

SETTING THE STAGE FOR QUALITY TEACHING AND LEARNING: FIVE ENABLING CONDITIONS

March 2018
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SUMMARY: In typical schools, schools' realities are filtered through the belief that they can do very little to influence learner achievement. Consequently, these beliefs are manifested in their practices. In contrast, when schools that work are confronted with debilitating challenges, they develop the resolve to persist against challenges and realise increased and sustained learning outcomes. To do this, they attend to the following enablers:

A capable teaching force

High-performing schools make sure that learners are taught by properly qualified and effective teachers

Flexibility and autonomy

Teachers and HODs have flexibility/autonomy to do their work but are held accountable for learner performance

Being and NSC exam marker

NSC exam marking is beneficial not for individual teachers but also for other teachers at the school

Teacher commitment and dedication

Teacher commitment and dedication is one of the highest-ranking enabling factors that define high-performing schools

A focused curriculum

Schools that work specialise in a few subjects and do not spread themselves too thinly

produce good results over the years." (Principal, **School KV**-Quintile 2)

The principal quoted above argues that when faced with major challenges, he capitalises on *enabling conditions* to improve the quality of curriculum delivery at the school.

While *enabling conditions* do not always cause things to happen, they increase the likelihood that things will turn out as expected. Attending to the following five *enablers* help schools that work¹ to ensure sustained and positive learning outcomes:

THE FIVE ENABLERS

① A CAPABLE TEACHING FORCE

② FLEXIBILITY AND AUTONOMY

③ BEING AN NSC EXAM MARKER

④ TEACHER COMMITMENT AND DEDICATION

⑤ A FOCUSED CURRICULUM

Each of these enablers is discussed next:

INTRODUCTION

"We don't have the best of everything—not many resources. We have large classes, poor and sometimes hungry children. All we have are committed teachers and the love they have for their learners. These are the only two things that have *enabled* our school to

¹ In April 2017, the Minister of Basic Education commissioned the National Education Evaluation and Development Unit (NEEDU) to conduct the *Schools that Work II* study. This study sought to examine the characteristics of top-performing schools in South Africa. The best practices discussed in this advocacy brief are based on the findings of that study. The full report is available on the Department of Basic Education website: www.education.gov.za/Resources/Reports.aspx NEEDU can be reached at (012) 357 4231



No. 1

A CAPABLE TEACHING FORCE

In their quest to provide learners with quality education, high-performing schools make sure that learners are taught by properly qualified and effective teachers. To achieve this, they focus on three strategies. These strategies are briefly discussed below:



Recruiting and appointing the most qualified teachers

Schools that work are proactive in recruiting teachers. Following are examples how these schools recruit properly qualified teachers as part of their strategy to improve the quality of teaching. They:

Target skilled teachers with pedagogical training and qualified teachers with university majors in the subjects they are teaching

Target university students enrolled in education faculties who were former learners at the school:

I target students while they are still at university and I woo them to come and join us in this rural school. I know all my former learners who are in the education faculties in different universities. Right now, 26 [65%] teachers in my staff were learners in this school. (Principal, School KZ-Quintile 3)



Retaining good teachers once recruited

Schools that work use different approaches to retain teachers once appointed. This includes:

Raising funds to build decent housing in rural schools for teachers who stay away from home

Supporting new teachers when they join the school by assigning them to a mentor who is a senior teacher

Every new staff member is allocated a buddy who shows him or her the ropes... Teachers stay here until they retire. (HOD, School WI-Quintile 4)

Motivating staff, incentivising teachers for the job well done and providing school-based staff development (see Policy Brief N-10 about professional staff development)



Creating good conditions for teachers to excel

Principals in high-performing schools strongly believe that their teachers cannot teach well unless suitable conditions are created:

The SMT [School Management Team] is always concerned about the teachers' wellness. Every year, we have at least two of what we call 'teachers' out sessions' where we connect as a staff away from the school and work pressures. (Teacher, School WL-Quintile 3)

No. 2

FLEXIBILITY AND AUTONOMY

Principals in schools that work strongly believe that HODs and teachers know their learners best. For this reason, they feel that "placing decision-making closer to the classroom and holding HODs and teachers accountable for results is the best way to

increase learner achievement” (Deputy Principal, **School GL**-Quintile 4). Schools that work do the following:

Give flexibility/autonomy to the HODs in their departments: Driven by a belief that flexibility/autonomy encourages an environment of creative thinking so HODs and teachers can tailor teaching strategies to fit their departments and their learners, each department has flexibility to try practices or take actions that would work for them but perhaps not in another department:

*In exchange for that autonomy, after making sure that teachers are supported and empowered, we then make a deal with our HODs: “You are free to use your professional judgment to decide what you do in your department, but you are going to be accountable for how your learners perform.” In the same way, I am accountable to the District Director. (Principal, **EF School**-Quintile 3)*

Give flexibility or autonomy to the teachers in their classes: Teachers decide how to teach in class (autonomy) but they are held accountable for learner performance. Flexibility or autonomy and accountability are treated as two sides of the same coin:

*We say to teachers, “the non-negotiable is that you have to teach the whole syllabus. You don’t have a choice. How you do that, we leave it to you and your team. But you will get monitored by the HODs and the Principal, not because we don’t trust you, but because that’s part of our job.” (Principal, **School GP**-Quintile 2)*

Principals encourage teachers to apply to become National Senior Certificate (NSC) exam markers because they value what being an exam marker means—not just for individual teachers but also for other teachers in different departments.

But why should teachers mark examination papers? What is in it for their schools and their learners? Teachers in schools that work identify the following as the benefits for being an NSC exam marker:

Allows teachers to see common errors learners make in the exam:

*You can see silly mistakes learners make so you can advise your own learners and other teachers as to what they should pay attention to. (Teacher, **School KI**-Quintile 4)*

Enables teachers to develop exam style questions and create model answers more easily:

*We find that learners do not fail because they do not have information to answer the question but because of the way the question is presented and also how learners answer the question. (Teacher, **School EE**-Quintile 4)*

Enables teachers to improve their teaching:

*Teachers know what to concentrate on, how to improve their teaching, and how to assess their learners. (Teacher, **School WK**-Quintile 4)*

Strengthens teachers’ subject content knowledge, particularly in aspects in which teachers are not as competent:

*As they mark, teachers can see where—if they are masters in their subjects—they have a shortfall. (Principal, **School LI**-Quintile 3)*

No. 3

BEING AN NSC EXAM MARKER



Ω Enables teachers to give more support to those groups of learners who need extra help in specific topics

Ω Develops teachers' understanding of the mark schemes used

No. 4 TEACHER COMMITMENT

Teacher commitment and dedication is one of the highest-ranking enabling factors that define high-performing schools in the *Schools that Work II* study. Teachers hold themselves accountable for helping learners improve. For these teachers, teaching is not just a job: "We know that this [good performance in the NSC examinations] might be our learners' last opportunity to get out of poverty because of the environment where they come from." (Principal, **School KV**-Quintile 2)

Teachers in schools that work display commitment and dedication in different ways including the following:

Ω Take responsibility for their own performance as well as their learners' performance:

At the end of the year, I must get 100% pass rate in my subject. I must get distinctions—no excuses. (Teacher, **School KZ**-Quintile 2)

Ω Give learners more opportunities to learn within and outside school hours:

Our teachers put in a lot of extra effort to give us extra classes. They give us extra classes for free and that helps us very much with our studies. Our teachers are here on weekends and holidays when they should be spending that time with their families. (Learner, **School WG**-Quintile 4)

Ω Care deeply about their learners:

They are our second parents. They spend time with us almost 24/7. I know they don't get more money for doing this. But they do it because they care. (Learner, **School LF**-Quintile 3)

Ω Send their own children in the same school where they teach:

Our own children attend or have attended this school. My last-born is currently at this school. If you believe that the school where you teach is not good enough for your own children and that your children are better off in another school, what you are basically saying is that the school where you teach is not good enough—you do not believe in what you do in your school. You are saying other schools are doing a better job than yours. But if your own child is in the same school where you teach, you are going to do everything possible to make sure he or she succeeds because you have a vested interest.. No one wants his or her child to get an inferior education. This is why the level of commitment among our teachers is high. (Principal, **School KT**-Quintile 3)

No. 5 A FOCUSED CURRICULUM

Schools that work specialise in a few subjects and do not spread themselves too thinly because, as one principal notes: "It does not make sense to offer too many subjects or streams and then struggle to recruit qualified teachers in those subjects." (Principal, **School LL**-Quintile 2)

We simply could not offer the universe [all subjects] because the number of teachers allocated to our school remains the same. So, we decided that with our PPN [Post Provisioning Norm] we can only provide quality education if we offer one stream. (Principal, **School EE**-Quintile 4)

