

Coping With Very Weak Primary Schools: Towards ‘Smart Intervention’ in Dutch Education Policy

Presentation for the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)
conference:

“Effective Governance From the Centre”

First GCES Thematic Conference, The Hague, Netherlands, 21-22 November 2011

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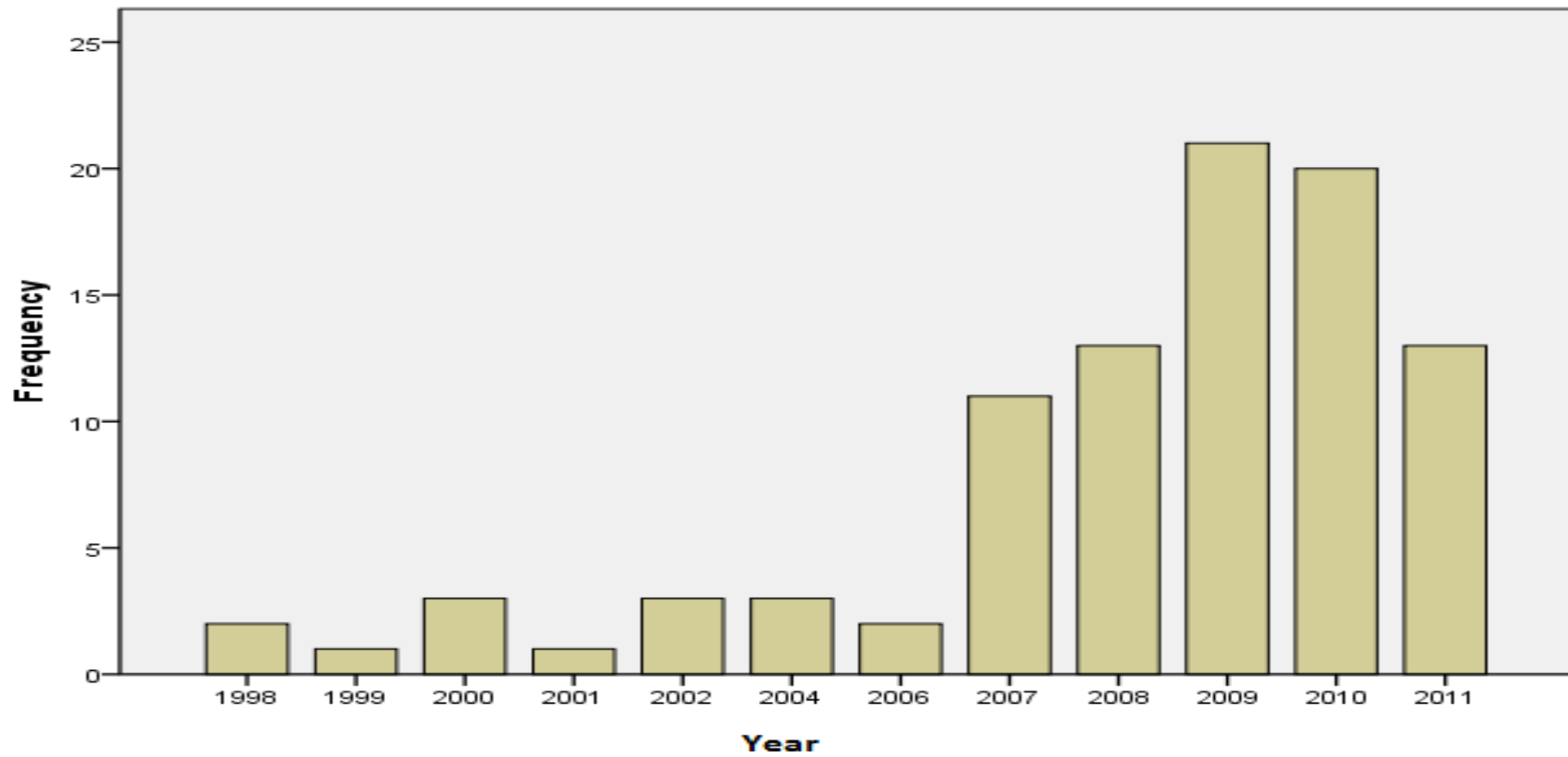
Few questions to start with...

- What would you do:
 - if you were a parent who finds out that the school your child is attending is actually assessed as very weak?
 - if you were a local alderman and note that a number of schools in your city are (again) assessed as very weak?
 - if you were a Minister of Education and experience growing pressure to intervene in very weak schools while keen to respect the autonomy of schools?

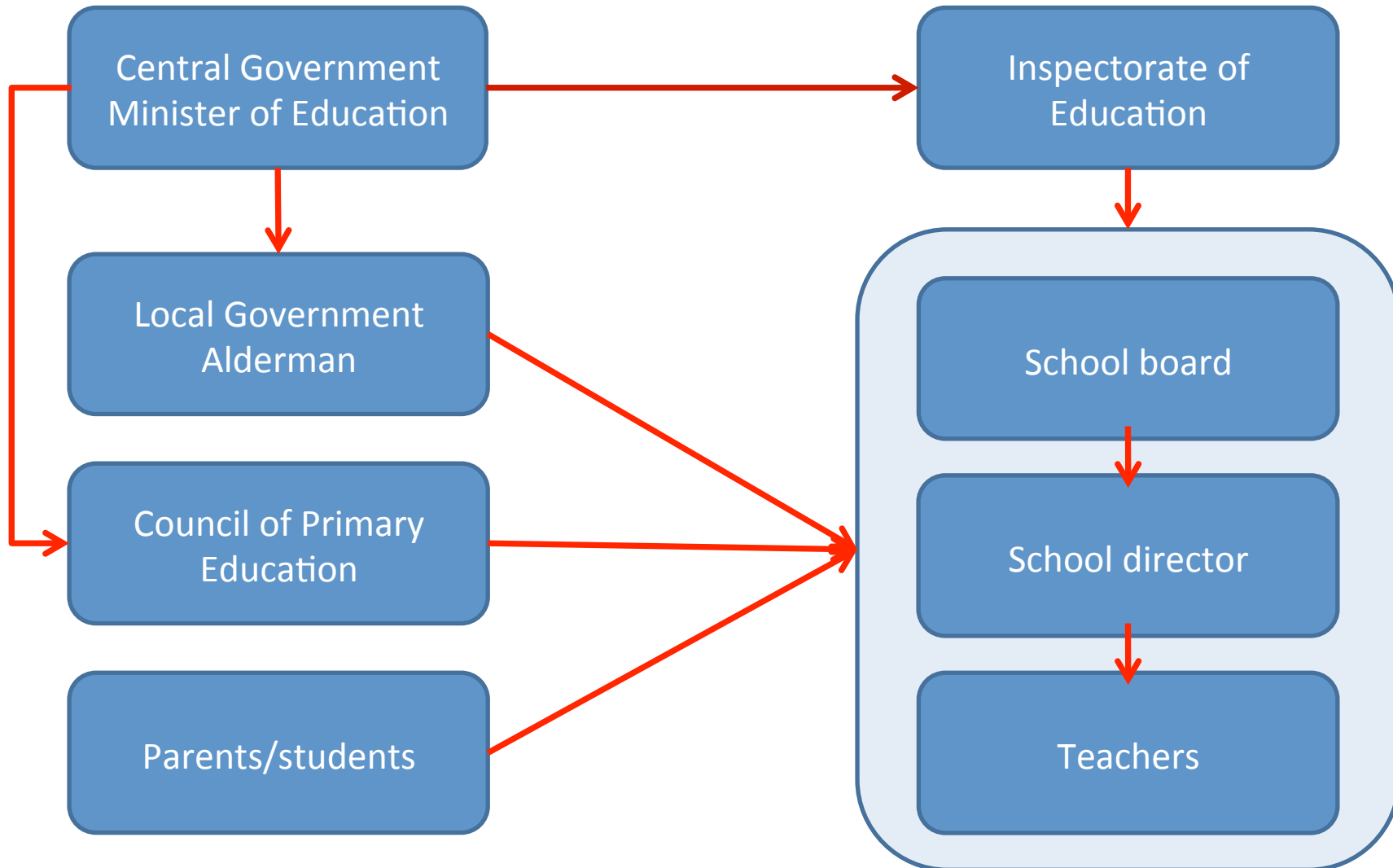
Outline

1. Policy context regarding 'very weak schools'
2. Story behind 'best practice' policy approach
3. Empirical analysis of five very weak schools
4. System dynamics: vicious & virtuous circles
5. Challenges for policy makers

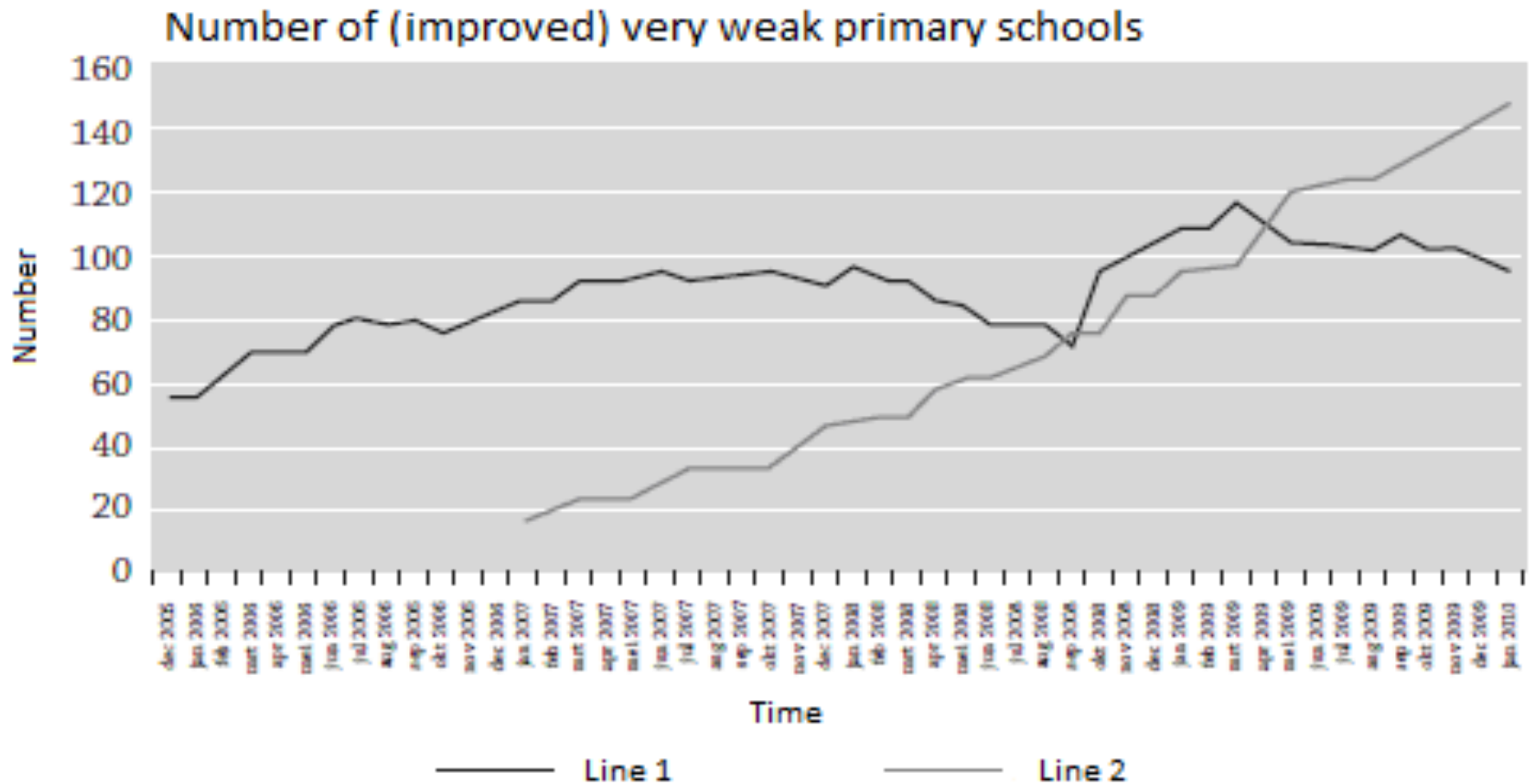
Policy & Media



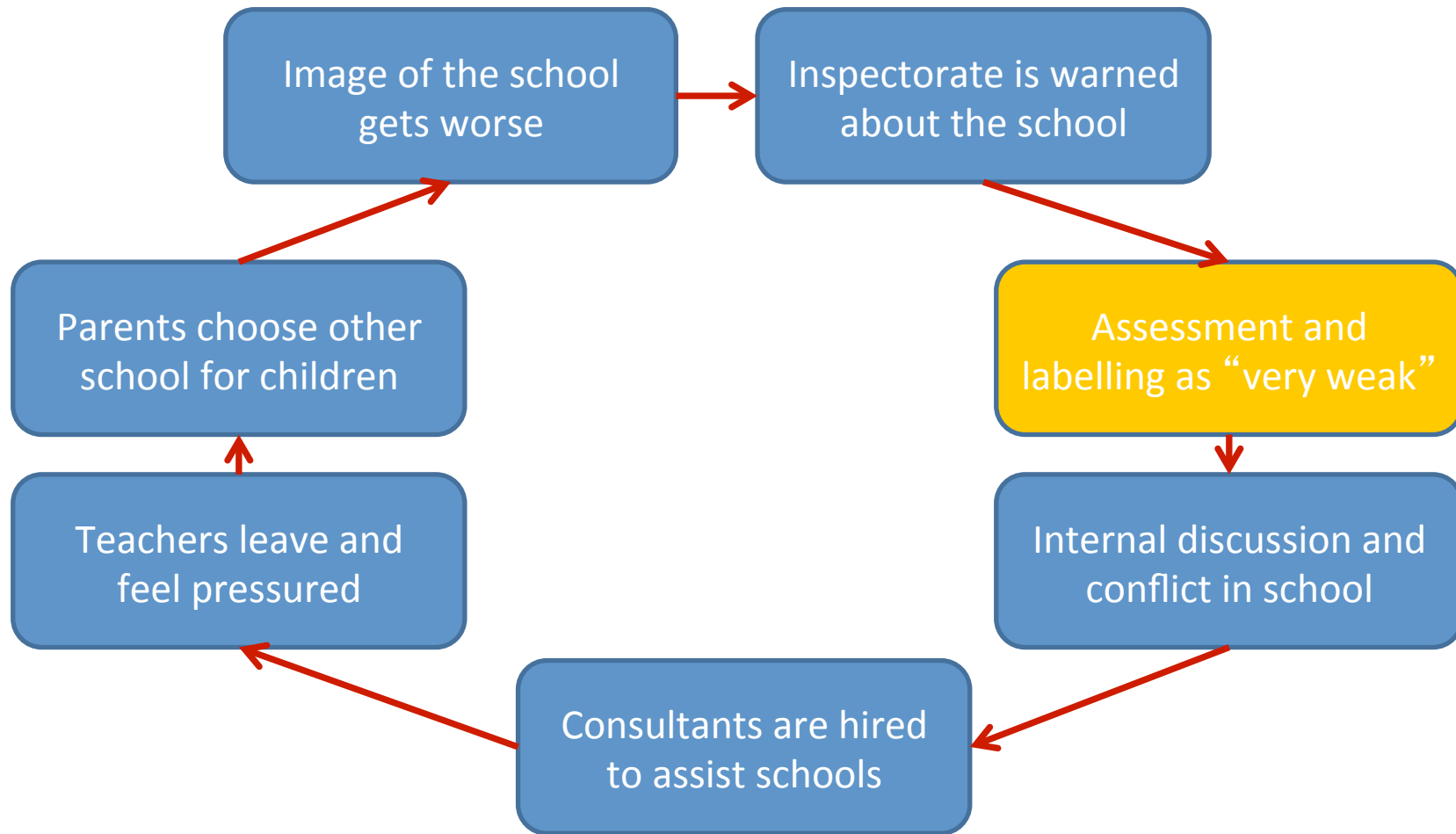
Multi Level Governance



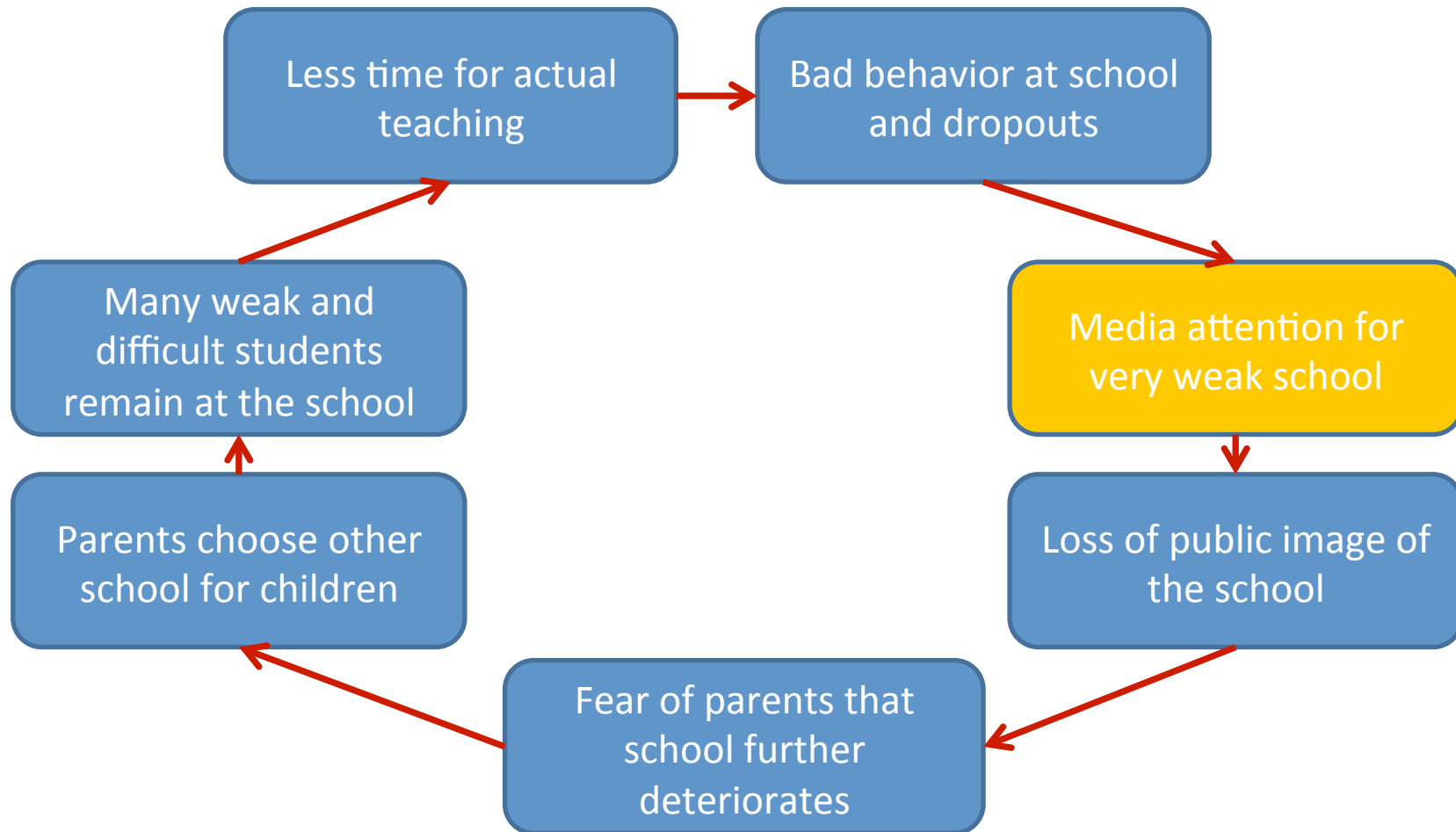
Policy Results



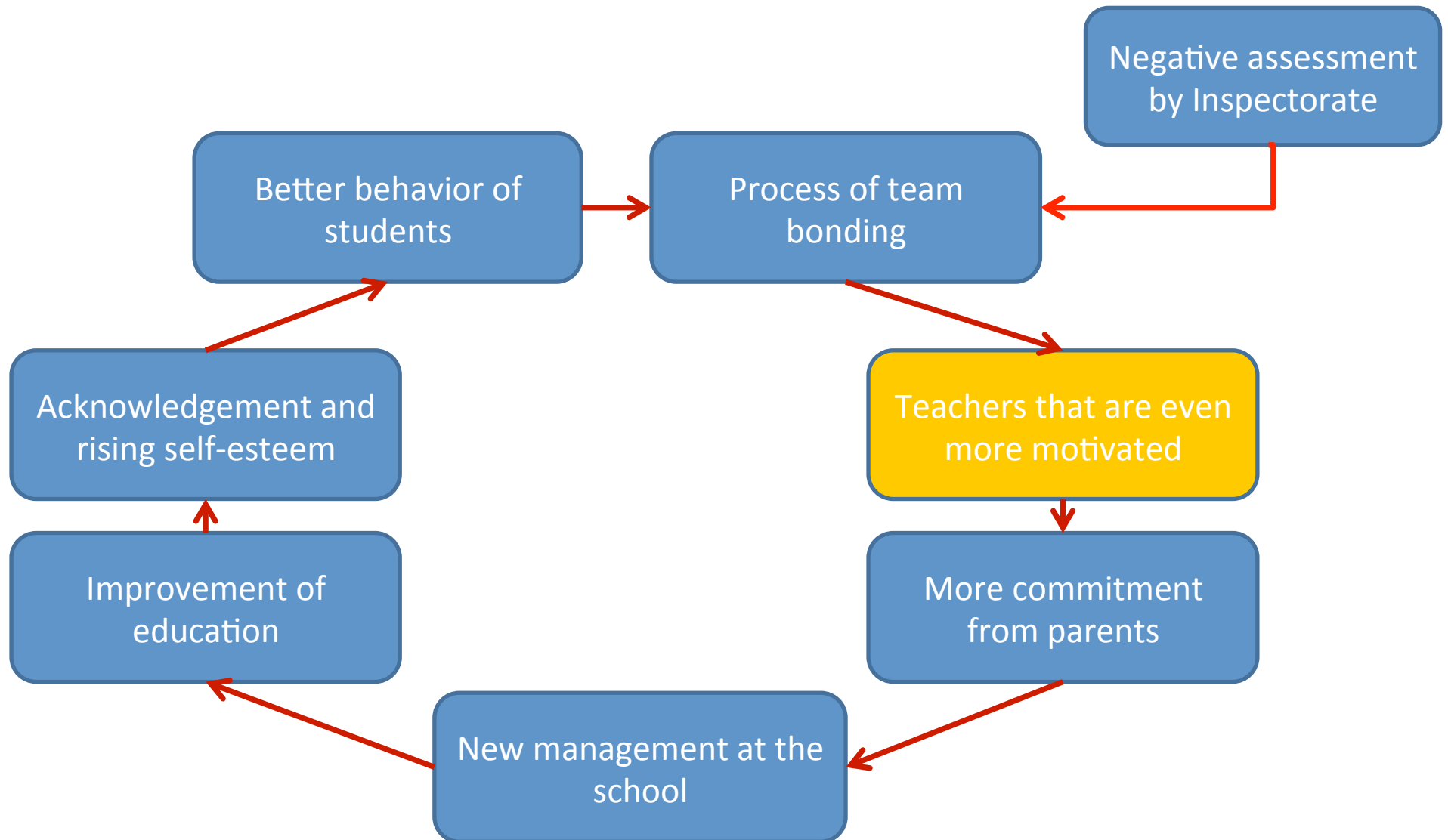
System Dynamics: labelling as 'weak'



Vicious Cycle in Very Weak School



Virtuous Cycle in Very Weak School



Lessons Learned: Policy Inferences

- Macro-level of the educational system:
 - Clarity about expected outcomes & performance measurement
 - Policy ‘keeps its distance’
- Micro-level of individual schools:
 - Localized approach, but only if schools fail to comply to the given performance indicators
 - Policy becomes ‘up, close and personal’
- Meso-level of schools systems dynamics
 - Can explain why interventions that work surprisingly well in one situation may be disastrous in another
 - *Loops, not lines: vicious & virtuous cycles*

Conclusion & Discussion

- Central steering in complex distributed multi-level systems requires 'smart' strategies to influence system dynamics.
- Complexity implies non-linearity and a high degree of 'unexpectedness', but that does not mean that patterns and regularities are entirely absent.
- Looking at loops allows seeing beyond the linear models of cause and effect in policy intervention.
- Policy makers who use circular models to take a second look at their existing repertoire will gain new insights in:
 - why and how some interventions work surprisingly well.
 - Why and how some interventions work less well or not at all, because of vicious cycles with unexpected indirect effects.