



Improving Teacher Quality at Scale

10 Tips from Practitioners

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Enhancing teacher quality is a high priority for the Partnership to Strengthen Innovation and Practice in Secondary Education (PSIPSE)—a collaborative of donors seeking to catalyze improvements in secondary education. Over the past five years, PSIPSE donors have invested more than \$18 million in eight projects run by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to improve teacher quality. These NGOs are testing strategies to sharpen teachers' pedagogical skills, mostly in East Africa.

The NGOs' experiences yield several insights for practitioners who want to design scalable interventions for cultivating teacher quality. This brief draws on these insights to offer 10 concrete tips on designing an intervention, partnering with key stakeholders, and motivating teachers.



DESIGN FOR SCALE

TIP 1: Develop simple, streamlined pedagogical approaches.

Practitioners emphasized that straightforward program models are more likely to be adopted by teachers

and scaled successfully than complex models. One NGO working in East Africa designed an innovative pedagogical approach that is easy for teachers to remember: build-practice-present. The NGO said that teachers easily learn this approach during training and can deploy it in class fairly quickly. This approach met an important need, as many teachers told the NGO that they had learned to develop lesson plans at their teacher colleges but that "no one really used lesson plans in real life." The simple build-practice-present strategy facilitated improvisation when teachers did not have a lesson plan ready. It also enabled its expansion: the clarity of the approach ensured that it was easily understood by government officials overseeing scale-up and that it did not get diluted when cascaded to multiple schools.

TIP 2: Give teachers time to internalize new pedagogies. In-service trainings often ask a lot of teachers—to shed practices they have followed for years and adopt methods that may be radically different. Training

programs need to acknowledge this challenge up front and allow enough time for teachers to fully understand the new pedagogies, to test them in class, and—through trial and error—to master their use. One NGO built an ambitious three-stage model to facilitate ICT-infused¹ teaching but rolled it out too quickly—over three terms. Given the steep learning curve to become technologically literate, teachers got stuck early in the multistep change process. This NGO has since stretched the rollout of the new approach over three years.

TIP 3: Strike the right balance between inclusion and efficacy when deciding whom to train.

NGOs want to structure training programs so that they reach the most teachers, and each teacher receives adequate support. This is a difficult balance to achieve. For example, one NGO found that its approach to selecting teachers for training was leading to feelings of inequity and demotivation among those excluded. It therefore revised its implementation model to allow teachers to take turns attending the trainings, and it began requiring trained teachers to share their new knowledge and skills with other teachers in their schools. Although this variant of cascading trainings is more inclusive, it could reduce teachers' exposure to trainings run by a skilled trainer and thereby reduce training effectiveness.

¹ ICT stands for information and communication technologies.

TIP 4: Consider school size—and draw on the strengths of small and big schools—in designing a training strategy. Working in small schools can lead to significant changes in practices, particularly for capacity-building efforts that rely on teacher collaboration. For example, one NGO felt that its project, which requires joint development and review of lesson plans, would work best in smaller schools, where teachers regularly shared experiences and ideas with one another. This type of collaboration does not happen quite as organically at larger schools. But it could be enabled by training teachers in unified groups or cohorts—for example, all teachers in a specific department.

TIP 5: Design an affordable intervention if you want to sustain and scale it. For innovations to permeate the educational system, they must be cost-effective and in line with government resources. One NGO that is particularly vigilant about costs built a reasonably priced model that the government of India could adopt. It used the government’s per-pupil spending of \$200 as a yardstick and designed an intervention that costs about 1 percent of that amount (\$2). Measuring costs (and benefits) enabled the NGO to make a strong business case to the government. It argued that “each \$1 invested in improving teacher motivation saves Uttar Pradesh’s education system \$7 in enhanced teacher effort” (STIR Education 2017). This NGO is now scaling its model in different states in India and is preparing to scale in Uganda.



BUILD STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS

TIP 6: Partner with teacher training colleges and universities. Forging strong ties with teacher colleges and universities that offer preservice training could help create a virtuous feedback loop—whereby the NGOs’ in-service trainings benefit from the expertise of academics, and the academics benefit from the infusion of new practices and practical experiences of the people testing approaches on the ground. One NGO is relying on the expertise of university instructors to offer its new in-service training modules to teachers, and notes that the instructors are bringing knowledge from these experiences back to their colleges to improve preservice offerings. These collaborations could help spur continuous improvements in teaching quality over the long term.

TIP 7: Gain the government’s buy-in for program scale-up by building trust. PSIPSE NGOs said that engaging government stakeholders in the design process—and having them participate in trainings—can increase their confidence in new pedagogical approaches. The NGOs found that field visits and classroom observations are powerful ways to gain government officials’ buy-in for potentially radical shifts in the way teachers are trained. Strategically engaging the government in this way can set the stage for eventual program scale-up. One NGO noted the importance, during this journey, of being open with the government about your mistakes, an approach that ultimately wins you more trust from policymakers. Transparent communication and the joint development of program strategies can build true partnerships and enable more effective delivery of programs at scale.



MOTIVATE TEACHERS

TIP 8: Provide a mix of intrinsic and extrinsic motivators at scale. The teaching force is heterogeneous: some teachers enter the profession in response to a strong vocation, whereas others make a sound career choice given viable alternatives. Over time, commitment levels in both groups may change. The experiences of PSIPSE NGOs suggest that enhancing teachers’ motivation at scale—to drive improvements in teacher quality at the system level—will likely require using a mix of strategies to motivate both sets of teachers, those who respond to intrinsic versus extrinsic motivators.

TIP 9: Support teacher networks to boost intrinsic motivation and increase student learning. One NGO is relying on teacher networks to nurture intrinsic motivation in a sustainable and scalable way. The NGO supports teacher networks that hold regular meetings during which teachers identify challenges they are facing in the classroom, develop and adapt solutions, and reflect on their impact on students. Preliminary evidence not yet publicly available suggests that these activities may lead to increased teacher effort and improvements in reading among primary school students.

TIP 10: Offer tangible recognition of accomplishments—such as certificates, accreditation, and awards—to boost motivation. A few NGOs use extrinsic motivators to encourage teachers. They recognize teachers’ accomplishments through certificates of participation, awards for best-performing teacher or school, credit toward teachers’ licensing renewal requirements, or the showcasing of teachers’ work to others. This formal recognition may encourage teachers by helping with their career advancement—and may fuel intrinsic motivation as well. It is yet to be rigorously tested, but it may work particularly well in school systems that rely heavily on teachers who work part time or get paid by the hour. Two NGOs tried financial awards but discontinued their use. One felt that the awards motivated teachers and schools but did not foster long-term ownership of the new pedagogical model. The other found that the awards became a focal point for some teachers, distracting them from the adoption of new teaching practices.

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