Latin America

Lead for democracy

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Developed in partnership with the Organization of Ibero-American States for Education, Science and Culture (OEI), the regional edition on Latin America focuses on distributed school leadership. Linked to the theme of the 2024/5 Global Education Monitoring (GEM) Report on leadership in education, this regional edition builds on case studies carried out in six countries (Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica and Honduras), country profiles on school leadership from the GEM Report's PEER website, and thematic papers. It also incorporates findings from a survey of the region's education ministries conducted by OEI with the support of its country offices.

The concept of distributed leadership is not universally recognized in Latin American education policy. Distributed leadership is a collaborative approach to determining the purpose of education and learning within a vision of strengthening participation, democracy and social justice. In Latin America, the concept first emerged in research in the mid-2000s but has yet to be fully systematized in policy. A survey of ministries of education on regulations and policies in 17 countries shows that only Colombia, Mexico and Nicaragua explicitly refer to distributed leadership in legislation, regulations or policy. Participatory leadership is explicitly mentioned in eight countries, teacher leadership in five countries, and democratic management in five countries. In Chile, a series of policy reforms have promoted the participation of all education community members, fostered school networks, and encouraged local community engagement. The 2021 and 2023 Indicative Performance Standards have guided principals and their teams to build a shared vision. In the Brazilian state of Ceará, the Diretor de Turma (class director) programme has encouraged a stronger relationship between schools and families.

Distributed leadership can foster democratic values in schools and beyond. Distributed leadership is a way of conceiving schools in more democratic and participatory ways. It facilitates a collaborative culture that encourages a sense of ownership and agency among school community members. Since the end of the authoritarian regimes in the late 20th century, education has been a cornerstone for building resilient democratic societies. Yet two public opinion surveys indicate that support for democracy fell in Latin America in the mid-2010s and has not recovered since. In contrast to hierarchical school structures, which can discourage democratic participation, distributed leadership is one of the routes for learning about and through democratic institutional life. The 2016 International Civic and Citizenship Education Study conducted in Chile, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Mexico and Peru showed that students who were exposed to open dialogue, debate, and critical thinking had higher levels of civic knowledge and were more likely to value democratic participation.

Distributed leadership is easier when power is delegated to schools. Distributed leadership is facilitated when schools enjoy autonomy and when power is delegated from the school principal to other school actors. In Latin America, decision-making power is delegated mainly in the case of developing school improvement plans and, to some extent, in decisions about professional development, discipline, curriculum and pedagogy, but not in staff management. In professional development, teachers participate in deciding their training in Guatemala and Uruguay. With respect to the use of school resources, the education community participates in Colombia and Paraguay; management teams in Argentina, Nicaragua and Panama; and principals in Brazil, Costa Rica and Uruguay. Overall, the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Panama and Peru assign the lowest degree of autonomy to schools. Other countries grant greater autonomy by empowering actors, such as principals (Brazil and Costa Rica), management teams (Argentina and Chile), teachers (Mexico) and school community bodies (Colombia, Cuba and Ecuador).

Strong recruitment and training can support distributed leadership. Analysis of the PEER country profiles shows that 13 out of 17 countries have public competitions for recruiting principals, although in Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, Honduras and Peru, these coexist with closed competitions and appointment. Open recruitment can attract skilled external candidates, and merit-based systems can enhance legitimacy. In Brazil, principals chosen following a competitive process have better managerial characteristics than those appointed by technical staff or politicians. All countries, except for El Salvador, Paraguay and Peru, have mandatory training processes for principals. In terms of content, only Chile, Colombia and Nicaragua include distributed leadership or similar approaches in their training for principals. Continuous professional development opportunities are limited, and participation is mostly on a voluntary basis. There is a standardized principal appraisal process in 10 of the 17 countries, although only 6 countries encourage school principals to engage school stakeholders in this process, and few focus on evaluation.

Teachers in leadership roles need support. All countries have organized structures of teacher participation. Teachers are formally engaged mainly through school management teams. Teachers in leadership roles are in a good position to understand other teachers' needs and are more empowered to participate in decision making, building on their experience. But teachers need their principals' support to succeed in their leadership roles. According to the 2019 Regional Comparative and Explanatory Study (ERCE), a cross-national assessment,

66% of primary school principals reported having 'created opportunities for teachers to collaborate with each other in developing new classroom practices'. However, teachers do not often feel their perspectives are valued. In Brazil, 59% of teachers feel they can influence policy, but only 7% think their views are valued by policymakers. Information and communication technology can serve distributed leadership by enabling collaboration and facilitating professional development through training, networking and mentoring. In Mexico, school management functions and attributions were redefined to include communication with families and adaptation of study plans.

Distributed leadership is manifested through engaged students, parents and communities. All countries have established organized structures of school community participation, including networks of school principals and engagement of students, parents and communities. Students exercise leadership formally through participation in school management committees and student councils. Analysis of PEER country profiles shows that 70% of countries in Latin America have regulations for including students on school boards. In Colombia, principals report the highest level of student participation in school management teams (97%) among countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Student leadership can also occur in informal ways through regular meetings, open forums and consultations. Parents can engage in school governance through school management committees and parent–teacher associations. Parental engagement in school governance is high in Latin America. According to the PEER country profiles, 83% of countries have policies or regulations for parents and guardians to be on school management committees and 62% for community members. Yet although schools offer opportunities, parents are not always involved. In Mexico, where 82% of schools offered parents the opportunity to participate, only 23% of parents were involved in school activities.

Distributed leadership can impact education practices and outcomes. Distributed leadership improves teachers' motivation. When teachers are actively engaged in decision making, a typical example of distributed leadership, they experience greater job satisfaction. Students have been found to perform better when teachers are motivated and supported by school leaders. In Chile, a study of 69 schools showed that participation in decision making and cooperation among leadership teams had a significant effect on student learning outcomes in mathematics, as measured by SIMCE, the national assessment. There was also higher incidence of teacher collaboration in higher-performing secondary schools.

Distributed leadership can foster democratic values in schools and beyond. Collaborative relationships strengthen governance, improve decision making, enhance accountability and foster inclusion – and need to be encouraged at all levels of education. Distributed leadership is connected with pedagogical innovation, inclusion, educational improvement and, ultimately, educational transformation. Although the concept of distributed leadership is not widely understood in Latin America, relevant practices exist in the region and governments can build on them. School principals need support to use existing structures – such as school management teams and student councils – more effectively for consultation and engagement.

The following recommendations aim to promote distributed leadership in Latin American education systems not just as an end in itself but as a fundamental strategy to strengthen participation and promote democratic values in school communities and beyond.
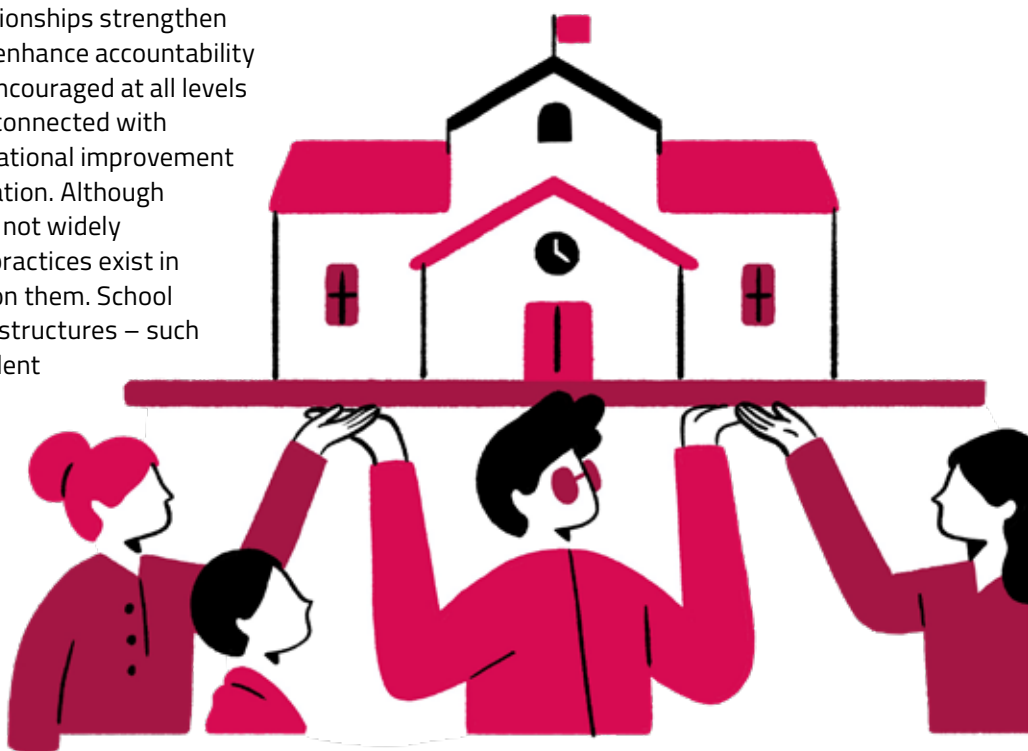
RECOMMENDATION 1.
Recognize and promote the importance of distributed and democratic school leadership in national and subnational education policies and regulations.

RECOMMENDATION 2.
Clearly describe the functions that all actors need to perform in a distributed leadership model throughout the system: not only within schools, but also in school networks, and beyond schools at local and central level.

RECOMMENDATION 3.
Empower school principals with sufficient autonomy, particularly in financial and human resource decisions.

RECOMMENDATION 4.
Develop a research agenda that systematizes local, subnational or national experiences promoting distributed leadership to better inform the development of policies and regulations.

RECOMMENDATION 5.
Ensure that professional school leadership standards explicitly mention participation and empowerment and are used as a basis for recruiting, training and evaluating school principals.

RECOMMENDATION 6.
Develop initial and continuous professional development strategies that foster key skills to exercise participatory and collaborative leadership, including through the use of technology.

RECOMMENDATION 7.
As more and more countries improve their policy and regulatory frameworks, invest in the development of school communities' awareness, preparedness and willingness to work together.

Related resources

2024/5 Global Education Monitoring Report, Leadership in education: Lead for learning

- Country case studies on distributed leadership in education in Latin America:
    - Argentina
    - Brazil – Ceará
    - Brazil – Santa Catarina, Mato Grosso do Sul and Piauí
    - Chile
    - Colombia
    - Costa Rica
    - Honduras
- Thematic papers on distributed leadership in education in Latin America:
    - Governance
    - Technology
    - Monitoring and evaluation
    - Conceptualization
    - Professional development
    - Results of the survey of education ministries

Global Education Monitoring Report 2020 – Latin America and the Caribbean – Inclusion and education: All means all

Other publications under the 2024/5 GEM Report cycle on leadership

- Gender edition
- Youth edition
- Other regional editions:
    - Central and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia on leadership for inclusion
    - East Asia on leadership for digital transformation
    - Africa Spotlight on instructional leadership

Profiles Enhancing Education Reviews (PEER) provide comparable qualitative data on education policies and laws at the national level, covering inclusion, financing for equity, climate change education, regulations of non-state providers in education, comprehensive sexuality education, technology and leadership. New PEER profiles on leadership for 211 education systems review legislation and policies on principals' selection, preparation and working conditions.

www.education-profiles.org

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The *Global Education Monitoring Report*: informing education action since 2002.