

# Letter to a young minister: A few things I wish I knew when I came to office<sup>1</sup>

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A few months after becoming minister, I used to say that “no one who has never before been an education minister should ever become an education minister”. This silly joke wasn’t usually understood. But what I meant was clear to me: this is the type of job for which we are always unprepared.

How can someone who has the advantage of having had such an experience be useful to those who are initiating it? Maybe by listing a few recommendations that for the very same person, i.e., me, have proven to be more important than I thought.

## 1. Do no harm!

Unfortunately, many ministers come to the job without a clear plan. They are appointed by political reasons, to fill a post or fulfil an ambition. Some don’t have any experience in education, just general political convictions unrelated to educational issues. Many times, during my four-year-and-some-months tenure I’ve met new ministers of education who candidly confessed to be novices, just trying to understand their job. In the European Council of education ministers, which happened almost every other month, I’ve found many new ministers eager to learn from their colleagues. At other international venues, such as the OECD or Iberian-American meetings I’ve found colleagues with similar concerns.

Disappointingly, a few weeks later the same ministers who started their job very humbly and cautiously, had many definite and revolutionary ideas for education.

My advice for such cases may seem a bit arrogant: *either quit or try to do no harm*. Education is a very serious issue, a very particular one, and it’s very easy to be convinced of some radical ideas and pursue them without any caution. To make things worse, everybody, but literally everybody, acts as if they had definitive ideas on education, and supposedly good, righteous ones.

This is a puzzle to me to this day: how is it possible that so many people, including some believed to be experts in education, have so many nonsensical ideas and are so convinced of being on the right side without any consideration of the rich, extensive, controversial, and complicated history of education and education research?

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<sup>1</sup> In F.M. Reimers (ed.), *Letters to a New Minister of Education*, 2019.

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An education system is a system... I mean, an educational system is a complex network with interacting mechanisms and we cannot improve the general results just by tinkering with one component and disregarding its interaction with the other components. Sometimes, for instance, some ministers have tried to introduce more freedom in the system by giving more autonomy to schools and abandoning all types of testing and supervision. Sometimes, the ensuing results have been regretful: schools and teachers were not prepared, had no idea about how to manage a less defined curriculum and students' results plunged. Other times, education authorities have thought that computers would modernize schools and entice students to learn. Nothing wrong with this idea, but computers can be distracting and useless tools if there are no computer learning applications and no idea about how to use them in classrooms. A few countries had disastrous and expensive experiences in this regard.

So, if I may give you an advice, I'd say: don't invent if you are not sure of what you are doing, always doubt your beliefs, *do no harm*, manage the ministry, try to solve the most pressing issues, try to establish a dialogue with your partners – teachers, principals, parents, unions –, but don't be a slave of any of them. Visit schools, encourage students, encourage parents, dignify education. If you succeed in these apparently simple tasks, be sure you have already been an excellent minister. If you try to learn and do one or two things well, improving education just a bit, you have been an outstanding minister.

## **2. Don't believe the experts**

The moment you become minister, you will find new best friends everywhere. People whom you forgot existing will approach you with wonderful suggestions. Friends who haven't called you in ages will congratulate you and – by the way – ask you for a job for some very qualified but underappreciated relative. Very honest people who criticize all politicians as corrupt will approach you asking for a very natural favour that is simply unfair and discriminatory to other people. And they will naturally criticize you if you don't bend to their requests.

Worse than all are people who will encircle you because they have forever been at the ministry as highly-ranked officers and permanent advisers, or because they have always had business and partnerships with the ministry. These people never criticize you, and suddenly and naturally discover you are a much better person than your political competitors or your predecessors. They are experts in seduction. You can't rival their experience. You can't outsmart them. But you must contain them. And you can't do without them.

You need people who have been at the ministry, who know the system. But you will soon realize that some of them have different views. Always hear them. Always hear both sides. Try to think for yourself and keep hearing criticisms.

This is difficult. However, if you are cautious, you will achieve no daring goals, but will avoid costly mistakes.

### **3. Pay attention to data**

When you start your work, you may not be aware of the importance of many simple, but decisive statistics. You may be interested in improving the curriculum but pay no attention to dropout rates; you may be interested in improving school facilities but forget about curricular outcomes; you may be interested in improving teachers' salaries but forget about student retention.

When you approach your second year in office you start realizing the crucial importance of some basic statistics. They mean a lot to the education system and you are going to be judged by them.

Are student grade completion rates increasing? Are student dropout rates decreasing? Are students performing reasonably in PISA, TIMSS and similar assessments? Are school bullying and school violence occurrences being reduced? Are there more students finishing high school and enrolling in post-secondary and tertiary college programs?

At the same time, is the average number of students per class reasonable? Is the student-per-teacher ratio reasonable? Are general expenses appropriately contained?

To pay attention to data doesn't mean you should tinker with data, fiddle with them, or pressure statistical authorities to change results. It means two things: firstly, to make sure data are coherently and consistently presented, that some officer doesn't decide to suddenly alter criteria in such a way that results look much different; secondly, that you should pay attention to individual policy changes that are going to affect data results and the evolution of the main indicators. Indicators are just that: indicators – they don't represent the whole reality. But often they mean a lot, they may mean more than what you think, and bad results are costly.

### **4. Choose to be a minister of students' future**

This is my final and maybe more important advice. If you are a minister of education your main duty is with the nation: students' training and students' future. However, those are not the most vocal voices in education. Unions, parents, civil servants, political parties or pressure groups are much more active, much better heard and much better multiplied by the media.

If you have teachers' unions fighting for better salaries and a shorter working schedule, be sure the slogans will be noble: we need "to dignify the teaching profession", schools and teachers need time to "prepare well their classes and to contact students", or teachers need "opportunities to help students become active citizens". All these noble slogans may be true in a substantial sense. But you must judge: are teachers really badly paid, as it happens in many countries? Will the reduction in class hours allocation be used in favour of students' preparation?

I'd bet that 90% of the times 90% of the claims, although they may be fair, are not about students. Yet, students should be your major concern. It's easy to be fooled, and your duty is to think about those who are not voicing their opinion.

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If you think you have just wasted your time reading this simple list of advice, maybe you will find time for us to talk again when you leave office. I wish you the best. Better yet: I wish your country's youth the best!

## References

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