

**POLICY BRIEF**

# The Challenge of Delivering for Learning

**the Education Commission**



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*This policy brief was written by Kate Anderson and Celeste Carano of the Education Commission as the first in a series for the DeliverEd initiative. It draws from the working paper:*

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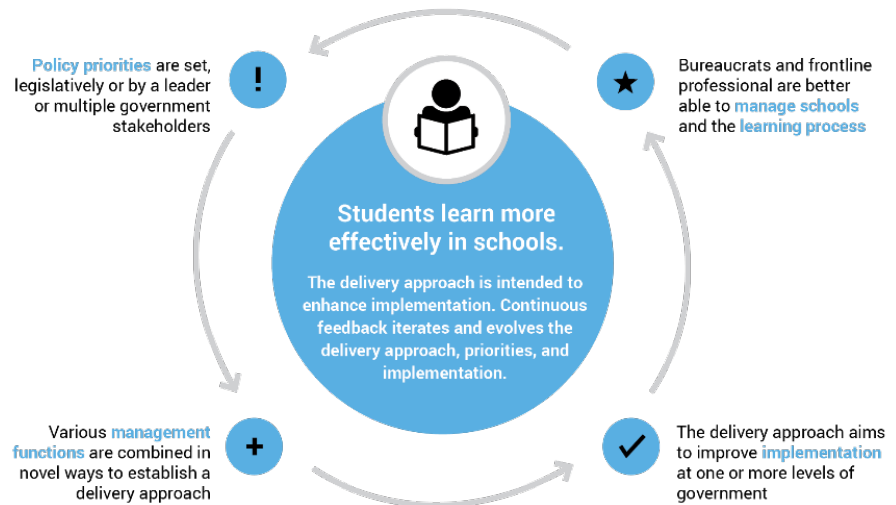
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# The Challenge of Delivering for Learning

## Key messages

Low-performing education systems are failing more than half of the world's children. Many well-designed education reforms are hindered by implementation challenges, which exacerbate the global learning crisis.

- Education sector planning has improved, but implementation has not
- Big picture visions are not yielding results



A delivery approach is an institutional unit or process that is used by governments to improve their performance when delivering services and implementing policy.

- These include delivery units, delivery labs, and other homegrown solutions
- Delivery approaches have been used in over 40 national and subnational governments worldwide

These approaches have been used in education, including:

- UK Prime Minister's Delivery Unit
- PEMANDU in Malaysia
- Big Results Now! in Tanzania

While there are some promising cases, interested policymakers should proceed with caution:

- Leaders should continue to seek out evidence and ask critical questions about how these approaches may suit their needs as gaps in knowledge exist about their application
- DeliverEd is building the evidence base for how and when these approaches can be effective through independent research

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## A decade of delivery?

As 2020 began, the UN Secretary-General called on the global community to commit to a decade of delivery to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). One of those goals, SDG4, aims to ensure inclusive, equitable, quality education for all by 2030. We are badly off track.

Even before the global coronavirus pandemic, more than half of all children and youth worldwide – over 600 million – were not learning the basics in reading and math.<sup>i</sup> Progress had been particularly weak in regions like sub-Saharan Africa, where 88% of children and adolescents were not on track to learn to read proficiently during their primary and lower secondary school years.<sup>ii</sup> High-income countries were also stagnating. According to the Programme for International Student Achievement (PISA), one-third of students in middle- and high-income countries fail to show minimum reading and math proficiency.<sup>iii</sup>

COVID-19 has exacerbated this crisis. Without effective policy responses, \$10 trillion in lifetime earnings could be lost for the affected cohort of children who have experienced school closures.<sup>iv</sup> What was already an outsized challenge will require even more aggressive action to address.

The Education Commission's *Learning Generation* report provided an explicit agenda for action to make faster progress towards SDG 4 centered around the education workforce, 21st century learning and skills, education financing, and delivery of results. Addressing these and other recommendations to achieve learning outcomes requires that governments implement effectively and continually reassess and recalibrate their approach to ensure they are achieving desired outcomes. This effective implementation is even more critical now that educational progress is at a standstill worldwide.

## Implementation is not improving

While the education community has made strides in the last decade in investigating what works in education, there are still significant questions on how to best implement those solutions. The 2018 *World Development Report* on education underscored these implementation challenges, describing how low-learning traps in countries are often related to delivery challenges. A review of 118 high-quality studies for the Research on Improving Systems of Education (RISE) program found poor governance and accountability to be a primary barrier to translating inputs to outcomes in developing country education systems.<sup>v</sup>

Development partners supporting governments to implement reforms are also struggling with these challenges. The Global Partnership for Education (GPE) is increasingly focused on supporting countries to translate sector plans into yearly operational plans in recognition of the challenges of enacting agreed priorities. A recent report notes that there is not a universal understanding of what implementation capacity means or entails, which constrains efforts to effectively gauge and monitor capacity to

implement sector plans.<sup>vi</sup> GPE is now exploring if there is a need for support of education sector management assessments to better map blockages or challenges, such as those around data, accountability, incentives, or finances, illustrating the increasing need, but lack of clarity, on how best to boost management capabilities.<sup>vii</sup>

These implementation challenges are particularly concerning for governments facing already scarce resources. COVID-19 is expected to reduce education spending in 2021, as governments reallocate resources to health and crisis spending and prepare for the long-term effects of the global fiscal crunch.<sup>viii</sup> Education decision-makers will need to demonstrate results even more urgently in this constrained environment.

## Why implementation fails

Numerous frameworks describe how and why service delivery failures may occur. The 2004 *World Development Report* introduced the “accountability triangle” which identifies three key relationships in the service delivery pathway: citizens and policymakers, policymakers and providers, and providers and citizens. When services break down or are poorly delivered, it is because of failures in the flow of accountability in these relationships.

RISE researcher Lant Pritchett applied this accountability lens further to the education sector, describing four foundational relationships of accountability: citizens and the state, the state and organizations (like schools or district offices), organizations and frontline providers (like teachers and principals), and citizens (students and parents) and frontline providers. Breakdowns within or across these accountability relationships can cause service delivery failures. This highlights how there can be many different ways in which accountability can break down in an education system. What further complicates the ability of a system to deliver on learning outcomes is that these relationships and accountability structures may not have initially been set up with learning as the end goal.<sup>ix</sup>

“I realized the problems may not necessarily lie in the quality of policy-making processes or policies themselves, but in the mechanisms in place for implementation, monitoring and evaluation... much of the time we are bogged down by processes and bureaucratic inertia.”

**- Jakaya Kikwete**  
*Former President, Republic of Tanzania; launched Big Results Now! in Tanzania*

Education systems are also often among the largest and most complex government institutions in many countries, frequently comprised of a large civil service and a mix of national and sub-national bureaucratic actors, and sometimes private actors. Within these complex systems, policy incoherence and challenges can manifest horizontally, with overlapping mandates and confusion of ownership, or vertically, when policies do not have clear implementation strategies or lack ownership for problem-solving along the delivery chain.<sup>x</sup>

What is clear from these practical experiences and theoretical frameworks is that while having a well-designed reform is necessary, it is not sufficient by itself. It is crucial to also think about how the reform is implemented – the ‘how’ of ensuring policy impact.

## The appeal of delivery approaches

To overcome these challenges, governments are adopting delivery approaches to better implement their vision.

**A delivery approach is an institutionalized unit or structured process within a government bureaucracy that aims to rapidly improve bureaucratic functioning and policy delivery by combining a set of managerial functions in a novel way to shift attention from inputs and processes to outputs and outcomes.** Policymakers use delivery approaches to ensure that service delivery improvements are effectively implemented by the bureaucracy. In education, this would typically mean that improvements which begin in the education ministry extend all the way down to schools.

Delivery approaches have been suggested as solutions to a range of problems, including: overcoming shifting priorities across system actors due to political pressures, a lack of policy continuity due to the limited tenure of policymakers or bureaucrats, difficulty in measuring progress at the frontline against key priorities, a lack of effective performance management routines to connect policymakers to bureaucrats to frontline workers, a lack of human resource capacity in the bureaucracy to overcome implementation blockages, and misaligned incentives which shortchange citizen wants and needs.<sup>xixixiii</sup> While these approaches can differ in design, they are institutionalized and embedded in the operations of the bureaucracy in some way. They have the common aim to rapidly improve how the bureaucracy executes policy, often from the center of government (whether at a national or sub-national level) all the way down to the local community level. To accomplish this, delivery approaches combine a government’s managerial functions of delivery – such as monitoring or communication – in a novel way. Put simply, they are solutions which governments adopt to get things done better.

“The mistake I’ve learned from the most is building education policies with a ‘closed door’ approach and not listening to more of the voices of those who would be beneficiaries of the policy... When things are built with consensus, and everyone feels that they are part of it, it’s more sustainable.”

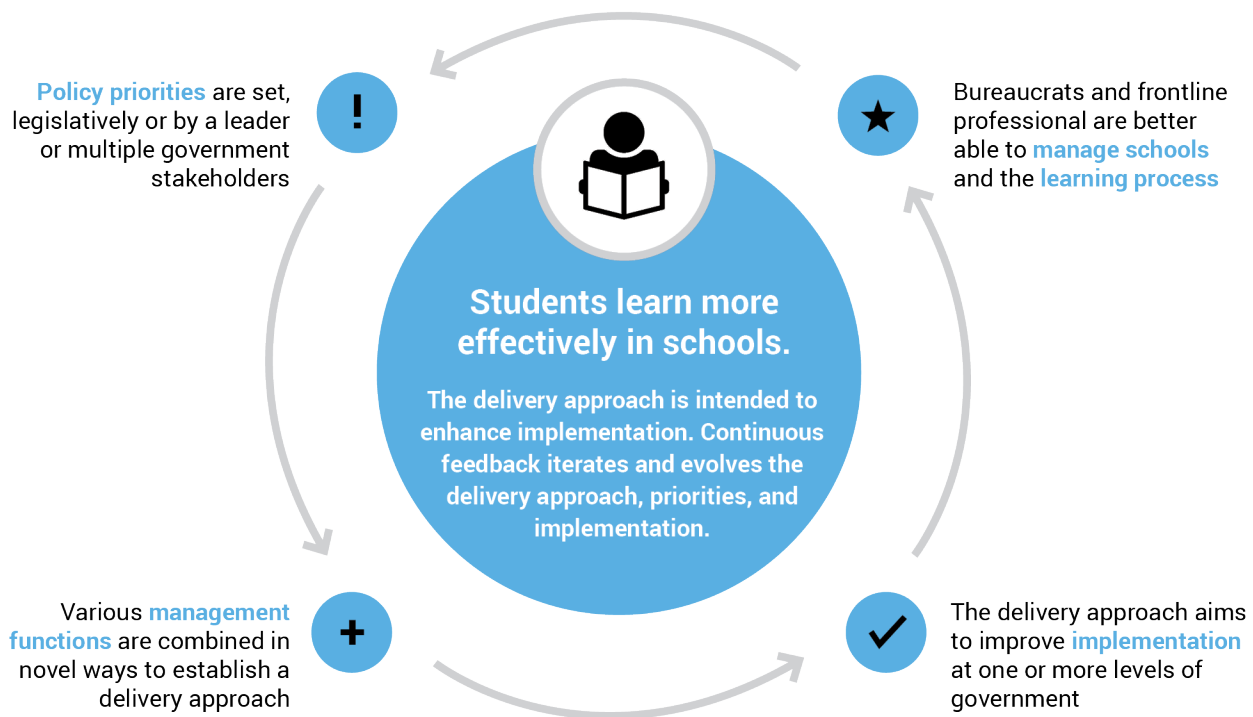
**- Mercedes Miguel**  
*Former Secretary of Innovation and Educational Quality, Ministry of Education, Culture, Science and Technology, Argentina*

Delivery units, perhaps the most well-known and easily identified of these approaches, are only one type of a broader class of delivery approaches that governments adopt. Many of the functions performed by delivery units can (and often are) also carried out by other parts of the government. The shift in where and how these functions are performed in the bureaucracy is often the signature change which delivery approaches bring to a government.

In the past three decades, delivery approaches have become increasingly popular and been applied in a range of contexts. The first model of the delivery unit with this name emerged in the UK in 2001 (Prime Minister's Delivery Unit – PMDU) which drew inspiration from past models of performance management, including those developed by the New York Police Department in the 1990s, which successfully reduced crime rates, and from the UK's Department for Education, which had successfully used similar approaches to improve service delivery in the late 1990s.<sup>xiv</sup> Primary education became one of the UK PMDU's priority areas of focus. As more countries have tried these models, more adaptations of them have emerged. For example, some delivery units (such as Malaysia's PEMANDU and Tanzania's Big Results Now!) conduct "delivery labs" (intensive six- to nine-week problem-solving sessions) with key stakeholders to identify and resolve problems.<sup>xv</sup> These approaches may or may not involve external partners and can sometimes involve a reorganization of staff or offices. They can range from a new mode of operations undertaken by existing civil servants to external units operating in parallel to the bureaucracy. This diversity speaks to the range of needs which leaders see in their bureaucracy. How they design a delivery approach is likely in response to the perceived weaknesses or strengths of the bureaucratic status quo.

Because they can be based at the center of government or at a ministerial level, delivery approaches are sometimes cited as a way to enable more effective cross-sectoral or cross-governmental collaboration. An education minister who wants to address girls' education challenges, for example, may need to work closely with a ministry of gender and/or ministry of health.





As this simplified diagram of a delivery approach (above) shows, the communication, coordination, and connection feature across government is at the core of a delivery approach. Yet this process of engagement is not necessarily top-down or one-directional, and our definition of a delivery approach emphasizes that this feedback may occur continuously within these levels. Many delivery approaches emphasize problem-solving, communication, and collaboration or aim to empower frontline workers to operate more effectively.

Interest in and use of this type of model and its application to education has spread, first to other high-income countries but quickly to low- and middle-income countries. Since 2000, governments at a national and subnational level worldwide have established more than 40 delivery units.<sup>xvi</sup>

Because of their focus on outcomes, and the argument by delivery practitioners that they are adaptable to any desired outcome or sector, delivery approaches are often presented as a strategy to manifest a leader's interests in any range of potential priorities, or to a broader interest in innovation, design thinking, transparency, and data-driven decision-making. They are also often suggested as a starting point for new leaders following a political transition. It is this promise of application and purported ability to achieve results within a diverse range of settings, sectors, and desired outcomes that has drawn governments to delivery worldwide.



## Examples of delivery approaches for education

Delivery Approach	Description
<b>UK Prime Minister's Delivery Unit</b>	The PMDU (2003-2010) was established to oversee the national Public Service Agreement (PSA) targets for education and skills as well as conduct a number of problem-solving 'priority reviews' to address specific issues within the education system, including a focus on performance of secondary schools in London. <sup>xvii</sup>
<b>Punjab, Pakistan – Reform Roadmap</b>	The Punjab Schools Reform Roadmap for the Government of Punjab launched in 2010. It was an approach focused on prioritization and performance management. An evaluation of the Roadmap showed progress on student enrollment and attendance, and teacher attendance, among other indicators. <sup>xviii</sup>
<b>Malaysia – Performance Management Delivery Unit (PEMANDU)</b>	PEMANDU introduced "Delivery Labs" to bring key stakeholders together to work intensively on detailed practical solutions to delivery issues. PEMANDU worked across multiple sectors, including education, and in this sector was credited with achieving improvements in access to pre-primary education. PEMANDU notably also worked with other governments to share lessons from their approach, including Tanzania. <sup>xix</sup>
<b>Tanzania's Big Results Now! (BRN)</b>	BRN (2013-2016) targeted goals in six sectors, including education. In the education sector, BRN focused on improving primary and secondary pass rates, and boosting attainment levels in the early grades for reading, writing, and arithmetic. <sup>xx</sup>
<b>Brazil's Pernambuco State</b>	The state of Pernambuco in Brazil began a management reform in 2007 which evolved into a delivery approach at the center of government, inspired in part by progress in other Brazilian states. The delivery approach introduced outcome goals for education that required frequent monitoring meetings to readjust and maintain progress. <sup>xxi</sup>
<b>Sierra Leone President's Recovery Priorities (PRP)</b>	The PRP was introduced during the Ebola recovery phase in Sierra Leone and was overseen from the center of government by the President's Delivery Team. The PRP included a focus on restoring education post-Ebola classroom construction, school approvals, payroll verification, and school feeding. <sup>xxii</sup>

As the previous cases demonstrate, delivery approaches have naturally spread as policymakers look to examples of success in other governments. But approaches can also be developed independently and are not necessarily linked or inspired directly by other models.

There are also a range of other approaches to improving implementation, such as problem-driven iterative adaptation and Rapid Results, which have also been promoted as ways to improve the abilities of bureaucracies to trial and test solutions to overcome implementation obstacles more effectively.<sup>xxiii</sup><sup>xxiv</sup> While these approaches are not called delivery approaches, it is possible that in practice they have a great deal of similarities and overlap. DeliverEd is seeking to map the full spectrum of strategies that align with our definition of delivery approaches.

## A lack of reliable evidence

While the appeal and expansion of these approaches is apparent, they have rarely been the subject of peer-reviewed academic research, especially in low- and middle-income countries. The limited scholarly work that does exist is primarily focused on cases in the UK, the US, and Canada. The aforementioned education and delivery approaches, for example, have not all been rigorously evaluated despite being shown as success stories.

The proliferation of applications of these approaches has led to a variety of perceptions of delivery. In addition, research and thinking on systems change has emphasized that different strategies to promote and enact change are required in different contexts based on stability and the degree of complexity of the challenge at hand.<sup>xxv</sup> Despite this, for decision-makers, there is neither an objective, policy-oriented evidence base of the conditions under which a delivery approach might succeed in different contexts, such as a crisis or post-crisis setting, nor an evidence base specific to education. There is also no agreed framework for contextualizing when a delivery approach, or what type of delivery approach, is best suited to a government's goals, and when another approach to improving policy execution may be more appropriate. To date, there also remains no evidence on how these approaches may relate to equity in education, a key concern for governments wanting to reach marginalized groups most vulnerable to poor learning outcomes. These gaps in evidence are a dilemma for the many countries concerned about accelerating education reforms for learning but wanting to ensure their solutions are set up for success.

In short, despite the interest in and uptake of this approach worldwide, there is little agreement on when and where delivery approaches might be beneficial, or even what they are and are not able to achieve. As a result, policymakers are making choices with insufficient evidence, leading to concerns that delivery units have often been designed inappropriately or adopted because they are a tangible and visible response to the imperative for leaders to “do something.”

## Creating a more robust evidence base for delivery

DeliverEd's research will specifically focus on capturing new evidence on how governments can best execute their reform agenda, not what policies that vision should encompass. There are existing research efforts to inform what policies can best enable learning, such as the work by RISE, which is already suited to answering the latter question, but a dearth of research on the former.

By building a greater evidence base for how governments can achieve their policy priorities, DeliverEd will strengthen the ability of governments to implement reforms which could improve learning outcomes and advance progress towards SDG 4. DeliverEd will produce a series of four papers, a minimum of six policy briefs, and a summary research output on the conceptual understanding of delivery approaches, the landscape of delivery approaches in the world today, and the evidence from studying five real-life approaches in Pakistan, Ghana, Jordan, Tanzania, and India.

DeliverEd also aims to mobilize and engage a community of research and practice around policy implementation to share current practice and build awareness on the need to develop more effective global efforts to achieve SDG 4. The initiative will engage national and global stakeholders to capture how practitioners and policymakers confront implementation challenges and what information they need to empower decision-making and tackle obstacles to policy delivery.

Through this external outreach, DeliverEd will also engage with researchers and experts who study and support the science of teaching and learning. While DeliverEd is not designed to answer questions on what policies are best placed to help teachers in the classroom or how students learn, it will endeavor to build a dialogue of how to integrate and connect the knowledge and expertise of programs and organizations operating along this continuum from policy setting and planning, to implementation, to frontline action in the classroom.

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