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### KEY PRESCRIPTIONS FOR THE JOURNEY OF IMPROVEMENT: LESSONS FROM 20 EDUCATION SYSTEMS

In December 2010, McKinsey & Company published “How the World’s Most Improved Schools Systems Keep Getting Better” based on lessons from 20 education systems with the largest performance gains. Systems were selected based on having “achieved significant, sustained, and widespread gains in student outcomes from 1980”. The authors classified schools within two categories. *Sustained improvers* were defined as systems with at least five years of consistent increases in student performance across multiple data points and subjects. *Promising starts* described systems in developing countries or emerging areas that exhibited significant improvement over two or three years, despite only recently establishing data-supported reform.

Through interviews with over 200 system leaders and a robust review of quantitative education data, 575 different reform interventions were identified and examined to determine how student outcomes improved over the reform period. As a result, the research highlighted both universal and context-specific aspects of the system reform journey, which will be helpful in answering the question, *How does a system with modest performance become great?*

#### THE JOURNEY OF IMPROVEMENT

The authors began by classifying improving systems along four different stages of the performance spectrum: poor to fair, fair to good, good to great, and great to excellent. The findings show that at each stage along this *journey of improvement*, a common pattern emerges among the interventions implemented to move systems from one performance stage to the next. The authors concluded that “while the context does influence the emphasis and combination of interventions the system chooses from within this cluster, the intervention pattern is strikingly consistent for systems pursuing similar outcomes” (Mourshed et al., 2010, p.24). Therefore, it is recommended that a degree of care must be taken to ensure that interventions are appropriate to the system’s performance stage (See Table 1).

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Mourshed, Chijioke,  
Barber, p. 24

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**Table 1: The focus of intervention at each performance stage**

Performance Stage	Focus
<b>Poor to Fair</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Supporting students in achieving literacy and fundamental maths skills</li> <li>▪ Providing scaffolding for low-skill teachers</li> <li>▪ Fulfilling all basic needs of student body</li> <li>▪ Bringing all schools in the system up to minimum-quality threshold</li> </ul>
<b>Fair to Good</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Consolidating the system foundations                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Producing high-quality performance data</li> <li>○ Focusing on instructor and institutional accountability</li> </ul> </li> <li>▪ Creating appropriate pedagogical, financial, and organizational structure models</li> </ul>
<b>Good to Great</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Treating teaching and administrative leadership as a full-fledged professions                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Ensuring practices and career paths are in place to clearly define professions</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<b>Great to Excellent</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Moving locus of improvement from the ministry of education to the schools</li> <li>▪ Developing peer-based learning through school and system-wide interaction</li> <li>▪ Loosening guidelines on the process of instruction</li> <li>▪ Supporting system-sponsored innovation and experimentation</li> </ul>

Source: “How the World’s Most Improved Education Systems Keep Getting Better”, Mourshed, Chijioke & Barber, 2010

The study found that six types of interventions were consistently implemented regardless of the stage along the *journey of improvement*. All implemented in context specific ways, these interventions—which play a central role to teaching and learning—include:

1. Revising curricula and standards
  2. Ensuring an appropriate remuneration structure for teachers and principals
  3. Building technical skills of teachers and principals
  4. Rigorously conducting student assessments
  5. Establishing effective data systems
  6. Publishing policy documents & implementing educational legislation
2. Develop mediating layers between the schools and the ministry of education , which provide:
    - a. Targeted hands-on support to schools
    - b. A buffer between schools and the ministry of education
    - c. A channel to share and integrate improvements across schools
  3. Design “tomorrow’s leadership” in order to sustain the continuity of system leadership, and the constant drive and course for change.

The authors conclude that system improvement is a “disciplined craft of repeated practice and learning”, which requires an emphasis on developing a skilled system, rather than individually based skills. (p.112).

## SUSTAINING IMPROVEMENTS

For system improvements to be sustained, the authors suggest that “improvements have to be integrated into the very fabric of the system pedagogy” (p.72). The authors identify three methods to promote this integration:

1. Establish collaborative practices, where the routines of instruction and leadership excellence are embedded in the teaching community. Classroom practices should be made public, and teachers are to be trained as coaches to their peers.

This report can be accessed at

<http://jamaica.kdid.org/library/how-world%E2%80%99s-most-improved-schools-sytems-keep-getting-better>