CDE INSIGHT

Widening Circles of Leadership
How to reform an education system

Sir Michael Barber

Introduction

In November 2023, CDE brought the internationally renowned Sir Michael Barber, a leading expert on governance, reform and service delivery, to South Africa for a series of talks and engagements with policymakers, business and civil society leaders. Founder and chairman of Delivery Associates, Barber rose to prominence as the head of the United Kingdom's education and other public service reforms under Prime Minister Tony Blair in the late 1990s and early 2000s. As co-chair of the Pakistan Education Taskforce, he developed the ambitious Punjab Roadmap goals, which led to phenomenal improvements in the quality of education offered at the 60 000 schools in that province of some 200 million. He has since advised more than 60 governments. A former teacher, he has had senior appointments as head of McKinsey's global education practice and chief education adviser to public company, Pearson. He has written three books on system reform and delivery: Accomplishment: How to Achieve Ambitious and Challenging Things, How to Run a Government So That Citizens Benefit and Taxpayers Don't Go Crazy and Deliverology 101.

This paper is based on a presentation Barber made at CDE's offices to senior education officials, leading education NGOs, philanthropic foundations and business leaders.

South Africa's basic education system in crisis

There can be no doubt that South Africa's basic education system is underperforming. World Bank data reveals that we are the biggest underperformer among developing countries: South Africa gets the lowest learning outcomes on international standardised tests per dollar spent of all low and middle-income countries, according to analysis by Prof Lant Pritchett, research director at Oxford University's global Research on Improving Systems of Education (RISE) Programme.

In March 2023, CDE published The Silent Crisis: Time to fix South Africa's schools, a series of five reports analysing how our system underperforms, what the root causes of this dismal situation are, what could be done to tackle these deep-seated challenges, how we can take inspiration from successful reform strategies in other, similarly charged political contexts, and what business, civil society and parents need to do to pressure government into delivering reform.

CDE argued that the systemic issues within the education system have to be addressed if we are to fundamentally change the way teaching and learning takes place in our classrooms. The biggest challenges are: corruption in the system at many levels, cadre deployment in the bureaucracy, accountability deficits throughout the system and a weak teaching corps. Government's poor handling of the Covid-19 pandemic and its impact on schooling aggravated these fault lines.

To address these challenges, CDE identified five priorities for government, with detailed recommendations under each area: (1) tackle corruption and cadre deployment; (2) raise accountability levels throughout the system; (3) strengthen the teacher corps; (4) appoint new leadership, including a new Basic Education minister; and (5) publicly commit to achieving realistic national goals. To get there, business, civil society and parents need to agree that rapidly improving learning outcomes should be the education system's number one priority and then mobilise to ensure that government focuses its energy and resources to achieving that goal.

CDE 2024

On 'patch and mend' versus whole system reform

Often, in the face of an underperforming system, people both inside and outside that system believe that too much negativity about the system's performance is demoralising, and a much better way of improving the system is introducing a few, simple tweaks that can bring about progress. Barber argues forcefully against this 'patch and mend' mentality. "If a system is underperforming badly," he asks, "why not redesign it completely?"

He used the analogy of St Paul's Cathedral in London to illustrate his argument. After Charles II was reinstated as king in 1660, he wanted to rebuild the cathedral, which had lost its steeple and fallen into disrepair. Most of the architects he consulted suggested that they patch the steeple and renovate the front of the church where stones were falling out. Christopher Wren, a young architect who knew the, king was opposed to this approach, pointing out that the original had been badly designed and that the whole edifice was full of deformities. Instead, he wanted to design a new cathedral inspired by the beautiful Hagia Sophia mosque in Istanbul (previously a cathedral). Since Charles II lacked funding for the project, he initially demurred, but following the devastating fire of London in 1666, which razed the cathedral to the ground, he eventually commissioned Wren to construct

the new cathedral where it stands proudly to this day. The lesson for Barber is that Wren was right all along: if the goal was to create a beautiful building, patching and mending would never have worked.

In the case of South Africa's basic education system, says Barber, it would not make sense to try to 'patch and mend': performance and outcomes of the system are too bad for that approach. Whole system reform is the only answer. Given that, "If the fire comes, it will be terrible," the real question for him is: "Why wait for the fire?"

The 10 principles of systemwide transformation

Through his distinguished career as an education expert and his extensive experience implementing fundamental changes in complicated organisations and systems, Barber has developed a highly informed and practical set of principles that can guide such systemwide transformation. These are his 10 principles for reforming an education system:

1. Put every child on the agenda.
2. Develop globally benchmarked standards.
3. Ensure that adequate data and accountability systems are in place.
4. Recruit great teachers and train them well.
5. Support the continuous development of pedagogical skills.
6. Select and promote great school leaders.
7. Build effective central administrative departments.
8. Devolve operations and budgets to schools.
9. Develop the capacity to manage change and engage parents and communities.
10. Encourage, learn from and incorporate systemic innovations.

Barber's message about reform is that "At the end of the day, unless you change what teachers do in the classroom all day, the results will stay the same." In an underperforming system like South Africa's, teachers need pressure to change and support from their school leaders and the education ministry to get the changes right.

When Barber was introducing reforms to the Punjab, with its population of 120 million people, 20 percent of public school teachers were not pitching up to work on any given day. Ensuring that teachers at every one of the 60 000 schools were arriving every day was a complex challenge. The answer involved 900 ex-army officers, each of whom was given a motorbike and a clipboard. They were sent to three different schools each day to register teacher attendance (as well as whether facilities such as water and lighting were operational). Since schools were not forewarned about which day the officers would arrive, teachers were incentivised to arrive on all days. By the programme's end, teacher attendance jumped from 80 percent to 93 percent.

Getting a reform movement off the ground

As the example of St Paul's shows, often the greatest hindrance to reform is funding. But, as Barber pointed out, that is not the case in South Africa, at least not with respect to education. In his words, "If you make a comparison to the rest of Africa and to other developing countries around the world, South Africa is not underfunded. The vast majority of the money goes straight into teachers' salaries. The trouble is that teacher unions in this country use their political influence to get in the way of change."

As Barber notes, this is a serious problem: unions will resist change until they are pressured to change. How, then, can we get around it? As a starting point, he said, education stakeholders need to first agree that the system is terrible and needs to change. Only then can a movement for reform emerge. But who, the audience asked, should play the role of Christopher Wren and take charge of this movement?

His advice to NGOs and business leaders, is that they need to take responsibility for convincing government of the need for whole system reform. "You can't do these things without government, so you have to persuade government that it needs to change. And it has to be people like you. There's nobody else. You've got to get enough people from within the education system to agree with you. And to do that you've got to make the argument consistently over time – you have to keep at it – and you have to build connections with insiders."

Political courage and widening the circles of leadership

Pressure for reform can, however, only get you so far. What you ultimately need to get reform going is political courage. As Barber puts it, "A government needs to say, 'We're not going to wait for the fire; w e're g oing t o redesign the education system.' For that to happen, politicians need to be willing to take that project on. That requires courage and sustained political leadership."

A political leader is not necessarily the person who needs to, or will have the time to, 'obsess' over reform details. In Barber's view, "Political leadership is about appointing the right people and backing them when they go through tough times." That is why Barber maintains that it is so crucial to have "seven or eight people" close to the President (or other reform leader) as part of the 'guiding coalition', who can show they mean business by starting to take action, demonstrate results and thereby win over sceptics to support the reforms. (See CDE report outlining Michael Barber's views on how to govern). Once those people start believing in the reforms and they get on board with the programme, there can be a positive ripple effect: as implementation starts to reap ever more rewards, an increasing number of people want to become involved. Eventually, if successful, a tipping point is reached and a majority of people will support the process. That, in practice, is what Barber means by the imperative for reform leaders to 'widen the circles of leadership'.

Crucial to this is backing reformers when they inevitably make 'blunders'. No reform programme will be without hiccups or setbacks. Barber cites an example from his own experience as head of Blair's education reform programme when he made a speech about the need for ethics in education – one that had been described as 'boring' by the political advisors who cleared it – only to face front page headlines in the newspapers suggesting that "Blair's education advisor promises new code of ethics to replace God". It required the Prime Minister's leadership to defuse the situation, but Barber's point is that, without political support from the top, he could not have been successful in enacting the reforms.

From a reform programme to a reform movement

This links to Barber's argument about the need for a good communications strategy and public relations campaign outlining the need for reform and the positive role that parents and the wider society can play. As an example, he cites the advertising campaign that ran ahead of some of the most popular soap operas on television, which prompted parents with the simple question, "Why don't you read with your child this evening?" The proportion of parents reading to their children at bedtime rose from 40 percent to 70 percent. By demonstrating the agency parents have and the positive role they could play in their children's learning, reformers generate greater parental involvement in education, and so transform their technical programme into a whole-society reform movement.

Often, parents do not know what a good education looks like. After Hurricane Katrina, one newly opened charter school in Louisiana faced opposition from parents, despite objective data showing that children in their old schools had previously not been learning sufficiently. The school's provider decided to fly parents to another of their schools in New York to showcase how their children could be learning. Only then did the parents realise what their children were missing out on, and it convinced them to support the opening of the new charter school.

Transforming the whole system

Barber also argues for the importance of allowing systems to be open to innovations. The new charter schools in Louisiana helped introduce competitive pressures that promoted state-wide learning improvements: as parents sought to send their children to better schools, other schools that were falling behind tried to improve their results. Barber highlights the positive role that school vouchers for the poor could play in this regard: by giving families greater choice over the schools that children could attend, and, crucially, by testing the low-fee private schools where these vouchers could be utilised, those that perform better and charge competitive fees will flourish and put pressure on schools that don't perform and/or charge higher fees.

This is something that has worked in other contexts and could be considered in South Africa. The point is not necessarily the specific intervention, but the need to challenge the public system to up its game. In Barber's words, "If the core system has become complacent – if it is protected by a profession that cares more about its pay and conditions than about whether children are in fact learning – then you need to challenge the system, otherwise it will just stay the same."

The need to 'challenge the system' reinforces Barber's primary lesson: that the whole system needs to be transformed. Another way to do this is by devolving powers and responsibilities from the centre. In an education system such as South Africa's, that might mean granting more responsibility to provinces. Barber is very careful in this regard, emphasising that "You should never devolve power to an underperforming system." Decentralisation should happen only if a smaller system has the capacity to manage reforms and is still large enough to reap the benefits. Barber also cautions that any decentralisation process needs to take cognisance of what will remain at the centre when powers are redistributed. And if it is to succeed, he says, "The devil is in the details." But if all these elements align, then he agrees that, in principle, a better performing area may introduce the necessary pressures to incentivise the rest of the system to improve. Getting this right, though, is "easier said than done". Importantly, even if successful, this should never diminish the pressure placed on the system as a whole to improve.

Concluding thoughts

Given that there should be consensus on the need for whole system reform, the real question, as one audience member put it at the workshop, is how you get Charles II to agree to do the necessary. Luckily, in a democracy like ours, it is possible to express dissatisfaction with the performance of an incumbent and to demand better.

If those who hold power ignore such exhortations, then ordinary South Africans frustrated by the lack of progress can always up the pressure at the ballot box. If they really want to see the reform the country so desperately needs, they should express their dissatisfaction by casting their votes in the next election in favour of those who have the best plan for building a better education system. That would either make it clear to the ruling party that they need to take reform more seriously, or it could result in a new team coming in, who, determined to deliver on election promises, should be highly motivated to implement a workable reform programme.