

## PUTTING A STOP TO THE BLAME GAME:

### HOW PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOLS COLLABORATE TO IMPROVE LEARNING OUTCOMES

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**SUMMARY:** If managed well, the transition from primary to secondary school can be a positive step forward in a learner's educational journey and the foundation for success throughout their schooling. However, most schools do not manage this transition well.

This policy brief outlines how schools that work have developed a close collaboration between feeder primary schools and their secondary schools in order to ensure a successful transition from primary into secondary education and to close the achievement gap. These schools engage in different forms of collaboration, including those summarised below:

**Inter-school collaboration:** To ensure that learners achieve at their full potential in primary and secondary schools, feeder primary schools work collaboratively with their receiving secondary schools.

**Intra-school collaboration:** Intra-school collaboration precedes inter-school collaboration. Inter-phase collaboration among teachers within the same school is crucial. Teachers make sure that learners master all skills and content in each phase before they are promoted to the next phase.

## INTRODUCTION

Most secondary school teachers are known to cite primary school teachers as being to blame for learners who struggle academically. Echoing the sentiments of most secondary

school teachers, one teacher in a school that works<sup>1</sup>, lamented as follows:



We teach before the school starts in the morning, during break, after school, during weekends, during holidays. We don't have a social life. Teachers in primary schools do not teach. When learners get here in Grade 8, they have a two-year content gap or more. We have to teach what should have been taught in primary school.

[High School Teacher]

In defence, primary school teachers fight back and argue as follows:



When learners are here [in primary school], they excel. They do very well. There's something they are not doing right in high school. Those teachers [in high schools] must do their work and stop blaming us when learners underperform.

[Primary School Teacher]

The blame game between primary and secondary school teachers is not helping learners as they move from primary schools to secondary schools. Initiatives to address a smooth transition from primary to secondary

<sup>1</sup> 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](http://www.education.gov.za/Resources/Reports.aspx) NEEDU can be reached at (012) 357 4231






schools so that learners can excel academically are few and far between. With the emphasis of learner attainment focussing predominantly on secondary schools, primary schools are often side-lined.




Teachers in primary and secondary schools have their own ideas about the other, but few have experience of seeing each other in practice. The challenge is for feeder primary and receiving secondary school teachers to work together in a more collaborative way so that the whole rich academic experience of transitioning learners is enhanced and maximised.

### THE IMPORTANCE OF INTER-SCHOOL NETWORKING/COLLABORATION

Many learners are held back by the disruption caused when they move from Grade 7 in primary schools to Grade 8 in secondary schools. This leaves many learners who thrive in primary school not achieving their full potential in secondary schools. Learners' academic failure in the higher grades can be caused by a number of barriers or factors. These include the following:

-  A mismatch between foundational skills that learners have not mastered in primary school and curriculum expectations in secondary schools
-  The transition from primary schools to secondary schools often coincides with 'normal' adolescent development as well as important social, intellectual, physical, emotional and physiological changes in the lives of adolescents
-  Environmental threats such as family background, social ills and peer pressure from other learners resulting in skipping classes, decreased desire to do well in academic work, smoking, drinking, using drugs, and general misbehaviour

Whatever the challenge, there are practices that schools that work, collaborating with their feeder primary schools, use to pave the way for their learners. These schools engage in inter-school collaboration to:

-  Break down some of the barriers listed above and to promote a dialogue between feeder primary (contributing) schools and secondary (receiving) schools
-  Give secondary school teachers vital insight into how returning to some of the primary school teaching methods can help learners struggling through the transition
-  Make sure that the journey from primary to secondary school is a successful and less stressful one for every learner
-  Raise the standards of educational practice and attainment within primary and secondary schools by facilitating school-to-school support

### EDUCATION TRANSITIONS

At some stage in their school lives, learners make many transitions. Following are seven main transitions most learners pass through:

- 1 Begin early childhood education
- 2 Start school for the first time
- 3 Start a new grade
- 4 Start a new phase
- 5 Transfer from one school to another
- 6 Move from a primary to a secondary school
- 7 Move from secondary school to further or tertiary education, training or employment

It is beyond the scope of this policy brief to explore all these transitions. Rather, this policy brief focuses on Transition No. 6. The move from primary to secondary school is one of the huge milestones in a child's education.

### INTER-SCHOOL COLLABORATION STRATEGIES

In this policy brief, inter-school *collaboration* and inter-school *networking* are used interchangeably. Inter-school collaboration entails two or more schools, e.g. secondary or receiving schools and their feeder primary or



contributing schools, working together collaboratively.

Teachers at both primary and secondary schools have important roles supporting the transitions of all learners. Empirical evidence shows that it is crucial that learners experience success in their primary schools before they go to secondary school. Grade 8 teachers, on the other hand, have a significant role in providing a seamless learning transition into secondary school.

Outlined below are good practices from schools that work.



### The role of the feeder primary schools

Following are processes that primary schools go through to make learners' transition from primary to secondary school smooth and less stressful or less detrimental:

① Prepare learners academically and socially, and ensure that they have a strong learning foundation required to tackle secondary school curriculum

② Share important information about learners' academic, medical, family and personal history with teachers of the receiving secondary schools

Effective primary schools maintain an up-to-date information of every learner in his or her learner profile. This crucial information is shared with the receiving secondary school

③ Set-up visits to the receiving secondary school to have discussions with Grade 8 teachers before Grade 7 learners join secondary school the following year

④ Introduce learners to learning approaches they may encounter at secondary school

⑤ Prepare learners for a new school culture, e.g. subjects, discipline, classwork, homework, etc.



### The role of the receiving secondary schools

The support secondary schools give to learners coming from their feeder primary schools takes two forms: *Pastoral* and *academic* support.

#### Pastoral Support

Good pastoral care is a fundamental aspect of and is integral to all aspects of the culture in the effective schools.

Schools that work implement the following strategies which are designed to demystify secondary school and minimise the shock many learners experience when they move from a smaller environment in primary schools where they are senior and well-known to a larger, but less personalised context in secondary school:

① Help learners to adjust to new surroundings, become familiar with new teachers and peers, learn new ways of working and make sense of the rules and routines that operate in different classes

② Use learner profiles requested from feeder primary schools to identify vulnerable learners for support

③ Have processes in place to monitor the wellbeing and progress of all learners, especially vulnerable learners

④ Help learners to:

✦ adjust to different expectations of teachers in different classes and subjects

✦ cope with work load, which some learners may find too difficult or challenging

✦ juggle timelines for multiple assignment from different teachers

⑤ Offer support to learners throughout the year--not just in the initial opening weeks

⑥ Develop a whole-school approach to supporting learners as they come into the school and as they move through different grades



#### Academic Support

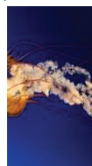
Following are examples that illustrate how schools that work help learners achieve success at their level of ability right from the time they get to secondary school for the first time.

① Learners at risk of not achieving are identified and an appropriate programme is designed to address their specific needs

② Learner progress is reviewed and tracked in order to promote learners' success and achievement

③ During the first week of Grade 8 learners' arrival at secondary school, baseline assessment is conducted. The analysis of the baseline assessment results is used to establish learners' competency levels and content or skills gaps in different subjects

④ The best and most experienced teachers are assigned Grades 8 and 9 classes to lay a strong foundation in these grades





## Primary and secondary schools working collaboratively

Learners who have difficulty with their work when they arrive in secondary schools and have content or skills gaps, find work in secondary school too challenging. To ensure that learners achieve at their full potential in primary and secondary schools, feeder primary schools work collaboratively with their receiving secondary school by:

- ① Using every opportunity to get feeder primary schools and receiving secondary schools together to discuss ways of teaching topics across Grade 7 and Grade 8 that build on existing knowledge.  
Senior Phase teachers, i.e. Grade 7 teachers from primary schools and Grades 8 and 9 teachers from secondary schools form Professional Learning Committees (PLCs) in each subject to make transition from primary to secondary school easier and less stressful for learners.
- ② Organising teacher swaps between feeder primary and receiving secondary schools, and sharing information that gives secondary teachers a more rounded picture of their new arrivals at secondary school.  
Information about learners' achievements, weaknesses and strengths contained in learner profiles that receiving secondary schools request from their feeder primary schools assist secondary school teachers to have a better understanding about learners coming from primary schools.
- ③ Working together to help bridge differences in assessment systems that are used in primary and secondary schools and supporting learners in making good progress when they move on to secondary schools.
- ④ Sharing the results of the baseline assessment with feeder primary schools. The receiving secondary schools conduct baseline assessment in different subjects at the beginning of year to assess Grade 8 learners' readiness to engage with Grade 8 curriculum.  
Sharing the baseline assessment findings with feeder primary schools help them to know content and skills that learners have not mastered when they get to Grade 8 in secondary schools
- ⑤ Scaffolding content and skills that must be taught in the Senior Phase because success in secondary school is reliant on the mastering of the fundamental skills in primary schools



One highly effective secondary school describes how it works collaboratively with its feeder primary schools to scaffold the curriculum as follows:

*As teachers, we discuss the curriculum in detail. We illustrate how a concept that is introduced in Grade 1 builds up as learners progress through grades until Grade 12.*

*We then review CAPS concept by concept. We say, 'for this concept, in Grade 4, this is what you **must** make sure that it is addressed adequately. In Grade 5, this is how you build on this concept—and so on.'*

*This helps teachers to see how each concept builds up from Grade 1 to Grade 12. This makes a lot of difference because primary school teachers, who are not familiar with Senior Phase and FET Phase curriculum, all of a sudden realise that they are part of an important value chain. What they do or don't do will affect learners long after they leave primary school. They become aware that if any part of the value chain becomes disconnected because a concept was not taught at all or was not taught well, it affects the whole value chain. [Teacher, School KU-Quintile 3]*

## CONCLUSION

If there was more collaboration between the receiving secondary schools and their feeder primary schools, all learners would benefit and the number of progressed learners in the system would be greatly reduced.

*Inter-school* collaboration is a vital tool in the school improvement efforts. However, collaboration between receiving secondary schools and their feeder primary schools is not the only form of partnership that schools must embrace. Other important partnerships include *intra-school* collaborations.

*Intra-school* collaboration precedes inter-school collaboration. The National Senior Certificate examinations are the final step; but each of the twelve years preceding this step is equally important. Learners are very seldom successful in the FET Phase if they have not achieved in the Senior Phase. Similarly, learners cannot be successful in the Senior Phase, if they have not achieved in the Intermediate Phase. And, success in the Intermediate Phase is reliant on the mastering of the fundamental skills in the Foundation Phase. Thus, learners must be well-equipped with skills and knowledge to make the transition from grade-to-grade, phase-to-phase and school-to-school successful.

