

# Pairing business leaders and school principals

PARTNERS for Possibility received a powerful endorsement from the private, public and academic sectors, following the publication of an independent report on the effectiveness of the programme in its first five years.

The project is a leadership development programme that pairs business leaders with school principals at struggling schools.

By pairing the leaders from these two distinct worlds, Partners for Possibility builds strong leadership capacity within the under-resourced schools, finds solutions to the challenges facing each school and creates fertile soil for other interventions.

Described as “overwhelmingly positive” and “uniquely powerful”, the programme was discussed during two Business in Education summits held in Cape Town and Joburg this month. They brought together some of the most active commentators on education from the private sector, provincial governments and civil society.

“Our Business in Education events presented an ideal opportunity to discuss the challenges facing basic education and the powerful leverage effect that we can create by partnering the private sector with under-resourced schools,” says Dr Louise van Rhyn, chief executive of Partners for Possibility.

The summits were addressed by well-known business leaders, academics and participating principals. They included Poovendran Pillay, the head of segment and client value management for consumer banking at Nedbank; Francois Adriaan, the head of corporate affairs at Sanlam; Godwin Khoza, chief executive of the National Education Collaboration Trust; Paul Harris, co-founder of the FirstRand Group, Adam Craker, chief executive of the IQ Business Group, and Panyaza Lesufi, member of the executive committee of the Gauteng provincial government.

“A well-functioning and effective



Adam Craker, CEO of IQ Business speaking at the Business in Education Summit held in Johannesburg recently.

basic education sector is absolutely fundamental for any sustainable economic growth and I would argue for a state of emergency in basic education in South Africa,” said Craker.

“This is why we wholeheartedly support the work done by Partners for Possibility.”

Each partnership is contracted to last for at least one year, although the study has found that 68 percent of partnerships continue for much longer.

During the first year together, business leaders and school principals receive formal training, one-on-one coaching, group support and guidance to first hone their leadership skills and secondly, to identify and address the challenges facing their schools.

“To understand the challenges facing under-resourced schools, one should consider the context within which each school finds itself.

“Principals are mostly ill-prepared for their role as general manager of a school, while the children and teachers face the harsh realities of poverty, lack of resources, drugs and

gangsterism and a myriad other ills that place a strain on their learning environment,” said Dr Andrew Hartnack, a lead researcher into the effectiveness of the Partners for Possibility programme.

According to Hartnack, over 20 000 schools in South Africa are considered under-resourced. Partners for Possibility is active in about 400 of these schools having grown from only one school in 2010 to nearly 300 when he conducted his research.

“The Partners for Possibility programme is a home-grown innovation and a perfect example of frugal innovation, using the resources and people you have to make a significant change in the lives of children at under-resourced schools,” he said.

Hartnack conducted 120 in-depth interviews and closely studied 20 schools that completed the programme, comprising schools in the Western Cape, Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal.

According to him, 100 percent of all principals questioned found the programme extremely beneficial for

them as leaders and for their schools. All principals also saw significant value in having access to a partnering business leader.

“Because the programme does not apply a ready-made solution for all schools, but rather pairs and empowers these high-level partnerships to address each school’s unique challenges, the effect is both significant and long lasting,” he said.

Some of the benefits described in his report include greater community involvement, improved education outcomes, such as pass rates and standardised test scores, and infrastructural improvements, such as working bathrooms thanks to each partnership raising funds for its school.

The benefits remain with the school even after the partnership has concluded, thanks to the strengthened leadership structures and general improvements at the schools.

Partners for Possibility has been nominated as a finalist in the World Innovation Summit for Education (WISE) Awards – the only participant from the African continent.