



Teachers at the heart of global sustainability: a call for urgent reform

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There's so much happening around the globe that it's easy to miss significant announcements. Back in February, an urgent and impactful report was released that has flown under the radar for many. While immediate global crises demand our attention, this story shines a light on a crucial yet overlooked issue. It's about a long-term strategy to transform our future, prevent conflicts, mitigate natural disasters, and work towards peace, democracy, and shared prosperity.

It's about teachers.

And it couldn't be more vital for the future of humanity and the planet.

Established by UN Secretary-General António Guterres, the "High-Level Panel on the Teaching Profession", led by two former heads of state and sponsored by the UN, the International Labour Organization, and UNESCO, was announced in July 2023. That announcement garnered significant media attention, but the recent release of the report has not. One has to wonder why.

The report calls for urgent action to "shape a stronger, more sustainable future" and is considered our best hope for building a more sustainable and socially just world. It outlines the critical need for support, governance, investment, and a "new social contract" to change mindsets, leadership, and how we treat teachers.

The Crisis: A Shortage of Teachers

The report highlights the *severe and dangerous problem* of international teacher shortages, estimated at 44 million worldwide. This shortage is linked to the low status and poor working conditions of teachers, and insufficient professional development opportunities. The problem is evident in wealthy nations like the USA and Australia, where importing solutions, and teachers, from abroad has already been shown to produce "domino effects." Adding to this are pervasive global stagnant or declining educational performance, the impact of COVID-19, the rapidly changing technological environment, and growing conflicts and climate crises, creating a troubling scenario.

To tackle these complex and interconnected problems, the report argues for *reshaping societal perceptions of teachers and transforming their roles to create better education for all*.

The Recommendations

The report provides 59 recommendations. They look straightforward but challenging to implement. These recommendations' value lies in their clear articulation of values and principles, recognizing the central and pivotal role of teachers in strengthening society.

And these recommendations serve as a checklist for countries to evaluate their attention to teachers. They provide a clear and rational framework for optimal education system management, and they are applicable to both developing and developed economies. I've summarised and grouped them here into 24 points addressing 6 key strategies.

1. Enable Transformation of the Teaching Profession

- **Holistic Social Support:** Teachers need an enabling environment.
- **Rights for Education and Decent Work:** Governments should implement these.
- **Varied Learning Pathways:** Education goals should promote this.
- **National Teacher Policies:** Adopt through dialogue.
- **Tackle Shortages:** Establish mechanisms to ensure equitable deployment.
- **Teacher Management Systems:** Implement these for efficiency.

2. Invest in Teachers

- **Education Funding:** Ensure at least 6% of GDP and 20% of government expenditure.
- **Long-Term Investment:** Essential for sustainability.
- **Monitor Spending:** Ensure financial autonomy and evaluation.

3. Promote Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion

- **Equity and Diversity Policies:** Develop and implement.
- **Incentives for Teachers:** Especially in rural and hardship settings.
- **Support in Crisis Areas:** Develop policies for teachers in these areas.
- **Integrate Refugee Teachers:** Facilitate their integration into host communities.

4. Educate for Sustainable Development

- **Sustainability Education:** Integrate into curricula.
- **Global Citizenship and Human Rights:** Train teachers accordingly.
- **Climate Resilience:** Develop adaptation strategies.

5. Foster Decent Work in Teaching

- **Secure Employment:** Ensure fair salaries and gender pay equity.
- **Supportive Conditions:** Promote well-being and mental health policies.
- **Reduce Non-Teaching Tasks:** Support education support personnel.

6. Nurture Leadership and Human-Centered Education Technology

- **Collaborative Leadership:** Foster for recruitment and retention.
- **Diversity in Leadership:** Promote within schools.
- **Integrate Technology:** Pedagogically for active learning.
- **Autonomy and Privacy:** Ensure in technology use.
- **Effective Training:** Train teachers and learners to use technology effectively.

Implications for Global Education

The report, although succinct at 44 pages, is packed with crucial points. Let's delve in for a closer look and unpack Recommendation 1:

*" 1. Teachers are the central element in the transformation of education systems. Yet teachers do not work in a vacuum. To be effective, they require an enabling environment and **holistic social support** for their work. Governments should develop economic and social policies that support teaching and learning through **adequate and equitable funding for education and lifelong learning**. Such policies should ensure that parents and families have the time and capacity to support learners, **that learners have access to adequate nutrition and healthcare services**, that learning spaces are safe and inclusive, that learning institutions have adequate infrastructure and connectivity, and that the teaching profession enjoys high status and support."*

Holistic Social Support for Teachers

Teachers are at the heart of education system transformation, but they need an enabling environment and holistic social support to be effective. Governments must develop policies supporting teaching and learning through adequate and equitable funding for education and lifelong learning. This includes ensuring parents and families can support learners, providing adequate nutrition and healthcare services, maintaining safe and inclusive learning spaces, and ensuring the teaching profession enjoys high status and support.

Accountability and Working Conditions

In many countries, like Australia, teachers often bear the brunt of educational accountability. The report emphasises that teachers should also hold the system accountable, requiring decent working conditions, sustainable workloads, work-life balance, appropriate class sizes, professional autonomy, and safe and healthy working environments. Addressing these issues is crucial to management of a healthy education system.

Funding and Transparency

Equitable systems are successful systems. Adequate and equitable funding is another critical area where many countries, including Australia, fall short. The report stresses the need for efficient and transparent education funding, with mechanisms for monitoring and evaluation to ensure accountability.

Lifelong Learning and Strategic Policy

The report highlights the importance of lifelong learning for both teachers and students. While it is a national goal in many countries, it often lacks prominence in high-level policy. Effective incentives and monitoring systems are needed to develop lifelong learning approaches, which are currently often found in rhetoric but not seen in system design.

There are 58 further recommendations, all with sound, rational principles for orienting education systems design so that the system serves their people, but one stands out as most critical to me.

National Commissions for Education

One of the report's most valuable recommendations is establishing independent ***national commissions*** to address teacher shortages, manage the teaching profession, monitor, and strategise for system improvements and address other critical issues as they arise. These bodies should include financial authorities, teacher representatives, education experts, and other diverse stakeholders, to provide informed comprehensive assessments and solutions. Such commissions can act as independent advisors, ensuring equitable funding, good working conditions, and effective policies. Independent commissions are important if we are to avoid playing political football with education policy; develop long-term strategy that sustains beyond political terms, and hold pursuit of a strong future for our children above all other concerns.

A Global Call to Action

Guterres' calls the report "a powerful global call to action", responding also requires global commitment. Every country needs to evaluate its education system against these recommendations and take actionable steps to support teachers and improve education.

It's not too late to start and turn things around. Independent education commissions could be the key to realising the vision laid out in the High-Level Panel report, ensuring that we can build a more sustainable and just world through education.

The opinions expressed in this blog are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect any official policies or positions of Education International.

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