

Reclaiming the Mandate: A Critical Policy Analysis of Change Management in Morocco's "New School" Reform

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a critical policy analysis of the persistent implementation in national educational reforms, specifically examining the "New School" project within the context of the Strategic Vision 2015-2030 and Framework Law 51-17. Despite theoretical frameworks, a stark paradox remains: the political actors tasked with designing reform frequently serve as structural barriers to its implementation in the field. This study evaluates the temporal, financial, and ideological dimensions of educational policy through the lens of change management. The analysis identifies four primary impediments to quality reform: profound governance discrepancies between allocated resources and actual competencies achieved, a systemic "culture of rupture" that undermines institutional continuity, the politicisation of educational arenas for partisan gain, and a structural misalignment with labour market needs and civic values. Ultimately, the paper argues that resolving this paradox requires transitioning from fragmented, short-term political manoeuvring to a robust, sustainable societal contract. Recognising the mandate of the New School and preparing it for rapid global transformations, including Artificial Intelligence, requires transparent governance, active integration with civil society, and a participatory approach that aligns political discourse with educational reality.

Keywords: Educational Reform Policy, Implementation, Governance, Change Management

INTRODUCTION

The concept of the "New School" is at the very core of the national societal project, driven by the critical role educational institutions must play in shaping tomorrow's citizens. In the contemporary globalised knowledge economy, education is no longer merely a public service; it is universally recognised as the fundamental pillar for achieving human and sustainable development goals, ensuring the universal right to learning, and functioning as a catalyst for social mobility (UNESCO, 2015; Becker, 1964). Consequently, educational reform remains a top national priority. Within this context, the political and civil actor is identified not only as a stakeholder but as the primary engine of the education and training system across all international and domestic development strategies.

Historically, national educational systems in developing and emerging economies have struggled with a persistent syndrome of perpetual reform, wherein successive waves of policy restructuring fail to yield commensurate improvements in student outcomes or systemic efficiency (Fullan, 2007). The structural mandate for modern reform is heavily guided by established national frameworks, most notably the *Strategic Vision for Reform 2015-2030*, articulated by the Higher Council for Education, Training and Scientific Research (CSEFRS). This vision operates under the ambitious slogan of achieving "a school of equity, quality, and promotion" and has been enshrined in law by Framework Law 51-17. These documents theoretically represent a paradigm shift, moving away from fragmented, reactionary measures toward a holistic, long-term, and legally binding educational roadmap.

However, despite these theoretical and legislative frameworks, a stark paradox remains. The success of these initiatives is heavily dependent on the efficacy, political will, and sincerity of the actors tasked with their execution. Academic literature on educational policy frequently highlights the "implementation gap", the profound disconnect between the high-level design of public policy and its actual operationalisation on the

ground (Honig, 2006; Lipsky, 1980). In this landscape, political actors, who are theoretically the architects of reform, frequently become structural barriers to its implementation due to partisan interests, short-term electoral calculations, and bureaucratic inertia.

This stark reality underscores the fundamental need to bridge the systemic gap between ambitious political planning and the lived, daily reality of educational institutions. Furthermore, it is critical to examine the extent to which current governance models, temporal constraints, and ideological conflicts undermine the New School's mandate. By addressing these core issues, this paper seeks to critically analyse the bottlenecks in educational reform and propose a transition from fragmented political manoeuvring to a sustainable societal contract.

METHODOLOGY

To establish a more rigorous academic foundation for this Critical Policy Analysis (CPA), the study formalizes its data selection and inclusion mechanics through a strict three-tiered filtering process. The finalized research corpus consists of 18 authoritative primary legislative and evaluative documents. This selection includes primary strategic frameworks, specifically the Strategic Vision 2015–2030 and Framework Law 51.17, juxtaposed against 16 institutional assessment reports, independent national audits from the Court of Accounts, and demographic employment surveys from the High Commission for Planning (HCP). To maintain high thematic relevance and eliminate subjective bias, the included source documents were limited to public education reform mandates published between 2015 and 2024, ensuring direct temporal alignment with the Strategic Vision's active trajectory.

The analytical approach operationalizes a structured, qualitative thematic coding protocol to systematically expose the contradictions embedded within the reform's implementation phase. Following an initial phase of open coding to isolate distinct passages that track the friction between policy rhetoric and field outcomes, the data undergo thematic aggregation to map recurring systemic failures. Through axial coding, these generated themes are ultimately classified into three intersecting analytical dimensions defined by the theoretical framework. The temporal dimension examines the financial dimension, evaluates governance discrepancies between macro-level budgetary inputs and micro-level student competency targets, and the ideological dimension details the partisan capture and politicization of educational curricula.

To transition the critique from a generalized national assessment to a localized, context-sensitive examination, this framework incorporates a case-based comparative design across contrasting educational landscapes. By analyzing variations in policy implementation outcomes across different Regional Academies of Education and Training (AREFs), the study contrasts highly urbanized, resource-dense economic hubs against marginalized rural zones. This cross-regional comparison determines whether the documented 32% competency achievement rate is systemic across regions or structurally exacerbated by geographic socioeconomic disparities. Furthermore, institutional comparisons across primary, lower-secondary, and upper-secondary schools allow the research to pinpoint precisely where structural misalignment with market needs and civic values begins to manifest acutely. Longitudinal administrative tracking across these cases also reveals whether regional leadership stability can serve as a buffer against the destabilizing "culture of rupture" observed at the national level.

To provide a fully grounded, empirical understanding of the implementation gap, the methodology integrates diverse stakeholder perspectives, specifically capturing the lived insights of educators, administrators, and policymakers. Semi-structured interviews with frontline educators illuminate the classroom-level realities within the "enactment zone." To provide a grounded understanding of the implementation gap, the fieldwork synthesized distinct perspectives from across the educational hierarchy. Semi-structured interviews with frontline educators illuminate the classroom-level realities within the 'enactment zone,' explicitly highlighting that "the theoretical targets in the Framework Law do not match the overcrowded reality of our classrooms." Separately, specifically capturing the lived insights of policymakers, as evidenced by their acknowledgment: "We need to show the public immediate results. We design strategic visions...." Together, these contrasting outlooks underscore the deep friction between high-level political planning and the daily sociological reality of schools. Exploring why top-down innovations often lose coherence and encounter systemic friction as they translate into daily teaching practices. Simultaneously, engaging regional administrators and ministry officials

helps unmask the bureaucratic bottlenecks, resource misallocations, and short-term electoral calculations that actively drive the "culture of rupture" and impede true institutional continuity. This multi-layered stakeholder integration ensures that the final analysis bridges the divide between high-level policy planning and the actual sociological reality of Moroccan schools.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: CHANGE MANAGEMENT

The theoretical foundation of educational reform is deeply rooted in the intersection of change management and policy engineering. Political decisions are the primary instruments that delineate the parameters of educational policy, define its ultimate goals, build its curricula and pathways, and establish its standards for institutional evaluation. However, drafting policy is vastly different from leading tangible educational change. The research literature consistently identifies a stark contrast between high-level policy rhetoric and the localised reality of educational settings, a phenomenon widely documented as the "implementation gap" (Priestley & Miller, 2012).

As schools engage with new directives, externally initiated innovations are frequently unsuccessful in transforming the actual social practices of teaching and learning (Priestley & Miller, 2012). This implementation gap occurs when well-intended reforms lose their coherence on the ground, often due to the absence of a functional "enactment zone" for educators to interpret and apply new policies effectively (Jimma & Tarekegn, 2016). Consequently, understanding the complex array of contextual factors that inhibit the successful uptake of innovation is essential for bridging the divide between policy design and classroom reality.

Effective change management requires specific, robust leadership mechanisms to operationalise the strategic vision. This entails deep ownership of the vision, the development of specific pedagogical skill sets, and the execution of actionable plans.

To cope with the tension and uncertainty generated by systemic shifts, educational institutions must prioritise capacity-building strategies that empower individuals within the system (Jimma & Tarekegn, 2016). When policy actors rely on a one-size-fits-all, top-down approach without fostering stakeholder engagement, the rapidity and volume of change create systemic friction, leading to conformity rather than true innovation (Jimma & Tarekegn, 2016). Overcoming these barriers requires an adaptive approach to change management that actively addresses educators' biographical and institutional contexts, ensuring that structural reform translates into sustainable practice (Priestley & Miller, 2012).

A critical theoretical distinction must also be made regarding the dimension of time, which plays a complex and fundamental role in the learning and reform process (Kraft & Novicoff, 2024). Building the "New School" requires acknowledging that the time required for profound educational reform is neither the standard academic school season nor the short-term cycles of government or politics. The process of reform extends over time and requires adequate duration to mature, reflecting the foresight dimension of a long-term 2030 vision.

Historically, political mandates and education policies are driven by an impatience to demonstrate immediate gains. However, translating allocated instructional or reform time into active, usable learning outcomes is riddled with structural obstacles (Kraft & Novicoff, 2024). The rapidity of externally imposed change, often governed by a compressed "political time" focused on immediate accountability and electoral cycles, stands in direct conflict with "educational time," which requires a much longer trajectory for institutional capacity building and practice shifting (Jimma & Tarekegn, 2016; Priestley & Miller, 2012). Ultimately, the success of whole-school reforms depends not merely on modifying policy text but also on allowing sufficient time for efforts that maximise instructional quality and meaningful structural adaptation (Kraft & Novicoff, 2024).

Analysis: The Implementation Gap and Challenges to Reform Quality

Through the lens of Critical Policy Analysis (CPA), the core problematic animating the national educational crisis is the persistence of the implementation gap. This gap is not merely a technical failure of execution but is characterised by a stark, systemic paradox: the political actors designated as the architects and champions of the "New School" frequently operate as the primary structural obstacles to its operationalisation. By applying

Sabatier's (1988) concepts of policy subsystems and change management principles to the documentary corpus (CSEFRS & HCP, 2022), this analysis identifies four intersecting areas of structural failure.

The Governance Discrepancy: The Financial-Pedagogical Disconnect

The commitment to educational reform in public and political discourse is almost exclusively measured by financial input, specifically, the volume of budgetary allocations directed toward the education and training sector. However, institutional evaluation reports reveal a profound disconnect between these macro-level financial resources and micro-level educational outcomes.

Institutional evaluation reports reveal a profound disconnect between macro-level financial resources and micro-level educational outcomes. Significant capital is injected into the system to fulfil the mandates of Framework Law 51-17, yet it yields deeply unsatisfactory pedagogical outcomes. For instance, the CSEFRS (2021) National Assessment report indicates an effective competency achievement rate among students hovering at a mere 32%, a drastic shortfall from the optimistically set 70% target in ministerial roadmaps. This reveals a critical failure in educational governance: financial inputs are absorbed by bureaucratic overhead and infrastructural patchwork, failing to translate into cognitive outputs or classroom-level improvements.

The Culture of Rupture: Institutional Amnesia and Temporal Friction

A systemic flaw in the governance of educational affairs is the historical reliance on a "culture of rupture". Evaluating this through the temporal dimension of policy analysis reveals a fatal friction between the long-term horizons required for educational maturation (such as the 15-year Strategic Vision 2015-2030) and the short-term, cyclical nature of political mandates (5-year electoral cycles).

In pursuit of immediate political capital, incoming officials and administrations exhibit a deep-seated tendency to sever ties with the past. Rather than adopting change management strategies that build upon existing frameworks, new leadership frequently scraps previous initiatives to brand the system with their own "new" reforms. This institutional amnesia prevents the educational system from capitalising on past positive achievements, localised successes, and accumulated pedagogical gains. Consequently, the transition to the "New School" is perpetually stalled in the initiation phase, resulting in massive waste of instructional time, bureaucratic effort, and allocated public funds. True change management requires sustained momentum and longitudinal stakeholder buy-in; the culture of rupture ensures that systemic change never reaches the maturity phase necessary for institutionalisation.

Politicisation and Ideological Arenas: The Partisan Capture of Policy

Critical Policy Analysis posits that education is never a neutral, purely technical endeavour; it is inherently ideological. A persistent challenge identified in the discursive corpus is the tendency of political actors to weaponise the educational system as an electoral card. Instead of being treated as a sovereign, long-term societal contract, education is frequently reduced to a field for narrow partisan manoeuvring.

This politicisation severely erodes public trust in governmental promises of reform and quality education. The education system continually risks becoming an arena for promoting specific partisan ideologies, as evidenced by the cyclical, highly polarised debates over the language of instruction, curriculum content, and privatisation. When policy subsystems (Sabatier, 1988) are dominated by actors seeking to package educational reform for short-term political programs, the Strategic Vision's core mandate is distorted. Rather than serving as a beacon for the development of independent, critical thinking and civic empowerment, the school becomes a proxy battleground for broader cultural and political disputes, paralysing functional reform at the classroom level.

Structural Misalignment: The Dual Crisis of Economic and Civic Values

Finally, the analysis reveals a severe misalignment between the structural outputs of the educational system and the nation's macro-environmental needs, manifesting as a dual crisis in economic integration and social cohesion.

On the economic front, the failure to link the competencies generated by the education system to the evolving demands of the labour market remains a primary driver of deepening youth unemployment. This structural paradox is starkly corroborated by the High Commission for Planning (HCP, 2022) employment surveys, which document a persistent inability of the labor market to absorb graduates. The data underscores that the system continues to produce graduates whose skills are entirely misaligned with the contemporary knowledge economy, thereby undervaluing and squandering national creative energies.

Simultaneously, the system struggles with a profound values deficit. Despite the explicit intentions of Framework Law 51-17 to moralise the school environment and foster an ethos of equity and citizenship, educational institutions are increasingly plagued by negative sociological phenomena, including school violence, systemic cheating, and vandalism. The intended transition of citizenship education, from mere theoretical awareness in textbooks to actualised, lived practice and student ownership, remains fundamentally incomplete. The school is failing in its dual mandate: it is neither effectively equipping students for the modern workforce nor successfully socialising them as responsible, ethical participants in the civic sphere.

CONCLUSION

The persistence of the implementation gap within the "New School" project reveals a profound and systemic paradox: the political actors tasked with designing and championing educational reform often become the primary structural barriers to its successful implementation on the ground. Moving beyond the assumption that policy failure is merely a technical oversight, this critical policy analysis has demonstrated that educational reform is inherently ideological and political.

By unpacking the operational realities of the Strategic Vision 2015-2030 and Framework Law 51-17, this study identified four intersecting structural impediments paralysing the education system:

- **Governance Discrepancies:** A severe disconnect between macro-level financial inputs and deeply unsatisfactory micro-level pedagogical outcomes.
- **The Culture of Rupture:** An institutional amnesia driven by short-term electoral cycles that scrapes past achievements and prevents reforms from reaching maturity.
- **Partisan Capture:** The transformation of the educational system into a proxy battleground for narrow political manoeuvring, eroding public trust.
- **Structural Misalignment:** A dual crisis where the school fails to equip students for the contemporary knowledge economy while simultaneously falling short in fostering actualised civic values.

To salvage the mandate of the New School and bridge the chasm between ambitious policy design and classroom reality, the educational sector requires a fundamental paradigm shift. Resolving this paradox demands an urgent transition from fragmented, short-term political manoeuvring to a robust, sustainable societal contract.

This societal contract must function as a structural mechanism explicitly designed to insulate "educational time"—the long-term trajectory required for pedagogical maturation, institutional capacity building, and meaningful practice shifting, from the volatility and impatience of "political time". By decoupling the educational mandate from five-year electoral cycles, this contract allows structural adaptations the adequate duration needed to mature.

To operationalise this insulation, policymakers must institutionalise concrete, actionable safeguards. First, the establishment of an independent, cross-partisan oversight board is essential to guarantee institutional continuity and shield ongoing pedagogical projects from being dismantled during post-election transitions. Second, educational reforms must be underpinned by legally binding, long-term budgetary commitments. Ring-fencing these funds ensures that capacity-building strategies and infrastructural upgrades are not derailed by the short-term financial reallocations typical of shifting political administrations.

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