

**Successful School Improvement and the Educational District Office in
South Africa: Some Emerging Propositions**

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Introduction

The quality of public education has come increasingly under the spotlight over the past few years. Despite the increased financial resources in education, the expected improvement in learner performance at all levels of the system has been elusive. The quest to find the answers to sustaining school improvement in South Africa has recently focused on the education district . There is a growing understanding of the importance of the role of the district, as an intermediary between the central education office and the schools. This article looks at why school development in South Africa has not moved forward as fast as possible and presents emerging propositions for districts from development projects currently implemented in provincial departments of education.

1. The failure of school development in South Africa

South Africa is soon going to be reaching a decade of democracy and transformation post the period of separate development and apartheid education. The first term of the new government (1994 - 1999) concentrated on addressing issues of access, equity, redress and imbalance through putting in place the necessary legislative framework and unification of 18 different departments. The expectations amongst ordinary South Africans, the majority of whom had to endure inferior “Bantu” education in the old dispensation, were very high, and included easy access to free education, quality teaching and learning and education in adequate schooling facilities, improved learners performance in examinations, and subsequent improvement in the qualifications they received. As the experience over the last few years has shown, this was not to be. The challenges facing public schools, despite the revolutionary policy framework, still remain to a large degree those challenges that faced South African schooling eight years back.

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During this period of transition, there was much interest from different educational constituencies in finding out the characteristics of effective and improving South African schools. A number of school development, school effectiveness and school improvement initiatives were started, both by the new government utilizing donor funding, and by non-governmental organisations. The programmes touched different aspects of school life in individual schools - school management, teacher development in subject content and teaching methodology, learner assessment, organizational development etc. However, studies of school development projects in SA over this period have revealed that they have not had a significant impact on teaching and learning and subsequent learners' performance (Christie and Potterton 1998). One of the main reasons for the relative failure of these projects, despite their good intentions and excellent content in many cases, was the implementation of single change programmes or the lack of integration of many programmes initiated in schools. In addition, it was generally found that those schools that did make improvements in some aspects, and whose learners subsequently improved their performance, could not maintain that improvement in subsequent years consistently. Many of these early projects, aside from having single change programmes, tended to be "supply-push" interventions, either focusing on inputs or on improved schools processes and that was natural; they generally did not focus on "demand-side" and on accountability for final results. They were based on the notion that there was some input or process deficit, and that fixing that deficit would more or less automatically lead to better final results. Processes and inputs have indeed improved, but actual results have not (Crouch, Communication with Chinsamy 2002).

International research on school improvement are increasingly showing that individual, one-off initiatives directed at a particular aspect of the school's work or a particular constituent grouping in the school, with the intention of bringing about meaningful and sustainable innovation and change will not work. What is needed is a holistic look at the school – its structure, its peoples, its processes, its values and culture. Just as important is a look at who demand what from the school, how effectively it is demanded, and whether the school has the response capacity to actually produce the results that are demanded. This is a huge task. A school with energetic and forward-looking leaders and staff will be able to start such a process, but there is general agreement amongst school improvement practitioners that it will not be sustained. This is because of the changes in the society in which the school finds itself, and because of the changes that schools themselves go

through in terms of its staff turnover, pupil enrolment, changed priorities from the education authorities etc. Examples of schools that have started with innovative school improvement initiatives but failed to sustain them abound in South Africa.

2. The education district – an answer to the dilemma?

Over the last few years the attempts to find answers to why such initiatives failed seemed to be gelling around the potential role of the education district office, a largely neglected level of the system. There is general agreement that the failure in education (and for that matter in other public sector departments) is not in the arena of policy formulation, but of policy implementation. While the national and provincial departments of education have successfully formulated empowering policies, their implementation by schools has been disappointing. The gap between policy formulation and implementation - the vacuum in the structures necessary to translate policy into practice- that has been regarded as the primary reason for the failure of transformation in education. Between the provincial department of education and the school stands the district office. This is where the answers seem to be pointing to.

In his analysis of the problem of sustained change, Michael Fullan presents two conclusions. Firstly, he concludes that sustained improvement requires serious restructuring of the school, the district and their inter-relationships, and that schools and districts will never be able to manage innovation without radically redesigning their approach to learning and sustained improvement. Secondly, he concludes that schools cannot redesign themselves, and that districts play an important function in establishing the conditions for continuous and long-term improvements for schools (Fullan, 1992: 209).

3. Cornerstones for district support to schools

3.1. Balancing pressure and support

Experience in schools that have been involved in school improvement projects indicate that success is linked to the *balancing of pressure on and support for the school* by the district office. Schools need to be held accountable for the quality of the learning and teaching it offers. Despite the large amounts of money spent on education (more than a quarter of the budget is allocated to education), South African schools are still at the bottom of the table

in comparison with other countries of the world, as attested by the recent international mathematics and science studies. Schools are not pressured enough by the departments of education to take responsibility for their learners performance. This pressure takes various forms eg. calling the school management to explain poor learners results and demanding schools measures for improvement, tracking the progress schools are making in improving curriculum delivery and learner assessment, assessing individual educators work in classrooms, taking action on educators misconduct etc. At the same time, however, the provincial departments of education must offer support to the school management and educators, otherwise schools do not know how to discharge the accountability pressure. If the provincial department is pressurising the school to deliver quality learning and teaching and improved learner results, then it needs to support the schools so that they are able to. This support takes a number of forms, the more important of which are capacity building in training workshops and seminars for management and educators on the new curriculum and assessment, on site classroom and school visits and lesson observation, coaching and mentoring. The head offices of provincial department of education are not in a position to adequately pressure and offer support to schools, as they are largely staffed for the purposes of policy formulation. It then becomes the responsibility of the intermediate structure between the head office and the schools – the circuit and district office - to play this role.

3.2. Balancing Maintenance and Development

Successful school improvement internationally has shown that a school needs to be assisted in both maintaining the work it does, its operations, on a day-to-day basis, with the idea of continuing to achieve its objectives, but also of moving to a higher level of development for all its constituents and its community. This cannot happen by the provincial departments of education – they are too far removed from the local school - but by the districts. The district needs to balance its maintenance work with its development work. Schools need to be serviced for the purposes of maintenance. However, if all the district is engaged in is maintenance, then schools within that district could stagnate. There needs to be a creative balance found so that while the district does not neglect to assist its schools in maintenance, it must also not neglect to focus on development.

3.3. Balancing necessary and sufficient conditions for teaching and learning

The core function of any school is the delivery of the curriculum, and this is dependent on the existence of conducive conditions for teaching and learning. These conditions include at one level, the provision of basic resources for the classroom and school eg. chalk, stationery, learning materials, and at another level, suitable and adequate buildings and equipment and their maintenance, and appropriately skilled human resources. Educators have a number of personal issues that need to be addressed by the department of education eg payment of their salaries, benefit queries like housing subsidies and medical insurances, etc. While these conditions are not sufficient conditions for learning and teaching, they are definitely necessary conditions. They do not have a direct bearing on learner performance, but if they are not addressed, they could very well affect how well learning and teaching happens in a classroom. The bureaucracy of the state's departments is known for its delays in addressing issues related to these conditions, and this has led to much discontent, disillusionment and low morale in school staff. The new restructuring initiatives underway in the provinces is based on the principle of bringing service centres closer to schools to speed up the time of delivery on all of these resources. Hence, in most provinces, districts will have the authority to make decisions on such matters quickly, easily and more efficiently, thus ensuring that conditions are conducive for the school to carry out its main function ie. the delivery of the curriculum.

4. Emerging propositions on educational districts in South Africa

The education district has not been researched much, and hence very little has been written on the matter. However, over the last five years, there has been a renewed interest, both nationally and provincially, in the role of the education district office and its direct link to the improvement of learner performance and this has resulted in the funding of district development projects by external donors, the private sector and the National Department of Education (see Roberts, 2001). A major boost was the establishment of the District Improvement Programme (DIP) nationally in 1998, and the focus on developing effective districts. In addition, during this period, a number of external funders and non-governmental organisations started district development projects in many provinces. Some of the larger ones include Imbewu in the Eastern Cape, funded by the Department for International Development (DfID), District Development Support Programme (DDSP) operating in four provinces and funded by USAID and the Quality Learning Programme (QLP) in all nine provinces and funded by the National Business Trust.

Nearly all provinces are also in the midst of re-structuring their education departments in line with the principles of de-centralisation. A major aspect of this process is the establishment of relatively autonomous districts headed up by District Directors who are given authority to take decisions on a large range of issues. The new districts are structured such that they offer greater service and support to their schools. New job descriptions for the performance of duties at district level are presently being developed.

When these projects, running parallel with the restructuring process in most provinces, have been completed, and their experiences have been written up, a clearer picture of the role of the district, and of how to improve districts so that they can perform their role better, may emerge. However, there are a few tentative common findings that seem to be emerging, and will be worth keeping in mind.

- (a) For successful school development and school improvement, there is a need for multiple innovations at the level of the school at the same time, managed in a co-ordinated and coherent way. The *co-ordination* is beyond the capacity of individual schools, and seems to lie best with the district. The district office controls and co-ordinates all development projects implemented in its schools.
- (b) For the district to play the role of initiating and sustaining school improvement, it needs to have a certain degree of *functionality and effectiveness*. A functioning and effective district has certain basic (minimum) systems, policies and procedures in place to support its schools meaningfully, and in a sustainable way.
- (c) The district office has a clear *plan for supporting its schools*, a meaningful system of prioritising and sharing the limited resources to enable its schools to have access to relevant officials, resources and facilities, and proper follow up mechanisms.
- (d) The district office is easily *accessible* to, and maintains regular contact with, its schools.
- (e) Both *pressure and support* by the district is essential for sustainable school improvement.

- (f) School improvement initiatives that make a positive impact on learners performance are those which are supported by the education district office through the necessary *capacity building* of school level personnel, regular follow-up through classroom and school support visits, systematic monitoring of the implementation of planned programmes, application of appropriate pressure and use of appropriate data.
- (g) School improvement initiatives focused on improving learner performance is most effective and sustainable when the district and school leaders see and conduct themselves as *instructional leaders* as opposed to merely administrators and rule-enforcers.
- (h) The education district office values *data* of its schools, continuously updates and manages its data and uses it to improve learning and teaching in its schools.
- (i) The education district organises all its activities around its primary function, that of supporting schools in the *delivery of the curriculum*.

In summary then, it is the district office - the way it is comprised, its functions and roles, its management and its vision and the way it operates, its limitations and its possibilities - that is pivotal to successful school improvement.

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