

# **Empowering middle-tier actors in Guyana for school improvement**

## **Blog**

Microplanning of education

**When looking to improve education systems, policy makers and development partners tend to focus primarily on the central and school levels. However, there exists a variety of actors between these levels whose work goes unnoticed: middle-tier actors.**

## **What is the middle tier?**

In the [work of UNESCO's International Institute for Educational Planning \(IIEP\)](#), the middle tier refers to the sub-district, district, or regional levels of education systems. In other words, to that 'messy place' between schools and the central level. Middle-tier actors are defined as intermediaries in systems that are responsible for implementing and monitoring national education policy at the local level. These include [district education offices](#), [local elected authorities](#) – through their education departments –, [head teachers coordinating school networks](#), [supervisors](#), [pedagogical advisors](#), and other actors.

In the context of the learning crisis, the middle tier is increasingly seen as a key lever in strengthening the delivery and effectiveness of education systems and improving learning outcomes. Ministries of Education are looking for ways to equip professionals at the intermediate level of the system with the necessary skills and capacity to better support schools and frontline education professionals.

This is the case of the [Ministry of Education of Guyana](#), who approached the IIEP to design and run a programme to develop the capacity of regional education officers, district education officers and central planners to support schools in designing, implementing, and monitoring school improvement planning. The online course “Support school improvement planning in Guyana” is based on the IIEP’s longstanding expertise on how to engage local level actors to improve educational quality.

# Improving quality and learning outcomes through school improvement planning

Guyana has undertaken strong commitments to improve learning outcomes and promote equity in its [Education Sector Plan \(ESP\) 2021-2025](#). Many children face considerable education problems in terms of access, equity, and quality. 15% of pre-primary age children are excluded from the system, especially those from the lower wealth quintiles. Net enrolment rates are higher for girls than for boys, particularly in secondary education, while a significant proportion of children with disabilities have never attended school (on average, 11% among five regions of the country). In addition, the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Venezuela has led to large groups of refugee children that need to be placed in Guyanese schools, creating additional demands for the education system to address.

Guyana has developed a decentralization framework that relies on a sharing of responsibilities between the central ministry of education (MoE), regional and district education offices – that act as technical arms of the [Regional Democratic Council \(RDC\)](#), the local government organ responsible for managing and administering the region – and schools. One key strategy of the ESP is to strengthen school-based management, empowering schools to develop their own school improvement plans. Regional and district education offices have a crucial role to play in this process, with the mission to guide and support schools in designing, implementing and monitoring these plans. The objective is ultimately to improve school management and learning outcomes.

## A tailor-made capacity strengthening course for middle-tier actors

**IIEP's online course targeted 50 education officers from 11 regions, including regional and district education officers, central planners, and school inspectors over an eight-week period.** It covered the decentralization of education, the pivotal role played by middle-tier actors in an ecosystem of local-level actors, and the key role they play in designing, implementing, and monitoring school improvement plans (SIPs).

The course fostered collaboration among middle-tier professionals, promoting a peer-learning practice. Overall, participants valued IIEP's expertise and shared that the course greatly contributed towards equipping them with more technical know-how and applicable tools to better support school improvement in their

regions:

The content of the course will be used in every aspect of my duties and responsibilities especially with the formulation, implementation and monitoring of SIPs. [It will be useful] in assisting managers and teachers and other stakeholders understand their roles and responsibilities to enhance performance and contributions to the development of same. (Course participant)

## **Empirical learning: the crucial role of middle-tier actors to support school improvement**

Through discussion forums and live group sessions, the course enabled the identification of specific characteristics of middle-tier actors in Guyana, their mandate, and the challenges they face to successfully fulfil their mission.

In Guyana, as in other countries, the mandate of middle-tier actors is wide and has been increasing over time. Responsibilities include monitoring the quality of education in their regions, data collection, guiding and supporting schools, as well as managing teaching staff. However, they face a number of obstacles to effectively fulfil their mandate:

- **Relationship with upper tier authorities:** Within Guyana's decentralized education framework, regional education officers are accountable to both the MoE and the RDC. Regional education officers implement and monitor the national education policy according to the MoE's mandate within the framework of the RDC's priorities. The challenge comes when the human and financial resources allocated by the RDC are misaligned with the education needs of the region and the national education policy, particularly in hinterland and riverine regions.

Our education departments are operated and funded by RDCs whose technical and professional staff may not view education delivery as a priority. This lack of emphasis on educational outcomes often leads to misappropriation and poor allocation of financial resources. (Assistant Chief Education Officer)

- **Relationship with schools:** Conducting school inspections and formative assessments are part of the role of middle-tier actors. However, local officers

may lack awareness about the objectives of the evaluation and which tools to use for monitoring education quality. This leads to a poor shared understanding between district education officers, school principals and teachers on the purpose of school visits and the support middle-tier actors can provide to improve school quality.

- **Relationship with parents:** Parents are key actors for school improvement but difficult to involve as allies in the implementation of the local education strategy. Although parents support schools financially, their lack of time and low involvement in the school decision-making process, leads to them having low expectations on how schools can impact children's development and limits their contributions to school improvement.

Parents see the school as an institution where the responsibility to educate lies on head teachers and teachers only, they do not see themselves as stakeholders. (District Education Officer)

- **Structure and profile of regional education offices:** Across Guyana, regional education offices share similar structures and functions, with little consideration for any regional particularities (for example staff able to assist refugee children or regions with high numbers of disabled students). Regional education offices are often understaffed leading to them taking on additional responsibilities for which they do not always have the technical capacities. This, along with a lack of regular training adapted to specific needs, focusing on soft skills, self-evaluation and a peer-learning culture, limits their potential of becoming real drivers of change.

On many occasions, Welfare Officers are overwhelmed. Thus, the Regional Education Officers' intervention is regularly requested and additionally, they have to perform the role as Guidance and Counselling Officers. (Regional Education Officer)

As in many other countries, the Guyanese case shows that middle-tier actors play a critical role in the education system, bridging the gap between central and school-level actors, bridging the gap between policy and practice, and ensuring better learning outcomes. However, although middle-tier actors are expected to play a greater role in the management and pedagogical support, they often lack the resources and capacity to successfully fulfil their demanding mandate.

With strong expertise in this area, the IIEP aims to pursue capacity building at the middle tier as a strategic focus, to empower these professionals to support

schools in improving learning outcomes, to lead innovative reforms, and to fulfil their mission as key actors in local learning ecosystems.

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