

SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITIES WORKING TOGETHER TO IMPROVE QUALITY EDUCATION: SOME LESSONS FROM SCHOOLS THAT WORK

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Prepared by NEEDU

SUMMARY: Schools do not exist in isolation. They reside within the communities they serve and must cultivate relationships with them. Schools that work bring together diverse individuals and groups to expand opportunities for learners and to create supports that enable children and youth to learn and succeed.

This policy brief features the perspectives of schools that work as they shed light on how they successfully mobilise communities to improve the educational delivery so that more children learn better and are well prepared for the changing world. Schools that work enlist the help of various community structures to address societal challenges that affect learners at school. Following are some of the approaches schools that work use to mobilise these community structures. They:

- ♣ Reach out to the business sector
- ♣ Solicit support from the government departments for the benefit of the learners
- ♣ Get traditional leaders involved in schools
- ♣ Use former learners to motivate learners
- ♣ Partner with faith-based organisations
- ♣ Engage non profit organisations and other stakeholders

INTRODUCTION

A common African proverb, *it takes the whole village to raise a child*, implies that education takes place not only in schools but also within

families, communities and society. Thus, the concept of a village raising a child is probably more essential to developing the whole child today than it was few generations ago. Improving the quality of education has remained undoubtedly a challenging task—one that requires schools, families and communities, working collaboratively as a formidable trio, to address. Schools and families cannot be the only group responsible for children’s education as long as children interact with and learn from the world outside their schools and families. While each member of the trio takes some responsibility in the upbringing, socialisation and education of their children, none can be the sole agent to take full responsibility for educating children.

Schools and their communities cannot be considered separately. It is true that the *raison d’être* (reason for existence) of schools is to educate all children effectively in preparation for various roles they will assume as adults in their society. However, schools cannot and should not operate as separate entities within society. Schools that work¹ have recognised community participation as one of the strategies to improve educational access and quality. This policy brief outlines how these schools are mobilising communities to participate in and to support schools.

¹ In April 2017, the Minister of Basic Education commissioned (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



WHY IS SCHOOL-COMMUNITY COLLABORATION IMPORTANT?

Today, when we consider the challenges confronting education, there are even more compelling reasons why we cannot lose sight of the importance of community participation in schools. Some of the challenges facing schools include the following:

🔗 **Jobs are changing:** The skills that used to qualify matriculants for entry-level jobs or for further training in different professions are no longer enough.

🔗 **Wide income gap between many rural and urban communities:** Many learners with the greatest needs, mostly black and in rural areas, go to school with the fewest resources.

🔗 **Families are changing:** The structure of many families have changed dramatically, e.g. children growing up in single-parent homes, child-headed families, parents spending little time with their children, etc.

🔗 **Growing concern about values:** Commonly shared values such as honesty, respect and responsibility seem to be in decline.

🔗 **Violence is on the rise:** Violence in different forms, which affects many children, is on the rise.

🔗 **Drug and substance abuse by young people and adults** is affecting thousands of learners at school.

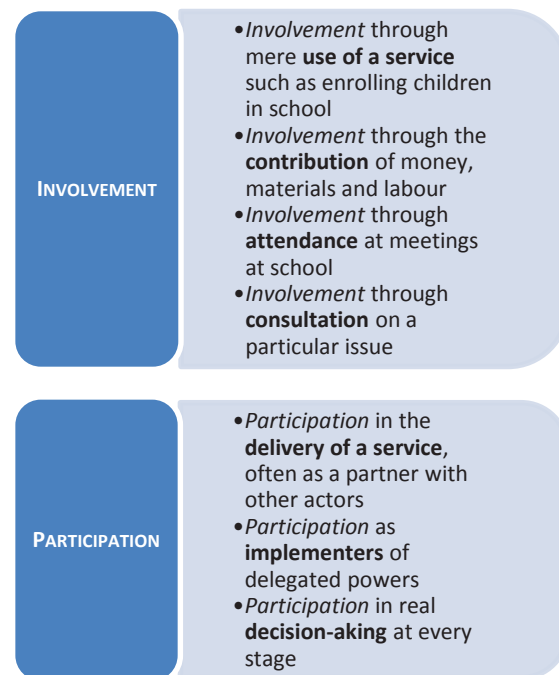
🔗 **Unemployment** leads to high levels of poverty and crime in many communities.

The challenges summarised above have a powerful and immediate impact on how schools prepare learners to contribute to the betterment of the society in which they operate. While there is no easy answer to meeting these challenges, it is clear that any lasting answer will require the *involvement* of different stakeholders from the community. But what is meant by community *involvement*?

FORMS OF COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

Shaeffer, an expert in community participation in education, identifies different degrees or

levels of community participation and distinguishes between *involvement* and *participation*, as illustrated below.



According to Shaeffer, the first four definitions use the word *involvement* and connote largely **passive collaboration**. The last three items, on the other hand, use the word *participation*, which implies a much more **active role**.

HOW TO MOBILISE COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT AND PARTICIPATION?

Schools that work recognise and appreciate that education takes place most efficiently and effectively when schools, parents and communities work collaboratively. Towards this end, these schools work tirelessly and continuously to establish partnerships with different structures in the community. These structures include the following:



Schools that work enlist the help of these community structures to address societal challenges that affect schooling. Following are some of the approaches these schools use:

APPROACH № 1

• REACHING OUT TO THE BUSINESS SECTOR

Three principals of successful schools describe how they mobilise the business sector to solicit support for their schools as follows:

Big companies won't come to you and say "Can we help you?" You need to approach them, sell your school; woo them. You have to show them what you have been able to accomplish with the little [resources] that you have.

[Principal, **School KF-Quintile 4**]

You cannot expect companies to invest in some unknown schools in the middle of nowhere. But if you approach a company and say "We are a rural school and this is evidence of what we have been able to do with little resources", they are likely to listen. That's what we do.

[Principal, **School MM-Quintile 1**]

We visit different companies and make a joint presentation with learners. It's hard for companies to say 'no' to learners' innocent faces. We have been able to secure different sponsors to support us in different ways—donating science equipment and chemicals, sponsoring our top learners at universities, buying other teaching resources, etc.

[Principal, **School KV-Quintile 2**]

APPROACH № 2

• SOLICITING SUPPORT FROM THE GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENTS

Schools that work make all the necessary arrangements with clinics, police and other government services to maximise their efforts. To do this, these schools use different strategies, which include but are not limited to the following:

We have made an arrangement with the local clinic here. Our learners go to the clinic from 2 o'clock [pm], and we ensure that they don't lose any lesson.

[Teacher, **School FF-Quintile 1**]

The Principal has made an arrangement with the police to escort us home when we finish our extra classes at 11 pm. So, we don't have any safety difficulties. It is very rare for us to come across an incident where you are attacked. We have the support of the community.

[Learner, **School LN-Quintile 1**]

APPROACH № 3

• GETTING TRADITIONAL LEADERS INVOLVED IN SCHOOLS

Principals in schools that work value the important role traditional leaders in rural communities play in maximising school functionality. One teacher has the following to say about how the working relationship that his school has forged with the local traditional leaders is benefiting the school:

The school has a good working relationship with the headmen and the chief. They support us to deal with different issues. For example, when we have disciplinary problems and we have exhausted all options, the headmen and the chief summon the learners and their parents at the headmen's kraal and they talk to them and advise them.

[Teacher, **School LF-Quintile 3**]

APPROACH № 4

• USING FORMER LEARNERS (ALUMNI) TO MOTIVATE LEARNERS

Acknowledging that motivating learners is not always an easy task, schools that work invite successful people that learners can look up to and can identify with. Two schools describe how they do this:



APPROACH № 6

•ENGAGING THE NON PROFIT ORGANISATIONS AND OTHER STAKEHOLDERS

Schools that work have a team or a committee that is responsible for creating or expanding community-school partnerships guided by a partnership plan. Such committees include the principal, teachers, members of the School Governing Body (SGB) and learners. These committees connect and create an authentic bond with different stakeholders in the community, including the non-profit organisations.

One approach schools that work use to solicit support is that they go to the people who matter most, and meet them on their own turf. Two schools share some light how they make connections outside the school walls to ensure that communities support the school:

If you send home a flyer asking the community to come to a meeting at the school, it [the community] won't show up. We know that. So, go to them. Don't expect them to come to you. Visit them where they are.

[Principal, School LN-Quintile 1]

We cannot do what we need to do to produce good results with the funds we receive from government. Most our funds go to municipal services. We can't even buy basic science chemicals. So, we have a rigorous strategy to mobilise support from the NGOs and private sector.

[Principal, School GN-Quintile 3]

CONCLUSION

Community is an important actor in promoting quality education. The goal of any kind of activity that attempts to involve community in education is to improve the educational delivery so that more children learn better and are well prepared for the changing world. Successful schools forge partnerships with communities in the best interest of their learners.

What better way to motivate learners than to invite learners who studied here, who have achieved something in life or are still at universities. They motivate our learners and say, 'Not too long ago, we were learners at this very school just like you. We came from the same background as you do. I made it. I am a medical doctor. You, too, can make it.'

[Principal, School KT-Quintile 3]

Our Principal and teachers invite successful people, some are people who were once learners at this school, to motivate us. They come here in their big and fancy cars and tell us that only by being focussed on their studies did they make it big in life.

[Learner, School LN-Quintile 1]

APPROACH № 5

•PARTNERING WITH FAITH-BASED ORGANISATIONS

Schools that work meet the community where it is, e.g. church, mosque, synagogue or wherever the community gathers. Given that something has gone wrong with our moral standards, these schools have joined forces with faith-based organisations to enforce discipline and to teach young people values that schools cannot do it alone. Following are few examples how schools that work do this:

We share our dreams for enhanced community-school partnerships. We discuss them with the right people, including worshipers how they might help our school. We invite pastors to come to school to pray for learners, administer the word of God to them and advise them. We have to resort the divine powers to conquer these social ills that are affecting our children.

[Principal, School EF-Quintile 3]

The community supports us because we involve them. We involve politicians, the civic organisations, including the men of the cloth [the pastors] and so on, to encourage our learners and to try and solve problems like drug and alcohol abuse, teenage pregnancy, et cetera.

[Teacher, School LF-Quintile 3]

