

Comment at the Release of the  
2012 NEEDU Report

Brief History of NEEDU and its Mandate  
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Honoured guests it is a great privilege and honour to have been asked to give a brief history of NEEDU and its mandate at this important event that will remain a significant marker on our journey to a better quality of education for all in our country. At the same time it is with a sense of profound regret that my personal circumstances prevent me from joining you in person at this time. I would like to assure you that I remain vitally interested in the work of NEEDU and I am extremely excited to read the report. May I at the outset congratulate the CEO of NEEDU, Dr Nick Taylor and his team for putting together this highly valuable document based on their work in schools.

Allow me then to briefly contextualize this event by briefly sketching the journey of NEEDU and how we have reached this point in our journey:

Since the 2009 elections, the South African government policies have been shaped by a new focus on accountability and an emphasis on planning and performance monitoring driven from the Presidency. This is based on the achievement of clear outcomes and their associated targets. Of the six priority areas in government policy, *improving the quality of basic education* is the No. 1 priority. The Department of Basic Education has outlined its vision and targets in a document entitled: *Action Plan to 2014 Towards the Realization of Schooling 2025*.

It was agreed as early as 2007 that an external agency had to be established to evaluate the entire education system and report to the Ministry and the public on the state of education in South African schools. The establishment of such an agency was seen as essential because low levels of performance still persist widely in the system.

In 2008 the then Minister of Education, Naledi Pandor appointed a Ministerial Committee to investigate and advise the Ministry on how the quality of education could be enhanced through an independent performance evaluation system. The work of this committee culminated in the establishment of a Unit, commonly known as the *National Education Evaluation and Development Unit (NEEDU)*. The core responsibilities of NEEDU are to identify the critical factors that inhibit or advance school improvement and to make focused recommendations for redressing the problem areas that undermine school improvement. The main task of this Unit would be to provide the

Ministry with an authoritative, analytical and accurate account on the state of education in South Africa, in particular, on the status of teaching and learning in all schools.

The report by the Ministerial Committee was published on 6 April 2009 and comments were sent to Minister Motshekga by 2 September of that year.

Mr Ron Swartz served as an interim CEO of NEEDU for just under a year, thereafter I was appointed as CEO as of 1 July 2010 supported by a small but highly professional team in Dr Sibusiso Sithole, Mr Mark Potterton, Mr Yousuf Gabru and Ms Saheda Dadabhay, Ms Adri van Staden and later Dr Kim Draper.

In September 2010 the NEEDU team analysed the public comments that were received by the Minister. These comments came from teacher organizations, NGOs, teacher unions and a few departments of education.

Generally the public submissions welcomed the establishment of NEEDU. There was recognition that:

- the existing evaluation approaches at the time have not adequately addressed that the problems in education.
- that we require stronger accountability measures and
- that we also require developmental support in schools.
- that NEEDU will only work if it is staffed by consummate professionals who are knowledgeable.

There was also strong support that NEEDU needs to be a statutory body outside of the Department of Basic Education with its own governance structures. The need for NEEDU to have authority to follow-up and report on actions was also highlighted.

NEEDU convened an expert discussion group in September 2010, which included university people, evaluation practitioners, teacher unions and others. The strategic conversation focused on the kinds of organizational and strategic processes that were needed to establish NEEDU. Part of the discussion focused on the mandate of NEEDU which were summarized into four functional dimensions: those which define an **accountability** framework; those which **report** on the state of schools and the factors that impact on school performance; those which help schools to **develop** their own internal evaluation processes and those which provide schools with **advice on good practice and improvement strategies**.

NEEDU also engaged with those responsible for IQMS and WSE within the DBE on the roles and functions of those units and their possible alignment with NEEDU.

NEEDU made a formal submission on the DBE's Action Plan 2014 noting that the plan was a clear acknowledgement of shortcomings in the system and the identification of the means to address these shortcomings were welcomed. The Action Plan would form one of the components of NEEDU's framework for school, and system-wide, evaluation.

NEEDU also embarked on a series of visits to the provinces to meet the MECs and HoDs for Basic Education and senior education officials to share the emerging vision of NEEDU as well as visiting schools from September 2010 until my premature departure at the end of 2011. We also held ongoing meetings with teachers unions in which the scope and role of NEEDU are discussed.

An inception conference was held in March 2011 which helped NEEDU to explore experiences and best practices from organisations and countries that have implemented a system of school reviews or school evaluations. These experiences together with the views of the wide range of local experts who attended the inception conference helped to shape the thinking and refined our approaches to evaluation in the establishment of NEEDU. As NEEDU was still in a "sunrise period" with respect to its own emergence as a fully-fledged external evaluation agency in South Africa, the inception conference also provided an opportunity to officially launch the establishment of NEEDU.

In establishing a NEEDU, the State is assisting all the partners with a mechanism to promote and improve quality at schools. The school is a central building block in realising that vision and ultimately change can only happen from within the school. As Dr Nick Taylor said at the Inception Conference: "*NEEDU is there to help schools to help themselves.*"

Central to the notion of quality is the concept of accountability. For me accountability is about owning one's commitment. Schools have a commitment to the learners and their families, to the profession of education and of course to the State. These accountabilities have to be understood, institutionalised and continuously renewed. It is the case that teachers have a natural aversion to "the inspectorate" in whatever form or guise it might come. However the need for accountability is both necessary and inescapable. Let me hasten to add that the focus of NEEDU is not only on schools but also on the district support to make schools work. In fact accountability applies to every level of the education system.

I am convinced we have now in NEEDU, under the able and experienced leadership of Dr Nick Taylor, a team with the professionalism, the experience, the insights and the passion to make a difference and who can take the mandate of NEEDU from strategic

intent to operational reality without fear or favour. However this will only be possible if every stakeholder is committed to support the vision of NEEDU. Without the confidence and acceptance of all involved in education, no evaluative based system will work – it will in fact be counterproductive. The challenge of improving the quality of education in this country therefore remains the responsibility of every South African. Every social partner in the education process must be prepared to embrace and pursue this dream to make education better for all.

It is my sincere hope that the release of the 2012 NEEDU Report would help us to be inspired again by a renewed vision of what a quality education system would look like and that we also would renew our courage to do whatever we can to strengthen education in schools within our own sphere of influence.