

Leadership at the school level is vital for creating a positive learning environment, guiding transformative practices, and fostering collaboration among staff, students, and the community to achieve success and overall school improvement.



A Transformative Leadership Approach to Public Education in South Africa

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Education is a key pathway out of poverty and inequality; it reduces unemployment, drives economic growth, fosters innovation, and strengthens society. Unfortunately, the South African education system is in crisis, despite a significant budget allocated to it.

The Challenge

The Reading Panel Report¹ highlights that South Africa's education system is ranked among the worst of all middle-income countries participating in national educational assessments. The PIRLS Report² reveals that 82% of South African Grade 4 students cannot read with comprehension, a decline from a 72% pre-pandemic level. Students who fall below the lowest benchmark are unable to read for meaning or recall basic information from texts to answer simple questions. If the current trends persist, it will take over 86 years

to ensure that 95% of learners in the country can read meaningfully.

The COVID-19 pandemic has wiped out a decade of progress, meaning that only 18% of students may achieve reading comprehension by 2033. Furthermore, 50% of Grade 1 students in public schools do not learn the alphabet by the end of the year. International standardized tests show that 80% of South African schools fail to teach fundamental skills. South African Grade 9 learners ranked 38 out of 39 countries in mathematics and were last in science in the 2018 International Association for Evaluation of Educational Achievement. Additionally, 25% of matriculants fail their final exams, approximately 50% of students drop out before completing matric, and less than 5% of students who start primary school achieve a tertiary qualification. It is estimated that around 80% of schools in South Africa are underperforming, equating to approximately 20,000 schools.

A Solution

International evidence suggests that systemic improvements in education can be achieved through various strategies, including the development of principal leadership. Principals serve as key change agents within their schools and investing in school leadership presents a cost-effective, innovative solution to the education crisis. A major issue contributing to the public school system's failure in South Africa is lack of leadership development for principals. While principals are tasked with complex responsibilities, most have not received formal training in the skills necessary to effectively manage those responsibilities.

The UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report³ supports the view that enhancing principals' leadership abilities can drive school improvement. It is time to refine principals' skills, empower them with greater authority for school management, and hold them accountable for their performance.

The current environment presents an opportunity for cross-sector collaboration to tackle the complex issues facing the education system. The private sector, with its knowledgeable and skilled leaders, can contribute significantly to improving public schools, offering innovative solutions to the leadership crisis in South African public schools by integrating business acumen with educational practices.

The Persistent Challenge of Public-School Leadership

In South Africa, many practicing school principals lack

foundational training in leadership and management. This issue arises because essential skills and competencies are often missing from teacher training curricula. Thus, principals frequently encounter difficulties when striving to manage change and adapt to their leadership roles.

Effective 21st-century leadership requires principals to be well-skilled and empowered to navigate contemporary challenges. However, not all leaders receive formal training; some emerge through informal or discursive practices, highlighting the importance of communication in leadership development.

There is a notable positive correlation between principals' values, abilities, and their strategic actions, which in turn enhances student outcomes. Principals are responsible for creating an environment where all stakeholders can realize their potential and foster innovation.



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The persistent poor performance in South African schools can be attributed to principals being overwhelmed by administrative tasks, particularly in townships and rural areas where responsibilities often exceed their capacity. Conversely, schools identified as successful typically have capable and effective leadership. This underscores the critical need for improved training and support for principals in order to prevent the continuation of insufficient leadership.

Leaders for Education: An Innovative Approach to South Africa's Public Education Crisis

Leaders for Education, a program of Citizen Leader Lab, focuses on leadership development and support for principals in underprivileged communities. It stands out

as an internationally recognized, multi-award-winning leadership development program that is making a significant impact on the South Africa's education system.

Schools are a pivotal unit of transformation within the education system and so the Leaders for Education program aims to equip principals as effective change agents capable of transforming their schools into thriving environments for teaching and learning. The approach involves partnering with private-sector business leaders, who collaborate with principals to bolster capacity building and drive positive change.

Leaders for Education represents a creative solution to South Africa's education challenges — collaborative partnerships between school principals and business leaders. The initiative aims to enhance social cohesion while empowering principals as





transformative leaders within their communities and schools. By focusing on improving the quality of education, Leaders for Education provides support to principals from under-resourced schools, equipping them with essential skills through business partnerships.

How Cross-Sector Collaboration Is Transforming Public School Leadership in South Africa

Launched in 2010, the Leaders for Education program is designed to deliver transformational leadership development and support to school principals. The program pairs each principal with a private-sector business leader for a 12-month period, during which they collaborate to apply new skills and knowledge within their individual schools.

These partnerships empower principals to drive change in their schools and communities while allowing business leaders to enhance their leadership skills through reciprocal peer learning. The program's primary objective is to improve educational quality by equipping principals with new skills and resources, while also giving business leaders insights into the complexities of South African public schools.

Partnerships, or dyads, consisting of a school principal and a business leader are organized into clusters of 8-10 schools. This clustering facilitates peer- and co-learning. Unlike traditional leadership development programs, which often use a one-way mentoring approach, the Leaders for Education program emphasizes peer learning, enabling principals to gain insights from their peers as well as their business partners.

Each cluster is supported by a Learning Process Facilitator (LPF), a trained and experienced coach who conducts regular meetings to facilitate knowledge sharing and best practices. LPFs assist in the professional growth of each partnership through coaching, helping principals explore new possibilities and develop their own solutions rather than simply receiving directives. Coaching is recognized as a vital component of ongoing professional development for both principals and teachers.

The program follows the 70:20:10 learning model. Approximately 10% of learning is derived from formal training, through three workshops focused on transformational leadership. Twenty percent of learning occurs through social interactions with other leaders within the cluster. The remaining 70% comes from experiential learning. This experiential learning happens

as participants work together to identify and address challenges in their schools. The practical projects they implement often lead to significant benefits, such as infrastructure improvements, equipment upgrades, and staff development.

Objectives of the Leaders for Education Program:

- **Empower Principals:** Equip school principals to address the unique challenges and obstacles they face in their specific contexts through adaptive, rather than purely technical, leadership approaches.
- **Promote Transformative Leadership Styles:** Encourage principals and business partners to adopt more inclusive, participatory, and collaborative leadership styles that dismantle barriers, build connections among staff and external stakeholders, and drive meaningful change.
- **Build Cohesive Teams:** Foster the development of well-integrated and effective teaching teams within each school.
- **Engage Parents:** Encourage parents to actively embrace their role as primary educators of their children.
- **Strengthen Parent-Teacher Partnerships:** Cultivate a strong, collaborative relationship between teachers and parents.

- **Support Community Partnerships:** Promote community collaborations that benefit students and enhance their learning experiences.

As of September 2024, Leaders for Education has positively impacted over 2,000 schools, reached more than 40,000 teachers, and engaged over 1.4 million learners across all nine provinces of South Africa.

The Role of Transformative Leadership in Enhancing Public School Success

The success of a school is dependent on effective transformative leadership by principals and active involvement from parents and the community. Transformational leadership development equips school principals with essential qualities, such as confidence, resilience, hope, optimism, active listening, and the necessary tools and practices to effectively engage stakeholders and mobilize teams toward achieving the school's objectives.

Transformational principals are pivotal in driving educational innovation and reform by:

- Articulating a clear vision for the school's future
- Fostering a culture of collaboration
- Empowering others to take on leadership roles
- Inspiring and motivating staff to pursue shared goals
- Advocating for positive change
- Supporting teachers and staff in enhancing their skills and perspectives
- Cultivating a school culture focused on teaching and learning
- Encouraging parental involvement in their children's education.

As a result, teachers become more motivated, cohesive, and empowered, while parents increase their engagement in the educational process. Learners benefit from a more supportive environment, allowing them to concentrate better on their studies. Empowered teachers prioritize actions and behaviors that enhance teaching and learning, leading to improved school performance and, ultimately, a more successful education system.

Overview of Program Activities for Participants

The program provides courses to enhance the emergence of principals' leadership capabilities. The courses are described in the following section.



- **Time to Think** establishes the foundation for a “Thinking Partnership” between school principals and business partners by enhancing their listening skills and introducing the components of a thinking environment. Key takeaways from this session include the importance of listening to understand rather than to provide immediate solutions and creating spaces that encourage free thinking. Participants were introduced to the “thinking council” technique, where one individual presents a concern or topic while others listen attentively, ask questions, and share personal experiences without offering advice.
- **Community Building** fosters environments where every individual feels purposeful and valued. This training highlights the significance of inclusivity in decision-making and the benefits of authentic leadership. Participants learn that relinquishing control and fostering a participatory environment enhances collective problem-solving and engagement.
- **The Awakened Leader** promotes a leadership style defined by deep self-awareness, empathy, and a strong sense of purpose. The Awakened Leader goes beyond merely achieving school goals; this leader is committed to fostering personal growth, building genuine relationships, and making a positive impact on the broader community. Emphasizing mindfulness, ethical behavior, and alignment of personal values with professional actions, an Awakened Leader is a visionary who exhibits self-awareness, empathy, purposefulness, ethical integrity, innovation, and resilience. This approach not only enhances school success but also cultivates a more compassionate and purpose-driven form of leadership.
- **Community of Practice Meetings and Coaching Sessions** include bi-weekly community of practice sessions, lasting 2-3 hours and hosted at different schools within the group, to promote leadership growth through networking and peer connection. Business partners receive 6-8 individual coaching sessions throughout the year to assist them in their roles as development partners and to identify opportunities for leadership growth. Triad sessions, consisting of three-way meetings between the partners and their LPF, are held 4-6 times during the Leaders for Education year. These sessions are designed to foster communication and build trust between the partners.



What Next? Implement Innovative Solutions to the Education Crisis in South Africa

Efforts to enhance the quality of education must acknowledge the important leadership role that school principals play. A persistent lack of leadership capabilities among public school principals has been a significant challenge in South Africa for over 25 years. Thus, it is essential to equip public school principals with the leadership skills necessary to improve the future of our learners and the broader South African context.

As a society, we need to recommit to the principles of equality and social justice through quality education for all.



Ongoing efforts to improve educational quality, address inequities, and guarantee that every child in South Africa has access to a high-quality education are vitally important. We must pursue continued dialogue about the state of the education system in South Africa in order to collectively tackle the challenges, paving the way for a brighter future for all.

Notes:

¹The Reading Panel. (2023). *Report on the science of reading: Evidence and recommendations*. Available at: https://www.readingsummit.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Reading-Panel-2030_NRS2023.pdf

²International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement. (2023). *Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) 2023: Report*. Available at: <https://www.erc.ie/programme-of-work/pirls/>

³UNESCO. (2021). *Global Education Monitoring Report 2021: Gender and education*. Available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf00000379875>

Disclosure Statement:

The author is an employee of Citizen Leader Lab.