, not certainty.

Vietnam's Education Reforms took a phased approach to shifting the national curriculum and improving preschool access, especially in under-resourced communities. The government piloted reforms, adjusted based on feedback, and prioritized iterative learning over linear planning. These reforms were supported by multilateral donors, including the World Bank and UNICEF, and unfolded over a decade of shifting needs and national priorities (Cohen & Kim, 2022).

How to use these principles

These ten principles provide a flexible framework for reflection, learning, and action. The order in which they are presented follows an arc that many systems changemakers experience from understanding and identifying the system, to acting within it, and shifting it to promote change. You are welcome to start with whichever principle speaks most to your current work or challenge. Our recommended goal is to approach it with a goal of intentionally building capacity over time.

¹ These principles draw from IREX's programmatic experiences and a wide array of literature including Barton, 2021; Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Foster-Fishman & Behrens, 2007; Foster-Fishman et al., 2007; Fuller & Kim, 2022; Gersick, 1991; Gonzalez, Aikens & Gosciak, 2021; Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 1999; Jacobs Foundation, 2019; Meadows & Wright, 2008; Munro et al., 2002; Olson & Eoyang, 2001; O'Connor, 2007; Parsons & Krenn, 2018; Pritchett, 2015; Roland & Eberhardt, 2018; Seidman, 1988; Tschannen-Moran, 2004.

2. Listening to Multiple Voices

Including diverse perspectives—especially those most affected by the system—leads to more trusted, relevant, and sustainable reforms.

[*Youth Excel*](#), an IREX program, supported youth-led research in over 20 countries. Young people—particularly from underrepresented communities—identified local education priorities, gathered evidence, and presented their findings directly to decision-makers, helping shape more relevant and trusted reforms. To support this work, the [*Research-to-Change Toolkit*](#) offers practical guidance for youth-led and youth-serving organizations to strengthen their programs using research and data.

3. Building to Sustain

Systems change that lasts is embedded in policy, funding, and institutional routines.

Sobral, Brazil achieved long-term improvements in literacy by embedding high-quality instruction into the foundations of the education system. Local leaders aligned curriculum, teacher training, and accountability systems to create coherence. Importantly, Sobral secured political and financial stability over multiple administrations, with results continuing beyond initial project funding or technical support (Kaffenberger & Spivack, 2022).

4. Mapping Systems and Actors

Understanding who holds influence and how parts of the system interact, helps changemakers act more strategically. Mapping helps reveal leverage points, disconnects, and relationships that shape how the system operates.

IdeoDigital, Chile mapped actors across the education ecosystem to embed computer science into the national public school curriculum. Led by Fundación Kodea with support from the BHP Foundation, the initiative brought together the Ministry of Education, teacher training institutions, schools, and private sector partners. By aligning efforts across policy, pedagogy, and digital access, IdeoDigital created pathways for over 150,000 students in 1,000 schools to build future-ready skills. The systems mapping process helped identify where support was needed most and strengthened collaboration across sectors to sustain long-term change (Fundación Kodea & BHP Foundation, 2021).

5. Collaborating Across Sectors

Education intersects with other sectors such as health, workforce, and digital inclusion. Strong collaboration across sectors allows changemakers to address the root causes of exclusion and create more holistic solutions.

TRECC (Transforming Education in Cocoa Communities), Côte d'Ivoire brought together government ministries, cocoa-industry stakeholders, researchers, and civil society to improve learning outcomes in rural communities. The initiative aligned private and public investments, scaled promising innovations, and built system-wide coordination that centered sustainability and local ownership. Led by the Jacobs Foundation with cross-sector partners, TRECC illustrates how deep collaboration can shift how education systems function at scale (Jacobs Foundation, 2023).

6. Adapting as you Learn

Effective systems change depends on continuous learning. Iteration, reflection, and course correction are essential tools for navigating complexity and improving over time.

Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL), India, developed by Pratham, tackled foundational literacy gaps through grouping students by learning level rather than age or grade. The program embedded real-time feedback mechanisms through regular assessments and teacher reflections, which informed adjustments to implementation. Its adaptation across countries and delivery models highlights how responsiveness can support equity (Banerjee et al., 2016; Kaffenberger, 2022).

7. Identifying Leverage Points

Small, well-placed changes can create ripple effects across a system.

[*Kenya Play*](#) introduced play-based learning with technology in coastal Kenya by leveraging a window of opportunity created by the introduction of the government's new competency-based curriculum. Early in the process, IREX and its partners recognized that teachers were still learning how to implement competency-based curriculum and needed additional training and support to use it effectively. In response, the team collaborated with local education authorities to embed play-based learning within the competency-based curriculum and to provide teachers with the resources and support needed to use both approaches simultaneously in their classrooms.

8. Strengthening Relationships

Trust and strong relationships between actors can enable shared purpose and sustained progress.

Training Educators for Excellence, Republic of Georgia, established a strong relationship between the Ministry of Education and Science, the donor Millennium Challenge Corporation, and international consultants from IREX. By embedding consultant staff within the Ministry and collaboratively developing a targeted plan for aligned professional development—serving both secondary educators and school leaders concurrently—these three partners created sustained progress towards systems change ([GPE, 2024](#)).

9. Focusing on Root Causes and Patterns

Systems thinkers go beyond surface issues—like test scores or dropout rates—to investigate the underlying structures, beliefs, and incentives that keep those patterns in place.

Indonesian Teacher Reform addressed inequities in education quality by overhauling teacher hiring, certification, and placement. The reforms introduced performance-based incentives and redistributed teachers to underserved areas. With support from the World Bank, this effort targeted structural conditions over short-term outcomes (World Bank, 2015).

10. Cultivating Continuous System Evolution

Systems are never “finished.” Strong systems develop the capacity to evolve with new challenges, technologies, and priorities over time.

Singapore’s Holistic Education Reforms span decades of gradual evolution. Reforms combined rigorous academic expectations with a growing emphasis on civic values, ethics, and student well-being. These shifts were enabled by strategic investments in teacher professional development and system-wide learning infrastructure, allowing the system to evolve while maintaining coherence (Sengeh & Winthrop, 2022).

Every step will take you further on your changemaker journey!

These principles are not intended to be checkboxes; they are mindsets to strengthen over time. We invite you to use them to reflect, discuss with your team, and guide your next steps toward meaningful, systems-level change.