

# Fourteen Lessons for Improving Learning

BY JEFFREY PURYEAR AND TAMARA ORTEGA GOODSPEED<sup>1</sup>



This document is the authors' attempt to draw lessons from the work of the Partnership for Educational Revitalization in the Americas (PREAL). A project established by the Inter-American Dialogue in Washington, DC and the Corporation for Development Research (CINDE) in Santiago, Chile, PREAL has worked for nearly two decades to improve educational quality and equity by promoting better education policy. PREAL Co-director Jeffrey Puryear and Senior Associate Tamara Ortega Goodspeed, based at the Inter-American Dialogue, offer fourteen lessons that may be helpful for organizations seeking to improve learning in Latin America's education systems or in other regions of the world. The paper expresses the views of its authors and does not necessarily reflect those of other members of PREAL's network or the institutions they represent.

Over nearly two decades, PREAL has sought to improve the quality and equity of education through better policy and practice. It has pursued that goal by establishing partnerships with a broad range of high-level government, academic, civil society, and business leaders to promote informed debate, identify and disseminate best practices, and monitor progress toward learning goals. PREAL publications are widely read and discussed, cited in research and policy documents, and used in university courses. A combination of conferences, publications, databases, education report cards, regional working groups, national policy campaigns, research competitions, and study tours have helped PREAL and its partners place new issues on national policy agendas and develop common ground on reform.

PREAL has substantially changed the discourse on several key topics (standards, assessments, accountability) and helped place learning squarely at the center of the education debate. It has helped non-governmental organizations in the region

increase their knowledge of key education topics and provide advice to ministers on important policy issues. At the same time, it has reminded governments that their performance is being monitored, producing over 30 report cards and supporting national coalitions in their push to ensure government compliance with education commitments. Most recently, PREAL has worked with UNESCO and the Educational and Cultural Coordination of the Central American Integration System (CECC/SICA) to help countries discuss ways to modernize their approach to teacher policy in areas such as training, assessment, and management.

Given this experience, we asked ourselves whether there were any lessons that might be useful to others seeking to improve education outcomes by improving policy. More specifically, what might PREAL's experience suggest about strategies to raise levels of learning given the growing global emphasis on this topic?

<sup>1</sup> Jeffrey Puryear is vice president for social policy at the Inter-American Dialogue and co-director of the Partnership for Educational Revitalization in the Americas (PREAL). Tamara Ortega Goodspeed is a senior associate at the Inter-American Dialogue, where she manages the national and regional report card program for PREAL. PREAL's activities are made possible by the generous support of the American people through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and by the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), the GE Foundation, the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA), the World Bank and others. The authors would like to thank Sarvazad Katouzian, Scott Odell, and Alexandra Solano for their invaluable research assistance.

## Setting the stage

As we see it, two fundamental concepts underlie PREAL's work and are important for understanding specific lessons. The first is that, when it comes to learning, policy matters. Specific interventions are likely to have more limited effects without a system-wide policy and management framework to support them. It is difficult to imagine how children can learn

(or become better readers) if teachers don't come to class, if schools and teachers are ineffective or poorly managed, if resources don't reach the schools that need them, or if no one measures what children are learning and then uses that information to improve the system. Policy work and specific learning interventions go hand in hand.

The second is that there is a difference between knowing and doing. Even if governments, schools, and teachers know what learning strategies are effective, a number of obstacles may keep them from acting on what they know. Education may not be a high priority. Conflicts with teachers unions or between different political parties may block key legislation. Schools may not have the authority to hire good teachers or remove bad ones. Teachers may not be able to apply appropriate techniques in poorly maintained classrooms or may not receive textbooks or other teaching materials in time for the start of the school year. Families may not send students to class on a regular basis. These are systemic problems that require solutions beyond knowing what to do.

Keeping these factors in mind from the outset will help interventions be more successful and sustainable.

## Lessons: Knowing, adopting, and implementing policies that promote learning

It may be useful to organize the obstacles to better learning outcomes into three broad categories: knowing, adopting, and implementing (Gillies, 2010; Puryear, 2013).<sup>2</sup> The first—knowing—is relevant when the principal problem is a lack of information. It is essentially a technical challenge. Do policymakers, educators, and government officials know what to do? The second—adopting—addresses the task of getting appropriate policies adopted once they have become known. Here the challenge is essentially political. Will governments formally commit to doing what is known to work? The third—implementing—is important when appropriate policies are in place and the chief problem is turning them into practice. If governments (or other actors) know what to do and have adopted the policies to do it, do they have the capacity to implement the policies they have adopted?

<sup>2</sup> Although they use different terminology, both authors make similar conceptual distinctions.

Obviously, the three categories are connected and may overlap. One, two, or all three may be at issue in any given case. But they are conceptually distinct, and each addresses a different set of problems. Improving learning requires understanding which problems predominate in any particular context.

## Knowing what to do

In some countries, the chief problem may be that governments (or other actors) do not know what approaches have the potential to improve learning. They lack information regarding basic research, how research has been translated into policy, the experiences of other countries, and which practices are considered most effective. When the problem is a lack of knowledge, we think PREAL's experience offers at least four lessons:

### Lesson 1: Countries need access to a strong, easy-to-understand base of research and policy analysis on what works, and what does not.

In some cases, information already exists—for example, on the skill sets needed for effective reading,<sup>3</sup> the value of providing literacy and learning foundations early (starting at home and in pre-school), and the need to provide reading instruction in children's mother tongue. However, it may not be compiled in one place or it may not be available in Spanish or Portuguese. In other cases, new research needs to be generated. Do certain types of teacher training translate more effectively into classroom practice and reading gains for children? Do some techniques work better than others with low-income or rural children? What role do principals or municipal authorities play in improving learning? The research and analysis needs to be relatively comprehensive, of high quality, and easily accessible to policy practitioners.

PREAL's best practices database, working groups (on standards and evaluation, the teaching profession, and effective school management) and research program have proven to be valuable sources of information and expertise for those designing and carrying out policy interventions.

<sup>3</sup> Five critical elements of reading frequently cited in the literature come from a 2000 US National Reading Panel research review and include: **Phonemic awareness**—ability to manipulate sounds in words; **Phonics**—Knowledge of relationships between written letters and sounds; **Vocabulary**—Understanding the meaning of words in written and spoken language; **Fluency**—ability to read rapidly; and **Comprehension**—ability to gain meaning while reading. Definitions from Fiestler, 2010

## Lesson 2: Be selective and be brief.

National decision-makers, managers and practitioners need to be exposed to experience and debate on effective learning strategies, but seldom have time to wade through lots of information. This means choosing only key cases and lessons to bring to their attention, and tailoring messages to different audiences. We have found that one size does not always fit all, and material that communicates effectively to education specialists may not communicate effectively to political leaders, government officials, teachers, and parents. Widespread dissemination often requires a variety of publications designed to communicate the same information to different audiences.

PREAL's experience also suggests that while electronic publications can be an inexpensive way to get information to a broad audience, there is still a substantial demand for print publications among policymakers (who want one page that they can carry with them) and teachers and school administrators (who may have limited access to the internet). Finally, we have found that many practitioners and policymakers in the region have limited access to research published in languages other than Spanish or Portuguese, making identifying and translating the best international research a key knowledge function. PREAL has received widespread feedback from its network on the usefulness of its summaries of reforms in places as diverse as Chicago and South Korea, and of its translations of key reform documents (such as the McKinsey & Co. report on what the world's best-performing school systems have in common).

## Lesson 3: Personal contact is important.

Reading about reforms is no substitute for first-hand discussions and experience in helping national actors understand what international research and best practice might imply for their own context. Direct contact with actors from other countries allows leaders and practitioners to cement knowledge and clear up misconceptions. Over time, establishing ongoing relationships among professionals from different countries can have an important impact on thinking and on policy. Visiting successful programs can fundamentally alter views and strategies.

PREAL has worked to facilitate personal contact through conferences, study tours, professional networks, and by connecting governments with policy experts. Its

series of conferences on the teaching profession held with UNESCO-OREALC and CECC/SICA, for example, combined international speakers with national workshops designed to discuss how to improve teaching in a specific country. Study tours to Ontario, Canada, and to Boston gave participants insight on ways to improve learning in low-income contexts that they are now applying and sharing with colleagues in their own schools. These activities, along with PREAL's region-wide working groups, have created lasting peer networks that give decision-makers and practitioners access to expertise and help them deal with problems they encounter along the way. Ministries and international organizations regularly request that PREAL's working group experts participate in events. PREAL and its partners have also had success with virtual video conferences, which allow individuals from different countries to connect in real time when costs or logistics make travel prohibitive.

The success of these activities suggests that learning interventions may be more effective and have a greater likelihood of sustainability when they are reinforced by communities of practice that not only share ideas and document best practices, but also provide opportunities for individuals to see and discuss those ideas up-close.

## Lesson 4: Communication is most effective when led by national actors.

There is no substitute for local talent that knows how to get things done and is on hand year after year to move an agenda forward. In Central America, in particular, critical knowledge may be lost when experts leave the country, when personnel change within the ministry, or when teachers or principals leave a school. That is why PREAL has been working with national partners to help them serve as repositories of knowledge and expertise that endure beyond any single administration or individual. By supporting local think tanks' efforts to identify global best practices, communicate with opinion leaders, and adapt best practices to local contexts, PREAL helps countries build a cadre of experienced professionals who can work with or within ministries over time to support change. National actors also have a greater stake in promoting and following up on changes. PREAL's report cards and strategic partnerships have been effective in no small part because they are produced and championed by national actors rather than by outsiders.

It is important to note that when it comes to credibility within the national arena, who delivers the message is often just as important as what they say. Business leaders are often more likely to listen to other business leaders. Engaging the media is often more effective when organizations reach out to managing editors rather than reporters. Parents' primary source of information on education tends to be their child's teacher or school. Understanding these relationships is likely to affect efforts to build support for specific learning interventions, making leadership by knowledgeable national actors even more important.

## Adopting what you know

In other cases, the problem may be that even though governments (or other actors) know which policies and interventions could increase learning, they fail to adopt them. Unions or bureaucracies may block (or water down) adoption because changes—like evaluating teacher performance or assigning posts by merit instead of seniority or political appointment—go against their established interests. A new administration may discontinue policies simply because they were instituted by a previous government, without regard for results. Teachers may see little incentive to implement programs that are likely to change again with the next minister.<sup>4</sup> Citizens may not demand better policies, either because they have opted out of the system or because they lack mechanisms or motivation to do so. When failure to adopt is the problem, we see the following possible lessons:

### Lesson 5: Politics can limit policy choices.

In Latin America, changes in education policy are often contentious, pitting those who would change the system against entrenched interests. Powerful teachers unions or ministerial bureaucracies may resist sound policies if adopting them would reduce their power and privileges. Few teacher groups are likely to oppose greater training in techniques for teaching specific subjects, either as part of pre-service training or optional professional development. However, most are likely to oppose changes in management and follow-up that are just as essential to better learning outcomes. In Mexico, for example, the teachers union has historically resisted government efforts to test teachers' knowledge, only a small percentage of teaching positions are assigned by merit, and there is little follow-up on teacher performance.<sup>5</sup> In Guatemala,

conflicts between teacher candidates and the government have impeded efforts to make initial teacher training a five-year program, instead of the current three years of high school. A myriad of additional management issues that affect teaching and learning—from chronic teacher absenteeism, to isolated in-service training with little follow-up, to teacher candidates drawn from the lowest academic performers in their class—mean that effective instruction will likely require broader changes in how teachers are recruited and managed. Such changes are likely to meet with political resistance.

At the same time, politicians often respond more readily to power and pressure than to principle. In some countries, education systems allow administrators to be appointed on the basis of politics, rather than skill, and provide an important source of political patronage. Few political leaders are willing to promote policy reforms that threaten powerful interest groups unless they have strong support from other powerful groups for doing so. Because teacher strikes are common, vocal, and sometimes violent, and because they deprive children of valuable instruction time, governments often capitulate to teachers' union demands rather than implement needed management changes.<sup>6</sup> Government actors also face competing policy and budgetary priorities that can push education to the bottom of the list, particularly if activities come with a substantial cost. Effective learning strategies need to take into consideration these types of political constraints and work to build support for policies before, during, and after they are enacted.

### Lesson 6: Countries need to build civil society pressure in favor of reform.

To counter existing interests, successful reforms in public education usually must involve the non-governmental sector (business, political parties, media, parents, etc.) acting both as a stimulus to change—by pressing governments for reform—and as political allies in efforts to change. Unfortunately, in

<sup>4</sup> Ministry turnovers are more frequent in Latin America than in developed countries, and historically, few ministers of education have served out their full term. For more on how cabinet stability affects policy see Martínez-Gallardo, 2012.

<sup>5</sup> Information on the debates surrounding recent reforms in Mexico can be found on PREAL's blog at [prealblog.org](http://prealblog.org) (English) or [blogdep-real.org](http://blogdep-real.org) (Spanish).

<sup>6</sup> New approaches are beginning to emerge, however. Governments in Mexico, Ecuador, Peru, and Honduras have recently challenged traditional union positions.

Latin America, the demand for good education policy (including policies to support learning) is weak. Government leaders, under pressure to produce short-term results without offending powerful interests, have tended to focus on quick, tangible measures like higher enrollments; more schools, books and materials; and better teacher training—which few oppose. Only rarely are leaders willing to spend their political capital on the more contentious management reforms needed to support learning. For their part, parents, students, and employers have little information on how well schools are doing and seldom press governments for improvement—either because there are few mechanisms for them to do so or because they have other, more pressing, needs. Poor parents often feel they have little to contribute, particularly if their own education was limited. Middle- and upper-income parents generally send their kids to private schools and have no stake in making public schools better. Many businesses tend to favor interventions with high public relations value (e.g. scholarships and school supplies) over education policy support, saving their political clout for economic issues that more immediately affect their bottom line. The result is a system that favors the status quo and does little to empower civil society or strengthen learning.

Moreover, different actors may not agree on what needs to be done. According to a recent PREAL study on reading in Central America, at least three theoretical approaches to teaching reading are common in the region, and there is little consensus around a shared strategy for moving forward (Caballeros Ruiz, et. al., 2012). PREAL's strategic partnership to promote second-generation reforms (including bilingual education) in Guatemala found a similar lack of consensus around key issues.

Consequently, our work suggests that marshaling the arguments and building coalitions to support key policy initiatives is critical to their success. This requires providing spaces for constructive dialogue among different viewpoints, access to credible expertise both inside and outside the region, and well-crafted messages. Civil society organizations can play a vital role in this process, serving not only as repositories of knowledge, but also as watchdogs capable of sustaining pressure over multiple administrations. They can also serve as a focal point for coalitions and bringing other actors on board, as PREAL's experience with report cards, strategic partnerships, and working with reform coalitions demonstrate.

### Lesson 7: It is important to sound the alarm.

An important tool in garnering support for change is to build a sense of urgency. PREAL's experience suggests that reliable testing programs that can document low levels of learning and communicate that information clearly to parents and the general public are crucial in helping countries understand how children are doing. For example, government officials, international organizations, and civil society groups have used PREAL's publications on the results of the PISA

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and SERCE examinations—which consisted almost exclusively of simple graphs with one key message as a title—to sound the alarm on low levels of learning. Other monitoring mechanisms (such as PREAL's education report cards) that document deficiencies in reading and math have also helped generate a demand for improvement. In the field of early grade reading, experiences with the Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA), developed by the Research Triangle Institute (RTI), and the ASER literacy assessment, developed by Pratham in India, are further testaments to the power of regular, easy-to-understand metrics in communicating with education stakeholders and in conveying a sense of urgency.<sup>7</sup>

### Lesson 8: Leadership and credibility are essential to getting policies adopted.

Getting the right policies on the political agenda requires more than identifying and communicating which policies are most effective. Political leaders and decision-makers—not just education specialists—must also take them seriously. That means exposing leaders to ideas over time, listening to their concerns and constraints, and providing them with

<sup>7</sup> For further information on EGRA and Pratham's ASER tests see the RTI website at [www.rti.org/page.cfm?nav=528&objectid=E60C72B1-6190-49EF-918317C0BB7E464D](http://www.rti.org/page.cfm?nav=528&objectid=E60C72B1-6190-49EF-918317C0BB7E464D) and the Pratham web page at <http://www.pratham.org/M-19-3-ASER.aspx>. The *Early Grade Reading Assessment Toolkit* (RTI, 2009) also provides a good overview of the EGRA test and its application in several countries.

expert advice. Our work with PREAL suggests that, under the right circumstances, coaching from experienced peers, particularly those who have served in high government office, can be especially useful. Credible, balanced, independent analysis is also crucial to getting ideas heard and adopted. By combining rigorous analysis with access to outside experts who can speak to issues beyond a particular national context, and by convening national actors from a variety of viewpoints to engage in reasoned debate, PREAL and its partners have been able to help move dialogue forward.

Political leadership also matters. A strong policy entrepreneur—whether a president, minister, or civil society leader—can shift the tide in favor of policy reform. The success of PREAL's working groups, national business-education programs, and partners' efforts to affect policy change through strategic partnerships has been due in no small part to the groups' strong leadership. Identifying and partnering with capable, charismatic national leaders takes time, but is a critical investment in moving policies from knowledge to adoption.

### Lesson 9: Reform tends to be unpredictable and slow.

In the years we have worked with PREAL, we have observed that the path to policy adoption is seldom short or straight. Success requires sustained effort year after year. When successful, it is often hard to determine the exact factors that led to change. Activities and influences begun in one period may not bear fruit for several years. For example, a number of individuals who collaborated with PREAL extensively as part of civil society organizations have gone on to become ministers of education and have brought ideas they were exposed to during that time to bear during their time in office. Failure to generate desired results in the short-term does not necessarily imply long-term failure. Patience is essential.

### Implementing what you adopt

Even when they recognize and adopt good policies, governments often lack the capacity to provide high-quality services effectively. As Gove and Cvelich (2010) point out, even good strategies “cannot overcome the failings of a weak state” (p. 39). In Latin America, key educational institutions like ministries and schools suffer from a chronic shortage of experienced and capable personnel and often fail to provide sufficient support for or oversight of the education system. Teachers

and school principals may lack skills, training, or authority. Administrators may be political appointees, with little interest or experience in education or management. Delivery of materials may be unreliable; repairs to school facilities may go uncompleted. In poorer countries, teacher salaries may be delayed for months. These types of service delivery obstacles undermine efforts to improve learning. When implementation is the problem, we see at least five potential lessons:

### Lesson 10: Training teachers may not be enough.

Although it is certainly true that many Latin American teachers have not been trained to deliver effective instruction, teacher training is only one of several serious constraints confronting the profession. If ministries recruit teachers from the bottom of the talent pool and fail to manage for good performance, more training may produce limited results. High teacher absenteeism, limited instructional time, and few opportunities for teachers to collaborate and share ideas further hinder learning. Few consequences exist for poor performance, and teachers are rarely held accountable for ensuring that their students master essential concepts. These are issues of management and implementation, rather than knowledge or politics.

In addition, delivering effective teacher training is itself complicated by implementation challenges. Teacher training institutions in most Latin American countries are not well regulated, tend to focus on theory over practice, often do not have highly qualified instructors (few have PhDs), and are of variable quality. Most programs offer little in the way of student teaching or other follow-up to help teachers implement what they have learned and address the needs of their students. Existing programs may be unreceptive to new teacher training models or be incapable of implementing them at a national scale without substantial institutional changes and outside support.

Effective instruction hinges on having first-rate teachers. However, PREAL's work on teacher policy suggests that teaching educators what to do and how to do it is only the first-step in achieving that goal.

### Lesson 11: Institutional reform may be a prerequisite for significantly improving learning.

As Puryear (2013) notes, “Although complex, institutions are crucial. They convert policy into services. They determine whether teachers show up for class, whether books

reach classrooms, and whether training influences practice. Institutions get things done” (p.4).

Problems with execution often have more to do with institutions than with the design of the intervention itself. PREAL’s experience suggests that working closely with presidents and ministers to rethink and restructure national education systems, as well as working with reform-minded leaders at the state, municipal, or even school level to experiment with new institutional models can help improve implementation. PREAL’s strategic partnerships in Honduras and the Dominican Republic illustrate how working with municipal actors can yield concrete changes in institutional practice. By contrast, weak institutions with little oversight have a hard time producing quality services that help ensure that all children learn. Ministerial bureaucracies need to be re-engineered so as to strengthen their capacity to develop and implement policy, set goals, and coordinate solutions where education overlaps with other development objectives. Otherwise, technically sound projects may fail to achieve desired results because they are not implemented well or widely.

### Lesson 12: Finding and supporting good partners is key.

Because the effectiveness of groups and ideas often depends on who leads them, identifying the right partners is critical. In many countries, civil society organizations tend to be relatively young, and may have little experience working on education policy. When combined with institutional weaknesses within the education sector and a business community that, until recently, has not had much involvement in education, it can be difficult to find partners who can implement projects independently from the outset. PREAL has taken the time to identify capable, credible partners and build close and ongoing collaboration, along with robust networks between partners. These relationships have had a positive influence on project success and continue to bear fruit over time.

### Lesson 13: Invest in future leaders.

Latin American education systems, particularly in Central America, suffer from high staff turnover and a shortage of qualified personnel. Top-quality education specialists tend to be scarce and overcommitted. School administrators receive

little training, and district or regional managers may be selected based on criteria other than merit. Yet research suggests that strong, capable school leaders play an important role in educational excellence, serving as instructional leaders, driving educational innovation, and providing a crucial backstop for both teacher development and accountability for learning outcomes (Barber & Mourshed, 2007).

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Consequently, for programs to have maximum effect it may be necessary to expand the national talent pool in education policy analysis and implementation. Future leaders may need to be nurtured with mentors, training, exposure to the international community, and experience. PREAL’s work in these areas—through its research program and study tours for teachers, administrators, and business people, as well as their involvement in PREAL conferences and networks—suggests that, if done thoughtfully, such an approach can help establish a seedbed of ideas and leaders who can change institutions. Building talent takes time and good judgment, but can be an extraordinarily productive use of funds. It is often best done in collaboration with non-governmental organizations that can help identify promising analysts and sustain expertise when talented individuals leave the ministry.

### Lesson 14: Robust monitoring initiatives can foster accountability and strengthen institutions.

In addition to sounding the alarm, rigorous external monitoring (via independent testing agencies, education report cards or similar vehicles) serves notice that education systems are being scrutinized and assessed. It increases pressure for transparent implementation, engages stakeholders, evaluates progress, and helps set the agenda for how to improve schools and learning. To have the maximum effect on learning, good monitoring needs to focus not only on designing and implementing good assessments, but also on making sure that teachers, parents and administrators understand the results and can use them to improve the system. For that reason, PREAL works hard to communicate ideas simply and

clearly to a variety of audiences and to make recommendations for how to apply information to policy moving forward.

## Conclusion

Our experience with PREAL suggests that by taking these fourteen lessons—on knowing, adopting and implementing policy—to heart, development assistance institutions, governments, civil society organizations, and business leaders can go a long way toward improve learning in the region.

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1211 Connecticut Avenue, NW, Suite 510  
Washington, DC 20036

PHONE: 202-822-9002 ■ FAX: 202-822-9553

EMAIL: [iad@thedialogue.org](mailto:iad@thedialogue.org) ■ WEBSITE: [www.thedialogue.org](http://www.thedialogue.org)