

Helping principals to help schools

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At the heart of the education crisis in South Africa lies the problem of schools that are poorly equipped and run by principals who are often ill-prepared to shoulder the enormous responsibility that has been given to them.

Former Foreign Minister Pik Botha caused a furore recently when he said South Africa's education system was the worst in Africa. Although he came under fire for his statement, he is not far off. According to the World Economic Forum's Global Information Technology report, South Africa's education system is ranked 140th out of 144 countries.

The report specifically fingered schools as being responsible for the dismal picture of education. A recent government report by the Council on Higher Education also blamed schools for poorly preparing pupils for university. Less than 5% of black and coloured youths are currently succeeding in any kind of higher education and this has a direct impact on the economy.

Addressing this crisis in education is top of the agenda in many circles. Even the continent's leading business school, the UCT Graduate School of Business, has become involved by dedicating a new programme to tackling the lack of leadership in schools.

"Managing a school in South Africa is a huge job and probably far more complex than running a business with a similar number of employees and clients. Many schools have 30 to 40 teaching staff, 900 to 1200 pupils changing each year, 1000 to 2000 parents, a governing body, and teachers unions, and all this requires significant leadership and human relations skills," says Rick Haw, co-founder and former chief executive of civil engineering company Haw & Inglis and one of the drivers behind the establishment of the Postgraduate Diploma in Management Practice (PGDMP) for School Principals, an MBA-style course for principals, run in association with the Principal's Academy and Capitec Bank at the GSB.

Haw, who completed his own MBA at the GSB in the 1970s, believes that business and leadership training geared to the specific needs of principals and senior departmental officials, has the potential to dramatically improve their ability to execute their vast responsibilities effectively and efficiently.

"There are many examples of schools being very successful, even with poor facilities and infrastructure, because of the inspiring managerial and leadership qualities of the school principal," he says, proving that good leadership can, in fact trump circumstances.

Linda Buckley, director of executive education at the GSB agrees that many principals are in dire need of support and training. "In order to be a good leader, you have to know how to manage yourself. Often teachers become principals without any business management expertise, knowledge of budget costing, school finances, financial responsibility, data management, human relation management, etc. Principals need to be taught to see schools as a business and part of a bigger ecosystem."

The GSB programme teaches personal mastery and self-knowledge as well as valuable business knowledge over the course of one year. Apart from in-house teaching days at the GSB, usually during school holidays, there is also a coaching component where principals meet with mentors on a weekly or fortnightly basis.

The mentoring and coaching programme is run by The Principals Academy and Bruce Probyn, the recently retired head of Herschel School. Alan Clarke, the former head of Westerford High School shares the mentoring and coaching responsibilities of the current intake. Clarke says he has been impressed by the level of commitment shown by principals.

"Most of the talk that one hears when public schooling is discussed in this country are stories of doom and gloom, of lazy and recalcitrant teachers, of incompetent principals and of obstructionist teacher unions. But these individuals want to do the best for the children who attend their schools. Theirs are not schools situated in the leafy middle-class suburbs of Cape Town. The majority of the schools represented serve Cape Town's poorer communities, including places like Phillipi, Khayelitsha, Grassy Park and Mitchell's Plain," says Clarke.

The need to serve disadvantaged communities is the reason why Capitec Bank became involved, each year offering a number of bursaries for principals unable to afford the course fee.

"There are at least three reasons why we at Capitec Bank are concerned about education: firstly, we wish to grow people so that they can share in our country's economy; secondly, South Africa needs to address its skills shortage, so that people within the country have the skills that we need in order for South Africa to thrive; and thirdly, education will result in a growing population of people who can make savvy decisions for the sake of themselves and the country," says Sbusiso Kumalo of Capitec Bank.

Many of the principals are from severely disadvantaged communities, areas plagued by massive socio-economic problems. Helping principals in these areas has a ripple effect, which extends not only across the school but brings about a positive change in the community as well. The Principal's Academy reports that the course has already had a very positive impact on the lives of many principals. "Businessman Rick Haw, UCT's Graduate School of Business and CAPITEC bank need to be commended for their vision and commitment to what we believe is one of the most exciting and potentially game-changing innovations to emerge from the schooling sector in the past few years," says Clarke.

The next intake of students for the Postgraduate Diploma in Management Practice will take place in December 2013 and interested persons should contact Robyn Nefdt at the Graduate School of Business on 021 406 1374 or email at robyn.nefdt@gsb.uct.ac.za

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