

Practice Brief

Designing Blended Continuous Professional Development for School Leaders at Scale

Lessons from the INCREASE programme, Kenya
(2022-2026)



2026

About this practice brief

The purpose: To distil the design and implementation principles behind the INCREASE programme's blended continuous professional development (CPD) trajectory for school leaders, and the lessons it holds for school leadership in implementing competency-based education (CBE), so that both can inform future government-led CPD at national scale.

Audience: Ministry of Education, Teachers Service Commission (TSC), semi-autonomous government agencies, and other providers of CPD for school leaders and teachers in Kenya and the region.

When to use: When initiating a new blended CPD offering for school leaders or teachers or reviewing an existing one for scale-up or institutionalisation.

Main messages

- Effective blended CPD is designed for its context, not copied from templates. Every major design decision in INCREASE, from app-based delivery to cohort scheduling, traces back to evidence about the target group and was revisited after each pilot cohort.
- School leaders are experienced professionals. CPD works when it addresses a felt need, builds on experience, when knowledge is transformed into practice immediately, and is recognised in the career architecture.
- Self-paced app-based learning carries the core content consistently across counties; in-person supported peer sessions, localised and deepened it. Equity safeguards must be designed in, not added later.
- Facilitator capacity and workload are design variables. Systematic trainer preparation and automation of routine tasks are what keep quality stable as cohorts grow.
- Enhancing existing government systems, rather than building parallel ones, is the fastest route to institutionalisation. Evaluation at every level turns each cohort into an improvement cycle.
- Developing school leaders is a high-leverage route to classroom change: gains in leaders' capacity reached teachers through better resourcing, stronger collaborative cultures and school-based CPD systems.

Introduction and background

Implementing National Curriculum Reforms Through App-Based Learning for School Leaders in Secondary Education (INCREASE) a five-year programme (2022-2026) of the Ministry of Education and VVOB, was implemented by the Kenya Education Management Institute (KEMI) and accredited by the TSC. Through the blended course, Effective School Leadership for Junior Schools (ESL4JS), delivered via the KEMI eLearning App combined with in-person peer sessions, the programme strengthened the capacity of school leaders at junior schools to lead the implementation of CBE. The programme defined junior school leaders as heads of institutions (commonly referred to as the headteachers), deputy headteachers and senior teachers in primary schools. By 2026, the course had reached over 1,000 school leaders, about one third of them women, across 21 counties, including eight arid and semi-arid (ASAL) counties, in three cohorts. Participant satisfaction averaged above 90 per cent across cohorts, and KEMI now hosts, moderates and further develops the platform independently. A parallel track with CEMASTEIA applies the same blended model to gender-responsive STEM teaching.

INCREASE applied the ADDIE instructional design framework (Analyse, Design, Develop, Implement, Evaluate) documented in the ACSL practice brief on blended school leadership PD in Africa (2024) and the Blend-on guide. This brief captures what five years of design, delivery, monitoring and evaluation, including a national training needs assessment (TNA), a Most Significant Change (MSC) study on school leaders' CPD contribution to teacher efficacy and a cost effectiveness study on understanding Cost-Effectiveness of Blended CPD for School leaders in Kenya, have taught us about designing blended CPD that is effective, equitable and scalable.

Five design principles for blended CPD

Principle 1:

Design for the context, and keep redesigning as evidence comes in

Instructional design models describe a process, not a product. The defining design choice in INCREASE, delivering the core content through a self-paced course on a mobile app, came directly from the 2022 TNA of 759 school leaders: most owned and used a smartphone or tablet while far fewer had reliable access to a laptop, and around half had never completed an online course in any field. A laptop-based or fully facilitated online course would have excluded much of the target group; a smartphone-first, self-paced course met school leaders where they already were. The TNA equally shaped the retention of clustered face-to-face sessions (the preferred mode, and the vehicle for peer exchange), the staggering of the course over time, and dedicated ICT familiarisation before content delivery.

Context analysis does not end at design. Cohort 1 ran from August to February, clashing with national examinations and offering no school holiday windows for face-to-face events; later cohorts were re-timed around the school calendar. Nor was the blend itself fixed: three trajectory variants were piloted across cohorts, each adjusting the balance between app-based self-study, live online sessions and in-person workshops, to identify the most cost-effective and inclusive configuration. The lesson is twofold: treat analysis-phase findings as binding design constraints and treat every cohort as a new analysis opportunity.

Principle 2:

Develop a context-specific learning trajectory

School leaders are experienced professionals whose learning is most effective when it is relevant, practical, and responsive to their professional realities. The course responded to a concrete, felt need, since the TNA showed that most school leaders did not feel equipped to mentor teachers on the CBE framework, competency-based assessment or learner-centred approaches.

Experience: clustered peer sessions and communities of practice made school leaders' own experience a learning resource, which the TNA confirmed works best when participants are organised in geographic proximity.

Application: bridging activities required leaders to try out short exercises in their own schools between sessions and discuss the results with peers, closing the loop between knowledge and practice.

Self-direction: self-paced modules let leaders learn at their own rhythm around school responsibilities.

Motivation was designed with the same care. The TNA showed the strongest motivator was the desire to improve competencies and become a better leader, while a fully paid course by itself was the weakest; cost and time were the main barriers. INCREASE therefore combined subsidised participation with recognition that matters professionally: TSC accreditation, certificates earned through assessment rather than attendance, and alignment with the TSC career progression guidelines that make relevant PD a condition for advancement.

Principle 3:

Standardise the core content through self-paced learning; localise the practice in person

A national CPD programme lives or dies by fidelity of implementation. When all content is facilitator-delivered, quality varies with each facilitator, and that variation grows with every county added. In INCREASE the self-paced app component carries the core curriculum: every school leader, whether in Mandera or Mombasa, works through the same interactive modules, assessments and standards. Consistency is built into the modality itself. In-person and live online sessions then do what only they can do: contextualise content, build peer networks and rehearse practice. This division of labour allowed a small national team to deliver a coherent programme across 21 counties and keeps further scaling affordable.

Blended delivery also carries known equity risks: digital inequities by gender, age and geography, and disengagement driven by technophobia. INCREASE managed these through structured onboarding and ICT training before the course, delocalised in-person sessions to limit travel, access to online and offline materials, and participation monitoring so county offices could follow up on leaders falling behind. The reduced mobility requirements enabled participation from eight ASAL counties and supported gender-balanced participation. Equity safeguards belong in the design, not in the troubleshooting.

Principle 4:

Invest in facilitators, and manage their workload as a design variable

INCREASE was built on a strong foundation: KEMI's trainers brought years of experience in facilitating leadership development and deep familiarity with school leaders' realities, and that expertise remained the backbone of the programme. What the cohort monitoring made clear is that blended delivery asks facilitators to apply this expertise in new ways: moderating self-paced learning, sustaining engagement in live online sessions and connecting the two with in-person work. INCREASE therefore invested in extending trainers' repertoire through structured preparation, dry runs and coaching, and trainers grew visibly more confident and effective with each cohort. The lesson is to treat facilitator development as a continuous trajectory that starts before the first cohort and honours the capacity trainers already have, rather than as a one-off induction.

Workload was addressed just as deliberately. Routine tasks, such as tracking progress, grading standard assessments, answering repeated technical questions and chasing inactive participants, were automated or absorbed elsewhere: auto-marked quizzes and completion tracking in the learning management system, standard operating procedures for live sessions, structured WhatsApp groups for peer support and first-line troubleshooting, dashboards giving facilitators and KEMI near real-time participation data, and dedicated ICT support teams. This freed facilitator time for pedagogical

support, which is the part that cannot be automated. Across cohorts one conclusion held: the quality of facilitation and engagement design, not the delivery mode itself, determines the effectiveness of blended CPD, which argues for professionalising blended facilitation with clear standards and continuous capacity building.

Principle 5:

Embed in government systems and evaluate at every level

INCREASE was designed so that the government agency led the training from start to finish, a factor the research on school leaders' CPD contribution to teacher efficacy identified as key to. Rather than building a parallel platform, VVOB and KEMI enhanced KEMI's existing learning management system with reporting, analytics and forum functionality, improvements KEMI part-funded from its own resources and that now benefit educators beyond the programme. The App is a KEMI tool on a KEMI-managed platform, delivered under KEMI's leadership development mandate, accredited by the TSC and aligned with the TSC policy framework for CPD and its leadership standards; when donor funding ends, nothing needs handing over because nothing was ever outside government hands. Coordination across MoE, TSC, KEMI and county offices worked, but still needs strengthening, notably in harmonising CPD calendars across agencies and streamlining approval processes for digital content.

Continuous evaluation made this ownership meaningful. Following the Kirkpatrick framework extended with a participation level, monitoring covered participation, reaction, learning, behaviour and results, and findings fed into redesign between cohorts. The MSC study with 642 school leaders across two cohorts, followed by process tracing in 25 schools and focus group discussions with 145 teachers in junior schools, evidenced improved knowledge, confidence, attitudes and skills among leaders and traced how these reached teachers. Evidence of this kind enables the ministry to institutionalise the learning modality with confidence rather than assumptions.

What INCREASE teaches about school leadership for CBE

Beyond how to design blended CPD, the programme generated lessons on the substance: what school leadership means in a curriculum reform, and what makes leader development translate into classroom change.

Curriculum literacy comes before instructional leadership. The TNA showed that the majority of school leaders could not confidently mentor teachers on the CBE framework, competency-based assessment, career pathways or learner-centred approaches. A leader cannot lead a reform they do not master; CPD for school leaders in a reform context must build their own curriculum understanding first, and only then their capacity to support teachers.

Developing school leaders is a high-leverage strategy for improving teacher effectiveness. The MSC study identified three pathways through which improvements in school leaders' practices translated into benefits for teachers. First, improved planning and budgeting enabled schools to

mobilise resources and strengthen ICT infrastructure for CBE. Second, a stronger collaborative school culture involving teachers, parents and the wider community enhanced teacher motivation and professional autonomy. Third, stronger pedagogical support through school-based CPD systems such as mentoring, coaching and inter-departmental collaboration improved teachers' professional practice, with these changes being confirmed by teachers themselves.

Institutionalise distributed leadership so change outlives the individual. The follow-up study, six months to one year after completion, found knowledge and practices trickling down to teachers in most schools, but changes that depended on the leader's personal vision or individual skills proved vulnerable, for instance when leaders were transferred. Durable change requires distributed leadership and institutionalised school-based CPD structures, so that improvement is a property of the school, not the person.

Build decentralised capacity for scale. The same study recommended developing a pool of trained school leaders as master trainers at county level to support peer-to-peer training, a decentralised scale-up mechanism that also matches the TNA finding that peer learning works best in proximity clusters.

Recommendations

For the Ministry of Education

Institutionalise blended delivery as a core modality through the National Teacher Education and Training Policy, school leadership development frameworks, sector plans and budgets, transitioning it from a project-based innovation to a sustainable, policy-anchored practice.

Champion digital inclusion by investing in connectivity, device access, offline content and zero-rated data arrangements, so that ASAL and marginalised counties participate on equal terms.

Strengthen inter-agency coordination: harmonise CPD calendars with the school calendar and across agencies, and streamline approval processes for digital learning content.

For the Kenya Education Management Institute (KEMI)

As the mandated provider, KEMI is best placed to institutionalise what the programme built. Its mandate should be secured legislatively so that these capabilities outlast any single programme.

Anchor KEMI's role as the lead provider of blended leadership CPD in its institutional mandate, so that the capacity, standards and content built through INCREASE are sustained by legislation and mandate rather than by project funding.

Institutionalise blended design capacity and set digital CPD standards and accreditation criteria, so quality is consistent across providers; commission a training needs assessment before every new design and evaluate at all levels from participation to results.

Budget facilitator development as a multi-cohort trajectory with dry runs, coaching and standard operating procedures;

monitor facilitator workload per cohort and automate routine tracking, grading and communication.

Maintain and expand CBE-aligned leadership content on government-owned learning platforms rather than parallel systems, building towards a national repository of accredited CPD content.

For the Teachers Service Commission (TSC)

Link blended leadership CPD to the career architecture: certificates earned through assessment, TSC accreditation, and recognition within career progression and appraisal frameworks.

For CPD providers, development partners and other stakeholders

Co-design with the mandated government institution inside its existing systems from day one; act as a catalyst, not an operator.

Design for adult learners: anchor content in felt professional needs, standardise the core in self-paced modules, use bridging activities for application in the leader's own school, and organise peer learning in proximity clusters, with equity safeguards built in from the start.

Pair leader development with structures that make it stick: distributed leadership, school-based CPD systems (mentoring, coaching, peer learning) and county-level pools of school leader master trainers for decentralised scale-up.

Conclusion

INCREASE shows that blended CPD for school leaders can be delivered consistently and equitably at national scale, and that investing in school leaders pays off in teacher practice, provided the design starts from evidence, is context-specific, manages facilitation deliberately and lives inside government systems.

Taken together, the recommendations above chart how the Ministry, KEMI, the TSC and their partners can turn a project-based innovation into a durable, government-owned modality for developing the school leaders on whom curriculum reform depends.

