

Building Shared Purpose in Systems

Insights From The Better Future Forum in Singapore (May 2026)

Background: Shared purpose is critical, but how do we build it?

Building shared purpose among people at all levels of the education ecosystem is perhaps the most powerful way to drive sustainable change for all students. This was the conclusion of the [RISE Programme](#) (2023), Brookings CUE's [Transforming Education Report](#) (2022) and the [Global Institute's own Missing Piece Report](#) (2024). But what is the shared purpose we should work towards? Who decides it and how? Can we instill that purpose in people? Can we build it in groups? What happens when we need to find shared purpose with those who disagree? At the Better Future Forum, a group of 100 leaders came together to make sense of these questions and surface the barriers and enablers we're all confronting in our efforts to orient systems to the shared purpose of developing all students holistically. The [session slides are available at this link](#).

Perspectives

- In order to build shared purpose across the system, **Najelaa Shihab**, Founder of Guru Belajar Foundation, reflected on how we must first **start with building shared purpose in the 'microsystem' around children**, made up of their parents, peers, teachers, and school. This means making a real effort to **involve and empower parents**, helping to grow their capabilities as parents to their own child, and also their abilities to contribute to stronger systems for all children.
- **Ignacio Ibarzabal** from the Institute for Education Evidence showed how civil society can strengthen the purpose and commitment of the government. Their movement for reading comprehension, [Argentinos por la Educación](#), used **reports, campaigns and 300+ celebrities** to get foundational literacy to the **top of the media agenda** in Argentina. Using this power, they secured commitments from 24 out of 24 of the country's governors and six of eight presidential candidates to support literacy as a government focus, leading to the allocation of an extra \$2.5 billion to this priority.
- Student Leadership Advisory Council member **Amina Khamzatova** shared her experiences as a student leader in Kazakhstan, working to build shared purpose among her peers and leaders across her school and local community around climate action. She talked of the need to truly listen to others as a way to build purpose with them, and that this process necessarily took time. Through time and listening, she learned it was possible to build trust and shared purpose with almost anyone.
- In India, [Dream a Dream](#) works directly with 10,000 children each year on a life skills programme, as well as working directly with governments in several Indian states with one aim: to shift mindsets across systems towards ensuring children *thrive*. In order to shift everyone from students to government officials towards this purpose for education, Dream a Dream's CEO **Suchetha Bhat** says that we must each begin with reflecting on our own purpose, and do the work we each need to do to ensure our own lenses align to that purpose.
- **Larisa Hovannisian**, CEO of Teach For Armenia, has managed over several years to build shared purpose with the national government and local communities that were initially sceptical of her organisation's vision and mission. She urged that we should "stop convincing and start

co-creating,” “find the shared fear and not the shared dream,” and “tolerate disagreement on the *how* in order to find alignment on the *why* and *what*”

- **Saurabh Singh** shared how Mantra4Change works across India in close partnership with multiple state, regional, and district governments as part of its Shikshagraha education movement, which is so far reaching 30,000 of India’s 1m schools. They build shared purpose with government by “co-creating with care,” “distributing the ability to solve” (rather than distributing solutions), letting go of their own identity to allow others to take credit, and creating inclusive spaces that enable parents, teachers, and others who are often excluded to actively participate in shared change efforts.
- In Peru, **Valeria Duarte** showed how **collective learning across all levels of a system can build shared purpose**. She led a collaborative process for diverse stakeholders across the Ancash region to co-create shared purpose, goals, and learning questions in which they could all engage as both practitioners and researchers. Diverse participants including students, teachers, school leaders, and local officials came together repeatedly over several months, building personal relationships, deepening trust, and growing shared purpose as they dug into data, set goals, and reflected on the progress being made across the district to achieve them.

Key Insights

1. **Shared purpose does not mean full agreement on approach, but alignment on the *why*** - As Larisa Hovannisian shared, Teach For Armenia made the most progress when they stopped trying to convince skeptics of their vision and approach, and instead began to co-create a vision both with communities and the national government. Rather than finding ways to disagree about how to improve education, they found a shared purpose in the mission of educating a new generation of Armenians to ensure the country has a thriving future.
2. **Shared purpose is grown through relationship-building, listening, and openness to learning** - Several presenters and participants highlighted this core lesson: that building shared purpose with diverse people at all levels of a system means taking the time to listen to them, connect with them as people, understand their interests and aims, and be open to cooperating with them rather than simply seeking to convince them. Saurabh from Mantra4Change shared how they center this ethos in their work with government officials across India.
3. **But it is also grown through challenging, pushing, influencing and staying true to our values** - At the same time, there was a push from others in the group, such as Suchetha at Dream a Dream, Larisa at Teach For Armenia, and Ignacio at Argentinos por la Educacion, that it was important to balance this effort to construct safe, relational spaces with a continued commitment to your own core purpose, in order to not be completely subsumed by the current logic of the system. Learning to walk the line of this push and pull is critical.
4. **Shifting the purpose of the system requires power, which can be built with people** - In Argentina, the government was not interested in education reform, even though the country had a literacy crisis, because it was not a priority for voters. Through a national campaign involving journalists and celebrities, Argentinos por la Educacion made it a priority for voters, at one stage turning the crisis into the #1 trending topic nationally on social media. Politicians were then motivated to make it a government priority.
5. **Systems designed to serve individual children are misaligned with the aim of shared purpose** - Eivind Lodemel of the IB reflected that our education systems are inherently individualistic, designed to support and develop the purpose, agency, awareness, connectedness, capability,

and wellbeing of individual students—rather than their shared purpose. If we took shared purpose seriously, might our systems have the goal of community or collective wellbeing and agency?

6. **Before building shared purpose, we must explore and overcome our own biases and limiting mindsets** - Often the biggest barriers to building shared purpose are our own limiting beliefs, biases, and mindsets. Sucheta Bhat explained that work to build shared purpose must begin with understanding our own identity and position within a community or hierarchy, and unlearning many of our beliefs about other people, our communities, and society. Only through this work can we be in a position to truly build shared purpose with others at all levels of systems.

Notable Quotes

- “You don’t build shared purpose by finding people who agree with you. You build it by finding people who share the why, deeply enough to survive disagreement on the how.” - **Larisa Hovannisian**, Teach For Armenia
- “Systems don’t fail because people aren’t working hard enough; they fail because people are pulling in different directions.” - **Mo Olateju**, Brookings Institution
- “If our interests are not aligned, they may create barriers for the change we are trying to create.” **Ignacio Ibarzabal**, Argentinos por la Educacion
- “My ability to explore and overcome my own biases is the biggest barrier to systems change.” - **Suchetha Bhat**, Dream a Dream
- “True shared purpose can be built over time through dialogue.” - **Soon Seng Chan**, Teach For Malaysia
- “Student-centered learning could have the unintended consequence of focusing just on the individual—versus focusing on learning oriented towards the collective good.” - **Eivind Lodemel**, UWC South East Asia
- “When we stopped trying to convince our skeptics about our vision and when we invited them to start building a shared vision together, they became our fiercest defenders. Purpose built together is harder to abandon.” - **Larisa Hovannisian**, Teach For Armenia

Many thanks to all the participants at the **Better Future Forum** who contributed to these insights. Visit the [Better Future Hub](#) to explore more insights and collective learning from Teach For All’s [Global Institute for Shaping a Better Future](#).

To share additional insights or join upcoming conversations and learning experiences on this topic, please reach out to alex.beard@teachforall.org.

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