



Learning To Lead:
Four Principles For Ministers
of Education To Lead And
Succeed In Government

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Foreword

The Atlantis Group was born of a very simple idea of Mr. Sunny Varkey, our founder and international educational entrepreneur. What if you could bring together an extraordinary group of former ministers of education and heads of government from all around the world? What would they have in common? Where would their experiences differ? And what would their advice be for the next generation of political leaders?

Of course, the global education sector is an area where there is no shortage of recommendations – bold new ideas from think tanks that dominate headlines and fill column inches; exciting research by academics that fills conference floors; and innovative thinking from classroom teachers that gets us talking on social media.

But what happens behind closed doors at the highest level of government is often a mystery. Few will ever have the opportunity to listen and learn from the people who have actually run public education systems; the former ministers of education whose decisions affected the schooling of tens of thousands of children and young people.

This is a great loss, for effective political leadership is needed desperately to solve a growing global education

crisis. As UN data show, in many parts of the world public education systems are failing to provide children with a good education and millions of children are leaving school without being able to read, write or do basic mathematics – while millions more will never set foot inside a classroom. The problems fuelling this crisis are many and manifold. But the answer must be real leadership from the governments that run the public education systems where the majority of the world's children go to school.

Very simply, the Atlantis Group initiative is an important opportunity for today's political leaders to learn from those who came before; the former ministers and prime ministers who have walked in their shoes and faced the same challenges. As a foundation, it has been our great privilege to bring these leaders together to address one of the most fundamental questions in global education today: How do ministers make good decisions?

We now invite political leaders everywhere to consider the Atlantis Group's very simple framework on how to succeed in government: the principles of respect, conviction, resilience and reform.

Vikas Pota,
CEO, The Varkey Foundation



Executive Summary

In October 2017, a distinguished group of former education ministers and heads of government gathered in London for a two-day summit on the role of political leadership in education. This was the inaugural meeting of the Atlantis Group, a unique body which today consists of 25 members from across six continents with over 70 years of combined experience in managing public education systems at the highest level of government. The purpose of the Atlantis Group is to leverage that collective knowledge and experience and use it to address global challenges in education around the world. The group has a very simple vision: that effective political leadership is the key to delivering education for all.

That vision is desperately needed in the face of today's global education crisis. The UN's education agency, UNESCO, has warned that the world is likely to miss its Sustainable Development Goal of delivering quality and inclusive education for all by 2030 unless there is concerted action by the international community. Today, millions of children all around the world are leaving

primary school without basic proficiencies in key skills like reading, writing and mathematics, while millions more will never set foot in a classroom.

The Atlantis Group believes that this crisis will not be solved without effective leadership from ministers of education, who manage the world's public education systems and are directly responsible for the education of the vast majority of the world's children. Through its members' extensive discussions, research and reflections on their time in office, the group has identified four broad principles that underpin such leadership. These are:

Respect A minister will achieve nothing in public office if they don't have the confidence of their government and command the respect of other key political figures, public bodies and stakeholders.

Conviction A minister will only succeed if they believe in their programme and succeeds in making education an overall priority for their government.



Resilience A successful minister must be able to lead their ministry through systemic challenges and endure unexpected crises.

Reform An effective minister must work to build the capacity of the education system as a whole by fostering leadership, accountability, evaluation and innovation.

In this report the Atlantis Group offers its reflections on each principle and addresses a series of recommendations on effective political leadership to serving ministers of education.

Education has an outcome that everyone can agree on: well-rounded, educated children who have been given the life skills to be able to generate a successful future for themselves. In turn, they are able to contribute positively to the societies in which they live. It is the job of an education system and its leaders to prepare these students for the opportunities and challenges that lie ahead of them. To give a child an education is to give everyone a future.

With this report, the Atlantis Group offers the experience, expertise and insight of its members to ministers of education around the world.

“Effective political leadership is the key to delivering education for all.”

Introduction

Today the world is facing an extraordinary education crisis.

The international community looks set to fall well short of its 2030 Sustainable Development Goal of delivering inclusive and quality education for all and promoting lifelong learning. According to the latest UN data, millions of children around the world are leaving primary education without basic proficiencies in reading, writing and mathematics and there are also over 264 million children who are not in school at all.¹ There is also a global shortage of good teachers: according to estimates by the UN's education agency UNESCO, almost 69 million new teachers are needed if the international community is to meet its 2030 education goal.²

This is a global crisis that is unfolding simultaneously in dozens of States all around the world, in tens of thousands of schools and classrooms. It is a crisis that members of The Varkey Foundation's Atlantis Group witnessed first-hand while in government, from systemic poverty to political instability and conflict. Today, these former ministers and heads of government continue to believe in the power of politics to reshape education systems for the better.

“Your education today is your economy tomorrow.”

The Atlantis Group believes that the solution to the global education crisis must ultimately lie in the leadership of governments, which run the public education systems where the vast majority of the world's children go to school.³ The leadership of a handful of ministers of education has the potential to affect the outcomes of tens of millions of children all around the world.

Every major political decision a minister takes during their time in office has the potential to affect the outcome for a generation. A minister's decisions, for good or bad, will shape a child's first encounters with letters and numbers, their grasp of reading, writing and basic sums and ultimately their understanding of advanced mathematics, the sciences and their nation's history, literature and art. The quality of a country's education system will ultimately impact on the future of the State as a whole. As one member



¹ Progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals: Report of the Secretary-General, UN Secretary General (UN Doc: E/2017/66*). (Progress towards the SDGs, UNSG); and Reducing global poverty through universal primary and secondary education, UNESCO Institute for Statistics, June 2017.

² Close to 69 million new teachers needed to reach 2030 education goals, UNESCO, October 2016.

of the Atlantis Group argued during the body's October 2017 summit: "your education today is your economy tomorrow".

But the Atlantis Group also recognizes that many new ministers of education come to their role ill-prepared for these responsibilities, with little experience of national education systems or of public office altogether. This lack of experience means that many new ministers will struggle to succeed in government – and the realities of politics mean that most ministers will leave office long before seeing their policies implemented.

Reflecting on their own time in office, many members of the Atlantis Group wished they had been able to call on the advice of those more experienced than themselves to assist in their work as they began their careers in educational leadership and politics. Several of the members noted that their relative inexperience of high office had proved an important obstacle to getting things done – at least in their first weeks in the role. As one former minister joked during the Atlantis Group's October 2017 summit: "no-one should become a minister without having been a minister before."

The Atlantis Group has unique and practical insights to offer new ministers of education on how to be successful in their role: how to prepare for public office, how to navigate the political landscape and how to survive, succeed and make their voices heard at the highest levels of government. Based on its collective experience, the group has identified four broad principles as the basis of effective political leadership in education: Respect, Conviction, Resilience and Reform.

These principles draw upon discussions between 15 members of the Atlantis Group and its expert advisors at a summit in the UK in October 2017, as well as the reflections of individual members and ongoing research by the group's Secretariat.⁴

"We were ministers of education because we were passionate about education. That passion doesn't stop when we cease being a minister."



The Atlantis Group

The founding principle of the Atlantis Group is: "To bring together the skills and experiences of former ministers of education and interested former heads of government across the world to help address ongoing challenges in global education."

Today, the group consists of 25 former ministers of education and heads of government from around the world. Its members have over 70 years of combined experience in managing public education systems. The group advocates for action by the international community to address global issues in education and also puts its expertise and experience at the disposal of governments.

The Atlantis Group was established by global education charity The Varkey Foundation and launched at the 2017 Global Education & Skills Forum at Atlantis The Palm hotel in Dubai, UAE.

³ The Atlantis Group has also urged the international community to redouble its efforts to meet its Sustainable Development Goal on education. In October 2017, the group warned that aid for education was falling, and called upon G20 nations to enshrine in national law a commitment to education investment and assistance as a percentage of their GDP.

⁴ The summit took place under a modified version of the Chatham House Rule, where The Varkey Foundation agreed not to attribute statements to individual members and advisers.

1. Respect

The importance of the first weeks in office

- Building effective relationships
- Making good decisions

A minister will achieve nothing in public office if they don't have the confidence of their government and command the respect of other key political figures, public bodies and stakeholders. A minister of education's first weeks in office are therefore a critical time for them to work to build successful working relationships, both within their government and the wider education sector.

As one former minister noted during the October 2017 summit:

“Respect takes a number of different forms, and even if you're not respected by virtue of your own status and qualifications, being respected for the way you conduct yourself, for the political positions that you take up, and for the respect that you treat other people with is very important.”

It is obviously extremely difficult for a new minister to prepare for the responsibilities of government and the realities of high public office. This is often the case for new ministers of education, who in some countries are academics appointed to the role by the government with little to no experience of political life. Reflecting on their own first weeks in office, some members of the Atlantis Group described a paradoxical situation where they struggled to understand how to get things done, even though their political capital and support from top figures in government was at its highest. The members also highlighted the risks of becoming entrapped by others with more political experience who can easily co-opt a new minister's agenda and decision-making. One cautioned:

“If you are a minister who has no experience in education, it's very easy to be encircled by... people who have their vested interests and who say, 'I would do this because of this, because of that' and suddenly you are doing something that doesn't change anything and maybe makes things worse.”

Successful ministers will:

Make Decisions Informed By Evidence And Data

The Atlantis Group fundamentally believes that the most effective ministers use data and evidence to inform their decision-making – and that such practice also fosters respect among other stakeholders. The group further cautions that ministers who do not inform their decisions with evidence, but who instead base their decisions largely on their political beliefs, are more likely to attract intransigent opposition, alienate their allies and waste public money.

Effective data allows new ministers to make good decisions while in office and – critically for political leaders – to build respect and broad consensus around those decisions among allies and opponents alike. Reflecting on the importance of data in decision-making, several Atlantis Group members have cited and paraphrased the work of OECD Director of Education and Skills Andreas Schleicher, who has frequently championed the role of data and evidence in policy-making: They also noted the common aphorism, attributed to W. Edwards Deming:

“Without data, you are just another person with an opinion..”

While in office, members of the Atlantis Group drew upon evidence and data in many different ways, both to inform their own decisions and to build public and political support for their policies. While different members had access to different quality of national data while in office, many have spoken of the value of international standardised testing like the OECD PISA in providing information and fostering reform. In their discussions, the Atlantis Group also urged current ministers of education to look to the wealth of data and evidence of effective policies in other countries all around the world.

As one member of the group noted during the October 2017 summit:

“There are very few new ideas. There are also very few new policies and almost everything you want to do, somebody else has done and has usually done brilliantly.”

Reframe The Debate

While evidence and data are enormously powerful tools for new ministers to lead the public debate around education, as politicians ministers should also recognize that these will not always be enough to challenge deeply rooted political ideologies among their political opponents. A successful minister must be an expert communicator who is able to speak to the concerns and values of different audiences and constituencies both, within their own political sphere and that of the wider public.

Reflecting on this challenge, the Atlantis Group notes that the most effective ministers are those who can reframe the public debate itself, either to allay the concerns of their opponents – or to neutralise their arguments. For example, one Atlantis Group member noted that teachers in his country had resisted his attempts to introduce a new curriculum because they felt it would be a threat to their autonomy, even though his ministry had convincing evidence which showed that the new curriculum would improve results:

“We told them: 'This is not a curriculum that we're imposing, these are tools and resources to help you,



“Respect takes a number of different forms...”

because you haven't had enough support so far.' The perception changed completely, and the teachers welcomed the ministry's efforts.”

Build A Rapport With Other Factions

To succeed in office, a minister must be able to foster working relationships with their political opponents, both inside and outside government. To get things done, a minister must understand both the machinery of their own government and the people who make that machinery work. A minister must also recognize the importance of building working relationships with officials outside their own immediate circle of government, in political institutions and law-making bodies such as parliamentary education committees.

Reflecting on their time in office, members of the Atlantis Group discussed a variety of methods for building effective relationships while in office. Several members stressed the importance of making decisions that could not be viewed as arbitrary or partisan. One argued: “The Education Ministry should be viewed as the least partisan ministry of any ministry in government... suffice it to say that the Education Ministry should never be used for even vaguely partisan ends.”

Another member argued that it was important for a minister to build a sense of continuity after taking office, and not to arbitrarily overturn “good” decisions by their predecessor simply because of party politics. Instead, the member argued: “He [the minister] should try and be fair with his predecessor. This will gain him respect and the trust of his colleagues at the ministry.”

The personal is also political. Members also stressed the importance of identifying common ground with their opponents – and noted that in their experience such common ground was often as much personal as political. One member who served in a unity government described how he overcame the differences with his own head of State:

“Ultimately, this is about children. I met him on a one to one basis – and I was criticised for this – but I had to build rapport with him. I had to build common ground. I came to realise that he too, despite all our other disagreements, was somebody who was also passionate about education. The moment you mention children and you remind people what we're all about, somehow the differences start to disappear.”

Focus On Their Own Programme

There will always be competing factions within a government and across partisan, ideological and party lines. Governments are often preoccupied with day-to-day political crises, but the most effective ministers of education are not drawn into “big politics” unless absolutely necessary.

“Without data, you are just another person with an opinion.”



Most members of the Atlantis Group can recall the political crises, party factionalism and everyday scandals that threatened their governments during their time in office. Some of the former ministers also served in unity governments or in administrations run by their political and ideological opponents and so were effectively locked out of high-level strategy and decision-making. However, in their experience members felt that they were most effective in office when they remained outside of the everyday political machinations, petty debates and ideological squabbles that so often degrade a government's capacity to operate effectively.

Instead, the most effective ministers were those that simply focused on their educational role and worked to build respect and working relationships on all sides. One member of the Atlantis Group recommended:

“The education minister should totally and utterly ignore the big things that are going on in the rest of the government and just get on relentlessly with the job of reforming schools, leading the education system and engaging with ministerial colleagues.”

Other members disagreed with this view and argued that in order to survive in political life, a minister must make sure that they're aware of the issues affecting their government. One noted that ministers could not afford to simply ignore "big politics" as they would inevitably have to back their government's decisions in public.

In their discussions, some members of the Atlantis Group also noted that the day-to-day job of managing a government department could distract a minister from their long-term strategy. Reflecting on these challenges, one member recommended that a minister delegate as much as possible to trusted junior officials in their ministry, arguing that this would free up time for the minister to address important issues of policy.

Visit Schools And Listen To Teachers

A political leader who is prepared to connect with their constituency is more respected and effective than one who simply hands down orders. In their experience, members of the Atlantis Group consider that a minister of education is more likely to be effective if they visit schools in their country regularly and are prepared to listen to the day-to-day experiences of pupils, teachers and school leaders. The group notes the particular importance of ministers in visiting remote and underprivileged areas.

Such visits will give the minister an important insight into how schools are actually delivering policies at a local level as well as the challenges that teachers and school leaders face. Visiting schools is also a simple and important way for ministers to cultivate recognition and respect among local communities, teachers and political figures – as well as to discuss and agree upon solutions to the most common problems. During the Atlantis Group summit, one former minister described how he would spend half his working week visiting three or four schools a day, meeting teachers and school leaders:

"They were amazed that the minister would turn up personally. I would never turn up with a large entourage, because that creates completely the wrong impression. By doing this in a very relentless way, I developed a reputation for being non-ideological, practical, and rising above the party barriers."

"The education minister should totally and utterly ignore the big things that are going on in the rest of the government..."





“Say as little as possible and listen as much as possible.”

2. Conviction

Standing by your beliefs • Putting education at the top of the agenda • Convincing others

New ministers of education may struggle to put education at the top of their government's agenda and, in addition, often face resistance to their policies from the media, trade unions, teachers and parents. The most successful ministers of education are those who have the conviction to make education an overall priority for their government – and work to convince others of its importance.

For a minister of education to succeed they need to convince others of their own conviction in the importance and worth of their ideas. Members of the Atlantis Group discussed this issue in detail in their October 2017 deliberations on political leadership. Many spoke of indifference to education from leaders in their own government; others described the difficulty of building relationships with hostile trade unions, parents' groups and media. All the former ministers had faced immense pressure to compromise and capitulate to the demands of others. The most effective were able to resist this pressure by drawing upon the support of their political allies (see above, "Respect"), but also by understanding where to compromise on the political details of a decision or policy but not sacrifice the principle behind it – and making it very clear to others that they were prepared to stand their ground. As one former minister noted during the October 2017 summit:

"There are no jobs which are more challenging in society than political leadership in a period of change. Though it's very important that you enjoy respect, it's very important that you seek a rapprochement with your opponents, but if you are not resolved about what you want to do, then you will achieve nothing."

Successful ministers will: **Make Education A Top Priority For The Government**

Few will have forgotten that, when President George W. Bush received news of the attack on the World Trade Center, he was sat in a school. Bush had made education a key part of his political agenda through the slogan: "No Child Left Behind", and visited many schools during his tenure. UK Prime Minister Tony Blair's landslide electoral victory in 1996 was partly thanks to his very clear agenda: "Education, Education, Education". In both cases, the job of the education minister was made far easier because education itself had been made a priority by the head of government. As one member of the Atlantis Group noted during the October 2017 summit:

"A speech by a head of government on education as a big national challenge will do more to project education as a big issue than almost any other intervention that could be made."

In practice, however, ministers of education often struggle to make education a top priority for their government. As one member of the Atlantis Group described it, governments tend to see education as a "cold" issue, where decisions will take years or even decades to have any impact. Governments are therefore often reluctant to expend their limited political capital in making more than cosmetic changes to education systems. As one Atlantis Group member noted in the October 2017 summit: "You can lose an election over education, but you never win one." Another member also remarked: "We should never underestimate how inherently conservative a social system of education is."

The most successful ministers of education, therefore, are those who are able to change their own government's perception of education from a cold case to a hot topic. In their October 2017 summit, the former ministers described a range of political tactics to achieve this which they considered to be effective, ranging from seeking the interventions of respected international experts, to building public support for their proposals, to stubbornly door-stopping senior figures in their own government. For example, one member of the Atlantis Group described how, by getting public support first, political support followed:

"We didn't have the support of the ministry of finance, so we couldn't just pay teachers more and get their support that way. So we had to get support from the rest of the society initially. Then later on, some of the education stakeholders could see the benefits, including the parents that were initially upset about the changes we were making."

The teachers suddenly received recognition, because their classes were having better results and so on. And then the minister of finance actually became more willing to talk to us." Another Atlantis Group member described a different

"There are no jobs which are more challenging in society than political leadership in a period of change."

tactic: he gained the attention of the president and finance minister by sitting outside their offices until they relented and agreed to meet with him:

“There were several billion dollars that were committed to education by sitting outside of the president or the minister of finance’s office forever and becoming relevant by force. You have to be there because otherwise there’s another minister that’s going to sit there and fetch that money.”

Another former minister described how, when his arguments for compulsory kindergarten in his country were rebuffed by his head of government, he re-framed the idea as coming from international institutions. He drew upon data from the OECD and the World Bank, as well as the vocal support of the leaders of those organisations, to persuade the sceptical head of government:

“It was a good idea, but it hadn’t been accepted when it came from me, the minister. It worked when it came from outside experts.”

Another member of the group described how he used his conviction to persuade a new head of government to keep him in his role as minister of education:

“I said, I believe passionately in what we’re doing. I spent three hours with him, explaining to him what we were doing. He said, at the end: ‘well if you’re up for it, I’m up for it.’ And I carried on.”

Foster A Sense Of Public Emergency

It is often difficult for ministers of education to convince stakeholders of the need for urgent change and in practice this can be one of the biggest obstacles to reform, because the costs are upfront and the benefits may not be seen for years.

Considering this issue in their October 2017 summit, the Atlantis Group noted that an effective strategy can be to foster a sense of public crisis over the issue. The former ministers described a range of tactics to do this, including drawing on a country’s poor standing in international standardised testing or the findings of international bodies like the World Bank. One advisor to the group has described how he used the PISA results to effectively press for change to the education system in his country: “What I sought to do all the time was to paint it in terms of a crisis.”

Another member described how they fostered a sense of public crisis to tackle systemic corruption within their country’s education system. By ending the collusion between the exam providers and teachers, the pass rates dropped from 90% to 50% and she faced a barrage of criticism from teachers and parents and media:

“In countries like mine, where people are used to crises, you need to really come up with a big crisis if you want education to get on top of other sectors. This became a national issue. If you’re lucky to survive politically this kind of ‘failure’, as they called it, then you at least have the education on everybody’s agenda.

3. Resilience

Leading in a crisis • Overcoming systemic challenges

A national crisis is the ultimate test of a minister’s political leadership. Many education ministers will inherit systems badly damaged by the legacy of past crises, such as systemic poverty, political instability, conflict and natural disasters. Others will be asked to lead education systems crippled by decades of underfunding and poor public policy. Some may face sudden and acute crises that, if poorly managed, will threaten the stability of their entire education system.

As ministers, several members of the Atlantis Group had to lead their education systems through such national crises, including economic collapse, intransigent political shutdowns and mass demographic change. Others inherited an education crisis from their predecessor, such as taking office during a national, prolonged teachers’ strike. One member of the Atlantis Group described the situation in his country when he took office: “We don’t have buildings, we don’t have schools to teach kids. We don’t have salaries for teachers.”

Reflecting on these crises in October 2017, members of the Atlantis Group described situations where conventional strategic thinking had totally failed and where political processes had stalled or collapsed completely; scenarios where there was no clear roadmap. While contextually these situations were all very different, members described a range of common strategies and tactics they considered to be effective.



“What I sought to do all the time was to paint it in terms of crisis.”



“We find ourselves in a situation where we don’t have buildings, we don’t have schools to teach kids. We don’t have salaries for teachers.”



⁵ What We Owe Refugee Children, Elias Bou Saab, Project Syndicate, June 2017

Successful ministers will: Delegate Decision-making

During sudden and developing crises, ministers may be quickly overwhelmed by the sheer number of decisions they are forced to make in a short space of time. In such cases, one effective approach may be for a minister to delegate longer-term policy and less important decisions to others in their team so they can focus on leading the ministry through the acute problem. Members of the Atlantis Group have stressed that ministers should foster an atmosphere sense of autonomy, trust and responsibility with their juniors – and not lose sight of the big picture. One member of the Atlantis Group described his approach:

“You lose the contact [with day-to-day management] when you are subsumed with dealing with the crisis; I had to leave that to the rest of the government.”

Take The First Step To End A Political Impasse

New ministers can be very effective if they show that they are willing to negotiate and open new lines of dialogue, particularly during intransigent political standoffs. While politicians may build valuable capital with their supporters by prolonging arguments with their opponents, while in office leaders who work to de-escalate a situation are more likely to be successful. One member of the Atlantis Group described how he took office in the midst of union-organised teacher strikes:

“Others had sought to preach to the unions how adversely they were affecting children’s education, but it wasn’t working. So I decided I would just walk over to the trade union, open the door, and say ‘I’m ready to talk’. That changed the whole atmosphere.”

Create A New Roadmap

Some crises are so great that they threaten to overwhelm an education system without an effective response by government. In such scenarios, ministers must be prepared to consider fundamental changes to the way their national education system operates and is funded in order to ensure that everyone has access to an equitable and quality education.

For example, during its October 2017 summit the Atlantis Group considered the example of Lebanon, which has successfully incorporated millions of refugees from the conflict in Syria into its school system by introducing a double-shift system and seeking economic assistance from the international community.⁵ The group has noted that such reforms are only possible if a political leader can inspire confidence in the programme from teachers, government and the international community alike.

Be A Figurehead

Reflecting on leadership, members of the Atlantis Group have concluded that it is the personal qualities of an individual minister that will determine their ultimate success or failure in the face of crisis: their clarity of vision in complicated situations, their courage in the face of insurmountable odds and – ultimately – their grit and resilience. Such qualities are not simply rhetorical; a minister must understand that leading a complex government bureaucracy through a national crisis requires more than political acumen and an understanding of strategy and tactics – it requires them to be a figurehead that others can look to in the face of fear, uncertainty and desperation.



4. Reform

Building a legacy • Changing the system • Creating agents of change

Ministers of education are rarely in office for very long and it can be difficult for them to deliver real change in their political lifetimes. In practice, it can take years for their policies to take effect system-wide, and up to a decade or more to reach the classroom. Successful ministers will therefore work to build the capacity of the education system as a whole by fostering leadership, accountability, evaluation and innovation. As one Atlantis Group member argued in October 2017:

“Most reforms don’t die from lack of money, they die from lack of implementation capacity, from a lack of leadership throughout the system.”

Successful ministers will:

Build The Capacity And Status Of Teachers

Research by The Varkey Foundation has found that the social standing of teachers differs widely around the world and that in many countries the public does not see teaching as a high-status profession.⁶ Reflecting on these findings, the Atlantis Group notes many governments have failed to build the capacity of their teaching workforce as community figures, researchers and innovators and instead continue to subject teachers to a high level of centralized control. This may erode public respect for the teaching

profession and also contribute to a lack of morale among the teaching workforce itself: teachers may feel that there is nothing that they can bring to the profession. As one member argued during the October summit: “Too many school systems are designed like factories, where a few people at the top tell the rest what to do.”

Another recommended that: “Ministers should try and raise the social status of teachers in society and also give teachers reasonable freedom and autonomy in the exercise of their duties.”

The Atlantis Group urges ministers to consider the expertise and experience of teachers in building the capacity of the education systems and contributing to

“Most reforms don’t die from lack of money...”

⁶ Global Teacher Status Index, Professor Peter Dolton and Dr. Oscar Marcenaro-Gutierrez and The Varkey Foundation, October 2013



new ideas and policies. Reflecting on the most successful educational systems in the world, the group notes that teachers can also play the roles of researcher, learner, and professional collaborator. If ministers of education build teachers' capacity as leaders, they can radically change their system for the better.

The Atlantis Group believes that ministers of education will be most effective in office when they foster research and innovation at all levels of their system – as well a lifelong learning among teachers. For example, teachers in Finland are part of an education system that is considered one of the best in the world, and they generally continue to study at Master's Degree level or higher even after their employment. As a result, they have a research mindset, and remain learners throughout their career, investing that knowledge into the development of their profession. In China – a heavily-centralized State – the government still allows schools to experiment with policy ideas. Schools are allowed to test out innovations and experiments using government funding. If an idea is successful, it will be scaled up and shared with other schools. The government allows teachers time to pursue leadership responsibilities and work with parents.

The Atlantis Group urges ministers to consider teachers as ambassadors for reform, rather than obstacles to be ignored or overcome. Members note that often teachers

either aren't aware of reforms at the political level, or know what they need to do to implement a policy, but not why. In some countries, teachers have no control whatsoever over education and this can severely damage their morale. One member has noted:

"You can have the best school, the best tools, but if you don't have the commitment of the teachers, if you don't have their mission, their vision, their love of what they are doing, you won't achieve anything."

Foster Accountability

The Atlantis Group believes that an effective way to build a sustainable and successful education system is to allow teachers and schools to learn from their peers. The group has considered many views over how a minister should identify the right balance between vertical accountability and lateral, professional accountability. For instance, some members caution that introducing teacher-based assessment can lead to inflated results. One member, however, argues strongly for it:

"Why? Because the moment teachers have that responsibility, they become quite good at judging students' responses and judging other students' responses. Probably it helped them develop and learn a lot from the process. We do too little of that."

Making schools and teachers more accountable to their peers is not as simple as devolving power, however. It involves being open to the rest of society and reaching beyond the educational community. This kind of change can meet resistance, because it also means that teachers and schools have to be transparent. In Shanghai, teachers use a digital platform to upload their ideas, their lessons plans and projects, as well as model lessons. The platform has a reputational metric, so the more other teachers are downloading lessons, using them and improving them, the more status that teacher receives on the platform. At the end of the school year, they are assessed not only on the performance of students, but on what contributions they made to the platform, and ultimately, to their profession. Reflecting on this, one Atlantis Group member has noted:

“It is very important to instil the idea that the health of the education system is not just the cause of a government, but the cause of teachers, parents, students, local governments and professional organisations. There is so much energy in the system that we typically do not harvest and that we do not build into the system.”

Invest In Systematic Evaluation

The Atlantis Group has argued for ministers of education to inform their decisions with evidence and data (see above, “Respect”). However, the group also accepts that in practice relatively few ministers will have access to good data because so few governments adequately evaluate the impact of their policies. A recent study by the OECD has found, for example, that governments had only evaluated 10% of their education policies.⁷ Reflecting on this, one

member of the Atlantis Group has simply noted: “There is total amnesia in education.”

The ability to identify when a policy is succeeding or failing, and know why it, is a fundamental quality of effective political leadership. To succeed in office, ministers of education must therefore be prepared to invest in effective evaluations of their policies. By contributing to a body of national evidence and data about education policy in their country, ministers will be able to make more effective decisions while in office and will foster a culture of accountability in their country's education system that their successors may build upon. The Atlantis Group has also noted the increasingly important function of international standardised testing in holding failing national systems to account and handing ministers of education with a powerful political mandate for reform.

A fundamental obstacle to the systematic implementation of evaluation is that educational policy is part and parcel of the political cycle, which is much shorter than the cycle of educational reform. Often, complex, sweeping changes to an educational system can take years to establish and years to implement fully. Reflecting on their own experiences while in office, members of the Atlantis Group consider that ministers of education who build the capacity of the system as a whole are more likely to leave a lasting legacy than those who simply consolidate their own political power.

“There is so much energy in the system that we typically do not harvest and that we do not build into the system.”



⁷ Education Policy Outlook 2015: Making Reforms Happen, OECD, January 2015



Conclusion: Political Leadership For The 21st Century

Today too many children are sitting in schools around the world learning virtually nothing. Too many more will never have the chance to enter a classroom.⁸ Generations of children are leaving primary school ill-prepared for a world which is being reshaped by the extraordinary force of globalisation and the power of new technology. Without action most of the 800 million young people who will leave school in 2030 will not have had a basic education, according to the UN special envoy for global education.⁹

The Atlantis Group believes that effective political leadership by ministers of education holds the key to solving the crisis. The group believes that the most successful political leaders are those that manage their office with courage and conviction, inform their decisions with data, and have the humility to listen to teachers as well as the determination to stand up to their heads of government.

With this report, the Atlantis Group offers the experience, expertise and insight of its members to such ministers around the world. The members invite their counterparts in office to consider these broad principles as touchstones for what success looks like in government, based upon their more than 70 years of collected experience in public office at the highest level of State. Finally, the group offers as a fundamental guiding principle for ministers of education the words of British economic historian RH Tawney: “What a wise parent would wish for their children, so the State must wish for all its children.”

“What a wise parent would wish for their children, so the State must wish for all its children.”



⁸ See e.g. Progress towards the SDGs, UNSG.

⁹ ‘Act now,’ or by 2030, millions could be graduating from schools without even basic education, warns UN envoy, UN News Centre, April 2017.

Annex: Members Of The Atlantis Group

Name	Country	Title
Rosalía Arteaga	Ecuador	President and Vice-president of Ecuador [1996-1998]
Elias Bou Saab	Lebanon	Minister of Education and Higher Education [2014-2016]
David Coltart	Zimbabwe	Minister of Education, Sport, Arts and Culture [2009-2013]
Claudia Costin	Brazil	Secretary of Education for Rio de Janeiro [2009-2014]
Nuno Crato	Portugal	Minister of Education and Science, Portugal [2011-2015]
Arne Duncan	USA	Secretary of Education, USA [2009-2015]
Jorge Ferrão	Mozambique	Minister of Education and Human Development, Mozambique [2015-2016]
Luis Garcia de Brigard	Colombia	Deputy Minister of Education of Colombia [2014-2015]
Stefania Giannini	Italy	Minister of Education, Universities and Research, Italy [2014-2016]
Justine Greening	UK	Secretary of State for Education [2016-2018]
Zlatko Lagumdžija	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Chairman of the Council of Ministers [2001-2002]
Ju-Ho Lee	South Korea	Minister of Education, Science and Technology [2010-2013]
Armin Luistro	Philippines	Secretary of the Department of Education [2010-2016]
Silas Lwakabamba	Rwanda	Minister of Education [2014-2015]
Bálint Magyar	Hungary	Minister of Education [1996-1998; 2002-2006]
Steve Maharey	New Zealand	Minister of Education [2005-2007] [Hon. Maharey has also held other ministerial roles relevant to education]
Nicky Morgan	UK	Secretary of State for Education [2014-2016]
George Papandreou	Greece	Prime Minister [2009-2011] Minister of Education and Religious Affairs [1994-1996]
Remus Pricopie	Romania	Minister of Education and Research of Romania [2012-2014]; and State Secretary of Higher Education and Research [2007-2008]
Jo Ritzen	The Netherlands	Minister of Education and Science and of Education, Culture, and Science [1989-1998]
Jaime Saavedra	Peru	Minister of Education [2013-2016]
Maia Sandu	Moldova	Minister of Education [2012-2015]
Najat Vallaud-Belkacem	France	Minister of Education, Higher Education and Research [2014-2017]
Androulla Vassiliou	European Commission	European Commissioner for Education, Culture, Multilingualism and Youth [2010-2014]
Srdjan Verbić	Serbia	Minister of Education, Science and Technological Development [2014-2016]

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