

Putting the spotlight on Pakistan's middle tier

IIEP and partners led a middle-tier capacity analysis in Pakistan. Today, it's leading to new education reforms.

Behind Pakistan's vast education system is a largely unknown but essential workforce: the middle tier. These district and sub-district managers ensure schools run smoothly, teachers are present, and resources reach classrooms. Yet their vital role in driving reform has long been overlooked.

"Technically, they do everything under the sun," says Ahmad Ali, Programme Director of the Institute of Social and Policy Sciences (I-SAPS). "They ensure schools are operational, that teachers are present, textbooks provided, and classes are happening."

Despite this, their responsibilities remain poorly defined. Many move from teaching to management, often without training, and career paths are unclear. There are also frequent transfers, which can undermine performance, and women are underrepresented in leadership, according to research led by UNESCO and IIEP, with the Pakistan Institute of Education (PIE) and I-SAPS.

With stronger recruitment, clearer mandates, and more resources, however, middle-tier managers could play an even greater, more visible role in shaping educational reform.

Change is in the air

A new study, [*Leveraging the Potential of District Education Managers in Pakistan*](#), commissioned by the Ministry with support from UNESCO, has put forward recommendations to empower district leadership and strengthen institutional capacity nationwide.

"The joint work has successfully brought attention to a long-overlooked but critical layer of the education system: middle-tier education management. For the first time, education officials at the district and sub-district levels have been engaged in a focused and structured dialogue about their roles, responsibilities, and challenges."

Shahid Soroya, Director General of the PIE

Shahid stressed that this is more than symbolic. "The study has highlighted the importance of these managers not just as implementers of policy, but as frontline leaders, mentors, and decision-makers. A key impact has been the recognition of local innovations such as tailored enrollment drives and teacher mentoring models – that show real potential when properly supported."

Following the [middle-tier](#) capacity analysis, key proposals stemming from the research included structured professional development, peer learning, and mentorship programmes. Stronger use of education data through provincial EMIS systems was also emphasized to support evidence-based planning. Stakeholders have also called for

decentralized decision-making with accountability and clearer roles at the district level to drive learning outcomes.

“What this work shows is that strengthening the middle tier is not a technical add-on, but a systemic lever for reform. By connecting evidence, policy, and day-to-day management at the middle tier level, countries can translate reform ambitions into real changes in classrooms.”

Barbara Tournier, IIEP Programme Specialist

Finding the missing puzzle piece

“This study brought to the scene new dimensions which were not clearly explored earlier, particularly pertaining to the job descriptions and the challenges they are facing,” said Ahmad Ali. “The study provided the missing part of the puzzle.”

Qaiser Munir, a lead researcher at I-SAPS, emphasized that transitioning from routine management to mentorship and leadership is critical. “These are all things that are talked about, but not always in an organized, coherent manner,” he said. “This study structured this whole conversation and then chiseled it into very specific action-oriented recommendations for specific provinces.”

Munir explained how the study is already prompting education reforms, including district improvement plans for Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and a continuous professional development framework for middle-tier managers.

Zaigham Qadeer, Director from PIE, added that national policy is also being shaped: “PIE is currently in the process of developing the Education Policy for both the Federal and Non-Formal Education systems. Insights from this research are directly informing the policy by shaping key initiatives and focus areas.”

“Some recommendations are already being acted upon,” he added. “For example, early efforts have been made to formalize coordination structures between provincial and district education offices.”

For both local actors, the middle tier is not just an administrative muscle. “Middle-tier managers serve as the bridge between policy and practice,” Samana Ali, Deputy Director from PIE, said. “When empowered with the right tools, training, and authority, they can ensure that policies are adapted to local realities, implemented effectively, and continuously improved based on real-time feedback.”

Keeping up the momentum

To sustain the gains of the work, Samana called for “a clear, nationally endorsed framework defining the roles, responsibilities, and performance expectations of middle-tier managers, continuous professional development, coordination mechanisms, both vertical and horizontal and investing in data systems and providing timely access to

actionable information will enable middle-tier officials to make informed, strategic decisions.”

For Pakistan, the middle tier is no longer invisible. With new frameworks, district task forces, and policy shifts already underway, the research is delivering real impact. And as Samana put it, “the collaboration has laid a strong foundation for evidence-informed policy recommendations that are both practical and scalable.”

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