

**School leaders play a key role in achieving more inclusive education systems and strongly influence learner outcomes.**

These factors have led to a greater focus on the topic of school leadership in recent years. As the school leadership profile and the complexity of linked tasks have increased, so has recognition of the need for support.

The European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (the Agency) developed a project to inform wider discussions about school leadership across stakeholder groups in policy and practice. Supporting Inclusive School Leadership (SISL) investigated how to effectively develop and promote inclusive school-level leadership through national- and local-level policy frameworks and support mechanisms.

The following SISL outputs are available:

- A **review of international and European policy documents and guidance.**
- A **review of international and European literature** (post-2012) to agree operational definitions of key terms and identify key concepts underpinning policy and practice for inclusive school leadership.
- A **Country Survey** to analyse the extent to which different country policies support inclusive school leadership practice.
- A **Policy Framework** designed to support the development and review of policy for inclusive school leadership.
- A **Self-Reflection Tool** based on the Policy Framework, to guide joint discussions of stakeholders. It includes guidance for implementing and adapting the tool to existing country contexts.

This summary of key policy messages presents an overview of the main findings from these project outputs.

## PREMISES FOR INCLUSIVE SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

Inclusive education is understood in its widest sense. Its goal is to enable participation, raise achievement, support well-being and create a sense of belonging for **all** learners, including those most vulnerable to exclusion. This understanding is aligned with the Agency position on inclusive education systems.

**School leadership can be performed by one leader or, to be effective, by a collaborative leadership team or distributed among several key actors within or linked to a school.**

Leadership is considered an organisational function that is shared or distributed among many persons. A legal view of leadership may assume a single leader. However, a research-based approach presupposes leadership as a collective phenomenon.

There is a distinction between **school leadership** in general and **inclusive school leadership**.

**‘School leader’** refers to all those in key leadership roles in schools and learning communities. **‘Inclusive school leader’** can refer to both those in formal leadership positions and those within schools who show leadership in their practice.

**Inclusive school leadership is specifically dedicated to addressing inequity to build community and the full participation of all learners.**

Likewise, inclusive school leadership is understood in the widest sense and goes beyond mere organisation. It focuses on developing an inclusive culture where all stakeholders are supported to work together, value diversity and ensure that **all** learners, including those most vulnerable to exclusion, receive a high-quality education.

**Every school leader should aim to be an inclusive school leader and practise school leadership that promotes inclusion, even if school leadership takes place in different school contexts that are developing inclusive cultures and practices in varying ways.**

## UNDERSTANDING INCLUSIVE SCHOOL LEADERSHIP



Different leadership models and policy levers are relevant for inclusive school leadership. These include the core functions and roles and responsibilities of inclusive school leadership, as well as key policy levers that support school leaders to fulfil them.

### Core functions of inclusive school leadership

School leaders must be enabled to develop the wider range of competences required in today’s diverse schools. They can no longer work alone and should involve others by sharing and distributing leadership tasks and working with a range of partners in the community and beyond. Their potential role as change managers in wider system reform should be clearly acknowledged.

Research has identified three main leadership functions that must be performed for inclusive schools to run effectively. These are setting direction, organisational development and human development.

- **Setting direction:** Leadership is important for giving strategic direction, with a focus on the values underscoring inclusive practice and on the discourse that supports inclusive practice.

- **Organisational development:** Leaders and leadership teams are responsible for maintaining a school culture that is collegial, interactive and focused on supporting teachers and learners throughout the educational process. Fulfilling these functions enables school leaders to create an inclusive school culture with a focus on the learning environment, where every learner is a valuable participant expected to achieve through quality education.
- **Human development:** Leadership is one of the main drivers of teaching quality, which is the most important school-level influence on learner achievement. Supporting, monitoring and evaluating teaching practice is at the centre of this strategic role.

Fulfilling these functions supports leaders to develop a more inclusive learning environment. In addition to fulfilling these functions, **inclusive school leadership** must address inequity to build community and the full participation of all learners. Therefore, **inclusive school leaders** have the **vision** that ‘all learners of any age’ should receive ‘meaningful, high-quality’ education ‘in their local community, alongside their friends and peers’.<sup>1</sup>

### Roles and responsibilities of inclusive school leadership within education systems

Inclusive school leaders need to fulfil certain roles and responsibilities to perform the above-mentioned core functions. They are responsible for transforming policy and legislation into improved inclusive education practice, shaping policies that are relevant for their school environment and for stakeholders.

To do this, they must fulfil their roles and responsibilities across the individual learner, school, community and national/regional levels within the education system.

## INDIVIDUAL LEVEL



- Influence learner-centred practice/listening to learners, personalisation (centre)
- Ensure that teachers take responsibility for all learners
- Support innovative and flexible evidence-based pedagogy/practice in classrooms
- Monitor classroom practice assuring high-quality education for all
- Develop a culture of collaboration – positive and trusting relationships
- Use data as a basis for teacher reflection and on-going improvement

## SCHOOL LEVEL



- Guide and influence school organisation and resources according to principles of equity
- Engage the learning community in self-review and reflect on data to inform on-going school improvement
- Provide professional development opportunities
- Ensure a continuum of support for all stakeholders
- Commit to the ethic of everybody
- Ensure curriculum and assessment are fit for purpose and meet the needs of all learners
- Actively engage all families

<sup>1</sup> European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2015. *Agency Position on Inclusive Education Systems*. Odense, Denmark. [www.european-agency.org/resources/publications/agency-position-inclusive-education-systems-flyer](http://www.european-agency.org/resources/publications/agency-position-inclusive-education-systems-flyer), p. 1

## COMMUNITY LEVEL



- Build partnerships with support agencies, other schools/institutions at other system levels, and businesses in the community
- Build school capacity for diversity through research engagement and collaborative professional development activities, e.g. with universities
- Manage human resources, securing commitment to the shared vision of inclusion
- Manage financial resources to meet the needs of the whole school community

## NATIONAL/REGIONAL LEVEL



- Influence the development of national policy on equity and inclusive education through consultation and communication
- Translate and implement policies in ways appropriate to their school context and values and manage school-level change regarding curriculum and assessment frameworks, professional development, funding and resource allocation, and quality analysis and accountability

Figure 1. Roles and responsibilities of school leadership across different levels within education

The roles and responsibilities for inclusive school leadership are not independent of the policies that affect it. **Supportive policy measures** should enable individual school leaders or leadership teams to work towards their vision.

### Key policy levers to support inclusive school leadership

**Supportive policy measures for inclusive school leadership exist within a regulatory framework that universally defines inclusive education and determines which resources are available, which decisions can be made and what leaders are held responsible for.**

General frameworks for school leadership and school leaders exist, but they largely lack the dimension of **inclusive** school leadership.

To support inclusive school leaders to fulfil the above-mentioned roles and core functions, policies for school leadership should provide three key policy levers: access, autonomy and accountability. These influence how school leaders are enabled to perform their roles and fulfil their responsibilities. They can determine a school leader's effectiveness in creating and leading an inclusive school.

Specifically, school leaders need **access** to:

- support, both from formal development opportunities and from greater collaboration with colleagues and other stakeholders at all system levels;
- resources to develop the workforce's capacity through training, teamwork and knowledge exchange.

School leaders need **autonomy** to make evidence-informed decisions on the school's strategic direction, development and organisation. These may include decisions on:

- adapting the curriculum, assessment and accreditation frameworks to ensure they establish high expectations and meet local community and learner needs;
- the appointment and development of teachers and staff;
- pro-active work with other agencies and the local community;
- funding and equitable resource allocation.

Regarding **accountability**, school leaders must:

- be able to set out the vision, values and outcomes for which they (and other stakeholders) wish to be held to account (e.g. equity, non-discrimination and meeting all learners' personal, social and academic requirements);
- be held accountable (to learners, families, local community) through mechanisms that are aligned with other policy areas, ensuring support for inclusive education policy and practice;
- play a lead role in monitoring, self-review and evaluation, together with key stakeholders, to provide information on learner outcomes and reflect on data to inform on-going improvement.

The analysis of European and international literature and policy revealed that the focus of accountability measures is not always in line with the level of access to resources, support and professional development and the degree of autonomy school leaders have when fulfilling their core functions of setting direction, organisational development and human development.

## DEVELOPING AND SUPPORTING INCLUSIVE APPROACHES



Finding the balance between what **standards** school leaders are held accountable for and the **policy support** offered to achieve these was the core interest when developing the Policy Framework and especially the Self-Reflection Tool.

**It is essential that policies support the development and implementation of effective and inclusive school leadership that can enhance equity, equality and well-being in education. To achieve this, it is necessary to identify the gaps between the standards school leaders are held accountable for and the supportive policy measures available to them.**

### Developing policy frameworks to support inclusive school leadership

The Policy Framework helps countries to support school leadership to work towards enabling all learners' full participation, raising their achievement and supporting their well-being and sense of belonging. This is in line with the Agency's and its member countries' efforts to promote long-term inclusion in wider society.

The Policy Framework can be used in collaboration, exchange or decision-making. The aim may be to guide a more detailed set of policies, on-going maintenance or monitoring, or to further develop existing policies to achieve the wider goal of inclusive education.

The Policy Framework can:

- **Contribute to and offer a basis for developing new policies:** It offers a blueprint of key elements to include in policy focused on supporting inclusive school leadership or to address school leadership's role in wider inclusive education policy frameworks.
- **Support the review and further development of existing policies and policy frameworks:** The Policy Framework recognises that support for inclusive school leadership may exist as an individual policy or may be cross-sectoral in different policies and at different policy levels. Where policy for inclusive school leadership or school leadership in general exists, the Policy Framework can help to:
  - review and improve existing policy that supports inclusive school leadership;
  - develop existing general school leadership policy to ensure an inclusive approach.
- **Spark self-reflection (especially on the concept of inclusive school leadership, school leaders' roles in inclusive education, and leadership training):** Independent of developing or reviewing policies, the Policy Framework's key elements offer a framework for discussion and self-reflection on the practice of inclusive school leadership and school leaders' roles.

The Policy Framework includes:

- A wider **policy mandate** to contextualise policy focusing on and affecting school leadership. The mandate refers to several international and European-level guiding principle documents. It can be expanded by policies and legislation that provide the country's unique context, history and development path.
- A **policy vision** that outlines the ideal that the policy focuses on achieving.
- **Guiding principles** that underpin strategy or frameworks for supporting inclusive school leadership. Policy to support inclusive school leadership may not be a standalone document but interwoven into many others. In many country contexts, the goals, objectives and strategies are embedded in other educational policies and actions.
- A **policy goal** that provides a target to be reached through work within the inclusive education system.
- **Policy objectives** that should specifically be achieved.
- A **framework of standards**, which are statements of aspirations for school leadership to achieve.
- **Policy measures** that support the achievement of these standards.

**The vision of a policy framework to support inclusive school leadership is that existing and developing policy supports school leadership to build a culture and implement practice in which all learners are provided with meaningful, high-quality education, high expectations for their achievement, well-being and a sense of belonging within an equitable school environment.**

The Policy Framework respects country differences. It is an open-source tool, which each country is free to adapt to its respective context.

### **Supporting self-reflection and structured dialogue to bridge gaps between policy and practice**

School leadership practice is not independent of the policies that affect it. The Policy Framework therefore presents in detail the proposed **standards** required for school leadership to be inclusive and the supportive **policy measures** needed to achieve these standards.

To bridge the gap between policy expectations on school leaders and school leaders' need for support, the Self-Reflection Tool builds on the Policy Framework's standards and policy measures. Through guided and focused reflection, it stimulates professional dialogue and collaborative policy development within and across schools and at different policy levels.

The Self-Reflection Tool is for:

- school leaders and leadership teams seeking guidance in adopting and developing inclusive leadership practices;
- policy-makers responsible for developing and implementing policies for inclusive education at national, regional and/or local levels.

It can be used at all policy levels, from national to local governance.

The tool helps school leaders and leadership teams – and policy-makers – to assess where they are on the journey to inclusive school leadership. It offers three options for self-reflection:

1. **Reflection for school leaders** on how to develop inclusive practice to achieve inclusive education. This may focus on a certain role or aspect within the leadership function framing the tool.
2. **Reflection for policy-makers** on the policy measures needed to support inclusive school leaders in their practice.
3. **Joint reflection and dialogue of school leaders and policy-makers** on key issues in each area that need to be addressed.

Guiding questions lead stakeholders through reflections at both practice and policy level to answer the following:

- Where are we now?



- What are our main strengths, challenges and opportunities for further development?
- What are our priority areas to address?

**Jointly**, school leaders and policy-makers in focus groups can use the guiding questions to discuss what actions need to be taken after identifying priorities.

The Self-Reflection Tool recognises the differing policy and practice contexts across countries and the time constraints on experts in the field of education. Therefore, it is adaptable. As joint dialogue is the goal, ideally, all three options for self-reflection should be used. However, the first two options can be used independently or, with a focus on one of the core functions, as a basis for joint dialogue across levels working with specific stakeholders. The document includes guidance on using and adapting the tool to different country contexts.

**Through a guided reflection and a structured dialogue on the existence and efficiency of policy measures aimed at supporting school leadership, policy-makers can gain an insight into areas that need to be addressed. Being aware of the gaps between policy and practice can help to find a balance between what school leaders are held accountable for with the resources they have access to and their autonomy for decision-making within their schools.**

The added value is that the structured dialogue brings new opportunities for exchange and collaboration among different stakeholder groups across all policy levels.

## FINAL REMARKS

The Agency aims to be an active agent for policy change. All its work focuses on supporting its member countries' efforts to achieve the vision of inclusive education systems. The Agency's **Multi-Annual Work Programme 2021–2027** recognises this. It states that the Agency will 'aim to support policy-makers' efforts to translate identified policy priorities for high-quality inclusive education for all learners into practical actions for implementation'.<sup>2</sup>

One element of this is a supported dialogue between policy and practice. In the area of school leadership, the SISL project outputs have the potential to contribute to bridging the gap between policy expectations on school leaders and school leaders' need for support.

All the outputs are free or open-source materials. They were developed through a participatory approach by, with and for countries. This ensures that they are usable, adaptable and respect countries' respective journeys towards more inclusive education systems.

More information and all the SISL project outputs are available on the SISL webpage:  
**[www.european-agency.org/projects/SISL](http://www.european-agency.org/projects/SISL)**

<sup>2</sup> European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2021. *Multi-Annual Work Programme 2021–2027*. Odense, Denmark. [www.european-agency.org/resources/publications/multi-annual-work-programme-2021-2027](http://www.european-agency.org/resources/publications/multi-annual-work-programme-2021-2027), p. 5