

Transforming Systems

Insights From The Better Future Forum in Singapore (May 2026)

Background: We think we know how systems change, but we're stuck

Globally, we've come to understand that transforming the systems around children doesn't only require new policies and practices in our schools. It requires the development of shared purpose, collective agency, trusting relationships, and a culture of learning among all of the people across the wider ecosystem whose daily choices and actions inform children's lives.

Yet we're still learning how to do this work. 270 million children remain out of school and 7 in 10 children in low and middle income countries leave primary school unable to read a simple sentence. This whole-group session therefore invited participants to share their insights into what is missing from our current efforts to transform the systems around children.

Perspectives: Views from all levels of the system we're transforming

- Sanjay Purohit of the Centre for Exponential Change shared that the greatest driver of change is the **leadership of people at all levels of the systems** around young people, including teachers, parents and school leaders, all of whom must exercise their agency towards a shared purpose. He stated that our work then is to find ways to **multiply the leadership of the many millions of people** that make up the systems around children, because there will never be a leadership development program big enough to reach all of them.
- Dr. Iwan Syahril, former Director General of Education in Indonesia, argued that our reforms fail not because we lack good ideas, but because we struggle to translate our ideas into actions and impact for students. He said that we need to understand that **change is not logical, but emotional**. In that, he highlighted three drivers of change: **purpose, leadership, and choice**. Purpose: "In a journey of change, storms will hit you. Purpose ensures your compass points you the right way through the storms." Leadership: "Change is a hard journey, and you therefore need to multiply leadership. Find, develop, and grow your allies." Choice: "Transformation is more likely to be successful when it is not mandated, but invited."
- Angela Bravo Chacon of Enseña Perú highlighted the Efecto Áncash, a **multi-program approach to develop the leadership of teachers, parents, students, school leaders, and government officials** across a whole region in the Andes. She revealed that the approach was having a significant proven impact for all students in the region. This has been achieved through building a shared purpose towards both the academic and social-emotional learning of students, **creating inclusive and collective processes for people at all levels of the system to come together** to build purpose, build relationships, and learn and share about what is working. She spoke finally of the importance of **relentless passion**: the system is very hard to change, and throws up constant challenges. For instance, their biggest ally in government in Áncash is now leaving office.
- Najelaa Shihab highlighted the **critical and often overlooked role of parents in transforming systems**. "If there is one pivotal action we should take, it is to nurture parents," she said, and shared how her work with tens of thousands of parents across Indonesia had shown her how powerful they are. They influence their children's education of course, but they are also workers and voters who can shape policy in powerful ways by advocating for reform or defending the status quo.

- Angie Murimirwa of CAMFED made the point that the systems around us are still very unequal. She showed how few countries are led by women today, then argued that “**systems are made of people, and we produce these systems’ leaders.** They don’t just wake up and decide.” She asked us to consider what is happening when our education systems are producing societies in which this is the case. If we want to see a different system in the future, we have to ask ourselves what systems we are creating today in our classrooms, schools and organizations, because those same systems will be replicated in our societies as our children grow up.

Key Insights

1. **Systems change through the leadership of people at all levels working together** - A constant theme throughout the session was that ultimately systems change through the collective leadership of people working together at all levels of the wider system around children towards a clear shared purpose. This means that cultivating the shared purpose and collective agency of people throughout the systems—teachers, policymakers, school leaders, parents, students, and civil society leaders—is critical to transforming those systems. Indeed, that is the only path to transformation.
2. **Teachers hold true power to shape the education system every day** - Carlos Varga of UNESCO highlighted the importance of teachers in determining what happens daily in the education system, arguing that they must be the focus. Global Teacher Prize Winner Maggie O’Donnell took up this theme, arguing that teachers were the true holders of power and possibility in our systems: they are the ones who are actually standing in classrooms and facilitating the learning of our young people. Any effort to bring about change must focus on teachers, rethinking their role and our support of them.
3. **Governments have the power and resources to reach all students** - Stella Rose of ALIVE in Kenya highlighted the critical role that governments play in the function of the education system: they spend 99% of the money and dictate what teachers and schools must do. Any effort to transform a system has to account for a way to partner with, influence, or inform government efforts to improve learning for children at scale.
4. **Nothing about us, without us** - At the same time, governments are powerless to drive transformational change unless they also have the informal authority that comes through deep consultation with the people who make up the system: students, teachers, and parents. Maya Maddah, Chief of Staff to the Education Minister in Lebanon, shared how they regularly consult students, teachers, and parents ahead of any significant policy decision, in order to ensure that there is support to enact and sustain the changes the policy is designed to achieve.
5. **The untapped power of parents** - Critical to this is the role of parents. Parents are often an afterthought in our efforts to transform education—indeed at the Better Future Forum, no one had been invited to specifically represent this group—and yet they hold huge power in shaping the system, both in supporting their own children to learn and grow, and even more crucially in the role that they play as citizens and voters in shaping demand, narrative, and political priorities. We need to take this critical role of parents more seriously in our efforts to transform systems.
6. **The system is made of people and we each make it daily** - As Angie Murimirwa pointed out, the systems that we are making today around our children are systems that will be replicated as those children grow in age and influence. Each of us must strive to act not only to do whatever it

takes to bring about the system that we want, but also to act every day according to the values and practices of those systems that we hope to bring about.

7. **We must embrace politics if we're serious about change** - Tony Mackay argued that politics was the missing piece of our global efforts. In research that spoke to ministers and politicians worldwide, they heard seven recommendations for making political progress in transforming education: 1. Talk about it to get it on the political agenda, 2. Do it in order to show what is possible, 3. Attack the metrics to create room for change, 4. Involve young people to build a powerful movement, 5. Educate politicians so they can see the problem and solution, 6. Teachers need to stand up and lead as a powerful bloc, 7. Grow trusted convenors outside of politics.

Notable Quotes

- The late Danela Meadows: *"The scarcest resource is not oil, clean air, capital, or technology—it is our willingness to listen to each other and learn from each other—to seek the truth rather than seek to be right."* - **Sanjay Purohit**, Centre for Exponential Change
- *"There is not a leadership development program that can deal with one and half million leaders. And yet our work is to multiply the leadership of that many school leaders across India."* - **Sanjay Purohit**, Centre for Exponential Change
- *"Change is about moving the human heart, not convincing people with logical arguments."* - **Dr. Iwan Syahril**, Monash University Indonesia
- *"Change is a hard journey and therefore you need to multiply leadership. Find them, develop them, and grow them. They will be your allies. Leaders who we want to cultivate in the ecosystem are those who have changed their hearts and minds. We need to have the leaders who will fight for the purpose every single day. If your purpose is about the students. Give them the trust to innovate, to fail, to iterate, and learn."* - **Dr. Iwan Syahril**, Monash University Indonesia
- *"If there is one pivotal action it is to nurture parents—the context is very diverse. [We've] seen how powerful parents are. Yes they are parents, but they are also workers and affect policy in powerful ways. Their voices can limit what systems can do or expand what systems can do. They can advocate for reform, or defend the status quo."* - **Najelaa Shihab**, Guru Belajar Foundation
- *"Nada sobre los estudiantes por los estudiantes, sin los estudiantes"* - **Jessica Gabriela Guillen Trujillo**, United World College of South East Asia Student
- *"Gandhi did not immediately begin the revolution—maybe we are at the beginning of the journey. The most important change is to change ourselves, and the systems will change automatically."* - **Forum Participant**

Many thanks to all the participants at the **Better Future Forum** who contributed to these insights. Visit the [Better Future Hub](#) to explore more insights and collective learning from Teach For All's [Global Institute for Shaping a Better Future](#).

To share additional insights or join upcoming conversations and learning experiences on this topic, please reach out to alex.beard@teachforall.org.

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