

Collective responsibility for education

Partners for Possibility playing a leading role by bolstering principals

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THE challenges facing the education sector are not unique – there’s a global call for collective action between government, business and civil society to rebuild schooling systems which are failing pupils.

At least 250 million of the world’s 650 million primary school children are still unable to read or write, according to a report commissioned by the UN education agency.

That’s the word from Dr Louise van Rhyn, founder and chief executive of Partners for Possibility (PfP), and one of the representatives from South Africa at the Global Education and Skills Forum (GESF) in Dubai.

“Rethinking collective responsibility for public education” was the theme of the forum, Van Rhyn explains and there was much discussion around how public-private partnerships can help achieve quality education for all.

“What was clear from the forum was the issues experienced by South Africa with regard to poor quality of education are also experienced in other countries around the world,” Van Rhyn says.

“There were 1 600 delegates from 110 countries with 22 ministers of education in attendance. People

were committed to reach out, learn from one another and share innovations.”

The ideal of quality education for all remains distant, she says. It’s one of the UN’s millennium development goals, which has made some difference (it has contributed to improved access and there are more children in school today).

But 58 million children across the world still don’t attend primary school and half a billion are attending failing schools.

That applies in South Africa where, according to Van Rhyn, more than 8 million children are in failing schools.

Van Rhyn believes the only way to change a failing education system is by business, government and civil society working together.

“We need a shared vision for educational reform. The beauty of a shared vision is all parties involved will benefit when education improves,” she says.

Speaking at the GESF, Tony Blair, former British premier and founder of the Tony Blair Faith Foundation, said education was the biggest determinant of whether a country succeeds or fails.

Another speaker at the event, Sunny Varkey, reminded attendees the world has made a commitment to the UN’s sustainable develop-



CO-OPERATION: The way to change a failing education system is by business, government and civil society co-operating.

ment goals (SDGs), with goal 4 – quality education for all – at the heart of all the goals.

Varkey, a Dubai-based education entrepreneur and philanthropist – said without education, the other SDGs cannot be achieved.

Van Rhyn says there is widespread recognition governments can’t do this on their own.

“Business and society expect children to have the skills to succeed in the 21st century. However, those schools that are disconnected from the industry will never achieve this.

“The only way we can ensure students are ready for the world is to break down boundaries.”

Blair said the private sector has

a critical role to play to help with experimentation and innovation in schools.

“An overwhelming take-away from the GESF was that teachers are at the heart of quality education,” says Van Rhyn.

“As Andreas Schleicher said so eloquently, The quality of education will never exceed the quality of teachers. Technology can supplement good teachers, but if you don’t have good teachers, you have no chance.”

Van Rhyn points out that in Singapore, only the top 3 percent of high school graduates are able to apply to be teachers, and they earn as much as graduate accountants in their first year of teaching. “In Sin-

gapore, teachers are acknowledged and celebrated for their role as nation-builders,” she says.

Says Van Rhyn: “Schools and education have been inaccessible for too long and it is time to open education for all. People need to recognise that it is a societal responsibility. Everyone, including businesses, government and citizens, must take greater collective responsibility for education.”

This is why PfP was established. Since 2010, Symphonia for South Africa, a registered non-profit and public benefit organisation, has been supporting and developing school principals by partnering business leaders (with skills and knowledge of leading change) with school principals in co-action and co-learning partnerships for possibility across the country.

PfP is driven by an audacious vision, to improve the quality of education for all children by 2025, and in so doing changing each school’s story into one of hope and opportunity.

To date, PfP has 409 partnerships (409 principals paired with 409 business leaders and influencing 409 school communities) across South Africa. PfP is actively expanding in the country to improve under-resourced schools.

● For more information on the programme, please visit www.pfp4sa.org.

Building partnerships: Dr Louise van Rhyn attended an international education conference and realised that our challenges are not unique.