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## Laying the Groundwork for Successful Educational Reform

In today's world, opinion appears to be unanimous that developing and modernizing human resources is the basis for positive change in any society. The question now is: how can nations develop the skills and capabilities of individuals to implement change? Surely the answer varies from society to society, depending on different needs and development philosophies. But there is consensus on the fact that the education system must shoulder a major part of the development process. A country that provides systematic and free education to its people reflects the vision, aspirations and philosophy of society. Hence, reforming society often starts with reforming the education system.

The main stimulants behind decisions to reform education systems are performance evaluations of them and their ability to respond to the expectations

and needs of society. This is exactly what happened in the United States in the 1980s after the National Commission for Excellence in Education released its now famous report "A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform". The 1983 report showed the U.S. needed to initiate drastic reform of its education system or watch the very fabric of its society erode.

Some societies may simply attempt to imitate reform initiatives carried out in other countries, without clearly justified objectives for change. As a result, these initiatives are weak, groundless and only further burden already struggling educational systems.

These days, there is a surge in education reform efforts in many countries that suffered political and economic plights that exhausted their energies, depleted their resources and distracted their policies away from social advance. These countries realized late

that they should change their educational systems to be more sound and competitive, as there is little room for weak countries in the modern world.

The experiences of nations in implementing educational reforms vary, as do the degrees of success in attaining the desired results. However, we can identify the following four factors as key:

### **1. Aware leadership**

Reform projects must stem from political decisions which bestow on them the legitimacy, grants, and material and moral support necessary for success and sustainability. This support also turns the educational reform issue into a national issue and creates collective responsibility.

Individual or institutional attempts at educational reform can not succeed if they are not supported by a political leadership that is aware of the feasibility and importance of investment in human resources.

The production and development of knowledge necessary for the cultural and economic progress of a society can only be achieved by qualified and skilled individuals who are keen to preserve the cultural identity and heritage of their nation. These individuals must be proud of their country's norms and values, be ready and willing to communicate with other people, and be open-minded and capable of benefiting from other nations' experiences. These are the types of people who can implement educational reforms.

## 2. Society support

Societal participation in educational reform projects creates needed public understanding of the reasons, importance and objectives of reform. The reform, in turn, should be in harmony with society's needs, visions and expectations for a better education for its children, which is vital to making members of the public enthusiastic supporters of change. On the contrary, dealing with reform projects only at the level of educational specialists can provoke a great deal of controversy about the feasibility and importance of the project. In such situations, voices of anger may be heard from parents who will doubt the suitability and importance of such projects for the future of their children.

Concealing information regarding reform projects either intentionally or for any other reason will only serve to spread rumors among the public and create a situation of anarchy -- and eventually undermine the reform project.

Popular support for reform projects is a crucial element for success and such support can not be secured if the public does not feel that it is genuinely involved and that its support is necessary and required.

## 3. Clear reform plans

Educational reform can not be implemented with mere good

intentions. It can not be achieved by drafting strategic plans that are filed away in the desk drawers of senior officials.

Education reform requires clear plans that reflect society's visions and future expectations. Reform should entail practical, applicable and flexible plans that can be changed and amended whenever required and that are subject to revision and review.

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Reform plans should reflect a clear and common vision among all persons involved in their planning and implementation. There should be clear answers to questions such as:

- What do we really want?
- How can we implement such desires?
- How can we know that we have achieved what we sought?

Any ambiguity in answers to such questions can turn reform plans into measures for wasting energy and diluting efforts.

## 4. Qualified educational staff

No reform project can have meaning or produce results without well-trained staff able to translate plans from expressions on paper

into tangible realities.

A lack of qualified staff is one of the main problems facing most reform projects. There is no doubt that intensive training programs with a direct relationship to the educational reform objectives can secure the human resources required for implementation. People involved in the project should be skilled, enthusiastic and have a strong sense of patriotic spirit.

Unfortunately, in Arab societies we sometimes lack a sense of team spirit and the concept of individual work prevails. But however high the skills and capabilities of personnel involved in education reform may be, no substantial progress will be achieved if there is no sense of cooperation and collective work. Many educators believe that younger staff can play an important role in reform projects, as their way of thinking is not shaped by years of traditional practices that impose restrictions on creativity and innovation. But as there is a need to mobilize all experience and energy, senior staff should also be involved in reform projects. Making senior staff a part of the reform project is one of the best ways to absorb possible anger at change, to transform resistance into support, and to convert traditionalism into modernism. Yet bringing senior staff into the reform fold requires them to obtain skills and capabilities relevant to the implementation processes.

It is totally false to believe that reform projects should start from zero, as no reform project starts in a vacuum. Senior educators can not be excluded; the real challenge is to free human energies from the captivity of traditionalism into the spacious horizon of modernism.

The future of young generations should be entrusted to honest and confident people who have the right blueprints for building a better tomorrow.