

# Vietnam's Education System: How Coherent Is It for Learning?

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## Abstract

The disappointing performance of education systems in developing countries in improving learning outcomes has spurred research aimed at establishing what features of education systems determine their effectiveness or failure in improving learning outcomes. There has been special interest in the challenge of making education systems more coherent for learning, i.e., developing systems in which accountability relations among stakeholders across key elements of education policy design support and sustain strong learning outcomes. In the emergent literature on the political economy of education, a great deal of attention has been directed at Vietnam, a lower-middle income country whose results on assessments of learning have been vastly higher than all other countries in its income group and have even surpassed learning assessment results of many OECD countries. This has led to a raft of research papers asking, “how did Vietnam do it?” Addressing this question, this paper explores Vietnam’s education system’s coherence for learning through an analysis of accountability relations across three key elements of education policy design — delegation, finance, and information. Our aim is to ascertain how features of these policy elements’ practice may variously support or undermine the Communist Party of Vietnam’s objective of promoting quality education and improved learning outcomes for all. The potentially surprising answer to the “how coherent” question posed in the title is, not really that much. Analysis finds that Vietnam’s education system remains weakly “coherent around learning” and is best understood as a “formal process compliant” system that, despite its many strengths, is nonetheless underperforming relative to its potential. The implications of this for efforts to enhance the system’s performance around learning are explored in brief.

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The disappointing performance of education systems in middle- and low-income countries in improving learning outcomes has spurred research aimed at establishing what features of education systems or even specific reforms determine their effectiveness or failure at improving learning outcomes. There has been special interest in the challenge of making education systems *coherent for learning*, i.e., developing systems in which accountability relations among stakeholders across key elements of education policy design support and sustain strong learning outcomes (Pritchett 2015, Kaffenberger and Spivack 2022).

A vitally important and empirically demonstrated aspect the concept of “system coherence for learning” is that it may be achieved via *an array of different system arrangements* in different contexts (Pritchett 2013). Globally, the quest for coherence *does not* concern the identification, implementation, and replication of a specific formal model of “tightly coupling” technical elements of policy with authority (Weick 1976), which would invite a kind of institutional isomorphism. On the contrary, different arrangements are capable of being "coherent" (or incoherent) in specific contexts depending on context-specific features of education systems’ public governance as Levy (Levy et al. 2018), among others, has persuasively demonstrated. This, in turn, suggests that the challenge of enhancing a system’s coherence lies in creating systems that produce at least adequate and (hopefully) ever more adequate teaching and learning practices for most students in a specific setting. Rather than seeking to identify “the one best system” (c.f. Tyack 1974), but without discounting that system features can be decisive, the challenge for researchers becomes one of understanding the conditions under which system coherence for learning obtain or fails to obtain in specific contexts, specific education systems, and their specific social environments.

In scholarly and policy literature on comparative education and development, a great deal of attention has been directed at Vietnam, a lower-middle income country where assessments of learning exceed all countries in its income group and even surpass learning

assessment results of many OECD countries (Dang and Glewwe 2018). Vietnam's strong performance at low levels of income have raised questions about what features of Vietnam and the governance of its education system accounts for these results and what, if anything, can be learned from Vietnam's experiences improve system performance in Vietnam and in other settings. Recent research has identified sources of system coherence for learning in Vietnam's in the fields of politics and civic engagement, where the political commitment to education of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) together within an unusually highly engaged public bring performance-eliciting pressure to bear on the education system, schools, and teachers in ways absent in most other countries (London 2021). In addition to noting the CPV's historic commitment to education, other analyses have credited consistent government and donor support for improvements in Vietnam's education system, the high degree of professionalism in Vietnam's teaching corps (McAleavy et al 2018), an expanding economy that rewards investments in education and learning (Phan and Coxhead 2022, Dapice 2022), and cultural reverence for educational pursuits. In many respects, Vietnam does appear to be a country and a society that is unusually committed to the expansion of education and learning.

International praise for Vietnam's performance in education and learning sits in tension with domestic policy discourse that more readily emphasizes the education system's ineffectiveness (e.g., Anh et al 2021). Addressing these concerns, in this paper, we examine the question of Vietnam's education system's coherence for learning through an analysis of accountability relations across three key elements of education policy design — *delegation*, *finance*, and *information*. Our aim is to establish how features of these policy elements variously support or undermine the CPV's objectives of promoting quality education for all.

The discussion is organized as follows. The first section specifies the notion of system coherence for learning and extends it to Vietnam, highlighting distinctive features of the

country's education system over the last three decades. Given our interest in delegation, finance, and information, we take a special interest in Vietnam's movement toward administrative and fiscal decentralization and the promises and perils this has posed for the achievement of national policy goals. The second section describes the methods and reports findings of original qualitative research conducted by the authors in Vietnam between 2018 and 2022. The research explored links among formal principles and institutionalized practices governing delegation, finance, and information in Vietnam's education system. Based on research undertaken in Hanoi and three provinces, the study finds that coherence in Vietnam's education system with respect to delegation, finance, and information – i.e., the extent to which these policy elements are linked in ways that support good learning outcomes – is actually quite limited— that, in practice, delegation, finance, and information gathering is mainly focused on *procedural compliance* and is weakly linked and thus weakly supportive of the achievement of national policy goals. The final section considers the implications of this research for ongoing discussions on improving the performance of Vietnam's education system. Given Vietnam's decentralized governance, we suggest the need to consider policies that can increase transparency for more effective monitoring, evaluation, and support.

### 1. EXPLORING “SYSTEM COHERENCE” IN VIETNAM

Education systems are complexes of social relations and institutional arrangements that have been constructed, designed, and operated to fulfill a variety of social functions, including socialization (the transmission of prevailing norms and values), “education” (the dissemination of knowledge and information) and skilling, the training-up of variety of social, cognitive, and technical capabilities. Like health systems, education systems are not self-regulating or self-equilibrating, and their achievement of policy goals depends on enormous and sustained efforts by multitude of actors who themselves vary with respect to

their capabilities and interests. Given international variation in states effectiveness, it is unsurprising that education systems' themselves vary enormously in their effectiveness.

To understand education systems' performance, i.e., the extent to which they fulfill specific missions and objectives (e.g., the promotion of learning, ideological indoctrination), it can be useful to approach the analysis of education systems initially in the abstract as interdependent constellations of accountability relations among a variety of actors and interests along the lines of a framework first introduced in the World Bank's 2004 *World Development Report* and honed further in numerous subsequent studies, including a series of publications issued by the RISE program (see, especially, Pritchett 2005). There is a need, however, to move beyond the abstract to modes of analysis cognizant of how service delivery systems in general and education systems are embedded in specific social environments. There is a need, in other words, to produce sociologically "thick" approaches to education systems research. Our aim in the present research is to develop such an analysis of key aspects of Vietnam's education system, as party of efforts to understand the sources and limits of its effectiveness and its implications for policy in Vietnam and beyond. In what follows we outline the concept of "system coherence for learning," extend it to the Vietnam context, and outline the design and methods of our study.

### **1.1 What is meant by an education system's coherence for learning?**

Beyond such proximate determinants of learning as effective teachers, good textbooks and curricula, and suitable infrastructure, researchers have highlighted the importance of education systems' coherence for learning, which can be understood as the perpetual copresence of durable and robust relations of accountability within an education system where in principals (e.g., citizens, political decision makers, and managers) motivate agents (e.g. schools, teachers) toward the achievement of goals delegated to them, such as the realization of certain learning objectives (Kaffenberger and Spivack 2022). Elaborating this

perspective, Pritchett (2015) conceives of an education system as defined by features of four key sets of principal-agent relations across four policy design elements.

As depicted in Figure 1 (below), the four key principal-agent relations of interest (moving clockwise) include: The “*compact*” (relations between political executives and organizations charged with the oversight of education systems); *management* (relations between oversight organizations and such frontline service providers as schools, school principals and teachers); *community* (comprising relations between schools and the populations they serve), and *politics* (understood as relations between citizens and political executives who select education system policies and goals). The performance of an education system with respect to learning can be understood and explained by examining features of these principal-relations across five elements of policy design. These include: *Delegation* (the principal specifies what they want done (i.e., objectives)); *finance* (provided the for objective to be achieved); *information* (whereby the principal can specify the adequacy of agents’ performance), motivation (the agreement between the principal and agent specifies what will happen for the agent if the outcomes are “good: or “bad” (e.g., selective incentives), and *school support* (principals devise means of assisting schools in the performance of delegated tasks. The result is a complex, at-times-unwieldy, but useful heuristic for exploring how relations among multiple education system stakeholders across various policy design elements shape the performance of an education system with respect to learning.

[INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

In an education system coherent for learning, features of principal-agent relations across these design elements will result in the achievement of desired policy outcomes as measured by learning outcomes. Abstractly, an education system that is coherent for learning

can be likened to an integrated circuit. How (well) the education system (or circuit) performs (e.g., in the education of children, the promotion of learning) depends on how well appropriate resources, information, support, and motivation flow among actors and interests occupying various “nodes” in the system (e.g., political leadership, educational bureaucracies, schools, classrooms, and households). A key problem in putting the framework to practice stems from the fact that education systems are not abstractions. They are comprising dynamic sets of social relations embedded in specific institutional environments. Extending this conceptual framework to Vietnam thus requires an appreciation of the distinctive features of its education system, its sociohistorical evolutions, and its embedding. Put differently, we require an analysis of the distinctive features of Vietnam’s education system’s institutionalized features and public governance.

## **1.2 Vietnam’s education system and its social embedding**

The evolution of contemporary Vietnam’s education system traces its roots to Vietnam’s colonial and anti-colonial period (London 2011a). Educational themes (e.g., the right to education) figured centrally in calls for national liberation the development of an education system occupied a central place in the CPV’s strategies of war fighting and state building (London 2011b, Vasavakul 1997, 2018). The most rapid development of the system under the CPV’s authority occurred first in the north of the country, from 1954 through to 1975, and then in the south, from 1975 onwards. In both the north and the south, the formation of the education system was integral to processes of post-colonial state formation and took the form of a large-scale centrally administered educational bureaucracy organized, formally, on principles of centralized command-and-control. Importantly, Vietnam’s dire economic circumstances in wartime and postwar continuously limited the availability of resources for education while also compromising the flow of information and the extent of support for



schools. It bears emphasis then, that while Vietnam's education system exhibited formal centralization, its operation was decentralized.

It also bears emphasis that up until the 1980s, the development and functioning of the education system depended on social mobilization. Faced with threadbare conditions, the CPV nonetheless embraced the challenge of developing an education system that could extend access to education to all citizens. Indeed, the socializing functions of an education system in Vietnam were pronounced and were viewed by the Party as crucial to the socialization of new socialist citizens and the political values of Marxism-Leninism-Ho Chi Minh thought (London 2011b). The CPV's sprawling party infrastructure worked to deliver this outcome. Despite these efforts, by the late 1980s this education system, sustained by mass mobilization, faced near collapse in the face of an acute fiscal crisis that accompanied the decline of the planned economy and Vietnam's movement to a more market-based economy. Conditions in the education system worsened, as was reflected in sharp drops in enrollment nationwide and the exodus of large numbers of teaching staff. However, the crisis in Vietnam's education system was relatively shortly lived and its evolution since has been impressive across a variety of dimensions and performance metrics.

### *1.2.1 Growth in the context of fragmented decentralization*

Since the early 1990s, in the context of rapid economic growth and increased public and private education expenditure, the CPV has sustained vigorous efforts to develop the country's education system. Access to education in Vietnam has improved rapidly during this period and the country has registered very strong results on international assessments of learning. As will be discussed below, these results owe to distinctive strengths of Vietnam's education system— strengths frequently absent in many other middle-income countries. These have included most notably, the strong and enduring political commitment of its ruling

party, high levels of societal engagement, and the professionalism of the country's large education sector work force. Other helpful elements include a culture that venerates learning and, not least, an expanding economy that permits ever-increasing spending on education. Given these conditions, it is not altogether surprising (though still impressive) that Vietnam has been able to achieve the results it has at relatively low levels of income. These features of Vietnam's system and its public governance are worth of study.

International research suggests that features of centralization and decentralization in an education are important for understanding their performance over time and that it is not decentralization or decentralization that matter but how the public governance of centralized and decentralized aspects of education systems affect policy implementation and outcomes. Over the past three decades, Vietnam has moved toward a more formally decentralized fiscal and administrative system—a trend that has carried major implications for the education sector and system. In this context, the CPV has sought to affirm certain national policy directions and promulgate centrally determined norms, while also greatly expanding decision space for local authorities.

Surveying perspectives on the effectiveness of these reforms reveals differences of view. To its advocates, decentralization has permitted local education stakeholders to respond to local needs. The ability of localities (e.g., provinces and districts) and schools to exercised influence over their work is seen to be a major advance that permits more efficient use of limited budgetary resources while also allowing for experimentation and innovation. Research on education systems globally suggests responsiveness to locals needs and space for innovation are indeed crucial to education system's effectiveness. Critics of education sector decentralization in Vietnam point to the policy's adverse effects conceding that while granting local authorities greater discretion has certain benefits, doing so without levers of accountability to meet national policy norms poses few problems. Indeed, they complain,

central authorities in Vietnam have few ways of using financial levers or information to promote accountability to national policy objectives. For these critics, though Vietnam has adopted several promising reforms to strengthen the education system, the system's "slackness" in the way decentralization has unfolded has undermined the system as a whole.

### *1.2.2 Forces for system coherence and coherence gaps*

Before proceeding to an analysis of delegation, finance, and information, we wish to underscore how distinctive features of Vietnam's education system that work in favor of accountability and coherence. Specifically, research indicates that sustained political commitments of the CPV and features of "societal engagement" in Vietnam's education system as accountability enhancing elements that set Vietnam's education system and its social embedding apart from education systems in other countries (London 2021). In Vietnam, political commitment is expressed in the multi-faceted political activities of the CPV in the education system at all levels of its public governance and in the party's consistent support for education, seen both in high levels of spending and in fiscal transfers that permitted improvements in access to education. Organizationally, the CPV, acting through its sprawling political apparatus, has used its well-developed system of compliance procedures to oversee, coordinate, order and motivate public governance of the education system, from the activities of its various levels of bureaucratic management to the activities of teachers and children in the classroom (London 2022).

Societal engagement in Vietnam's education system is reflected, for example, in Vietnam citizens' literal and figurative "buy in" to the education system, i.e., the role households play in financing education through a messy and often opaque combination of formal and informal co-payments that the CPV and schools have promoted. And in Vietnam's highly active (state-controlled) media and (semi-autonomous) internet environments, which train attention to the education system. Vietnam is fortunate not only to

draw on a culture that venerates education and learning; the country has been home to one of the fastest growing economies in the world over the last three decades. In sum political commitments to education, reflected in the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV's) long-standing and active commitment to promoting education, together with the presence in Vietnam of high levels of societal engagement in the education system, seen both in households' financial contributions to the education system and active civic engagement through the country's lively "education sector public sphere," are hypothesized to work (however imperfectly, it will be shown) to enhance accountability in the education system in way that is frequently absent in education systems around the world (London 2021).

### *1.2.3 The reform imperative*

In Vietnam, there is a widespread desire to improve the education system's performance and widespread awareness of deficiencies in the system's public governance. The limitations of Vietnam's education system can be seen across several dimensions. Although Vietnam's education system's expansion has generated impressive enrollment figures, the country retains one of the shortest school years in the world measured in terms of contact hours (GPE 2019). Public spending, the inflow of resources through various "societalization" mechanisms, and balancing payments to shift resources to poorer provinces have permitted certain gains with respect to accessibility. Yet progression through the education system remains difficult for lower-income strata: across and within regions, children from lower income household are much less likely to advance beyond the lower-secondary level (London 2011 Coxhead et al., 2021). While Vietnam does better than all other countries in its income group across multiple international assessments of learning, the 2012, 2015, and 2018 PISA results' validity and representativeness have been questioned and need to be taken with a grain of salt (FT 2018). The overall picture is one of a high performing education system that could perform better.

Although the CPV's has demonstrated a political commitment to education, the Party's adoption of Resolution 29, in 2013, signaled a renewed commitment to education and an increased cognizance of the system's shortcomings. More importantly, the Resolution endorsed or triggered the introduction of a raft of education reforms aimed at increasing investments and their effectiveness, improving curriculum and pedagogy, and improving teacher quality. The Resolution, for example, lent momentum to efforts to de-emphasize assessment and focus, instead, on helping students realize and appreciate their individual learning gains. This, it has been argued, would reduce pressure on households and children. The Resolution also spurred action to develop a new generation of general education curricula that would reflect movement from a knowledge-based curriculum to one focused on problem-based education and the achievement of competencies across a range of social, cognitive, and technical skill sets to equip Vietnam for movement into higher skilled jobs. The resolution expressed concerns about the increasing costs and commodification of education and announced the need to more aggressively promote equity across the system by improving the accessibility of quality education to all citizens (Nguyen N.V. 2020), including through the elimination of formal fees for preschool and lower-secondary education (CPXHCNVN 2018).

Resolution 29 emphasized strengthening further political leadership in the field of education policy at all levels of governance to promote more effective policy implementation and to better align the education system's functioning to the needs of the state and citizens. The Resolution made these calls based on affirming widely acknowledged limitations in the education. Criticisms of the education's management including warnings about its excessive fragmentation, including acknowledgments that aspects decentralization has exacerbated this tendency. The Resolution refrained from setting specific performance targets in favor of broad emphases. The Resolution, for example, cited a need to promote quality education for

all and provided a list of goals, such as exempting all tuition fees for primary school by 2020, ensuring that all students enrolled in lower secondary school completed lower secondary school by 2020, calling for improvements in the quality of secondary education and the achievement of 9 years of compulsory education by 2020.

### **1.3 A sense and reality of incoherence**

While Vietnam's education system has registered impressive results, there is a consensus within the country that aspect the system's decentralized governance has undermined its performance. A recent article co-authored by the head of Vietnam's National Institute for Educational Sciences Anh (Anh et al 2021, 130) is indicative, stating that "Considering that decentralizing spending autonomy is proven to be ineffective in Vietnam, we suggest that Vietnam holds most of its budgetary power in the central educational authority." The sense and reality that decentralization in Vietnam has posed challenges for the achievement of national education policies is familiar to all researchers of education in Vietnam. In our research we sought to understand these problems more concretely, through an analysis of delegation, finance, and information systems in the context of Vietnam's decentralized education system.

## **2. EXPLORING SYSTEM COHERENCE IN VIETNAM**

In our research we desired to shed light on the problems arising from the apparent "slackness" of accountability relations in Vietnam's education system, i.e., accountability gaps with respect to the decentralized achievement of broad policy objectives elaborated in Resolution 29 (i.e., expanding learning and access to quality education for all). Funded by the

Research on Improving Systems of Education program<sup>1</sup>, the research sought to explore these issues through an examination of delegation, finance, and information the education system. At the level of the central government, our investigations focused on the activities of the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET). Subnationally, we undertook a comparative case study of three provinces to understand how local authorities made use of the discretion that decentralization has conferred to make choices about the management of local education systems. We aimed to understand how local authorities set policy priorities, delegated responsibilities for their achievement, and used information for purposes of policy planning, monitoring, and evaluations. Below, we describe the methods employed in the study before discussion our findings with respect to delegation, finance, and information, respectively.

## **2.1 Methods of data collection and analysis**

The objective if our research was to assess the coherence of Vietnam’s education system through an analysis of linkages between delegation, finance, and information systems, as key education policy design elements. These were to be examined with respect to relations between executive political authorities and the education bureaucracy (i.e., “the compact”) and in the governance of frontline service providers and organizations /school (i.e., management, as depicted in Figure 1). Our study was to rely on qualitative data gleaned through comprehensive documents review and ethnographic research. To this end, we conducted a literature review and interview protocols drawing on the framework outlined in Prtichett (2015) as well as SABER survey questions and OECD materials on “locus of decision making.” Primary and secondary data sources included government and party documents and English and Vietnamese, scholarly sources, and policy analysis, as well as more than 100 key informant interviews that we conducted over the period of 2016 to 2022.

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<sup>1</sup> The Research on Improving Systems of Education (RISE) Programme is a global research endeavour that seeks to understand how education systems in developing countries can overcome the learning crisis.

The focus of our research was mainly on central-level province-level organizations. At both the central and local level, our aim was to craft a diagnostic analysis trained on identifying features of accountability relations in connection to delegation, finance, and information, both in terms of the contents of formal policies and policy practices. Research on the finance system included a first-of-a-kind inventory of formal norms governing finance in all 63 of Vietnam's provinces, manually retrieved online and by other means. Focused research on Vietnam's Education Management and Information Systems entailed interviews with some 20 persons.

In 2019, the team undertook case-based research (and 40 additional interviews) in three provinces: Haiphong, Nghe An, and Kien Giang. The provinces under study were selected to capture some of the diversity that exists in the education system across Vietnam's northern, central, and southern regions. At the local level, our focus was on local units of public authority and, specifically, with People's Committees and agencies under their authority charged with the planning and implementation of education policy and the management of schools. Two districts were selected for study in Nghe An and Kien Giang, as these were the subject of research in a companion project. Research in the provinces especially focused on province level Departments of Education and Training (DOET) and Departments of Finance (DOF) as well as district level Bureaus of Education and Training (BOET) and Bureaus of Finance (BOF).<sup>2</sup> At the national and local levels we sought to better understand how political activities of the CPV affected processes of education policy implementation. Findings from the case studies will be made available in an online Annex.

Original interview data was transcribed and coded in NVIVO, a qualitative data analysis application. Categories taken from the relevant literature and interview questions

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<sup>2</sup> In Vietnam, People's Committees are the chief executive decision-making body of local government, acting with the consent of People's Councils, which are formally representative elected/selected bodies. In practice, the People's Committees wield real power, working in consultation with the People's Council and the Provincial or District-level party leadership.



alongside themes emerging from the data include *political commitment; province's education achievements, challenges, and priorities; financial management and inspection; decentralization; teacher management; public engagement in educational matters; information management related to education and learning*, etc. Ethnographic field notes were also integrated in these categories and (sub)themes which inform the interpretations and arguments to be reported in the next sections. The analysis does not seek to test specific hypotheses, but rather to contribute to a formative assessment of Vietnam's education system's coherence for learning, particularly in relation to the key policy elements of delegation, finance, and information. Below, these matters are addressed in turn.

## **2.2 Delegation**

The ability of principal actors in education systems – such as political leaders, ministries of education, provinces, districts, and school principals, to delegate tasks and to support and monitor and motivate the fulfillment of specific objectives around learning of is essential to an education system's effectiveness (Cameron and Naidoo 2018). Globally, large-scale, bureaucratically organized education systems have proven variably effective in meeting the logistical challenges of schooling and socializing increasing number of children, but much less effective in improving learning outcomes (Pritchett 2013). This owes, in part, to the sheer complexity of learning and its dependence on the interaction of actors with varying capacities and interests.

Efforts to improve the effectiveness of Vietnam's education system provide an interesting example of the challenges of achieving delegated tasks that aim to expand education and learning for all. Since the 1950s the CPV has constructed a sprawling bureaucratic apparatus designed to delegate tasks, allocate financial resources, process information, and render decisions to achieve nationally mandated education policy goals. In

the contemporary context, the CPV aims to increase the effectiveness of its education system, particularly with respect to improving the quality and equity of the system and the teaching of skills deemed necessary for sophisticating Vietnam's economy. The organization of the education system and its authority relations are depicted in Figure 2 and Figure 3 (below).

**[INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE]**

**[INSERT FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE]**

### *2.2.1 Delegation at the level of the Central Government*

The CPV (not depicted in Table 1 and Figure 2) is Vietnam's dominant organization and delegates tasks through its party organizations and cells, which interpenetrate all facets of the education system. Vietnam's Government implements laws created in the National Assembly whose members are formally elected through CPV-controlled (non-competitive) elections at the local level. As the leading organization in education, MOET is charged with developing and overseeing the implementation of education policies nationally. From its headquarters in Hanoi, MOET oversees an education system comprising more than 44,000 schools, employs over 1.5 million professionals, and serves nearly 25 million students daily.

Key features of the education system's functioning lie beyond MOET's authority. This is seen both horizontally (i.e., in relation to other functional ministries) and vertically (i.e., in relation to local levels of public authority). Nationally, MOET sets guiding norms for local education policies. But Vietnam's Ministry of Finance determines budgeting for MOET as well as the overall size of the budget dispersed to provinces. At the same time, it is the Ministry of Home Affairs (and not MOET) that determines policies concerning human resource. Problems and challenges that crop up pertaining to finance and human resources in

the education system (e.g., finance levels, hiring practices) cannot be met with robust responses from MOET, which lacks the formal authority to do so. This, combined with administrative and fiscal decentralization effectively limit MOET's role to one of dispensing policy norms and guidance. MOET has little power to sanction or incentivize performance.

The central government and MOET delegates responsibility for the implementation of education policy to local authorities. At one level, local authorities are expected to adjust and implement policies in adherence with the party line. A prime example of this is Resolution 29, which spells out policy orientations rather than specific, measurable policy objectives. Specific “delegated policy objectives” can be found in the use of national assessment standards for schools, teachers, and students. An example of this is performance criteria for schools, established in 2012 (and last updated in 2018) for [primary schools](#) and [schools of all levels](#), and guidelines for assessing academic performance. In principle, the issuance of performance criteria for schools is meant to increasing the number and share of schools that meet national standards. Progress in this direction is encouraged (and in respects compelled) through compliance with reporting procedures, wherein provinces, districts, and schools report progress on a quarterly, bi-annual, annual, and five-year basis their progress across a battery of organizational, academic, infrastructural, and financial criteria. School and teacher performance is evaluated based on students' learning outcomes, reflected in the percentages of passing graduation exams. In 2021, reflecting movement away from exam marks, MOET introduced criteria for assessing students in terms of high-, satisfactory, and low-levels of performance students associated with specific achievement levels.

### *2.2.2 Delegation at the province level and below*

At the local level (province-level and below), it is a province's People's Committee, or PPC – the leading executive authority of the state at the province level – that determines education

sector policy priorities and budgeting. In principle, PPCs must adhere to broadly defined national policy norms regarding education and funding and staffing. PPCs are expected to align policy priorities with local needs. PPCs and their DOETs oversee the collection of information on policy implementation and education processes and outcomes. This information is routinely transmitted to MOET (via computer, as is detailed later) for the purposes of policy reporting and monitoring. With respect to education, the key province-level department of interest are Departments of Finance (DOF), Departments of Planning and Investment (DPI), Departments of Home Affairs (DHA), and Departments of Education and Training (DOET). The latter directly administers upper-secondary schools and provides technical support and direction to district (level) Bureaus of Education and Training (BOET), which oversee primary, lower-secondary, and kindergarten education. Further aspects of delegation at the local level are described in relation to finance and information.

### *2.2.3 The strengths and limits of formal accountability*

In formal terms, Vietnam's education system is organized to promote and motivate accountability to the achievement of national policy goals, including standards schools and teachers across a battery of outcomes, including learning outcomes. Standards for schools tend to focus on EMIS-visible indicators, such as school infrastructure and equipment (water, electricity, desks and chairs, etc.), organization (management functions) and staffing (teacher qualifications). Standards for teachers' performance and learning outcome are stated in terms of various performance categories. Achievement of these standards is continuously monitored through the DOET and BOET of a particular province, through Party cells, school principals, the activities of the Provincial People's Council, and, more rarely, external inspections and audits carried out by MOET or roving central-level Party commissions. A member of one such commission, who was interviewed for this paper, detailed the nature of her inspection

work in two southcentral provinces. In practice, reporting success is expected and incentivized, even as party strictures also require continuous self-criticism. Across Vietnam, delegation from MOET to local authorities exists only in a broad sense. At local levels, delegation is overseen by the PPCs and DOETs. As we will observe below, in general, the national government and local authorities do not leverage finance and information to promote accountability around the achievement of specific policy objectives.

### **2.3 Finance**

Education finance in Vietnam draws on public and private sources. Rough estimates indicate that roughly 40 percent of spending on education in Vietnam is out of pocket. Our focus here is on public finance. At the national level, arrangements governing public education finance are enabling in that they are geared to support the operation and expansion of the education system across all provinces. This occurs by way of a fiscal system wherein tax revenues are redistributed as balancing payments to support poorer provinces. Government policies stipulate that education should account for 20 percent of annual budgetary expenditures at the national level and in all provinces. MOET controls less than 4 percent of this budget, according to one estimate (An 2022, p.83), with the lion's share occurring at the local level.

As indicated, decentralization policies have sought to increase provinces' discretion over the use of budgetary resources, subject to certain constraints. Information on actual expenditure (at the province level and below) is extremely difficult to access and can only be done through consultation with the State Treasury. Even then, accurate data on education finance (e.g., the amount transferred to schools) are available only one or two years later, foreclosing the possibility of swift accounting (Interview M8 2022). Overall, institutional arrangements governing public finance for education both at the national and local levels are not geared to promote accountability to and support for the achievement of specific policy goals.

### *2.3.1 Allocation*

The allocation of fiscal resources from the central government to provinces for education is based on transfer norms (định mức phân bổ) but come as part of larger block grants set for a three-year budget stability period.<sup>3</sup> In principle, education funds are supposed to ensure equitable funding across provinces as they are calculated based on enrollment numbers and attributes of enrolled students (e.g., residence in rural or urban or poor region, membership in ethnic minority groups). For current funds transferred from the central government to provinces, each school-age (1 to 18) child receives different norms, depending on in which of four types of regions they live. For the 2017-2020 budget period, the highest per-child norm was VND 5.05 million— or about 2.4 times higher than the lowest per-child norm. There are also broad centrally established norms for education budgeting at the province level and below. According to Decision 46/2016, salary and salary-like (e.g., social, health, unemployment insurance) expenditures are meant to be kept at the maximum rate of 82 percent, while 18 percent of total current expenditures are used for non-salary purposes. If a province has a budget shortfall, the central government will make up for this shortfall, but only in the first year of the budget stability period. Beyond these broad norms, central government leaves provinces autonomy in how they want to allocate resources.

### *2.3.2 Education finance in the provinces*

Within provinces, matters of education finance determined by province-level People's Committees and their Departments of Finance (DOFs) while decisions about the hiring and firing of teachers is made by province-level Departments of Home Affairs (DHO). Often

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<sup>3</sup> At the central level, the Prime Minister annually approves the budget allocation decision for recurrent expenditure (including salary expenditure, personal payment, professional activities, small repairs and other expenses). For example, in 2022, the Prime Minister issued Decision No. 30/2021/QĐ-TTg on principles, criteria and norms for the allocation of recurrent expenditure estimates of the state budget in 2022.

these agencies make decisions wholly independently, i.e., with no consultation of provincial Departments of Education and Training (DOETs).

Education finances at the province level and below are regulated mainly by the 2015 Law on State Budget (LSB) and the 2019 Law on Education. Provinces Determine districts' general and education budgets. MOET, DOET, and BOET officials are expected to explain policy to schools and to provide support and monitoring to ensure fidelity of implementation. According to the LSB, a province's People's Council is to decide on the allocation of the total budgeted amount on capital and current expenditures for each sector (including education) and for each government agency (Article 30) and on additional fund transfers to local governments for budget-balancing or targeted purposes. A provincial People's Committee is to present a proposed budget for the entire province to the People's Council to vote on. The final provincial proposed budget is a final product that combines information from the proposed budgets of all reporting units. Given the People's Council's decision, the People's Committee decides to how much revenue, and in what way, to allocate across different direct sectoral governmental agencies. Each direct government agency then decides how to allocate resources within their own reporting units.

Finance departments, especially at the provincial level, play an important role in an educational budgeting process. Provincial finance departments prepare a province-wide proposed budget (including on education resources for high schools and districts for their lower-than-high schools) for provincial People's Committees, monitor to ensure that reporting units implement their budgets according to the law and to provincial People's Councils' budget decisions. While provincial Departments of Education and Training are tasked with ensuring the quality of education, finance departments make all decisions related on fiscal resources (amounts and allocation formulas) for schools' current expenditures.

Finance departments also need to work with Departments of Planning and Investment for allocating and supervising fiscal resources for school capital projects.

Provincial authorities have wide discretion in allocating resources for education within “their” provinces. Indeed, beyond broad conformity to national education laws and the stipulation that provinces are to spend 20 percent of annual budgets on education, there are few specific formal rules that specify what provincial authorities may or may not do. While Vietnam has a well elaborated set of education policies, our research has established that Vietnam’s budget laws do not specify what provinces may not do with respect to education finance. Ongoing research indicates that there is substantial variation in how provinces allocate education resources to schools within their boundaries. Specifically, the variation manifests itself in share ratios between salary and non-salary expenditure items, the use or non-use of central-government-determined base amounts (*định mức*) for both salary and non-salary items or only for non-salary items, and the factors influencing the base amounts (e.g., basis per enrolled student or per capita or per personnel on approved payroll), regions, and education levels). Beyond transfer norms that grant provinces budgetary resources on the basis of socioeconomic considerations, provincial authorities themselves may address equity in various ways. First, they may use transfer norms differentiated by economically based regions, Second, provinces may have school fee structures with different tiers, depending on where students live. Until 2021, only primary students were exempt from school tuitions. Presently, tuition exemptions are being extended to preschool and lower-secondary school, but households have and will remain subject to other fees and charges.

#### 2.3.3.1 Finance and the Bureaucratic Administration of Education

Housed within the provincial and district People’s Committees, provincial Departments of Education and district Bureaus of Education have little autonomy or influence in matters of



finance. Although education departments at provincial and district levels are accountable for the quality of education, they have little say in their budget making process and the allocation of fiscal resources for both current and capital expenditures or in the hiring/firing of teachers. Provincial DOFs and district play key roles in budget and fiscal matters while provincial and district Departments of Home Affairs have the power to approve the number of new teachers to be hired that DOETs propose. The result is that decisions about finance and workforce in the education system are often wholly beyond the ability of education sector authorities and schools to control. In poor areas and most rural areas, schools have little scope for additional expenditure beyond funds allocated through the budget. In some localities, the budget allocation is based on the number of students at each school level, each school, in others based on the number of teachers, officials and staff of the school. Though not a focus of this analysis, resources garnered outside the budget form an important part of education finance, even as a former minister of education declared in his interview that sources of school finance in Vietnam are a mystery (Pham M.H. 2018).

#### 2.3.4 Finance and schools

Schools have little control over their financial affairs. The 2005 Education Law stipulated schools' right 1) "to hire teachers and participate in a teacher replacement processes" and 2) "to mobilize, use, and monitor resources according to the law" (Article 58). However, interviewees indicate that most public schools have little autonomy in hiring teachers or in raising additional revenue to meet their needs. They must abide by province-imposed tuition fees. Schools are sometimes able to raise 'voluntary' parental contributions under a set of policies known as "socialization" or societalization (*xã hội hóa*). However, rampant abuse and lack of transparency in the revenue source led to the enactment of Circular 16/2018/TT-BGDĐT. One of the major regulations of this circular is that parental contributions must be

completely voluntary with no required minimum amount. Modest funds can be raised through such items as bicycle parking fees, as long as they are permitted by the government. In wealthier urban and peri-urban areas income from societalization mechanisms and other sources can be more substantial (London 2014).

It is important to understand how finance is allocated vertically within the education system at the province level. Kindergarten (before first grade), primary (grades 1 to 5) and secondary (grades 6 to 9) schools usually report directly to district People's Committees, which report directly to provinces. Therefore, provinces allocate financial resources to district People's Committees which in turn decide on how to allocate these resources to schools within their own districts. By the same token, high school (grades 10 to 12) are administered by and report directly to provinces and thus receive resources directly from the provinces, not through district People's Committee. Resource allocation and implementation supervision (including reception of school financial reports) at provincial and district levels are carried out through provincial and district finance departments, respectively. Overall, depriving educational departments and schools of key decision-making power in fiscal resources and teachers may bring about some benefits. They ask rhetorically how they can ensure the quality of education when they have little power over key inputs in the education production process: finance and teachers.<sup>4</sup> At issue is how much autonomy in what areas education departments and local public schools could be given so that a balance among different seemingly conflicted goals—accountability, efficiency, and education quality. Suppose, for example, that a school had a self-driven, innovative idea for better learning that was going to cost some, perhaps quite modest, amount of money. As it stands, there is little in the structure of finance that would allow them to allocate finance to it from the existing budget. There is,

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<sup>4</sup> A remarked during and in-depth interview in Tan An District, Nghe An Province, July 2019.

little "flexibility" in the system. And there are also limits on schools' ability to raise funds through various "societalization" (*xã hội hoá*) mechanisms.

### 2.3.5 Finance and teachers

Given that teachers are a key determinant of student performance, education departments' lack of autonomy over teachers warrants discussion. Teachers work as public employees (*viên chức*) under the 2010 Law on Public Employees. Interior departments oversee the number of payroll teachers, teacher hiring standards, salaries, and performance evaluation. Interior departments have been tasked with implementing the 2015 Resolution 39-NQ/TW in which the number of payroll public employees including teachers need to be reduced by 10 percent by 2021. Policies have, to a limited extent, sought to promote modest degrees of financial autonomy for schools at the primary and secondary level. But autonomy itself is geared mainly toward reducing dependence on the state budget and is not linked to performance with or support for specific objectives related to learning. In all urban areas and even in many rural areas, teachers earn modest to sizeable amounts extra income through providing extra lessons, though these are in principle banned in certain localities (Linh 2012).

## **2.4 Information**

All states produce and use information to advance political objectives. Globally, efforts to enhance Education Management and Information Systems (EMIS) have been focused on tracking growth in enrolments, inputs, and compliance (e.g., reporting on progress in achieving various norms) (Abdul-Hamid 2014). It is a major focus of education systems reform, as is indicated by the considerable attention given it in the World Bank's SABER program and UNESCO. Research on improving education systems has emphasized the role information can play in increasing education system's coherence for learning, principally by

permitting principals (i.e., stakeholders at multiple levels) to use information to monitor, regulate, support, and incentivize agents (e.g., administrators and teachers) to expand children's learning. While not denying the value of conventional EMIS, many observers (e.g., Pritchett 2013) stress the limitations of such systems with respect to efforts to improve learning, noting that key determinants of learning (such as teachers' motivation and skill) are not visible to standard EMIS arrangements. Be that as it may, in MOET and in Vietnam's education sector more broadly, there has been great enthusiasm improving EMIS capabilities. In what follows we trace the evolution of EMIS in Vietnam and establish its strengths and limitations.

#### *2.4.1 From pencil and paper to computer*

Under the leadership of the CPV, Vietnam has collected information on education since the anti-colonial period. Still, up through the last decades of the 20th century and into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the country possessed only rudimentary education statistics and was geared toward reporting achievements rather than serving analysis. Statistical reports were compiled from the bottom up and its accuracy was difficult to verify. Weaknesses were seen with respect to information standards and collection procedures, accuracy, completeness, and timeliness. Where education information was put to use in policy formation, data collection and management tools were developed spontaneously to meet specific needs.

The flow of the EMIS system is as follows. At the school level, management staff regularly update profile data on schools, class, students, teachers, and staff. Compilation of reports are then submitted to the Bureau of Education and Training (BOET) at the district level and is used this for school-level management. BOET, in turn, are responsible for updating information on their own personnel and collecting and synthesizing data on a triennial basis (at the beginning, middle, and end of year) for the kindergarten, primary, and

lower-secondary levels for submission to the province-level DOET. DOETs, in turn, are responsible for updating information on their own personnel, synthesize data from the BOETs, high schools, and universities for transfer to MOET. MOET, in turn, is responsible for updating information on its own personnel, synthesizing data from the provinces/cities across the country on a triennial basis and using this information for national management.

#### *2.4.2 EMIS takes off*

Vietnam has developed formidable capabilities in reporting and collating information, employing increasingly sophisticated techniques. In recent years Vietnam's EMIS capabilities have grown even rapidly, owing to the availability of new technologies and assiduous efforts of sector leaders keen to learn and adapt international practices. Between 2003 and 2013, EMIS activities developed quickly, as computerization took hold. While MOET and local authorities used software, these were often rudimentary and there was no mechanism for transmitting information to upper management agencies. Financed through state and donor funds, the Support for the Renovation of Education Management (12 million euros, 2005-2010) sought to increase capabilities. By 2016, multiple MOET-authorized EMIS software platforms were available, and the sharing of data and transitioning from one system to another posed major problems.

Since 2018, Vietnam has put a new database structure into use. It is a centralized database that links the entire sectors at all levels and is designed to provide complete, fast, and accurate information for management and decision-making support of educational management agencies. The EMIS system is advanced in certain respects. It follows internationally recognized quality assurance measures such as the Total Quality Management Approach or ISO 9000 and is internally reviewed for quality assurance measures. There are also clearly defined procedures that document ongoing quality assurance in Data Collection,

Data Processing, and Educational Statistical Data Dissemination. Information is recorded and tabulated at the school level via the use of computers via five centrally approved software packages.

The data range covers all levels of education, including Public and Private and covers all levels of education, save post-secondary education (which has a different system). The state basis includes modules on schools, classes, staff (teachers, staff and educational administrators); students (identification, photos, biometrics, background, results of the learning-training process); facilities (school buildings, equipment, toilets); and finance. Today, Vietnam has fairly complete data on 44,000 schools, 93,000 classes, 1.5 million staff, and 22 million students. Data on any one school or teacher or student can be accessed instantaneously from MOET headquarters, as ministry staff demonstrated.

The database system has all preschools, high schools, and continuing education schools. Each school enters data at least twice annually, after which the data are checked, finalized, and shared with the central data base. As such, for every year there is a new data layer (accessible in real time). The issuance of unique identification numbers to students and staff aim to eliminate duplication. Data on teachers is cross-checked with the Ministry of Public Security.

#### *2.4.3 Big data without analysis*

Vietnam's education managers have amassed large amounts of data but have yet to figure out how to utilize it. MOET holds comprehensive data on 24 million individual students, but its Department of Technology and Statistics does not employ a single trained data analyst. Combined with its minimal control over education finance and human resources and its low access to budget and finance data, the Ministry can monitor all individual units in the education system from Hanoi but has, so far, little hope of using data to strengthen the delegation-finance link, as is demonstrated in the account below. The data available are

descriptive and is sparingly used beyond purposes of reporting. The data are not linked to information systems in other sectors that govern education finance and staffing. A 2016 interview with the coordinator for Education Management and Information Systems estimated that only in perhaps 20 of Vietnam's 63 provinces are there substantive discussions on planning between provincial departments of finance and departments of education that make use of EMIS generated data (Nguyen Khanh Tuan 2016). This suggests that the rationales guiding budgeting in provinces varies considerably and is rarely based on sophisticated use of information.

Limitations on information make it difficult to monitor and motivate the achievement of national policy objectives. The objective of equity illustrates this point. The Education Law stipulates that educational equality must be implemented. Meaning kindergarten, primary education, and lower secondary must be achieved. To date, the EMIS system is not utilized to monitor or motivate the achievement of these goals. The system may not be accessed by the public or by education researchers outside MOET. Where student performance is measured, the system is focused on enrollment and compliance with standards and processes and mid-term and end-of-year results. There is no data on student learning, formative assessment, and behavior,<sup>5</sup> which means limited feedback from teaching to learning. As a result, stakeholders lack information to improve the quality of education. Notably, some localities, such as Hung Yen (visited by the authors) are using separate learning assessment software to keep track of student progress. Currently, a separate Teacher Education Management Information System (TEMIS) is used in some localities to monitor professional development for teachers and administrators. This system records the evaluation of teachers, general education administrators according to professional standards, training

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<sup>5</sup> Interview with Mr. Thai Van Tai (Director of Primary Education Department, Mr. Ho Vinh Thang (specialist of Secondary Education Department), Mr. Nguyen Van Phe, Director of Hai Duong Department of Education and Training and experts from Hai Duong Department of Education and Training)

needs and regular training implementation of each teacher, records the entire process and results of training.

### 3. BETWEEN COMPLIANCE AND COHERENCE STANDS PURPOSE

Vietnam's strong performance on assessments of learning at relatively low levels of income raises questions as to what features of the country and its education system account for its strong performance and what lessons the country may offer for efforts to promote improvements in education systems' performance around learning in Vietnam and beyond. Alongside its numerous strengths, Vietnam's education system exhibits features that variously support and undermine efforts to achieve and sustain improvements in learning. Many of the strengths of Vietnam's education system lie not with incremental increases in national incomes or education budgets or household spending (those these can help, under certain conditions), but in relations of accountability and support that are sometimes observed in Vietnam's education system. These can be observed at a system level across the dynamic sets of stakeholder relations and education policy design elements that constitute its education system, even as they may be more or less present in specific regions, districts, or even schools. Other paths to expand learning are to be found in the adoption and scaling of more effective approaches to teaching and learning. Yet again, even the most promising pedagogic reforms on paper do not automatically translate into more effective teaching and learning.

There are, it seems clear, mechanisms that mediate between the formal design of an education system and its compliance procedures on the one hand and, on the other, the coherence of an education system around learning. Surely, those mechanisms do not simply or even mainly (as odd as it may seem) have to do with bureaucratic compliance with formal processes outlined in policy, as important and even as essential as compliance can be. Our research indicates that while Vietnam's education system performs well, its performance may



be improved further through the stronger links between delegation, finance, and information at all levels. It is certain that Vietnam and its education system have many things going for it that support the success of its education system, including political commitment, societal buy-in, a reasonably (but not spectacularly) well-functioning bureaucracy. Our research suggest Vietnam's education system is sufficiently coherent to offer an adequate basis for teaching and learning to the majority of Vietnam's children. This stands in contrast with the performance of education systems in other middle- and low-income countries, which tend to be stuck in the inadequate to severely inadequate range. The conclusion that Vietnam's education system is not as coherent for learning as one might assume or desire is not a pessimistic determination, but rather a soberly optimistic conclusion that further improvement in learning outcomes can be achieved. What is needed, we contend, is a greater commitment to the main purpose of the education system, which is not process compliance, but the promotion of ever-more adequate opportunities for children to learn.

### **3.1 A process-compliant but fragmented system**

We find that the specific ways in which administrative and fiscal decentralization have evolved in Vietnam between 2002 and the present have contributed to a mode of education policy implementation that is geared toward procedural compliance to loosely defined norms but lacks meaningful delegation-finance-information links that are necessary for central and local education sector authorities to effectively monitor, support, and motivate the achievement of national policy objective. Aspects of accountability in Vietnam's education system should not be understated. Still, our research indicates that while well elaborated formal policies and regular "party work" promotes elements of accountability (London 2021), the weak links between delegation, finance, and information likely limit the system's overall effectiveness with respect to expanding learning for all. As is stands, the locus of decision

making in education policy and budgetary matters lies with provincial authorities. But the central government and independent researchers lack the ability to assess whether and how the ways provinces establish policy priorities effectively meet local needs. Forthcoming data on education management practices using the World Management Survey should prove to be a useful resource in subnational diversity.

In practice, Vietnam's education system reflects elements of coherence seen mainly in the ways in which the CPV achieves the logistical challenges of supporting the functioning of the education system and ensuring regular reporting on the fulfillment of or progress toward centrally determined norms. The system as whole has strong elements of political accountability, but lacks "coherence around learning" in the sense that delegation, finance, and information are weakly linked. As illustrated above, finance and information processing within the system are "effective but cocooned": budgetary resources and information flow through the system, roughly for the right purposes, but remain separate and distinct from each other and are not aligned with the purpose of meeting/delivering education goals (delegation). Information about performance remains limited to the monitoring and self-reporting (by schools, districts, and provinces) of compliance. As in many countries, the political logics of bureaucratic reporting in Vietnam incentivizes "success" as process compliance (*"đúng quy trình"*) while emphasis on meeting targets has resulted in what in Vietnam is called "achievement disease," i.e., a great deal of attention to reporting success and comparatively little attention to tracking improvements in system performance around learning. In this sense, conformity with formal norms (by provinces, districts, schools, teachers) can take the form of performative routines.

### 3.2 Promoting coherence through the (re)discovery of purpose

The picture of Vietnam developed above can be contrasted with a situation in which delegation, finance, information is used to generate incentives, accountability, and support in ways that improves national and local education systems' performance with respect to the expansion of learning. In such a situation, decentralization down to the level of the province, for example, is “input and process compliant” – and “successful” in fulfilling local political and bureaucratic responsibilities (*nhiệm vụ chính trị*) but without regard for the needs of individual districts or schools or children. What we are suggesting is the need for delegation and finance and information to be better aligned across the system and at various scales of public governance with the purpose of enhancing, not compliance outcomes, but learning outcomes. Bracketing the question of delegation (which can be visited at another moment), we can consider finance and information in turn.

In finance, many aspects of education finance (especially at the local level) are invisible to standard measures, in part because a lot of education spending takes place informally and in part because information of public finance of education in Vietnam is difficult to access. In Vietnam, as it stands, there is no “here is what we expect you (province, district, school) to accomplish over the next year [or three or five year horizon] and here is what we are going to give you (resources, budget) to do that and we want you to report both (a) how you used it in a descriptive and process and (b) why and how that use was consistent/coherent/aligned with the agreed upon “delegation” (e.g. learning objectives we wanted to accomplish). Moving forward, making public and out of pocket education spending more responsive to the *purpose of learning* can be facilitated by foregrounding the purpose of the education system in public policies and public discourse while also making education finance more transparent. At both national and local levels doing, at the very least so holds the promise of permitting and motivating policy and public debate, which may help to better

align spending with governmental and societal priorities (Anh, et. al 2021, 130). Equipped with better information, actors at the level of the central-government and MOET, and in the provinces, districts, and schools may be better equipped to monitor, motivate, and support schools and educators in expanding learning.

This also draws the link with the use [or non-use] of information. EMIS Vietnam has made rapid progress in the last decade with the creation of an industry database system with very rich information for the input and outcomes of preschool education. Today, regular reporting in the EMIS system draws on the compulsory use of self-reporting of an ever-expanding range of measures. Information on these is collected across scores of dimensions. However, the collection and use data on finance and the assessment of the educational process related to the quality of education and learning need attention at the level of MOET and in the provinces. The development of information systems for evaluating linking finance to learning outcomes at a more granular level can be undertaken at a variety of levels. Over time, finance, information, as well as support can permit such activities to be adopted in localities, especially schools, in the context of efforts to increase the managerial capabilities, autonomy, and accountability of schools.

### **3.3. Final thoughts: Coherence and purpose**

Most observers within Vietnam recognize that while decentralization has its advantages, it had also raised problems. The solution is not centralization but rather clearer thinking of how the coordination and ordering of education policy can best service the CPV's stated goals of expanding learning. This, in turn, requires efforts to further align policies and policy practices with the purpose of supporting learning among an ever-expanding share of Vietnam's children.

As it stands, the central government lacks a comprehensive grasp of education finance and education system performance at the local levels. Despite the strong development of EMIS and a culture of reporting, there is no centralized overview of how local parts Vietnam's education system functions and thus little basis to evaluate what works better or worse with respect to the promotion of national policy goals. Some (Le Anh Vinh, 2021) have called for education finance to be centralized to give the central government the leverage it needs to hold provinces to account. But this is unlikely in the short term. As for information, moving forward, Vietnam's EMIS capabilities at the national level and local levels will need to move in the direction of developing evidence-based plans for expanding and tracking students' learning in relation to specific and adequately ambitious learning goals. The challenge will be effectively combining the collection and use of "big" and "thin" (superficial) data with detailed "thick data" (at the school level) [c.f. Ang 2019].

To Vietnam's credit, there are many forces that enhance accountability (politics, societal buy in, culture). As for the management of education: the presence of compliance to formal bureaucratic processes indicates *some* accountability, such accountability is often superficial and in any case is insufficient for expanding learning in Vietnam. Establishing strengths and weaknesses in existing relations of accountability and support for expanding learning in an education system's intra-governmental and management relations can assist policy makers in enhancing system performance, particularly when combined with "thick" (ethnographic) accounts of what is occurring in schools.

A key aim of education policies should be to motivate, equip, and constructively pressure schools and teachers to inspire students and expand learning. This can be achieved through smarter delegation, wiser finance, and deeper use of "thick" (e.g., detailed qualitative evaluative) information. The idea, overall, is to move from procedure-compliance to local, school-centered accountability to specific learning goals. To foster movement in this

direction will require a paradigm shift – from one of command and control and “physical production” (EMIS-visible) targets characteristic of the past and the present to a system geared to transparency, accountability, and effective school support. Doing so is difficult.

Education systems are bureaucracies while learning requires a human touch. Whether learning occurs or not depends on how well an education system can equip national and local authorities, schools, principals, and teachers in developing and sustaining school environments, teaching, and curricula conducive to learning. For this to occur, education systems must function in a way in which various relevant principal actors (elite politicians, education ministries and their specialist units, and so on) must be able deliver quality education for all in a way that places learning at the center. This, in turn, implies the centering of learning and perhaps the primary aim the education system, and the effective use of delegation, financial resources, and information, in addition to motivation and support. To move in this direction, we confront practical questions about the kinds of capabilities education stakeholders require and how such capabilities can be trained in specific settings. From the outset, this research sought to ascertain subnational variation in the public governance of education and in learning outcomes. For the time being that work is ongoing. What is clear, from the Vietnam case, and other countries, is that the quest for education systems more coherent for learning is an undertaking that requires attention to context and an interest in conditions under which delegation, finance, and information can support learning in specific national and local settings.

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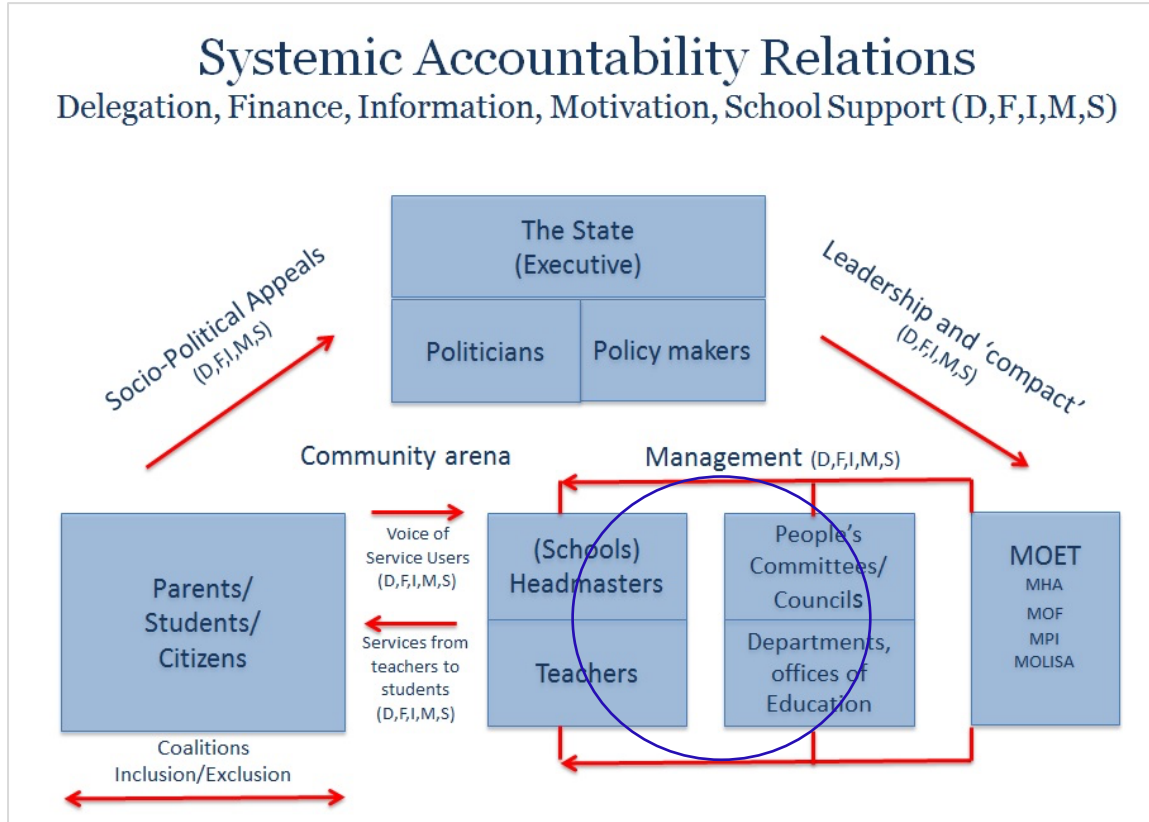
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## FIGURES

**Figure 1: Systemic Accountability Relations in Vietnam.**



Source: RISE Vietnam CRT

Figure 2. Subnational System Management: Stakeholders & Policy Design Elements

Leadership	Central Committee and Politburo of the Communist Party of Vietnam Government   National Assembly   State   Politicians						Leadership
		Delegation	Finance	Information	Motivation		
Compact	Vietnam's Ministry of Education and Training						Compact
		Delegation	Finance	Information	Motivation	School Support	
Management	Subnational Management Stakeholders' Including their 'vertical' and 'horizontal' relations						Management
		Province-, District- level People's Committees	Province, District-level Depts. Bureaus of Education	Dept/Bureaus of Education Functional Units/Staff	Province-, District- level, Dept. of Finance	Schools/ School Staff	
	Delegation						
	Finance						
	Information						
	Motivation						
	Support						
Community		Delegation	Finance	Information	Motivation	Support	Community
	Households and Community						

Figure 3

