

School leadership has to be our first priority

By Dr Louise van Rhyn

The past few weeks have seen a frenzy of articles, commentary and analysis of the 2015 Matric results. Although there are some positive trends and highlights, there is little doubt that we are still failing the majority of our children.

Consider that out of the approximately 1.2 million learners that entered grade 1 just over 12 years ago, only 10% passed math and science at Grade 12 level. Viewed in another way only 23% of all Matrics achieved more than 30% in mathematics in 2015, a far cry from the goal of a 50% pass rate in math for 80% of all children writing Grade 12 final exams.

It is encouraging to see that these problems are met with determination from the Department of Basic Education. There are plans to expand remedial education for children who are not prepared for math and science at a grade 12 level and other initiatives to introduce a three tier educational system.



The three tiered system – mooted for a trial implementation in 2017 – will offer an academic, a technical occupation and a technical vocation track and it holds the promise of alternative education options for young people who have not been prepared for academic success. The alternative technical tracks will allow learners to focus on subjects for which they have the necessary foundational knowledge and it can better prepare them for the world of work.

But a focus on alternative or remedial education does not strike at the root of the problem. For the greatest impact, we should focus our attention on early childhood development (ECD) and foundation phase teaching. Research has proven that a child in Grade 3's comprehension of basic shapes, colours, sizes, numbers and their ability to read well – in English – is the best indicator of their Matric success. Viewed differently, a child who has not been given a firm footing in the basic foundational skills will find it near impossible to later grasp the concepts necessary for success in math and science.

If we take the need for ECD and great teaching in the foundation phases to heart, our first reaction would be to draft



policies and instructions that filter from national level, through provincial government to the thousands of primary schools across South Africa. This, although necessary, is a blunt instrument and change will remain slow.

At Partners for Possibility, we believe that the largest unit of change in our education system is the school. Moreover, the pivotal point in a school is its leadership, who are often ill prepared and overwhelmed by the complexity of their task to lead an under-resourced school. There is a direct correlation between a confident and well equipped principal and the results achieved in that school. In 20,000 under-resourced schools, principals are mostly overwhelmed and struggling to cope.

These principals are typically great teachers who have been promoted to the role of principal without being equipped for their task. This is not fair to the principals, the School Management Team at that school or the learners at the school. Prof Brian O'Connell, who has a deep knowledge and understanding of the challenges in the South African school system, recently pointed out that the role of a school principal in an under-resourced school in South Africa, is one of the most difficult leadership roles in South Africa.

This means that new initiatives and policies often die on the desk of the school principal, who finds him or herself overwhelmed by the demands of a position that they have not been prepared for. During the last 5 years I have interacted and worked with hundreds of these school principals – amazing people who have been put in an impossible situation.

Contrast this situation with the leadership at the 5 000 well-functioning schools in South Africa. In these schools, principals typically enter their role with many years of training, preparation and privilege on their side and they are supported by well staffed school governing bodies and adequate funding.

In addressing this glaring problem, our aim has been to draw on our largest source of leadership capacity – the private sector – to assist these under-resourced schools. Business leaders partner with school principals in a mutually-beneficial leadership development programme that sees both partners grow in their leadership skill and their understanding of the social challenges facing our highly unequal society.

Most of the business leaders who are part of the Partners for Possibility process stand in awe of the principals they work with. Through working alongside the principals they are confronted with the significant challenges in these under-resourced schools and they are humbled by the courage, commitment and

resourcefulness of these principals. Business leaders in the PFP programme are committed to do what they can to mobilise resources and support to principals working in under-resourced schools.

The success of this approach has been borne out in each of the 376 under-resourced schools in the Partners for Possibility network, with schools such as Olievenhoutbosch Secondary reporting a 100% pass rate in 2015, Hout Bay High achieving a 24% improvement in pass rate and Newhaven Secondary jumping to an 87% pass rate with two students who had 8 A's each.

In these and other PFP schools the principals and teachers have a new sense of hope and confidence, which sees them take positive action that ultimately ensures a more prosperous future for their learners. ▲

(Louise holds a doctorate in complex social change and is the CEO of Partners for Possibility)

Images from various PFP schools

