

## **School Aggregators: What are they and how can they be supported to strengthen the global school ecosystem?**

*The Jacobs Foundation and the Aga Khan Foundation, with strategic input from OECD, engaged Dalberg Advisors to conduct a rapid landscape of school aggregators to better understand their various functions and identify best practices and potential opportunities for supporting their effectiveness and impact.*

School aggregators play a crucial role in supporting the school community to access opportunities, knowledge, and resources beyond the reach of their respective schools. They have the potential to advocate for policy reform, provide a peer-learning community for educators with relevant knowledge resources, support professional development, and ultimately contribute to improving student learning outcomes.

While there is a general consensus among practitioners that aggregators have a key role to play in strengthening the global school ecosystem, there is a shared view that they can be further harnessed to amplify their effectiveness and impact. This piece sheds light on what education funders and policymakers can do at a global level to further accelerate the impact of global school aggregators.

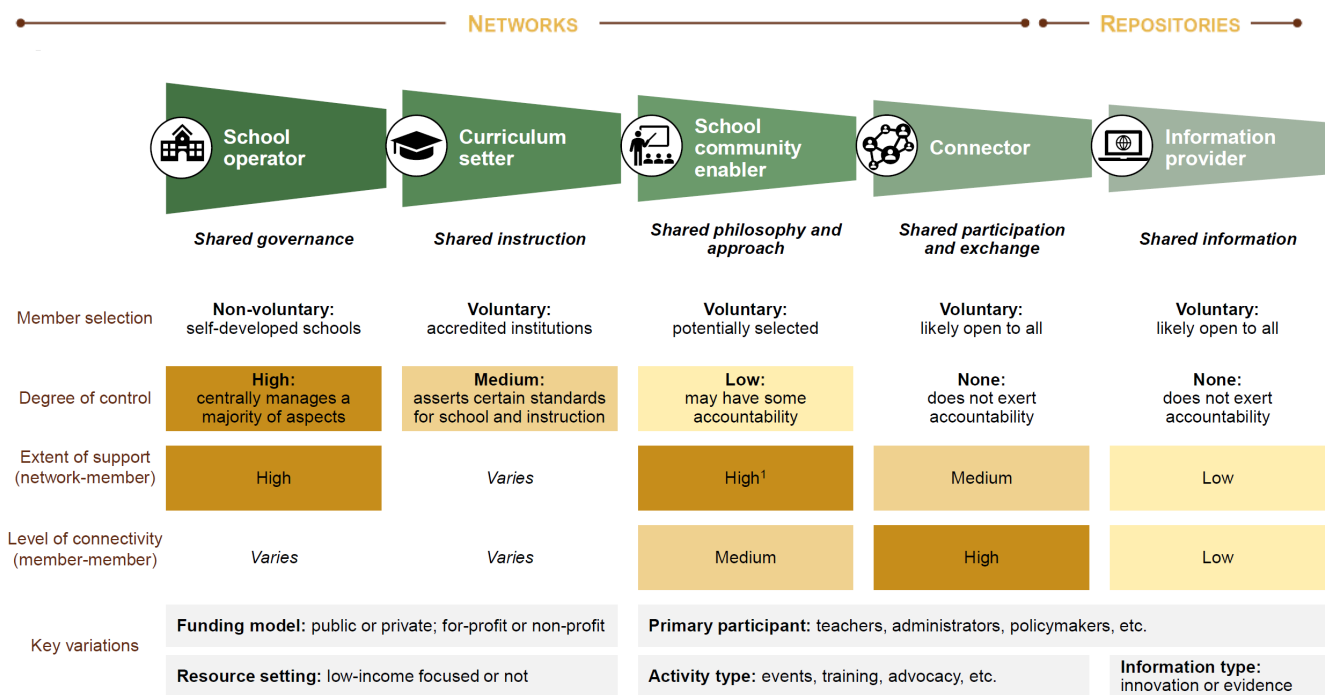
### **Understanding the landscape, typologies, and roles of school aggregators**

According to Dalberg's analysis, a **school aggregator** is a formal or informal entity that engages school-level actors at a global, regional, national or sub-national level. This is done according to common school characteristics or a shared objective with the aim of establishing knowledge and practice communities among school level audiences. The definition is intentionally quite broad and encompasses school networks as well as repository mechanisms systematically showcasing innovative or evidence-based practices.

The landscape analysis groups aggregator organizations into five "typologies" and introduces the following terms: School Operator, Curriculum Setter, School Community Enabler, Connector and Information Provider: (1) School Operators focus their work on the management of a network of schools with a defined common approach and shared resources. (2) Curriculum Setters influence and mandate a defined pedagogy or an established curriculum and perform examinations against that benchmark through 'franchises'.

(3) School Community Enablers generate and share knowledge/approaches to strengthen the school community while (4) Connectors facilitate the exchange of information and ideas on shared platforms. Finally, the core focus of (5) Information Providers is offering access to systematized knowledge.

These typologies typically vary based on issues such as member selection process, degree of control, extent of support, and level of connectivity (see table below).



Note: (1) Typically, support entails the creation of knowledge and implementation of practices

**Figure 1: Global school aggregators typologies**

The analysis revealed that most school aggregators cover a broad scope of topics, with curriculum and pedagogy being the most common while fewer focus on assessments or EdTech. Across K-12, the pre-primary level is under-represented and might merit increased focus in the future. In terms of audiences and participants, teachers are the stakeholders most often supported.

The review also found that large aggregators see trade-offs between expanding their reach and maintaining key aspects of their value proposition, including their degree of control and level of engagement with and among members. This points to the opportunity for aggregators to engage intermediary or local partner organizations to scale more effectively, which can also help in contextualizing to new geographies or settings.

In addition, aggregators may be able to provide additional capacity building support for implementation of effective practices—a major pain point for education practitioners that has been further exacerbated by the COVID pandemic. Finally, there is also an opportunity for more systematic knowledge exchange among school leaders as there currently isn't much of a focus on their specific needs across school networks and repositories.

## **Exploring avenues for harnessing school aggregators to amplify their impact**

The insights from the analysis identified five concrete areas for consideration when thinking about how to support school aggregator entities most effectively:

### ***1. Create a mechanism to support partnerships and best practice-sharing among aggregators.***

Aggregator entities have shared that they would benefit from increased knowledge-sharing on best practices, especially as aggregators have developed different approaches to common challenges. For example, they all must navigate the complexities of growing without diluting the strengths of central support and impacting relationships among members. They also have to develop ways of understanding and assessing their own impact and building effective fundraising strategies. To achieve this, each entity has developed a diverse set of best practices in terms of agility, evidence-based documentation, sourcing of innovative approaches, dissemination practices, communication for fundraising, etc. Moreover, aggregators of different sizes, typologies, and geographies can benefit from working together to maximize their impact. For example, Information Providers would benefit from partnering with other types of aggregators to promote their knowledge for increased uptake.

While many organizations regularly collaborate on an informal basis, some structured, regular processes for bringing them together to facilitate targeted joint learning would be beneficial.

### ***2. Build capacity to inform policy at the regional and country level.***

Aggregators that have successfully impacted policy work flexibly across the political hierarchy, adapt their focus to policymakers' immediate needs and leverage influential local organizations. For example, Zero Investment Innovations for Education Initiatives (ZIIIEI) in India signs Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) with stakeholders across many levels, builds individual relationships with the education officials, and invites them to its national and state-level events to recognize their support.

The European Schoolnet focuses on policymakers' top-of-mind issues by having member ministries collectively define the thematic focus and purpose of the working groups (e.g., Digital citizenship, STEM education). Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) builds long-term relationships with and disseminates its evidence to Head Teacher Associations, and other similar unions that work closely with the government officials.

***3. Increase focus on under-represented areas such as school leaders, pre-primary education, and EdTech.***

There is an opportunity for more dedicated knowledge exchange for/amongst school leaders and on topics such as pre-primary education, assessments and EdTech. An evidence review by Global School Leaders demonstrated that training school leaders adds ~5% to the school budget while increasing student learning by 30%. There is an opportunity to harness the untapped potential in this and other under-represented areas by supporting aggregators to prioritize and reflect these topics in their activities and learning agendas.

***4. Facilitate lessons sharing and engagement among private and public schools.***

While many of the aggregators cater to both public and private schools, some of the largest ones are limited to private schools (e.g., Eco-schools and Global Schools Forum). Given the large size of the public school system in most countries, there is an opportunity to create meaningful opportunities for engagement of public school entities. Some of the aggregators interviewed such as SPARK have expressed interest in expanding their aggregator to public schools as a means to bridge the divide between public and private schools.

***5. Develop framework and dissemination standards for evidence-based practice.***

Information providers currently use various formats to organize and share knowledge on good practices. However, there is no standardization of these formats making it impractical or challenging to access by teachers and other school level actors. Establishing a common and widely accepted framework can address these gaps and help teachers and schools find and ultimately adopt evidence-based and innovative approaches.

The insights presented here offer an exciting opportunity for funders and policymakers to reflect and determine how they can engage strategically with school aggregators. The partners on this report hope that these recommendations can serve as a source of inspiration for those working with school aggregators to strengthen the global school ecosystem.