

ACADEMIC PRESS + SOCIAL SUPPORT = IMPROVED ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT: HOW DO HIGH-PERFORMING SCHOOLS GET THIS FORMULA RIGHT?

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SUMMARY: Many learners have home backgrounds that have a bearing on how they perform at school. Regardless of their backgrounds, schools that work expect *all* learners to achieve well at school and they make sure that learners perform at an appropriate grade level. These schools are characterized by strong *academic press* and strong *social learner support*. These are driving force behind school improvement efforts:

Academic press

Academic press is a consistently high expectation on the part of the teachers that learners will do their best work.

A strong academic focus and press for achievement have been noted repeatedly as an important feature of effective schools.

Social Support

Social support refers to the personal relationships that learners have with people who may help them do well in school.

Because some learners receive little support from home, peers and community, schools that work find it even more important that they create school environments which provide personal support for learning.

Link between academic press & social support

Regardless of their background characteristics, learners learn substantially more when they experience high levels of academic press and strong social support together, but they learn much less when they experience only one of these conditions.

- ♣ Are orphans and/or are head of families or live with grandparents. They always have to worry about the most basic needs such as food, shelter and clothing
- ♣ Do not have much to eat at home. For some, the food they eat at school is their only decent meal
- ♣ Walk long distances to schools, some walk bare-footed, and tired by the time they get to school
- ♣ Their parents are unemployed, survive on the government's social grant, work away from home leaving children alone at home without much supervision
- ♣ Are or have been victims of different kinds of abuse
- ♣ Their home background does not foster learning, e.g. they cannot do their school work at home because they have to do some chores, there is no space and furniture, no light at night because they do not have electricity, etc.
- ♣ Their language of teaching and learning is different from the language spoken at home
- ♣ Have a huge content or skills gap that has accumulated over the years as they progress through the grades
- ♣ They do not have any role models at home and in their communities to look up to for motivation

Learners whose profiles are described above are at risk of not succeeding academically. So, how do schools that work¹, help these learners to achieve at expected levels academically in spite of their background characteristics?

INTRODUCTION

Schools in the lower quintiles (i.e. 1 to 3), including most quintile 4 schools in townships, serve learners with the following background and demographic characteristics:

- ♣ Are black and mostly African living in rural areas and townships

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



In this policy brief, we present the case of schools that work which illustrates some of the many approaches these schools use to strengthen *academic press* for and *social support* of effective learning for learners of different backgrounds and abilities.

But what is *academic press* and *social support*? First, each of these constructs is described and then we illustrate how schools that work match *academic press* with *social support* to ensure high levels of learning outcomes.

ACADEMIC PRESS

School environments high in *academic press* have been found to encourage more effective learning strategies and greater levels of learner achievement.



What is 'academic press'?

Academic press focuses on the extent to the school, including teachers and learners, put more emphasis on academic success, conformity to specific standards of achievement and push for all learners to reach high levels of academic achievement.



Why is 'academic press' important?

Research links strong press for academic success with high academic achievement. That is, academic press affects learner performance in different ways, including the following:



It provides specific direction for learners' work and academic attainment




It creates incentives that motivate learners and teachers to achieve at higher levels



How to enhance academic press?


Top-performing schools use different strategies to enhance academic press. Amongst other things, they exert press through:



Maximising learning time and minimising downtime. Teachers use time efficiently to generate better performance for all learners in their classes. This includes:

- Using the allocated time efficiently and effectively
- Mitigating and minimising factors that lead to loss of teaching time
- Creating more learning opportunities for learners, e.g. giving more support to struggling or lagging learners


How teachers do this, see Policy Brief **No N-01**



Pacing the curriculum using differentiated instruction. Teachers reach diverse learners in their classes so that:


- low-functioning learners do not find it impossible to keep up in a lesson
- high-performing learners are not held back to the speed of their less-able classmates

How teachers do this, see Policy Brief **No N-06**



Setting and communicating high standards and expectations for learning and academic performance. Schools:


- Encourage their staff, learners, parents/care-givers to have high expectations of themselves
- Believe that all of their learners can and will learn. If learners do not grasp something at the first presentation, teachers pursue alternative methods until an uncertain learner understands



Setting clear goals and targets for learner academic achievement and working towards achieving them. Schools that work:


- Employ an effective target-setting process, including gathering information about the level of learner achievement, analysing assessment data, setting clear targets, using targets for planning and reporting targets to ensure accountability
- Set targets at different levels chronologically as follows: **Individual Learner Targets** → **Subject Targets** → **School-wide Target** → **District Target**

How teachers do this, see Policy Brief **No N-03**



Holding teachers and learners accountable for their performance. Schools that work respond to the analysis of formative assessment results by holding everybody accountable for learner performance. This includes learners, teachers, SMT members and parents

How teachers do this, see Policy Brief **No N-03**




Developing effective learner assessment systems. Teachers in the schools that work or top-performing schools use different phases of the assessment loop effectively to:

- help teachers gauge learner progress and identify problems
- Provide SMT members a means to hold teachers and learners accountable for their performance

This is detailed in Policy Brief **No N-04**






Providing school-based teacher professional development aimed at improving the overall quality of teaching and learning.


Professional development programmes in schools that work provide a structured professional learning which results in changes in teacher classroom practices and improvements in learning outcomes at school

Effective school-based teacher development is detailed in Policy Brief **No N-10**



Delineating clear responsibilities for learners in raising their own achievement.


Teachers in schools that work use *cooperative learning*, which is defined as instructional use of small groups so that learners work together to maximise their own and each other's learning. This is discussed in sufficient detail in Policy Brief **No N-09**



Developing incentive systems to reward learners for high academic performance.

Top-performing schools create a strong culture of academic achievement by celebrating their successes and commiserating over their failures in different ways. Following are different ways they do this:

- 🔄 Show-case learners' work by displaying learners' good work throughout the school
- 🔄 Award academic excellence by announcing high-performing learners at the assembly, award and prize giving day, honours day, or Principal awards day



Assigning homework. Schools that work use a "community approach," characterised by a working environment where teachers, parents, and learners work together as partners to ensure that homework assignments maximise positive outcomes. In this approach, teachers design effective homework, assist learners to self-regulate and take responsibility for their work, and empower parents to support their children at home. See Policy Brief **No N-14** for a detailed discussion

These efforts create a stronger focus on academic achievement in the top-performing schools. Concurrent with these efforts to increase academic press, the top-performing schools also seek to strengthen the *social support* available to its learners inside and outside the school. How these schools strengthen *social support* to learners is the subject of next discussion.

SOCIAL SUPPORT




The schools that work create organised, caring learning environments that provide stability and emotional security for learners and buffer them from distractions.

What is 'social support'?

Social support can be categorised into two types. One type of social support focuses primarily on the social development and emotional well-being of learners, whereas a second type of social support focuses more directly on helping learners excel academically.


Why is 'social support' important?

The importance of social support for learning rests on an argument that learners who have more support will learn more as a result. Among other things, the literature suggests that social support:

-  Creates motivation for learners to achieve
-  Builds confidence and a sense of self that make academic success seem attainable
-  Provides a sense of trust and confidence that allows learners to take risks, admit errors and ask for help

How to enhance social support?

While schools that work understand that learners need to be pressed hard to learn (academic press), they also appreciate that learners at risk will achieve less if they are not supported. These schools implement the following strategies to enhance social support which focuses on the social development and emotional well-being of learners:

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- 🔄 Invite resourceful and successful community members as well as former learners who offer learners support and guidance as role models
 - 🔄 Develop partnerships with agencies and government departments to provide social services to learners (see Policy Brief **No 17**)
 - 🔄 Map out ways to broaden parental or family involvement (see Policy Brief **No 15**)
 - 🔄 Seek to increase learner participation through extra-curricular activities because some learners excel in sport or extra-curricula activities--that is where they get their motivation
 - 🔄 Encourage learners to help and respect each other and actively discourage teasing, ridicule, bullying and other negative interactions



The schools that work implement the following strategies to enhance social support in order to help learners excel academically:

More personalised and supportive learning environments for learners are created where teachers:

🔄 Teach the same group of learners for two or more grades in a row—a practice called *looping* (see Policy Brief **№ 19**)

🔄 Provide a tailor-made and properly paced instruction that matches (a) learners' learning styles and abilities and (b) teachers' teaching strategies (see Policy Brief **№ 06**)

🔄 Organise learners in small groups so that learners work together to maximise their own each other's learning (see Policy Brief **№ 09**)

🔄 Use different strategies to engage learners in a lesson, develop critical thinking skills and keep learners on task (see Policy Brief **№ 13**)

🔄 Use WhatsApp to create a safe milieu where learners and their teachers extend learning beyond the classroom borders (see Policy Brief **№ 16**)

🔄 Use assessment results to identify not only struggling learners who need extra help, but also learners who are gifted and are ready accelerate (see Policy Briefs **№ 01** and **07**)

🔄 Prepare learners for the exams in ways that do not detract from real learning such as teaching to the test (see Policy Brief **№ 20**)

🔄 Receive school-based professional development to promote more supportive interpersonal relationships with learners (see Policy Brief **№ 10**)



THE LINK BETWEEN ACADEMIC PRESS AND SOCIAL SUPPORT

In the absence of *social support*, raising standards and increasing accountability (*academic press*) will surely leave learners at risk behind. That is, when schools focus only on increasing academic press, the consequences for learners at risk who have few sources of support and who find it difficult to meet higher academic standards can be quite serious. For example, they do not perform well, lose motivation, become alienated and disengaged, and eventually drop out of school.

These potentially negative outcomes of academic press are most prevalent in schools that enrol substantial proportions of low-achieving learners, mostly schools in the lower quintiles.

Some studies have assessed the separate relationships of social support and academic press to academic achievement, while others have examined the relationships of support and press to academic achievement in tandem. The latter studies suggest that efforts to improve academic achievement by primarily emphasising strong academic press, unless these efforts are accompanied by social support in or out of school, will not be sufficient to improve academic achievement.

In their study, conducted two and half decades ago, Lee and Smith, found that learners:

- ♣ who attended schools with high levels of academic press and which also reported high levels of social support made the greatest gains in achievement
- ♣ who attended schools with low levels of press and which reported low levels of support did relatively poorly
- ♣ who experienced high social support but attended low press schools achieve somewhat better than learners in high press schools who experience low support

Findings in the *Schools that Work II* study are consistent with a growing body of research that academic press and social support are interactive and mutually reinforcing. The schools that work have improved the results over the years by expertly balancing the act of pressing learners to work hard learning new knowledge and skills (academic press) and helping them develop the confidence to achieve (social support).

CONCLUSION

Findings in the *Schools that Work II* study give credence to the findings in other research studies which suggest that efforts to improve academic achievement primarily by increasing school academic press will not be as effective unless learners also have a strong system of social support to rely on for their academic work. These findings challenge “either-or” proposals for school improvement that view academic focus and rigor and social support for learners as contradictory strategies.

