



Number 18 · September 2011



SCHOOLING REFORM IS POSSIBLE

Lessons for South Africa from international experience

This is an executive summary of **CDE Round Table no 18**, *Schooling Reform Is Possible: Lessons for South Africa from international experience* (September 2011). The full-length publication is available from CDE, and can also be downloaded from www.cde.org.za.



IN APRIL this year, CDE held a Round Table on lessons for South Africa from international experiences of schooling reform. This was a sequel to two CDE workshops on international experiences of schooling reform held in Washington, DC, in 2008. The Johannesburg workshop was addressed by experts from four countries where significant schooling reforms have been implemented in recent years: Brazil, Ghana, the United States, and India. It was supplemented by a new McKinsey overview of schooling reform in 20 countries, as well as a World Bank review of African experience.

The Round Table was addressed by Angie Motshekga, Minister of Basic Education, and Bobby Soobrayan, director-general of the Department of Basic Education. Participants included more than 60 educational experts as well as business leaders and leaders of civil society.

'I wish to commend CDE for organising this workshop. Experiences shared during engagements of this nature yield invaluable information which are vital for transforming education policies and systems.'

– Angie Motshekga, Minister of Basic Education

The South African education system is large and complex, comprising more than 12 million learners, more than 400 000 educators, and about 30 000 schools in more than 70 districts in nine provinces. It is also very diverse, with huge differences within and among provinces, districts and schools. Any reform attempts are complicated by South Africa's legacy of apartheid and past and current issues of race and politics.

The country is struggling to turn this ship around. While some improvements had been made, the public schooling system is failing too many young South Africans. There are few experts who believe the system will improve dramatically over the next five, 10 or even 20 years. Against this background, the aim of this Round Table was to explore what could be done to reform the South African schooling system, and establish what could be learnt from successful reform in other countries in the developed and developing world.

South Africa has its own specific circumstances, and CDE is not suggesting that we should try simply to replicate what people are doing elsewhere. Reflecting on other places and what they have done can help us look at our challenges in new ways, and ask different questions which are less rooted in our history and more future-oriented.



SPEAKERS

The Round Table focused on schooling reform at the primary and secondary level aimed at improving student performance. The international speakers were:

- **Paulo Renato Souza**, former Brazilian minister of education, and former secretary of education of the state of São Paulo, who outlined steps taken to improve public education in São Paulo;
- **Dr Ato Essuman**, former chief director of education in Ghana, who described a major initiative to reform the Ghanaian education system from 2001 onwards;
- **Tom Boasberg**, superintendent of Denver Public Schools, who outlined a major initiative to improve schooling in the city; and
- **Prof Anita Rampal**, dean of education at the University of Delhi, who spoke about the introduction of a rights-based framework for public education in India.

In addition, a new McKinsey study entitled *How the World's Most Improved School Systems Keep Getting Better*, which identifies lessons from 20 education systems which have significantly improved student outcomes, was presented to the Round Table.

KEY INSIGHTS FROM INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE

International experiences of schooling reform are varied, but a number of common factors emerged from the presentations.

Schooling reform is difficult. And yet, with the right leadership and approach, education systems can make significant gains from almost any starting point. Measurable improvement can be achieved in as little as six years. Success requires a sustained focus on key variables.

While minimum levels of funding and resources are essential, funds and resources are not enough in themselves to transform a schooling system. Many countries spend more money but achieve too little; other countries have less to spend and outperform those with bigger budgets.

The quality of teaching and teachers is a central determinant of student performance. Teacher quality cannot be reduced to formal qualifications, which often have little impact on student results.

School leadership, notably by principals, plays a key role, especially in motivating teachers and creating a culture of learning.

Sustained schooling reform requires a new approach to the teaching profession. Society needs to value the importance of teachers more highly, and teachers need to see themselves as professionals and behave accordingly. Incentive-based pay is essential.

There are groups and interests outside of government – especially parents and others in civil society – who have an interest in schooling reform and who can be mobilised in support of good school leadership, good teaching, and improved student performance.



Strategy and mechanisms of implementation are more important and urgent than endless policy development. The fundamentals of schooling reform are well known. The challenge is to take account of local context – politics, unions, economics – and devise an effective approach that will deliver results.

Virtually everywhere in the world, these insights or guidelines offer hope for turning around under-performing education systems. What is required is a strategy that places school leadership and effective, professional teaching at the heart of educational reform. The performance of school managers and teachers, in turn, should be judged in terms of improved learner performance.

'I found great cause for optimism in the idea that we can make a difference within six years or even sooner. This has changed my assumptions of what is possible.'

– Prof Cheryl de la Rey, vice-chancellor, University of Pretoria

SOUTH AFRICANS REFLECT ON INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE

South Africa does not exhibit an appropriate sense of urgency with respect to the country's crisis in education. Despite comparatively high government expenditure, and very poor outcomes in terms of student performances, the severity of the situation is not sufficiently recognised.

A business leader said South Africans, including business leaders, did not speak about the crisis in education often enough or with sufficient focus on the urgency for effective action.

'Business argued passionately against outcomes-based education, and were told we knew nothing, so we went off to focus on other things. We shouldn't have. We should have stuck with it because we've lost a decade as a result, and the human cost has been enormous. So I constantly remind myself that we need to speak with passion and urgency about education.'

– Mike Spicer, CEO, Business Leadership South Africa

The Brazilian experience should provide hope for South Africa. In a society characterised by great inequality, and much larger numbers than South Africa, political leadership made a major difference to education. Some years ago the president mobilised public sentiment and political will throughout a vast country. As a result of introducing incentives for teachers, professionalisation, and a focus on student performance, the country has moved from being 'bottom of world class' to 'the world's fastest reforming system'.



The evidence reported from Denver is instructive. This city is only one of the many and diverse city and state experiments in schooling reform taking place throughout the United States. The Denver presentation shows decisively that improvement in outcomes is not correlated with aggregate expenditure, but rather with how resources are managed. The first major city to introduce a significant merit pay programme for teachers, it has led national thinking on how to make public, private, and charter schools more competitive, and teachers much more effective.

The Ghanaian experience shows that achieving education reforms requires administrative and leadership continuity, together with a sense of urgency and political commitment from the very top. Many participants felt that these attributes were lacking in South Africa.

An overview of African and other developing country experience summarised new evidence on why education systems in developing countries are performing poorly. Funding is generally available but is inequitably allocated, both geographically and across income and ethnic groups. In addition, the funding 'leaks', with only 20 to 50 per cent of the money reaching schools. Teacher absence and significant loss of instructional time are key impediments to learner performance. Spending is poorly correlated with results, with evidence showing very large disparities between test scores and public education spend in a range of countries. South Africa is an infamous example – performing poorly in international tests, and yet spending 5-6 per cent of GDP on education.

The key to improving education in Africa is to strengthen accountability. In the case of schools, three levels of interventions are needed to achieve this: information, school-based management, and teacher incentives. Schooling reform in Africa is most effective when it starts from the ground up, and empowers those who are closest to learners, namely parents and communities.

'When parents can choose schools for their children, information increases market pressure on schools to improve their performance.'

– Ruth Kagia, South Africa country director, World Bank

The lesson about the importance of teachers – underlined by all the international presentations, especially those on Brazil, Denver, and Ghana – was strong and clear. It is now well known that no system can transcend the capacity and performance of its teachers. The importance of the school as a 'vital unit of performance and change' was also underlined. South Africans – in the view of the Director-General of Basic Education – need to understand that the school is the point at which we convert inputs into outputs. If we don't do that, we are not going to succeed.



'It is well known that no system can transcend the capacity and performance of its teachers. In this respect, the elephant in the room which mediates "the how" is the teachers' unions.'

– Bobby Soobrayan, director-general, Department of Basic Education

Many participants felt the time was ripe for a new social movement to improve public education in South Africa. Education reformers in other countries have worked with a wide range of social allies to achieve their objectives. This country should follow their example.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The international evidence demonstrates that schooling reform is indeed possible, even in very large systems. Significant improvements can be achieved relatively quickly. However, this requires resolve, leadership, and commitment.

Management capacity is also vital. In South Africa, this is an enormous challenge. The country needs effective management of the very large public education bureaucracy, as well as bold and effective political leadership. The country requires sound management skills needed to ensure the efficacy of a very large bureaucratic system. It also requires bold and effective political management that is essential if the country is to make progress.

International experience demonstrates that strategy matters. Success is not about having some grand plan at the beginning, but having a notion of what we can do first that will unleash a whole lot of other productive forces. We can't do it all. This will require some tough choices.

Continuity – of political and administrative leadership, policies, and strategies for implementation – is vital.

Differentiation is essential. Teachers, principals, and education officials all need to be incentivised, but this cannot be done in a uniform way.

South Africa will not succeed in reforming its public schooling system if it continues to have teachers in the system who are present only three days a week, but who remain employed and receive the same pay as everyone else. The rights of principals to hire and fire, and of their superiors to fire principals if necessary, should be reinforced.

South Africa needs a new social compact in respect of schooling. It is not only key officials and the department who need to be committed to a new plan. A much wider set of social groupings is needed to support both the department and political leaders.

The unions must form part of this compact. Three international experts spoke about challenges surrounding the unions, but their political leaders were able to move forward despite this. This is a complex issue, but South Africa cannot afford to be held back indefinitely in this way. National interests now need to trump minority interests.



There are some promising developments across the schooling sector, including centres of excellence (sometimes in unexpected places) in the public schooling system; the growth of low-fee private schools, which are more accountable to parents; and education projects largely funded by the private sector, which could be taken to scale.

However, these developments need to form part of an overall thrust which South Africa does not yet have. So the country has to look for synergies, partnerships, and combining the public sector and market forces without ideological blinkers on either side.

'We need teachers in class, on time, and teaching, but words and intentions are not enough. We need bold political leadership and a new social compact on quality schooling. We need firm resolve, and we need much better outcomes.'

– Ann Bernstein, executive director, Centre for Development and Enterprise

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This publication, and the workshop on which it is based, have been funded
by the Epoch and Optima Trusts.

