

INTERNATIONAL BEST PRACTICE IN SCHOOLING REFORM

What can South Africa learn from other countries?



September 2009

This is a summary of a CDE publication entitled *International Best Practice in Schooling Reform: What can South Africa learn from other countries?*, which reflects the proceedings of a workshop held in Washington, DC, in December 2008. The full-length report is available from CDE.

IN DECEMBER 2008 CDE hosted a workshop in Washington, DC on international experience in schooling reform. The gathering was addressed by international experts, and attended by a small group of South Africans.

CDE arranged the workshop because of its concern about the quality of South African education, and its desire to learn more about schooling reform in other countries.



WHY THE SA EDUCATION SYSTEM NEEDS TO BE REFORMED

The workshop underscored the fact that the South African education system is largely failing the community it is meant to serve. South African learners perform very badly in international tests of fundamental skills such as numeracy and literacy. This means that the education system is not providing most learners with the skills they need to find jobs.

Recent studies have shown that economic growth in a country is closely linked to the cognitive skills of its citizens. Poor education in South Africa is a serious constraint on improved rates of inclusive economic growth, which is vital to combat poverty. Moreover, the gap between the few who receive a good education and the many who do not perpetuates social and economic inequality, and limits national development.

The problem is not one of a lack of funding. South Africa spends substantially more on education than most low- and middle-income countries whose school systems significantly outperform ours. Nor is the problem one of access, because school enrolment levels in South Africa are very high. What we have is a serious problem of performance and efficiency: South Africans are receiving a very poor return on a substantial investment.

KEY LESSONS FROM THE WORKSHOP

South Africa is not unique. Many countries have tried to reform their education systems, and those programmes have been intensively studied. We can, and must, learn from their experiences. What are the key lessons from this workshop?

The central objective of reform must be to improve learning outcomes

The only way to improve outcomes is to improve the quality and quantity of instruction in the classroom. Steps must be taken to improve teaching methods, classroom management, and curricula. Above all, teaching time and the quality of teaching must be maximised.

The quality of an education system is mainly determined by the quality of its teachers

Good teachers are the main determinants of learner performance. A few years with a good teacher can transform the performance of even the most disadvantaged learners. This can play a major role in eradicating socio-economic backlogs and reducing inequality.

Effective schooling systems need to attract and retain talented teachers, and improve their knowledge and teaching skills. Teachers should be adequately supported, and their performance should be closely monitored. Teachers who do not meet required standards must be encouraged to leave the system, thus making way for others. Teaching must be regarded as a prestigious profession, and good teachers should be rewarded.



No children should be left behind

Effective schooling systems must ensure that every child has the opportunity to succeed. Weaker schools must be supported. This requires efficient monitoring systems and effective intervention programmes.

Schools need strong leaders

Top systems recruit and train excellent principals.

Reformers must pay careful attention to institutional and political factors

School systems are generally large and have many stakeholders, including parents; teachers; learners; local, regional and national bureaucracies; and private interests. Many potentially valuable reforms are thwarted by resistance from one or more stakeholders. Teachers' unions, for example, often oppose systematic assessments of teacher performance. As a result, successful reforms require careful political and diplomatic work aimed at removing obstacles to positive change, and securing support for it.

Reforms must keep pace with capacity

Many reform strategies add to demands on schools without increasing capacity, thus complicating and slowing the processes they are intended to improve. Inefficient processes and poorly performing people need to be removed. Innovations are less likely to work if they are tacked on to failing systems; therefore, reformers need to pay close attention to the problems and dynamics of practical implementation.

Competition can play a significant role in improving performance

Competition between public and private schools benefits both sectors, and lowers costs across the board. Major benefits can be obtained from various forms of private education, including private education for the poor.

Religious and faith-based schooling can also play a significant role. Schools need not be entirely public or private; there are privately operated but publicly owned schools in several countries.

Funding should follow learners

At least some funding should go to parents (in the form of vouchers), and move with their children to schools of their choice. This would empower parents, and compel schools to improve their performance or risk losing teachers and resources.

Public–private partnerships can play a major role in education reform

Broader society has a strong interest in an effective schooling system. As a result, powerful public–private partnerships can be mobilised, which can play a significant role in designing,



introducing, and supporting reform initiatives. These are especially valuable if they are based on mutual trust; pilot programmes are introduced which are suitable to be taken to scale; and if capacity is mobilised to strengthen implementation.

Corporations and foundations can also play a significant role

Private companies (and large foundations) can provide valuable technical and other support. They typically have high levels of expertise in gathering and evaluating data, including monitoring systems, and are administratively efficient. They can therefore help school administrations to run in more goal-oriented and efficient ways.

Accurate data plays a vital role

Every successful schooling system assesses the performance of teachers, learners, and schools. This information is essential for monitoring the performance of various aspects of the system, and achieving greater accountability. It also enables countries to measure their performance against international standards.

Excellent teachers can only be rewarded if administrators have some way of establishing who they are. Gathering the right data efficiently and accurately, analysing it well, and making it available rapidly, can help schools, teachers and officials to identify many forms of inefficiencies as well as successes, and intervene where this is needed. Accurate performance data also helps parents to choose the best schools for their children.

Every school must receive the resources it is entitled to

Sometimes basic inputs and resources do not reach all schools. Ensuring that they do can be a powerful change mechanism. Schools, parents, and communities should know what resources their schools are meant to receive, and be able to act when they are not delivered or used inappropriately.

POPULAR INTERVENTIONS OFTEN DON'T SUCCEED

Popular interventions such as simply spending more money, reducing class sizes, and giving schools greater autonomy in designing the learning process have not been consistently successful. Countries that spend relatively less often perform well, because what they do spend is spent well.

WHY GOOD IDEAS ARE OFTEN NOT IMPLEMENTED

Poor schooling systems are the way they are because some people are benefiting from them. Therefore, the first step reformers need to take is to examine why the system is working the way it does. This is necessary in order to work out what is feasible (given competing interests) rather than basing policy on rational or optimal but practically unattainable ideals.



A VITAL NATIONAL CHALLENGE

The workshop produced a compelling set of good ideas about how to move South Africa's struggling education system in the right direction.

There is growing consensus on the need to fundamentally improve the performance of the South African education system. What is vital as we move forward is that decision-makers focus on the right priorities. Many countries have tried to reform and yet focused on the wrong issues, which then result in failure.

The words of Luis Crouch, international education expert and long-standing technical advisor to the South African Department of Education, are worth repeating: 'South African policy-makers need to focus on the real issues in education reform, and turn away from the non-issues. The real issues are the poor quality of education, and the unequal distribution of quality. The non-issues are access to schooling, and completion rates.'

Addressing issues of quality will require debates about how to teach, who should teach, and how to run schools effectively.

The international evidence shows that determined interventions which are properly focused and managed can lead to real improvements within a few years. A significantly improved schooling system would be a national asset, producing people better suited to the world of work, thus reducing unemployment, poverty and inequality, and creating a more prosperous society.

Reforming the South African public schooling system is not a secondary or peripheral issue – it is vital to national development. Successful reform will be difficult, and will require vision, staying power, managerial competence, and political courage. South Africa's future success requires a greatly improved schooling system.



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The Centre for Development and Enterprise
Transmedit Place, 5 Eton Road, Parktown, Johannesburg 2193, South Africa
PO Box 1936, Johannesburg 2000, South Africa
Tel 2711 482 5140 • Fax 2711 482 5089
info@cde.org.za • www.cde.org.za

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