

Leading curriculum change in complex times: Putting learners first

Across the world, countries are introducing new curricula as a lever to improve equity and raise learners' achievement. Yet, no matter how well designed, a curriculum does not guarantee improved outcomes. Its success ultimately depends on school leaders.

In complex times, many leaders unwittingly approach curriculum reform as a compliance exercise or by imposing solutions without examining the beliefs and practices that shape outcomes. This "bypass approach" often produces excessive change with little improvement, underestimated challenges, teacher burnout, and repeated failure to meet goals.

Leading curriculum change does not mean discarding what came before. Effective leadership involves recognising high-impact practices in new curricula, building on existing strengths, and addressing gaps. Leaders must understand how curriculum can reduce equity gaps, and how to support teachers to adapt practice in ways that benefit learners. For example, some teaching practices are inherently harder to implement effectively (OECD, 2025).

Resistance to new curriculum is rarely intentional. More often, it reflects competing beliefs about knowledge and practice. When reforms conflict with educators' existing theories of action, the challenge lies not in unwillingness but in unresolved tensions that remain undiscussed. Leaders must work with their teams to surface and resolve these tensions so curriculum change can actively address inequity.

Drawing on our partnership with Professor Viviane Robinson, this presentation will use real examples to show how a more effective engagement approach involves leaders systematically inquiring into the beliefs about inequity gaps that sustain current practices. By deeply understanding these dynamics, leaders can integrate new curriculum practices into existing routines—retaining what works, adjusting what does not, and adopting only what is necessary.

We'll explore the distinction between change and improvement in curriculum implementation, and introduce a structured, research-informed approach used internationally to help leaders focus on what matters, solve complex problems, and build trust in ways that benefit learners.