Study on Supporting School Innovation Across Europe

Executive Summary in English

Supporting School Innovation Across Europe

Executive summary of the Final Report to DG Education and Culture of the European Commission

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Executive summary

The success of learners in school and in life is highly dependent on the capacity of education systems to address their diverse needs, and to keep pace with rapid societal and economic changes. To achieve this, education systems must become more flexible and dynamic, employing innovative approaches to learning and teaching, reconsidering the traditional roles and players in education, and opening up to a wider range of stakeholders and communities.

This study seeks to consolidate evidence on the ways in which schools and education systems can embrace innovation and ensure that every child can realise his or her potential. By engaging in discussions with a variety of national stakeholders and looking at inspirational examples of innovative schools that have succeeded in transforming their pedagogical and organisational practices regardless of unfavourable conditions, this study explores what drives and supports sustainable innovation in education[1].

Why do schools need to innovate?

Numerous innovations analysed in this study, and in the broader literature, demonstrate that new approaches to teaching and school organisation are not only possible, but also effective in creating favourable learning environments and improving academic and social outcomes for learners. A number of inspirational, innovative schools across Europe have broken free from traditional views of schooling, challenging conventional boundaries in terms of time, space, teaching and learning processes. In the process, they have succeeded in engaging with wider communities and put learners at the centre of the education process.

The diversity of the innovative approaches applied by these schools demonstrates the numerous ways in which education can transform not only *what* but *how* children learn. This offers great potential to address the persistent problems of inequality in skills and uncertainty as to their future outlook. Flexible, learner-centred teaching methods can help to customise the educational process, allowing teachers to better address the individual needs of each learner and, where necessary, offer timely support. The fast pace of societal and economic change demands that learners are well equipped with the necessary key competences and transversal skills[2] to face uncertainty, be resilient, work collaboratively to solve complex problems, and become active citizens.

Innovation can help to transform teaching and learning practices, enabling the development of the breadth of skills and competences necessary for the future. Innovation can also be perceived as a way to address the problem of productivity in education systems, stimulating more efficient provision. Leveraging the potential of new technological tools can help to transform teaching and learning, making it more interactive, personalised and engaging.

To achieve this transformational change, however, isolated examples of innovative schools are not enough. Education policies must be better engaged as to how and when to adopt innovative approaches in their ongoing efforts to encourage reform of the education system, and to improve its governance and capacity for innovation. The body of knowledge on how students learn best is now much richer than it was when school policies were designed. This knowledge, together with the know-how that stems from multiple examples of innovative schools, could be used as a driver

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[1] Annex 2 to the final report provides details on the innovative methodology used in this study.
[2] See: Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 December 2006 on key competences for lifelong learning, and its ongoing revision process, which aims to reflect social, economic and technological developments since 2006. More information: https://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/school/competences_en?pk_campaign=Chapeau&pk_kwd=KeyComp. Accessed 7.12.2017.

for system-wide change, ensuring that modern schools help each and every learner to grow and succeed.

What do we mean by school innovation?

Although innovation has become a ubiquitous topic in discussions of education policy, the concept remains blurred and elusive in practice. No single definition of innovation exists in terms of school practices and pedagogies. At the core of all definitions, however, stand two distinct features: the novelty aspect of innovation (i.e. pedagogical or school organisational practices that are new in a particular context, or which differ from those practices usually applied); and the potential effectiveness of these new practices or measures (i.e. the new pedagogies or practices should lead to positive student developmental outcomes). These two features distinguish genuine educational innovation from mere reform or change, though these terms are often used interchangeably.

Beyond a few rare exceptions, the introduction of innovative approaches requires fundamental changes in the school culture, rather than simply introducing or changing isolated practices. To succeed, school innovations must be flexible, responsive to local needs, embedded in local contexts and open to their environments. They must also be culturally sensitive and engage multiple stakeholders –there are no 'one-size-fits-all' models. In a culture of innovation, the primary goal is to learn, so that the organisation or system as a whole can improve. This means nurturing a collaborative learning environment that learns from failures, encourages various ideas and ways of thinking, and translates them into actions to solve specific challenges and better meet the needs of different students.

Innovation can occur at many different levels. It may range from the continuous improvement of existing pedagogical and organisational practices in a particular classroom or school, to a transformation of the ways in which educational goals are achieved. It may even involve the rethinking of what those goals are, at a systemic level. Innovation can be driven by governments, individual schools or school networks, civil society organisations, or the private sector. Regardless of who drives innovation, to be sustained and scaled up, a culture of innovation must be nurtured at all levels of the education system. School innovation, therefore, needs to be approached as a multi-level phenomenon.

Definition of school innovation

In this study, the definition of innovation has three components:

- ✓ An innovative pedagogy is *a teaching practice or approach that is often new to a given context, and which can lead to improved students' outcomes (i.e. one which has led to students' positive cognitive and social development).* Innovation should not be confused with the mere introduction of new information and communication technologies in the classroom. In this context, ICT is a tool to enhance teaching and learning, rather than an innovation in itself.

- ✓ At school level, innovation is *the capacity of schools to embed and sustain innovation in teaching and organisational practices*. The development of this capacity can often require fundamental changes in the school culture.

- ✓ At education system level, innovation is the capacity of the system to consolidate change and improvement – *to promote experimentation, monitor, evaluate, learn from failures, support networking and exchange, as well as design favourable school policies to help embed, tailor and sustain innovation in schools.* This definition recognises that innovation is not simply about a moment of invention, but a continuous learning cycle, which includes several stages and the involvement of many stakeholders, following a long-term vision.

What drives innovation in schools?

Our analysis of school innovation success stories reveals many entry points to the process of innovation in schools. Certain conditions must, however, be met to ensure that change is managed effectively, and leads to positive outcomes.

Supportive and distributed school leadership is the key to successful innovation

School leaders are a dynamic and influential force in the school community. They can guide schools in creating a culture that initiates and supports innovation – or hinders its progress. Good leadership can ensure a supportive environment for teachers; promote collaborative practices such as peer-learning, mentoring, formative feedback, reflective and inquiry-based practices; and provide relevant opportunities for networking and professional development. Furthermore, innovation is always a team effort. Creating strong leadership teams and encouraging teachers to assume increased responsibilities, engaging in individual or collective initiatives, and building their capacity to take on leadership roles within their particular area of expertise, are all key factors in achieving sustainable innovation.

Shared vision, strategy and action plan are necessary conditions for effective change

Evidence indicates that schools which have been successful in transforming their practices tend to set up clear and detailed internal strategies and implementation processes. A shared vision and clear action plans help to structure the implementation process, ensuring the sustainability of school innovations. This begins with identifying the school's needs and agreeing on the way to go, and extends to providing feedback and reflection in the process. Agreeing on a shared vision and a robust set of priorities also helps to instil a sense of commitment and stability among school staff, students, parents and local stakeholders. Innovative schools do not work in isolation. They promote an active role for students, teachers and school leaders, parents and other stakeholders, helping to build a system of horizontal accountability.

Teachers are key agents of change

Teachers' preparedness, commitment and capacity are key factors in ensuring that the proposed changes are implemented effectively. Internal and external training, collaboration and learning opportunities are important elements in supporting the implementation of innovations. These processes collectively focus on achieving success in teaching and learning, and developing innovative mindsets among teachers. Professional learning communities, developed through cooperation initiatives among teaching teams; practice-oriented action research projects; enquiry-based learning; reflective and formative feedback mechanisms – all of these are core enablers, supporting the development of teacher competences, and fostering the innovation process. Teachers can only be agents of change, however, if sufficient time, space and resources are set aside to make these activities part of their everyday practice.

Innovative schools open up to their communities, and engage in a variety of partnerships

Creating wider partnerships is an intrinsic feature of innovative schools. In such schools, parents and other local actors are equal partners in the education process. Engaging with parents can be a necessary step to overcoming their potential resistance to changes, stemming from their own past schooling experiences. Schools also need to draw on the various resources and opportunities

provided by other schools, as well as municipalities, teacher education providers, local businesses, civil society organisations and other local stakeholders. Recognising and supporting the horizontal connectedness of schools with their communities is a crucial step towards overcoming school isolation, facilitating different forms of learning, and bringing learning closer to real-life contexts. These help to ensure a sustainable innovation process and horizontal forms of accountability.

How can innovation become system-wide? Gaps and ways forward

While it is evident that in all EU countries, individual schools and local communities can drive innovation on their own, innovation is not yet a systemic feature of education policy. Some of the gaps and limitations in the system are not new, and this report serves as an important reminder that they should be acted upon.

Most EU countries commit to some innovation-related goals, but only a few embed school innovation in their education policy strategies, followed up with clear implementation plans

Evidence shows that education systems still struggle to provide coherent policy support for schools. The policy foundations for the development of innovation-friendly learning systems and innovative school cultures should be reinforced. Although most European countries have committed to some innovation-related policy goals, these tend to have been added to existing structures without fundamentally reviewing the long-standing objectives, established rules and routines of education systems, which can often inhibit school innovation. In the light of changing political priorities, education policies risk continuing to operate in the short term. The inability of education policies to develop a shared vision and strategic thinking that considers national, regional and local priorities, remains a serious challenge in many countries.

Furthermore, innovation goals cannot be implemented effectively in the absence of clear action plans, backed by adequate resources and the capacity to implement them. Inspirational examples of school innovation examined in the study demonstrate the potential of education to become more equitable, of high quality, relevant and efficient. However, coherent policy framework is necessary to achieve transformational, system-wide change.

Looking ahead
- ✓ Innovation must be explicitly embedded into education policy priorities and strategies. Innovation should be viewed as a means to improve education systems, ensuring positive experiences and development for learners.
- ✓ Innovation requires coordinated system-wide change, involving a broad set of actors, looking beyond conventional partners and structures, and promoting open dialogue between them.
- ✓ Innovation objectives in school policy should be translated into operational objectives and specific measures, followed up with clear action plans and the resources to implement them.

Balanced school autonomy, with built-in accountability mechanisms, improves schools' capacity for innovation

An increasing emphasis on efficiency and accountability for schools and teachers may discourage them from innovating and experimenting, when there is the expectation of immediate results, and possible sanctions for failure. These factors can lead to tensions between potentially conflicting forces in education governance, such as accountability and trust, innovation and risk-avoidance. Therefore, it is crucial to build 'intelligent' systems of accountability, that will combine both vertical and horizontal accountability.

Limited school autonomy can prevent schools from innovating, and may create incentive structures that reward risk-averse behaviour. Greater autonomy can create the conditions to experiment, innovate and develop supporting learning environments. However, autonomy must be accompanied by the necessary support mechanisms to empower schools and build their capacity to innovate.

Looking ahead
- ✓ Enhancing schools' autonomy can encourage and stimulate their innovation potential by allowing teachers and school leaders to adapt their curriculum and classroom assessment practices to better suit the needs of learners. More autonomous schools can also hire their own teachers; remunerate and recognise those teachers who undertake extra work; and organise schooling processes in line with their vision of high-quality education (e.g. in terms of lesson duration and location, etc.)
- ✓ Horizontal accountability measures need to be established to complement more traditional vertical accountability. These mechanisms must include diverse groups of actors in the governing process at school and at system level,
- ✓ A monitoring system needs to be put in place to identify schools that are struggling to mobilise their community for the improvement of teaching and learning. Measures should be put in place to encourage and support educational transformation in these schools, by providing them with the necessary support.
- ✓ Education systems should encourage evidence-informed policy experimentation with in-built risk management mechanisms, developing a system that learns from and reflects on both its failures and its successes.

Policy-makers need to review financial incentives for school innovation

Grants can help schools that are already innovating, but grants alone are not sufficient to promote innovative pedagogies and school organisation practices. While it is crucial that schools' basic funding needs are met, one of the main barriers to developing a school's capacity to innovate often relates to *how* rather than *how much* funding is provided. Schools are often restricted in the way they can use available budgets, which limits their opportunities to design strategies for change. A favourable environment for innovation is created when a school's overall financing and teacher remuneration system allows its leaders sufficient flexibility to allocate resources in a way that supports the development and implementation of innovative practices.

Looking ahead
- ✓ Policy-makers should review financial incentives for innovation and positive transformation in schools to ensure flexibility and sufficient levels of long-term funding, along with additional funding for networking and collaboration.
- ✓ Schools' efforts to develop or sustain innovation can be encouraged and supported by financial incentives such as rewards or other forms of recognition (e.g. status, additional functions, authority, exchange and learning opportunities)
- ✓ Additional financial schemes to support innovation should focus on networks and partnerships of schools and other stakeholders, to scale up innovation across schools and empower them to learn from each other.

Systems of professional development should better prepare school leaders and teachers for new ways of teaching, learning and school organisation

Most countries have not yet established extensive systems to prepare school leaders and teachers for new ways of teaching and learning, change management and collaborative practices. Case study evidence demonstrates that one of the main barriers to innovation is the existence of conservative

belief systems and traditional risk-avoiding mindsets among educators and families, rooted in past behaviour and experiences. These can be tackled through effective professional development systems. Although inspirational initiatives and programmes do exist across Europe, they tend to remain *ad hoc* or may not be available to all schools, in particular those in remote and disadvantaged areas. Schools that manage to succeed in their process of change have often created their own learning communities, and learnt from experience. These schools can become effective training agents for other schools, if such an option is supported and scaled up to system level.

Looking ahead
- ✓ Professional development systems (ITE, induction programmes and CPD) should more systematically incorporate training on new pedagogies (including the potential of ICT), collaboration practices and change management. High-quality school leadership programmes that focus on innovation and change management, should be made available to all school leaders.
- ✓ Schools and teacher education need to be better connected through dialogue and partnerships, to bridge the gap between theory and practice.
- ✓ More practice-oriented action research projects and learning laboratories should be set up in schools, to test new theory-based approaches to improving pedagogies and organisational practices. Evidence should be fed back into teacher education programmes.

School partnerships and horizontal interconnectedness with other actors need to be strengthened

The capacity of today's complex and fragmented education systems to learn and share knowledge is an important enabler for the spreading and sustaining of innovations. There is a lack of system-level mechanisms that encourage and support the transfer of innovation beyond the walls of the institution in which it was developed. Furthermore, current remuneration systems often fail to compensate teachers for the time required to collaborate, conduct research and prepare new materials and approaches. This study identifies the role of municipalities as an especially weak link.

In many countries, local authorities establish and finance schools, but play only a limited role in ensuring the quality of the education provided. Given a greater role in school monitoring, local authorities could act as intermediaries for the implementation of sensible education policies, and could relay bottom-up signals from schools when regional or national policies are failing. Where municipalities are supportive of local school networks and partnerships, they can act as an intrinsic part of local education environments and engage into an open dialogue with relevant stakeholders. This provides strong support for innovative pedagogies and school organisational practices to thrive.

Looking ahead
- ✓ Local authorities can play more active roles in monitoring their school networks and improving the quality of education provision. They should act as brokers for implementing national/regional policies and for bottom-up signals from schools when policies are failing.
- ✓ Municipalities should support local school networks and partnerships, and generate discussion and exchange on which schooling practices work, for whom and under what circumstances. Assigning municipal school counsellors and inspectorates to actively engage in dialogue and learning processes with schools has proved to be an effective strategy, helping to identify specific schools' needs, and enabling them to be supported in the innovation process.
- ✓ Education authorities should invest in the development and sustaining of high-quality networks and platforms for teachers, schools and a variety of other stakeholders to exchange their knowledge and experiences, receive recognition, and collaborate on joint projects at different levels. They also should support schools in networking at European and international level.

Developing a culture of evaluation is key to the success of innovation processes

A wealth of data is collected on the inputs, institutions, processes and outcomes of education systems. However, this data could be better used to identify which education policy initiatives are successful, and to understand the reasons for each initiative's success or failure. Education systems often lack the capacity to use and interpret the available data effectively. Short-term thinking at policy level, and an increased focus on high-stakes tests to evaluate school performance, can both hamper innovation, as schools are reluctant to engage in processes of change if they are required to show immediate results. Developing a culture of evaluation can be one of the most powerful tools for innovation.

Looking ahead

✓ Education authorities should promote a culture of evaluation by undertaking evaluations of their policy initiatives using the wealth of monitoring data already collected on an education system's inputs, institutions, processes and outcomes, along with primary research.

✓ Education authorities should pilot school policy initiatives to test innovative ideas on a smaller scale. Evaluation mechanisms should be built into the design of these initiatives to collect hard evidence on performance and areas for improvement.

✓ It is also important to strengthen the capacity of education actors, including schools and policy-makers at all levels, to use and interpret the available monitoring data.

✓ Online knowledge-sharing platforms should be strengthened to better spread inspirational examples of school innovation (that proved to be effective), both nationally and internationally.

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