

# Leading and Managing Staff to Raise Educational Achievement in the Northern States

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## Introduction

Education has traditionally been seen as teaching in schools and universities. However, more recently, there has been a recognition that education should continue throughout life and the term “life long learning” is now frequently heard. It must also be acknowledged that work oriented training is an important part of education.

Education is fundamental to sustainable development because without it people will not have the skills to fully contribute to society, including issues such as employment, leisure and culture, and participation in democratic processes that shape local communities.

As early as the fourth century B.C., the philosopher Plato stressed the importance to a just and prosperous society of investing in children from an early age. In *The Republic*, he discusses the type of poetry youth should learn, physical exercise they should undertake and diets they should follow to prevent diseases. He observes “... the first step, as you know, is always what matters most, particularly when we are dealing with those who are young and tender. That is the time when they are taking shape and when any impression we choose to make leaves a permanent mark.”

Several millennia later, numerous scientific studies confirm Plato’s suppositions about the importance of investing in our children. In many countries, particularly the United States, research on early high-quality children’s education programs shows gains that may last into adulthood, including higher earnings, lower unemployment rates, and lower crime rates.

This situation, however, is far from the case in Nigerian education. Indeed, the Northern Nigerian education system is in serious trouble, and has been for many years. Government at all levels, business groups, and others have documented low educational performance relative to other regions in the country, declining university admission rates, weak educational preparation of teachers, substantial numbers of adults without modern literacy skills to read a ballot, and inefficiencies in school management.

There has never been a concerted effort to determine what led to the present circumstances, nor the solution to this decay. The reasons for decay themselves are not too far fetched or hard to find. Nigerian educational system, despite serving a variegated Nigerian populace, does not understand, appreciate or allow for individual interpretations of the functions of education in the society. Indeed, the educational system was not created to serve the individual or to make the individual a useful members of the society, but was created as a manpower factor to serve the interests of

the State. This is evidenced by the fact that no component of the educational system attempts to incorporate the mindsets and world views of learning of the various communities, nor attempt to legitimize non-standard educational structures and provisions into the mainstream. The end product, especially in Northern Nigerian states is series of massive failures in the outcomes of the education system itself. The move forward and provide effective leadership in raising educational awareness in the Northern States of Nigeria, therefore calls for radical set of educational reforms that while acknowledging the Federal right to making provisions for education, yet provides individual communities with unique mechanisms for interpreting the role of education in the lives of individuals according to their unique circumstances.

### **Innovative Approaches to Raising Educational Achievements**

Providing effective leadership to raise educational achievements in the Northern states requires a radical departure from our conception of the normal. It requires a complete re-negotiation of the functions and values of education, and must provide education with a wider meaning than merely a manpower manufacturing factory aimed at the bureaucratic machinery.

There are a series of benchmarks that must be clearly defined before the issue of raising the educational achievements of children in this part of the country could be properly contextualized. These include:

- ***High standards for all children.***—This is the essential starting point for improving student and school performance. The provision of the National Policy on Education, particularly those for at-risk children (e.g. girls and indigent street-children) have generated low expectations for students, focusing instruction on low-level basic skills (e.g. the ill-fated technical education components). To move forward, schools and their corresponding communities should set challenging performance standards for all students, including those at most risk of failure, and design curricula based on those standards that fit into the community mindsets.
- ***Focus on teaching and learning.***—Opportunities for professional development of teachers and other school staff have been haphazard, short-term and ineffective. Clearly there has to be quality pre-service and in-service training and education for teachers and administrators. These would be tied to the high standards. A system of regional technical assistance centers would coordinate Federal programs and would assist States and communities implementing educational improvements. A new education technology program would support innovation to raise educational achievement for all students.
- **Flexibility to stimulate local initiative, coupled with responsibility for improved student performance.**—Flexibility and responsibility would replace compliance with administrative process. This flexibility would give schools and communities greater flexibility by simplifying the law and providing a broad waiver authority to remove Federal obstacles to State and community success imposed by blind adherence to the provisions of the National Policy on Education. More States with the highest concentrations of children who do not attend schools could use Federal funds to raise educational improvement throughout their whole schools.

- Link schools, parents, and communities.—Schools alone, particularly in highly rural communities, cannot ensure that all students reach high standards. A new strategy will encourage and enable parents to work in partnership with teachers and administrators to improve learning, and help schools forge strong ties with community social services. Parents would be encouraged to help their children do well in school.
- Resources targeted to greatest needs and in amounts sufficient to make a difference.—Federal resources are currently spread too thinly across too many schools, despite the allocation formula. Academic performance tends to be lowest in schools with high concentrations of rural children. In a new reform strategy, funds would be better targeted to the poor children in the schools and school districts serving areas with the highest concentrations of poverty and rural deprivation.

Thus the most viable option is a radical school reform which has to move more rapidly and more consistently in all the local governments and schools of the North in order to achieve dramatic improvement in educational achievement. Educators, business leaders, and parents are beginning to learn what works; these findings must now be used to improve schools in much larger numbers and in approaches designed by each community to meet its needs.

Such radical approaches, of course, require funding for sustainability, and it is one area where NERP could play a leading role in mobilizing the creation of a special task force fund that will ensure sustainability of any reform efforts. What I hope to do in this position paper is to provide specific pathways that I feel could form the bases for creating a discussion document that could provide a road-map to the reform strategies needed to raise educational achievements of the Northern States.

What is encouraging is that increasingly, and from the various results of field work carried out on the behalf of development agencies such as The World Bank, USAID, Unicef and UNDP in the last five years, Northern Nigerians assign unprecedented importance to the task of reforming public education so that all children are prepared for higher education, for the workplace, for participation in the nation's civic life, and for lifelong learning to keep up with the rapid pace of change in the 21st century. These are supported by innovative strategies ranging from building schools to building school-attractive components such as school uniforms, water wells, and craft-learning facilities. Thus the *enabling environment* already exists for radical reforms in lifelong education. The key to the success is to renegotiate the meaning of education to extend to lifelong process, rather than an adjunct to bureaucracy.

Thus at the *pre-primary and primary level*, we will need to consider strategies that would raise educational achievement in the following actions:

1. Provide free early years education places in the voluntary, private and maintained sector for all 3 year olds. This will include a considerable focus on Early Childhood Education initiatives such as Qur'anic Schools.
2. Give support to deliver a high quality curriculum which will provide a solid foundation on which children can scaffold their learning in future years;

3. Prioritize the personal, social and emotional well being aspect of development;
4. Prioritize leadership and management at all levels for those working with 3-12 year olds;
5. Offer high quality training to all who work with very young children including Qur'anic school teachers and their assistants
6. Promote pupil observation and reflection time for staff as a requisite for effective early years learning;
7. Achieve quality across all provision for 0-5s through a radically re-engineered educational and curricular provisions
8. Utilize fully the technology available to enhance children's learning and understanding of the world around them;
9. Encourage all practitioners to improve practice and learning environments and work towards a Quality Assurance Award;
10. Prepare teachers to devise an effective system for the collection and interpretation of data for formative and summative assessments at all levels;
11. Work with early years practitioners to develop effective working relationships with parents/carers;

At the secondary level, we may wish to consider the following activities in order to raise educational achievements in the region.

1. Raise standards in literacy, numeracy and ICT by building and developing capacity to sustain the literacy, numeracy and ICT national strategies. ICT has to enter the equation in any future reform because of its stealthy manner it is encroaching into our lives;
2. Demonstrate high expectations in the management and delivery of the curriculum for all as outlined by the National Policy on Education;
3. Ensure the head teacher is pivotal in the leadership of any educational reform effort;
4. Ensure effective monitoring and evaluation of standards and quality at school and LGA level;
5. Maximize the use of new technologies to support learning and school management to reduce the administrative burden;
6. Develop the role of PTA in shaping the direction of the school through training and advice;
7. Focus lesson observations on the subject content as well as the quality of teaching;
8. Maintain high expectations of pupils' achievement across a curriculum that is broad, balanced and relevant to the ages, needs and futures of pupils, laying foundations for life long learning;
9. Create a climate for learning that promotes positive attitudes and behavior;
10. Ensure effective teaching of the curriculum, which plans from the needs and maturity of the pupils and takes account of research into learning;
11. Offer teaching which is attuned to pupils' learning styles, revisits learning and assesses progress formatively;
12. Improve assessment procedures for monitoring and supporting pupils' attainment and progress;

13. Ensure training is focused on planning, assessment and use of support staff within the context of literacy, numeracy and ICT;
14. Maximize the use of all adults as the most vital resource for learning including parents;
15. Ensure the early identification, assessment and support for all pupils deemed to be at risk (e.g. girls and indigent street-children) and therefore unable to maximize their educational opportunities;
16. Ensure a continuum of intervention with all providers (including NGOs and development partners) and institutions working together for children to improve achievement;
17. Enable school based staff to utilize and evaluate ICT across the curriculum and promote its use to improve planning, management, organization and delivery.

It is clear that these broad intentions needed to be backed by a founding philosophy that would provide an effective framework for their realization. This founding philosophy would therefore serve as the emerging points for priorities of action that would include:

- developing more, and better, first steps back into learning for reluctant or unconfident learners;
- bridging some of the gaps identified as presenting barriers to those wishing to enter or progress in the labor market, particularly with respect to young people;
- using role models from a wide range of communities to motivate and support their peers;
- progressing real collaborative planning and delivery between providers, and
- providing consistency of quality across all providers by setting standards, and sharing specialist expertise and assessment procedures.

### **What Children Deserve**

As the future leaders of any society, children deserve a series of expectations that would help to articulate any reform strategy aimed at raising their educational achievements. These expectations can be briefly considered as follows:

#### ***Every child deserves to be surrounded by a culture of high expectations:***

All students need to be surrounded by adults who have high expectations. However, this is often not the case in today's schools and communities. Many students attend school in an environment in which no adults believe in them or expect much from them. Often, educators and community members reserve their high expectations for only those students who come to school eager and ready to learn, and possess low expectations of those who sit in the back of the room, disengaged, with their homework never complete. Others have lower expectations of low-income, rural, and/or minority students (for instance, girls). This foundational belief invites educators and community members to have high expectations of all students.

***Every child deserves a rich array of options for the future:***

All students need to be aware of all career opportunities and educational options. This allows students, with guidance from their parents, to make informed and meaningful decisions about their futures. Unfortunately in many schools, various opportunities are often not communicated to all students. For example, in some primary schools, only the brightest students are told about enrichment opportunities. In some secondary schools, only the best students are told about the most competitive universities while only the weakest students are told about apprenticeship programs. This foundational belief invites schools to inform all students about all opportunities so they can make informed decisions about their futures.

***Every child deserves rich educational and career guidance in order to define the pathways to the future options he or she chooses:***

Every student deserves educational and career guidance in three areas: academic development, career development, and personal-social development. However, in reality, three groups of students tend to receive better guidance services than others:

- Bright students who tend to self-refer to the school counselor,
- students with behavior problems who are referred to the counselor by teachers and parents who hope the counselor will fix the students, and
- students enrolled in special education who receive educational and career guidance as part of their educational offerings.

This foundational belief invites schools to establish a guidance system that reaches all students.

***Every child deserves a rigorous curriculum and rich teaching within a supportive environment to realize the options and pathways developed through the guidance process:***

All students deserve the opportunity to master a curriculum that will enable them to experience success at the next educational level and eventually, success as a citizen and competitive worker within a global economy. As the world becomes more technical, even students not going to universities will need to master educational content formerly reserved for the “university-bound.” Yet, many schools do not provide all students with a rigorous curriculum. For example, some primary schools place pupils in lower level reading groups instead of providing adequate support to enable all students to master rigorous reading content. Secondary schools often place students in watered down general math classes instead of requiring all students to take algebra and other upper level math courses with adequate support initiatives. This foundational belief invites schools to enroll all students in a rigorous curriculum with sufficient support structures to enable all students to be successful.

Thus the strategy for school improvement in Northern Nigerian education system should be based on

- raising aspirations;
- raising standards continually and a commitment to zero tolerance of under performance;
- self-managing schools with a high level of budget delegation;

- working relationships with schools based on the principle of intervention in inverse proportion to success;
- disseminating good practice;
- applying principles of Best Value; and
- reducing bureaucracy.

### **The *Vision-To-Action* Change Process**

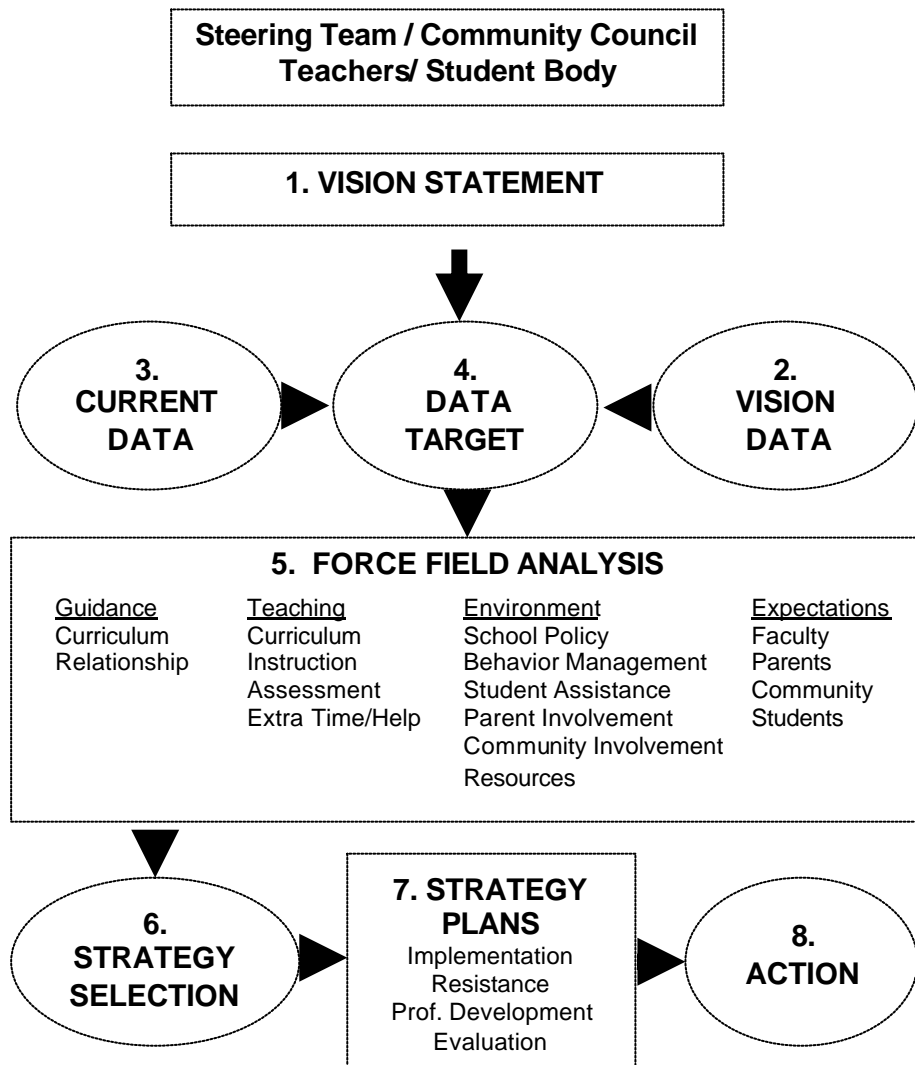
To achieve this, I would want to propose what I call Vision-to-Action Reform Strategy.

The *Vision-to-Action* systemic change process brings about whole-school reform, including the transformation of student guidance, teaching, and the learning environment. The process is vision-based, data-driven (using disaggregated data), and includes a local analysis of sixteen force fields that influence achievement. High-leverage strategies are implemented within targeted force fields. Each strategy is supported by a strategy plan, resistance plan, professional development plan, and evaluation plan. The schematic flow-chart of the plan is given in the next page.

### **Premise**

The *Vision-to-Action* systemic change process does *not* prescribe core values, one-size-fits-all strategies, or best practices to which schools must adhere. Instead, the *Vision-to-Action* process helps teachers, counselors, administrators, parents, businesses and community members create their local convictions, vision, and the initiatives that are “right” for their school, their teachers, their students, and their community. *Vision-to-Action* is also *not* a top-down approach to educational reform. Instead, *a small school-community team facilitates* change activities in which all members and representatives from all community stakeholder groups participate. The activities help the school and community discover the initiatives that make the most sense for their local situation. In this way, the initiatives that emerge from the process truly reflect the perspectives of the local practitioners and community.

## VISION-TO-ACTION SYSTEMIC CHANGE MODEL





## **Organizational Structure**

### **Steering Team:**

The organizational structure proposed encourages every teacher, student, and community member to become involved in the change process. Each participating school establishes a Steering Team consisting of six members (counselor, administrator, two teachers, a business representative, and a parent). Team members are selected to ensure that at least one team member exhibits each of the following leadership qualities: 1) credibility, 2) natural leadership, 3) technical competence, 4) authority, and 5) ability to allocate resources. Team members also have a demonstrated history of being successful change-makers within their community.

The role of the Steering Team is *not* to make decisions. Indeed, the Steering Team has no power. Rather, the team simply facilitates the *Vision-to-Action* change process within the entire faculty, student body and community. Each member of the Steering Team is responsible for certain activities conducted by the team. A “point person” is designated for: 1) working with the faculty, 2) working with the community, 3) working with the student body, 4) working with achievement data, 5) working with the force field, 6) establishing a guidance system. The only stipulation given for the assignment of Steering Team members is that the Data Point Person must be a school employee since this person has access to confidential student data.

The Steering Team attends training sessions every six weeks at a local educational facility, such as a the Department of Education in a nearby university, or a College of Education.

At each session, team members learn about systemic change, raising expectations, and meeting resistance. Team members become familiar with a few steps of the *Vision-to-Action* change process and practice the steps before returning to their school-community. Each school-community is supported by a planning grant which most schools use to purchase time. This planning grant is to be sourced from a fund-raising initiative of the *Northern Education Research Project* (NERP) as indicated earlier.

During the Implementation Phase (years two and three), teams implement their strategy plans, revising as warranted. Teams are supported by an annual site visit by the Board of Trustees of the program.

### **Community Advisory Council:**

In order to provide diverse perspectives for the reform process, the steering team establishes a *Community Advisory Council* whose members represent parents of various student populations, community stakeholder groups, and local businesses. Depending on the community, the Advisory Council may be as large as thirty people. The Council provides important input into the change process and acts as communication network among the school, Steering Team and community. Input from the Community Advisory Council enables the change initiative to reflect community stakeholder perspectives.

### **Full Teacher Participation:**

The entire teachers and school support staff participate in activities facilitated by the Steering Team to ensure that every teacher has a voice in the change process. This provides a variety of perspectives and creates a “grass roots” movement, rather than a “top-down” directive, which results in increased ownership in the change process and its resulting initiatives. It also creates a work environment in which “everyone knows everything.” There is no hierarchy of power created by differing knowledge bases. Input from the teachers enables the change initiative to reflect the perspectives of all academic members and support staff members.

### **Student Body**

All students occasionally participate in all activities, especially Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) to gather student input or reflection concerning an issue. During the FGDs each classroom appoints a facilitator and a recorder. In upper classes of primary schools, junior secondary schools, senior secondary schools, these roles are filled by students while in the primary school, adults assume these responsibilities. The students, led by the facilitator, discuss inquiry questions important to the change process. For example, when developing the vision statement, students are asked, “What would make it easier for students to learn?”

### ***Visioning***

The teachers, Community Council, and Student Body work together to develop a lofty vision for student success. The vision answers four questions:

- 1) What are our core convictions for all students?
- 2) If the teachers and community members were living by these core convictions, what would be their attitudes and behaviors?
- 3) In an environment in which the adults are living by these convictions, what would be the student’s attitudes and behaviors?
- 4) In an environment in which the adults are living by their convictions, what would be the school’s achievement data?

Vision-based reform encourages schools to define the ideal and then implement strategies to bring students closer to the ideal. The vision creates excitement and energy as stakeholders align school and community initiatives toward a common focus.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Once the vision data is established in the Vision Statement, the Steering Team completes the *Student Achievement Self Study*. Achievement data is disaggregated by gender, ethnicity, economic status, and in the secondary schools, curriculum pathways. This study helps the schools to display key achievement data in a user-friendly format. The data is shared with the teachers, Community Council and Students with the following inquiry questions:

- 1) What about the data pleases you?
- 2) What about the data surprises you?
- 3) What about the data disturbs you?
- 4) What achievement gaps exist between all students and the vision? Between subgroups of students?

**Data Target**

After analyzing the current data, the Steering Team works with the teachers, Community Council and Student Body to identify the *one* data field in which the school and community would like to see improvement. They then identify a data target that represents a realistic step toward the vision data which can be met within a certain period of time. The data target identifies the group of students who will change, defines a standard for educational achievement, and states the percentage of students who will reach that standard by a given date. Schools are encouraged to identify only one data target. This focuses everyone’s energy and helps the faculty and community not feel overwhelmed by the initiative. In most cases, additional data fields will be impacted since many strategies will have a broad impact, influencing more than one data field.

**Force Field Analysis**

Once the Data Target is established, the Steering Team conducts sixteen force field analyses to identify the key forces that interfere with student achievement in that data field. Each force field analysis includes:

- 1) a survey of students’, teachers’, and community members’ perceptions,
- 2) data related to the force field, and
- 3) discussion summaries resulting from inquiry questions.

The sixteen force fields include:

<b>Guidance</b>	<b>Teaching</b>	<b>Environment</b>	<b>Expectations</b>
Curriculum	Curriculum Content	School Policy	Teachers
Relationship	Instruction	Behavior Management	Parents
	Assessment	Student Assistance	Community
	Extra Time / Help	Parent Involvement	Students
		Community Involvement	
		Resources	

**Strategy Plans**

After the key force fields are identified, schools search for strategies to impact those force fields. A collection of strategies organized by force fields then helps teams conduct strategy research. The teams also conduct site visits to schools implementing strategies related to the key force fields they identified. After the strategies are identified, teams develop a plan for each strategy including an implementation component, resistance component, professional development component, and evaluation component. Although this work is time consuming, it provides a sound foundation for successful implementation of the strategies. The strategy evaluation plan is helpful later, should the achievement data not show improvement.

**Conclusions**

The vision-to-action strategy advocated in this position paper is not intended to be a perfect roadmap to the raising of educational achievement of children in the Northern States. Rather, it is intended to be a discussion document that would provide a basis for more inputs into the process from many perspectives so that at the end a concrete resolution is taken. It is clear, therefore, that a reform not only in educational structures, but in educational conceptualization is radically needed to move the region forward. This might be the beginning of an end.