



School Leadership

Efforts to improve the quality of education must take into consideration the important role that principals and school leaders play.

A Viable Solution to
21st Century Education
Challenges

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The **#FutureWeWant** begins with quality education for every child. As this becomes a reality, all citizens would be able to enjoy an equitable economy; sustainable development; social and economic enrichment; and a life of purpose, dignity, and contribution.

Citizen Leader Lab (formerly Symphonia for South Africa) asserts that the way to achieve this goal is through the empowerment of school principals as drivers of quality education. As a disrupter in education and leadership development, the organization hopes to ignite a shift in how we tackle the complex challenges that plague essential sectors.

It is a rarely contested assertion: Quality education is an effective equalizer in an unequal world. The link between cyclical poverty and a lack of quality education is well understood, as is the inextricable link between the provision of quality education and sustainable economic growth. As governments, policy-makers, civil society, and ordinary citizens work together to make quality education for every child a reality, the intersection with the development of competent school leadership becomes ever clearer.

Backdrop: Post-Apartheid Education in South Africa

Today, South Africa is home to 19.6 million children, making up about 35% of its total population



Photos courtesy of Citizen Leader Lab

of 56.5 million people. Of these 19.6 million children, about 98% have attended some form of an educational facility.¹ The country's constitution, one of the world's most progressive, guarantees every child the right to a basic education.

Quality education is recognized as a key enabler in unlocking people's potential and providing economic opportunities for everyone. The National Development Plan,² developed in 2011, highlighted education as one of its priorities.





Internationally, South Africa has committed to implement the Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education) to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.

It seems that years of sustained effort by the South African government have paid dividends. There is no doubt that children in South Africa have enjoyed vastly improved access to schooling since 1994. However, *quality* education for disadvantaged Black learners remains elusive.

Sadly, high education enrollment and attendance rates have not translated into high-quality education. The unjust education policies of the past may have been abolished, but the bimodal schooling system they created, where the privileged minority attend well-functioning schools while the disadvantaged continue to receive sub-par education, remains. It is believed that it will take many more decades to dismantle apartheid's legacy of unequal opportunity. As a nation

struggling with high rates of poverty, the correlation between poverty and education can be seen, with many different aspects to the relationship.

According to the World Bank, of the 13 million learners who attend public schools in South Africa, over 95% do so in poorly performing schools. While schooling is compulsory until grade nine, there have been increasing numbers of drop-out cases. In addition, South African schools have struggled to teach basic skills, such as reading and writing. The 2019 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) revealed that 63% of learners between the ages of 10-11 had not acquired basic mathematical knowledge, and 72% had not acquired basic science knowledge.³ The 2016 edition of the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) found that 78% of learners were not able to read for meaning in any language by the end of Grade 4.⁴ Even with large improvements in reading

levels since the release of that report, South Africa continues to lag behind other countries.

In rural areas in the former homelands, about 81% of children live below the poverty line.⁵ Education in rural areas is especially vulnerable simply as a result of the barriers presented by location. Essential resources, like electricity, books, and technology, are missing from many schools and so many South African children cannot access a complete educational experience. Furthermore, the location of schools in relation to learners' homes means long, daily commutes. Without reliable transportation, learners and teachers alike struggle to consistently attend school.

Compounding an already untenable situation, researchers estimate that during the COVID-19 pandemic, children in South Africa lost up to a whole year of schooling. Unsurprisingly, learners from poor communities were disproportionately affected, largely due to the widening digital divide.

School Principals: Drivers of Quality Education

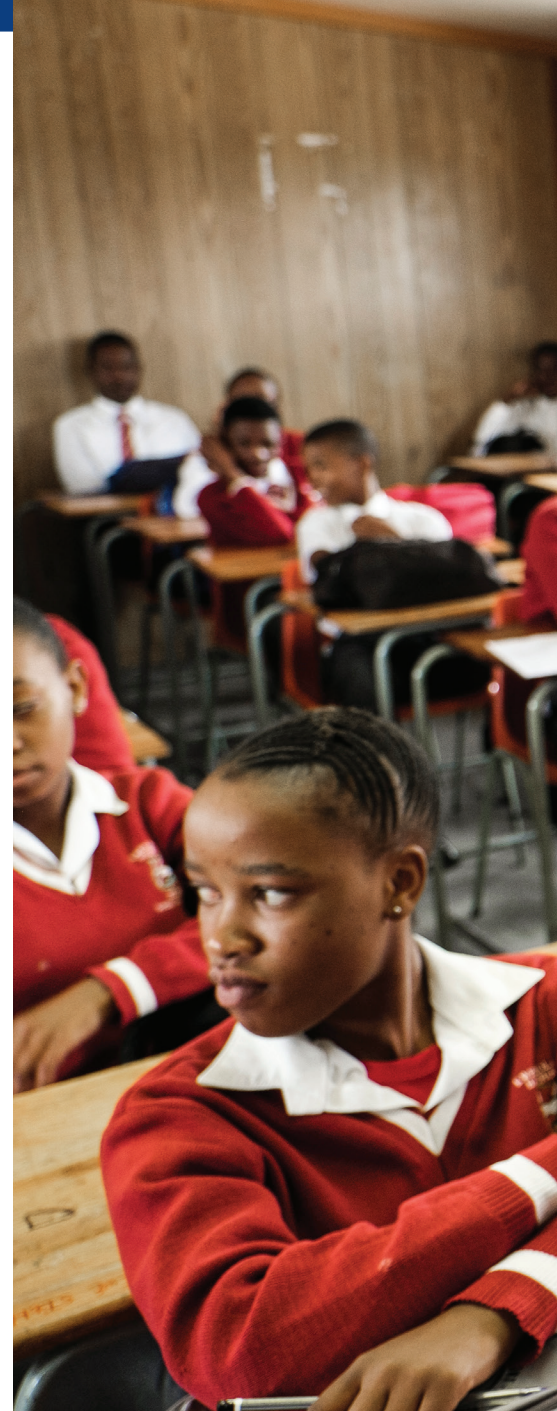
There is consensus among education experts that teacher quality is the most important in-school factor relating to learner achievement. Quantifying this impact, an analysis by the U.S. nonprofit global policy think tank RAND Corporation found that 33% of a school's impact on learner achievement is attributable to teacher effectiveness.⁶

Although it is accepted that a single teacher has a profound impact on learning over the course of the academic year, those gains tend to diminish unless the learner's subsequent teachers are equally effective. While school principals seemingly play second fiddle to teachers (they account for 25% of impact on learner achievement according to the same RAND Corporation analysis), the crux of the issue is how to ensure valuable learning gains for our children *throughout* their schooling careers.

The literature on school improvement supports the notion that confident, empowered principals are key to creating school environments that lay the foundation for effective teaching in every single classroom year after year. They successfully inculcate a culture of learning at the school, manage the school's use of time effectively, and demonstrate personal leadership to build a school environment geared toward teaching and learning.

In accordance with South Africa's Department of Basic Education's governance structures, principals are expected to lead, manage the school, and ensure that the policies and programs of the school are executed. Unfortunately, this has largely resulted in school principals not being fully prepared for their new role as Chief Executive Officers.

Principals in disadvantaged and under-resourced communities face more challenges, as their schools often experience a lack



of infrastructure, inadequate water and sanitation facilities, learners who go to school barefoot and hungry, high rates of school dropout, teenage pregnancy, as well as issues of substance abuse and gang-related activities in and around the school vicinity. All of this puts a strain on the principal's ability to deliver quality education.

Schools do not exist in silos; they exist in a wider ecosystem of learning that includes parents,



community members, and local businesses. It is well-known that when parents are involved in their children's learning, the children are more likely to succeed not just in school – but also throughout life. Communities also play a crucial role in supporting schools, as they have assets, skills, and capacities; in turn, schools have a major impact on communities. Parents and communities are more likely to get involved in their children's

learning and in the school when they know what principals expect from them and what role they can play.

It is within this context that Partners for Possibility (PFP), the flagship program of Citizen Leader Lab, was founded. PFP invites members of the business community to partner with a principal; both partners are exposed to a dynamic leadership development program that supports them through the

experience of applying new skills and knowledge in their schools. The program seeks to develop conscious leaders, break down barriers, connect people, and inspire change in schools and beyond – while responding to the Department of Basic Education's call for strengthening the management and functionality of public schools.

As a result of the enhancements to the principals' leadership skills, school culture could



improve and parental and community involvement increase. Positive cumulative effects may eventually lead to improved delivery of quality education.

Cross-Sector Collaboration: A Possible Antidote

Equitable access to a quality education undoubtedly has an important role to play in undoing social and economic inequality, but addressing the challenges that plague education in South Africa has proved to be a notoriously complex undertaking. Education is a *wicked problem* – a challenge that has no clear solution. Traditional solutions are ineffective and throwing money at the problem does not yield lasting change.

In light of this challenge, there has been greater acknowledgment that the problems in education cannot be shouldered by governments alone. Business, as a socio-economic partner, must help lead the movement. After all, business is the lifeblood of any economy and relies on a well-educated workforce to drive economic growth. School principals, in turn, are vital in terms of ensuring that schools are environments of quality teaching and learning that nurture and equip the future workforce.

The PfP program aims to improve the quality of education offered in South African public schools, by mobilizing active citizens from the business world to support school leadership.

Instead of developing an expensive, imported, consultant-led intervention, business leaders who are well-trained to assume leadership positions and manage change are partnered with school principals who serve under-resourced communities. South Africa, as a developed economy, has a plentitude of such experienced business leaders.

This process gives the private sector a worthwhile conduit for social investment. The philanthropic efforts of business in education are not limited to tangible donations – there is an opportunity to channel funds into a sustainable process that strengthens individual leadership skills, builds social capital, implements change initiatives,

and provides support in schools and communities.

Partners for Possibility: Process to Impact

PfP creates partnerships between school principals in under-resourced communities and business leaders over a 12-month period. The partnerships are grouped into leadership circles of 8-10 schools, to allow for peer and co-learning. Over a year, both partners are exposed to a dynamic transformational leadership development program that is based on the 70:20:10 model:

- 70% of learning occurs through experiential learning, as the partners work together to identify, prioritize, and tackle challenges in schools
- 20% of learning takes place through social learning, whereby participants gain new knowledge and insights through their engagement with other leaders from their leadership circle
- 10% of learning comes from formal training workshops.

The partnerships are actively supported by group coaching provided by a learning process facilitator. In addition, participants attend three co-learning workshops geared toward refining collaborative and adaptive leadership capacity:

- *Time to Think* lays the foundation for creating an optimal thinking environment by focusing on strengthening listening skills, improving interpersonal relations, and providing practical strategies for conducting productive and collaborative meetings.

- *Flawless Consulting* equips partners with contracting and conflict resolution skills that assist in clarifying goals and expectations within and beyond the workplace.
- *Community Building* workshop teaches participants how to build communities where every individual has a sense of purpose and value – particularly within the complex ecosystem of a school, where stakeholders include teachers, learners, parents, donors, local businesses, and community members.

Every six weeks, the Leadership Circle convenes community of practice sessions, so that participants can observe each other's places of learning and share their subjective experiences.

Significantly improved principals' skills, knowledge, values, and practices

Due to principals' increased confidence and implementation of the leadership practices learned through PfP workshops and from their PfP partners, many principals note improved morale among the school management team (SMT), school governing body (SGB), and teachers. The principals' continuous encouragement, trust, and teamwork contribute to teachers feeling more valued, inspired, supported, and understood. Both principals and teachers report having better working relationships with each other due to the change in the principals' communication and overall leadership practices. The teachers, and especially the SMT members, also become more cohesive. This, in turn, leads to coherence

within the school, a renewed enthusiasm and commitment for teaching and learning among teachers, and improved ability to engage with parents and community members.

Increased community involvement in schools

Principals report using tenets of the community building training to invite, encourage, and support parents to play a more active role in their children's education. The training also enables principals to model the changes that they want to take place in the school. Notable positive changes at the school inspire community members to become more actively involved in the school. Examples of increased community engagement in the schools include:

- Higher levels of attendance at school meetings and more active participation in these meetings
- Support for maintenance of the schools
- Local businesses donating food for Grade 12 learners during weekend and holiday classes
- Youth from the community volunteering to assist with office management tasks and tutoring learners.

Context-driven school improvement

We have extensive evidence that, through the partnership model delivered by PfP, tangible and intangible resources and social capital (i.e., networks) are mobilized around every participating school, often due to the involvement of the business partner. These new resources benefit learners directly and indirectly.

Examples of the resources mobilized into PfP schools include:

- ICT resources and training
- Math and science programs
- Tutoring and mentorship programs
- Study skills programs
- Staff development and team building
- Library development and stocking
- Vegetable gardens and feeding schemes
- Psycho-social support programs
- Accountancy and HR support
- Water and sanitation, classroom infrastructure, and sports facilities and programs.

Since its inception in 2010, PfP has grown exponentially. To date, more than 1,700 co-action,

co-learning partnerships between school leaders and business leaders have been established in major metropolitan cities and even remote areas in all nine South African provinces. The fact that the PfP program has a footprint in outlying regions of South Africa demonstrates its true innovation – it is an easily replicable and scalable solution to pressing educational challenges.

A South Africa where all children become economically productive adults, while contributing to a democratic society, is a vision that can be realized if we start to invest in the leadership of principals, who are tasked with shaping our future leaders.

For more information, visit: www.Citizenleaderlab.org

Notes:

¹ According to the Children’s Institute, 11.2 million South African children between the ages of 7 and 17 were found to have “attended some form of educational facility.”

² A plan to tackle the triple challenges of poverty, inequality, and unemployment in South Africa by drawing on the collective energies of the country’s people, growing an inclusive economy, enhancing the capacity of the State, and promoting leadership and partnerships throughout society.

³ <https://www.ica.nl/sites/default/files/2020-12/TIMSS-2019-International-Results-in-Mathematics-and-Science.pdf>

⁴ <https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/pirls/pirls2016/index.asp>

⁵ Income poverty, unemployment, and social grants: Katharine Hall (Children’s Institute, University of Cape Town).

⁶ <https://www.rand.org/topics/teacher-effectiveness.html>

Reference

Dube, D. (2021). *The role of constitutive communication in the emergence of leadership capabilities among public school principals in South Africa: A contextual case of partners for possibility* [University of Johannesburg]. <https://ujcontent.uj.ac.za/esploro/outputs/graduate/The-Role-Of-Constitutive-Communication-9913170407691#file-0>

For Further Reading

Broken and Unequal: The State of Education in South Africa

Broken and Unequal: The State of Education in South Africa examines access to quality education for children in South Africa’s school system with a particular focus on the provinces of Gauteng, Eastern Cape, and Limpopo — looking at schools. The report details some of the key challenges that are hindering the ability of South Africa to comply with its right to education obligations under both its own Constitution and international and regional human rights law.

<https://amnesty.org.za/research/broken-and-unequal-the-state-of-education-in-south-africa/>

