



# The Role of the Middle Tier in Supporting Improved Literacy Outcomes in Rwanda

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## Introduction

In 2024, the Gates Foundation's Science of Teaching initiative conducted a study of two better-performing school districts in Rwanda. The aim of the study was to gain insight into the characteristics of the subnational levels of the education system—referred to as the middle tier. The middle tier acts as an intermediary between the central authorities and the school and community levels where national policy is implemented. Why focus on the middle tier? Increasingly, research is showing that effective leadership, management, and support from the middle tier are essential to creating and sustaining improved learning outcomes (Asim et al., 2023; Honig & Rainey, 2023; Mangla, 2022; Tournier et al., 2025).

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## Research Design: Frameworks for Understanding the Middle Tier

Rwanda was chosen for the case study under the assumption that evidence would emerge from looking at school districts where a succession of investments has been made to improve the delivery of instructional support to schools. To select two districts within Rwanda, the study team applied a **positive deviance** approach, considering those districts that had better-than-average student performance on an early grade literacy assessment (in grade 3) and on an end-of-primary exam (grade 6) and that were recognized by a cross-section of education officials as districts that are better managed and better performing. Districts were then screened to ensure that those chosen were not particularly advantaged due to location or demographics.

The study was most interested in how the middle tier is organized to provide instructional support. Therefore, the research was designed to examine the ways in which district and sub-district actors promote, support, or reinforce improved teaching and learning. To attempt to determine which features of the organization and operation of the middle tier in Rwanda enable more effective instructional support, thus contributing to better student performance, the design of the research drew on a combination of several analytical models.

**Principal-agent theory** directed the study to focus on the accountability relationships across administrative levels, as evidenced by how authority is delegated, financing is provided, information flows, support is provided, and motivation is generated. Additionally, attention to the institutional arrangements typical of bureaucratic structures guided the study to examine the **policies, procedures, and rules** governing education system operations, as well as the ways in which targets are set and related incentives and rewards for performance are determined. This also included gathering information on **system routines** for collecting and using data and the existing definitions of roles and responsibilities of different actors and their horizontal and vertical **reporting relationships** (Silberstein & Spivack, 2023).

How policies, rules, reporting relationships, and accountability actually play out within institutional structures also depends on the factors that influence the day-to-day behaviors of the people involved. Therefore, the study team employed **social capital and social network analysis** to understand the extent and influence of informal interactions and information exchanges among school-facing middle-tier staff and other middle-tier and school-level actors (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Additionally, the team looked for insight into how interactions among these sets of actors are influenced by **norms, pressures, and expectations** prevalent in their working and social environments (Lipsky, 2010, Chapter 2; Mangla, 2022).



## The Context of the Middle Tier in Rwanda

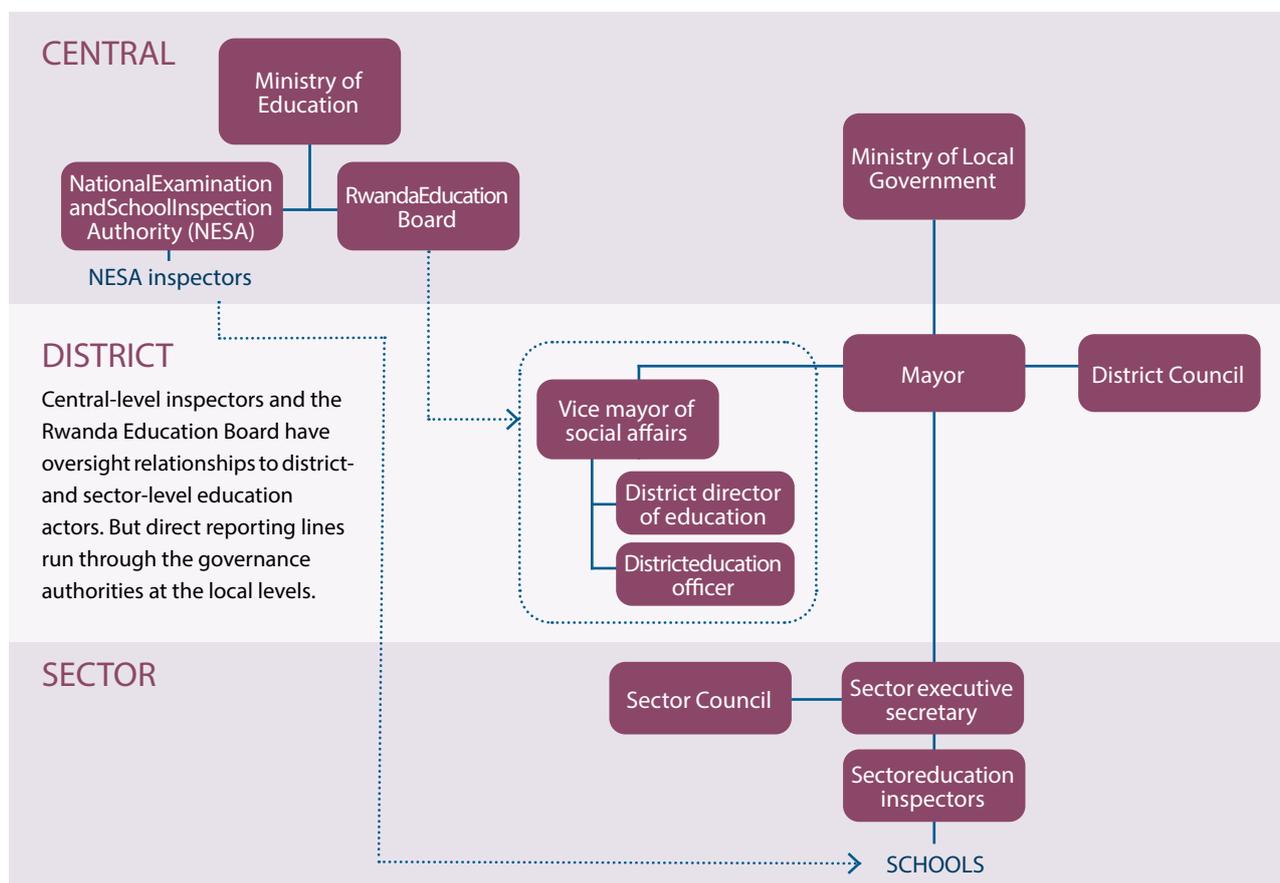
The Ministry of Education (MINEDUC) has put in place a strategy that prioritizes improving foundational learning outcomes. To achieve these outcomes, MINEDUC aims to strengthen instructional quality through teacher development and support and to strengthen quality assurance and performance management. The implementation of MINEDUC’s strategy relies heavily on the decentralized arms of the education system—in other words, the district and sector levels, also known as the middle tier.

MINEDUC, the Rwanda Education Board (REB), and the National Examination and School inspection Authority (NESA) play important policy roles. REB, in addition to its policy role, is responsible for curriculum and instruction. NESA conducts administrative, financial, and academic inspections and collects data on enrollment, attendance, and student performance. REB, and to some extent NESA, provides oversight on district, sector, and school education activities and performance.

Under Rwanda’s decentralized governance structure, significant authority over the delivery of public sector services such as education is devolved to district- and sector-level actors. As depicted in Figure 1, district-level education administrators (the district director of education and the district education officer) report to the local government, in particular the vice mayor of social affairs and the mayor, who in turn report to the Ministry of Local Government. At the sub-district (sector) level, education is the responsibility of the sector executive secretary, a political leader who reports to the mayor. Sector education inspectors (SEIs), working under the sector executive secretary, are the main school-facing officers interacting with schools’ head teachers and teachers.

Investments in improving teaching and learning in Rwanda have focused on strengthening the capacity of the middle tier. MINEDUC efforts have been complemented by financing and technical assistance from USAID, the Global Partnership for Education, the World Bank, and the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, among others. Many of the larger programs supported by development partners have contributed to realizing MINEDUC’s focus on foundational learning, investing in strengthening the capacity of system actors at the subnational level to support teachers in improving instruction.

Figure 1. Rwanda education system structure





## Exploring the Role of the Middle Tier

The study explored six domains to gain insight into the role of the middle tier in relation to the central authorities and, most importantly, with respect to the provision of support services to schools. The domains encompassed those commonly identified as relevant to improving decentralized system management; behavioral science domains relevant to understanding how capability, opportunity, and motivation determine how system actors operate; and domains related to key actors' knowledge and self-efficacy concerning foundational literacy.

The research team therefore gathered and analyzed qualitative and quantitative information to show how the following characteristics of middle-tier actors interact to contribute to improved system performance:



The decentralized implementation of national policies related to the provision of schooling is not unique to Rwanda. However, that local education authorities report to the political and governance structures at the local level is different from other countries' education systems, where education districts usually report only to the central education ministry.

As discussed below, this study of two better-performing districts in Rwanda reveals the importance of alignment among the technical, administrative, and political authorities in the education sector, from the center down to the middle tier—but more importantly, among those in the middle tier who share responsibility for managing and supporting schools. What in some education systems creates tension between the interests and priorities of political leaders in the middle tier and the policies and implementation needs of the education system was not evident in the two study districts. Rather, the technical, administrative, and political actors had a strong shared set of priorities and consistent communication and action to reinforce and support those priorities.

## Summary of Findings

The study found that actors at all levels were aligned in their orientation toward foundational learning and that they had shared knowledge and understanding of what is required to improve it. Within the middle tier, alignment among district- and sector-level technical and political actors meant that they delivered coherent and consistent messages and provided mutually reinforcing signals to school leadership and teachers.

What made the interactions among middle-tier personnel and schools particularly effective were the strong horizontal relationships between peers and among actors at the same level and their shared commitment to collaborative problem-solving.

Accountability among actors was voluntary and grew more out of professional responsibility than out of any formalized system of rewards and disincentives, such as the performance contract system (*imihigo*) in place at all levels. Middle-tier administrators and school support staff expressed a sense of accountability to the students in the schools in their jurisdiction, more so than to the authorities above them. Both of the study districts were implementing a range of activities—both nationally mandated and local initiatives—related to improving foundational learning. What stood out was the prioritization of foundational learning, the alignment among actors in support of whatever initiatives were being implemented, and their emphasis on engaging actors and stakeholders at the district, sector, and school levels. Study respondents consistently recognized their responsibility to implement the policies and directives coming down from central authorities, but with the understanding that it is up to them to determine how best to implement these policies in their own contexts, how best to overcome constraints, and how best to problem-solve on a day-to-day basis, thus seeing their role as critical to helping the education system realize its objectives.

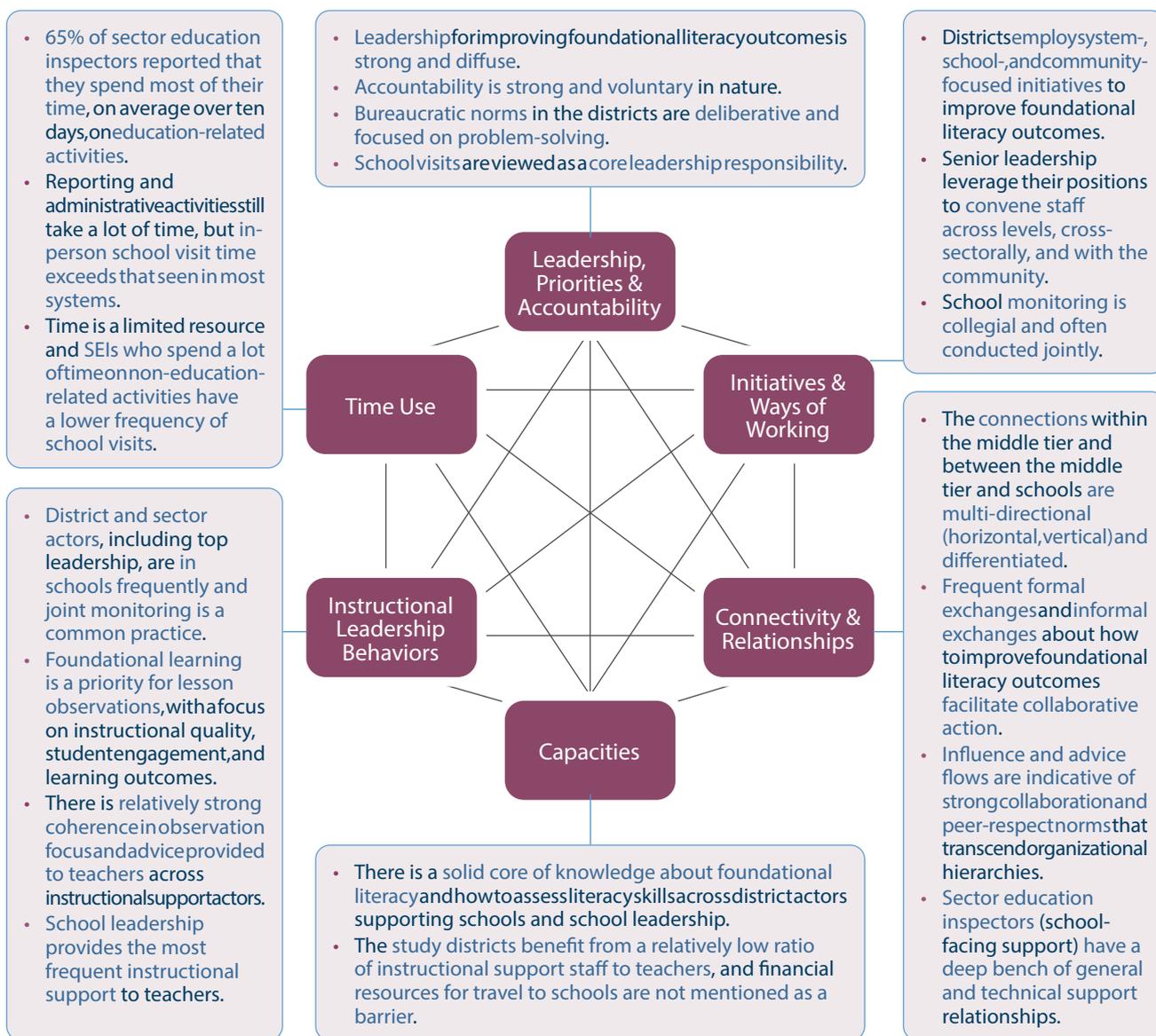


In a small country such as Rwanda, with reasonable ratios of support staff to schools (on average, each SEI is responsible for eight schools), one might have expected to see, for example, that coaching from SEIs was a key factor contributing to improved instruction. The study revealed that in fact that while SEIs prioritized school visits and visited frequently, it was nonetheless the school-based leadership team—comprising the principal, school-based mentor, and subject advisor—who provided the most frequent and consistent instructional coaching to teachers. The middle tier in the two study districts was not the primary provider of instructional coaching.

Visits by the district political and education sector leadership and by SEIs were prioritized, and therefore relatively frequent, in both districts. However, those visits served more to reinforce the importance of foundational learning, to reinforce education sector priorities related to how schools can improve literacy outcomes, and to monitor and encourage ongoing instructional coaching from the school-based team, thus establishing strong norms and expectations related to quality instructional delivery and student learning.

Figure 2 summarizes the findings in relation to the six domains mentioned earlier: (1) leadership, priorities, and accountability; (2) initiatives and ways of working; (3) connectivity and relationships; (4) capacities; (5) instructional leadership behaviors; and (6) time use.

Figure 2. Summary of findings by domain





To say that effective leadership within the middle tier is an important factor in an education system's ability to provide meaningful instructional support to schools is not a revelation. However, this study uncovered specific examples of what it is that effective technical and political leaders in the middle tier do.

For example, political leaders in the middle tier (mayors, district councils, and vice mayors) advocate for resources, convene stakeholders within their districts (including parents and local leaders), find solutions to problems in collaboration with education sector technical and administrative staff, and conduct school visits to reinforce priorities and gain firsthand insight into the constraints and challenges faced by schools and teachers. Technical leaders at the district and sector levels conduct school monitoring visits, manage the provision of instructional advice and the identification of training and support needs, solve problems, host meetings among school support staff, accompany SEIs on school visits, and conduct outreach to parents and communities to reinforce educational priorities.

The staff responsible for regularly interacting with schools (SEIs) monitor and support school leadership, conduct periodic classroom observations and advise teachers, organize trainings, and facilitate teacher communities of practice. While about 65% of SEIs' time is spent on education-related activities, the frequency with which they visit schools varies considerably. During the ten days when the study was actively collecting data on how SEIs spend their time, the median number of visits was to six schools. Three SEIs visited only three schools, while four visited more than ten. The direct contribution of any SEI visit to improving teaching is not something this study could determine. However, the recurring themes of alignment, consistent messaging regarding foundational teaching and learning as system priorities, and strong collaboration and peer relations across political and technical roles within districts speaks to how management and governance within the middle tier can help schools improve what they do on a day-to-day basis to strengthen instructional quality.

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